

A System Stretched Beyond Its Elastic Limits: The South African Foster Care Grant System

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Abstract

Foster care placements are temporary care arrangements for children removed from their biological families due to a plethora of reasons. The social worker investigates the circumstances of the child and then compiles a report to the presiding officer of the children’s court recommending that a child be placed in foster care. Upon placement in foster care, the foster parent then qualifies to receive a foster care grant on behalf of the child. Foster care grants are meant to assist families in the upkeep of children placed in their care. The number of children in foster care in South Africa continues to grow, which has resulted in the foster care grant system being overwhelmed and the caseloads of social workers becoming extremely high. This raises concerns about the feasibility and appropriateness of foster care grants as a vehicle for providing income to children in foster care. This qualitative desktop review explores the South African foster care grant system, and highlights challenges faced by the system, and the reasons that contributed to the challenges, such as the lapsing of foster care orders, which led to the discontinuance of foster care grants. Moreover, the use of money from foster care grants and their contribution in providing income support to families and children is highlighted. In addition, the shortcomings and unsustainability of foster care grants and their perpetuation of dependency syndrome are explored. Recommendations for the proper use of foster care grants and for addressing the foster care grant crisis in South Africa are outlined.

Keywords

child protection; foster care grants; poverty alleviation; social assistance; South Africa

1. Introduction

To reverse the legacy of apartheid, the democratically elected South African government had a tremendous task of addressing the inequalities it inherited from its predecessors (Sibanda & Ngwabi, 2025). The process commenced with its pre-election manifesto of equity and adoption of a developmental approach as a new perspective for achieving socio-economic justice and human rights (Patel, 2015). The Department of Social Development (2013) postulates, "The White Paper provides a framework for the transformation and restructuring of social welfare services in South Africa." To both respond to 21st-century challenges facing children in foster care, and fully accord them of their rights as enshrined in the 1996 Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, the South African government introduced the Children's Act (Act No. 38 of 2005; Republic of South Africa, 2005), which provides a legislative framework for rendering foster care services and for payment of foster care grants in South Africa. The Children's Act replaced the Child Care Act (Act No. 74 of 1983), which was legislation that originated from the apartheid period (Sibanda & Ngwabi, 2025). Since the introduction of the Children's Act in 2005, there has been instability in rendering foster care grant services (Sibanda & Lombard, 2015). Most of the shortcomings relate to ambiguous words and phrases in the Children's Act (Sibanda & Lombard, 2015). This has led to a slow uptake of foster care grants and the exclusion of thousands of children who otherwise qualify for them (Hall et al., 2016).

For a foster care placement to occur, a child should be declared as a child in need of care and protection by a presiding officer of a children's court, who acts on a recommendation of a social worker, contained in the social work report that is compiled after an investigation into the circumstances of the child (Sibanda & Ndamba, 2023). In South Africa, foster parents receive financial assistance to care for the foster children (Dhludhlu, 2021). According to the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA, 2025), foster parents receive a monthly grant to care for their foster children, and it is valued at R1,250 (€60) per child as of 1 April 2025. According to the Department of Employment and Labour (2025), the national minimum wage in South Africa is R4,500 (€218) per month. The South African foster care grant system seems to be grappling with several challenges (Sibanda & Ngwabi, 2025). Policy experts and social workers have called for a complete overhaul of the South African foster care system to make it responsive and accessible to several children who qualify for foster care grants (Sibanda & Ndamba, 2023; Skelton, 2015). This article aims to describe the use of money in foster care and the unsustainability of the South African foster care grant system. The value of foster care grants in providing income support to families will be underscored. Thereafter, challenges associated with the South African foster care grant system will be presented. Lastly, recommendations for overhauling the South African foster care grant system will be provided. The primary research question addressed in this article is: What challenges does the South African foster care system face? The objectives of the study were: (a) to contextualize the use of money in foster care; (b) to determine the contribution of foster care grants in providing income support to families and children; (c) to identify challenges and unintended consequences of the South African foster care grant system; and (d) to devise recommendations for the proper use of foster care grants in South Africa.

2. Legislative Framework for Foster Care Grants in South Africa

The Children's Act of 2005 provides a legislative framework for foster care and foster care grants in South Africa. The key provision is section 150(1)(a), which outlines one of the grounds for determining whether a child is in need of care and protection, so that a foster care grant can be paid to their foster parents. This

section states, “A child is in need of care and protection if the child has been abandoned or orphaned and is without any visible means of support” (Republic of South Africa, 2005). Problems of immense proportions have resulted from the wording of section 150(1)(a). This section has proved problematic when a social worker tries to open and finalise a children’s court enquiry for a child in foster care whose order has lapsed (Sibanda, 2013). The same is true for an abandoned or orphaned child requiring foster care that has been staying with alternative parents on a private arrangement and now needs state assistance because of a small source of income, which is only sufficient for them but not for an additional person (the child concerned). Such caregivers are usually relatives receiving some form of state assistance (for example, disability grant, older persons grant, or child support grant). A study conducted by the National Welfare, Social Service and Development Forum (2008) found that most children who require foster care reside with elderly relatives. Besides section 150(1)(a), there is usually no other ground for determining that such children are “in need of care and protection” so that they can be placed in foster care for their foster parents to receive foster care grants. Unfortunately, most presiding officers reject the ground, saying, “The child is not without ‘visible means of support’ as required by section 150(1)(a)” (Hall & Proudlock, 2011, p. 2). Such children can only be eligible for a foster care grant if the children’s court issues a court order placing them in foster care. It is noteworthy that there has been rejection of foster care applications on a “literal and strict” interpretation of “visible means of support” (*SS v. Presiding Officer of the Children’s Court, Krugersdorp and others*, 2011).

Most social workers in a study by Sibanda (2013) expressed serious concerns over this wording—“a child is in need of care and protection if the child has been abandoned or orphaned and is without any visible means of support” (p. 77)—and indicated that it should be changed. Their question was, “What exactly does the phrase ‘visible means of support’ mean?” (Sibanda, 2013, p. 77). They stated that it is a very subjective phrase and that the lack of clarity on section 150(1)(a) makes it inevitable for different stakeholders to have different interpretations of the Act. Participants stated that presiding officers of the children’s court do not have a standardised way of doing things; they have completely different ways of handling and approaching foster care placements and foster care grant matters (Sibanda & Lombard, 2015). Having such an ambiguous phrase allows presiding officers to use subjective discretion in dealing with foster care cases and in deciding whether the child should receive a foster care grant. This frustrates social workers and prevents access to foster care grants by many families (Sibanda & Lombard, 2015).

3. Developmental Approach to Foster Care Grants

The South African foster care system was formulated in such a way that ensures that foster care grants are administered from a developmental approach (Sibanda & Ngwabi, 2025). South Africa’s adoption of the developmental approach was an attempt to transform social service delivery from a residual approach to a developmental approach (Herselman et al., 2023). A developmental approach is underpinned by a human rights-based perspective (Patel, 2015). This article, therefore, makes use of a developmental approach embedded in a human rights paradigm as its theoretical framework, the rationale being that the study was done within the domain of child protection and social protection of one of the most vulnerable groups of society (Sibanda & Lombard, 2015). Some of the key principles of a developmental approach, spelt out in Midgley (2010) and Patel (2015), are: participation; universal access; self-reliance; empowerment; appropriateness; and accessibility. These principles are in alignment with the principles stipulated in the Children’s Act, which social workers should apply when rendering foster care services to children and their families. The key features of a developmental approach are: harmonising social and economic development;

facilitating and promoting access to rights; and challenging policies and social systems that compromise rights (Patel, 2015).

4. Methodology

This article is based on a literature review of journal articles, dissertations, media reports, reports from government departments, and reports on formal submissions and presentations made to the Parliament of the Republic of South Africa by the civil society regarding foster care issues. The author examined section 150(1)(a) of the Children's Act as the central section for placing children in foster care and subsequently paying the foster care grant, and then moved into exploring the shortcomings and challenges associated with this foster care grant system.

The study adopted a scoping literature review to provide an overview of the literature on foster care grants in South Africa. The literature review process included the following stages: identifying the research question; identifying relevant literature; selecting literature; summarising; and reporting the results. The Problem, Interest, Context (PICO) framework (see Table 1) guided the development of the following broad question: What challenges are faced by the South African foster care grant system?

Table 1. PICO framework.

Area of focus	Specific area of focus
Problem	Challenges in the foster care grant system
Interest	Contributing factors and effects
Context	South Africa

A search strategy was developed to identify relevant publications related to foster care in South Africa. The search was conducted across multiple electronic databases such as Scopus, ProQuest, Google Scholar, Web of Science, and Academic Search Ultimate. These databases were selected because of their relevance to social sciences, social work, and social protection. The search strategy employed keywords to maximise the retrieval of relevant literature. Using the PICO framework, the search terms for the constructs of interest were identified first, including “foster care,” “foster care grants,” “social grants,” “social assistance,” and “South Africa.” The search was limited to publications in English. To ensure a focused and relevant selection of literature for review, inclusion and exclusion criteria were established (see Table 2).

Data extraction was carried out using a semi-structured data charting form, which facilitated the collection of key information from each selected publication. The data extraction process included the following components:

1. Citation Information: Author(s), year of publication, title, and source;
2. Study Type: Classification of the publication type (e.g., empirical study, policy document, review article);
3. Key Findings: Summary of the main findings relevant to foster care grants in South Africa;
4. Context: Description of the factors contributing to challenges surrounding the South African foster care grant system, including any legislative, institutional, and infrastructural barriers;
5. Gaps and Recommendations: Identification of gaps in the current South African foster care grant system and recommendations for future research and policy improvements.

Table 2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Criteria Category	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Focus of publications	Literature and publications addressing factors contributing to the challenges in the South African foster care grant system	Literature and publications on foster care grants in South Africa without a focus on challenges and factors contributing to the challenges
Context of publications	Publications with a South African context	Publications with a non-South African context
Publication year	Publications from 2005 to 2025	Publications outside the stated period
Type of publications	Peer-reviewed articles, government reports, grey literature, and dissertations related to the topic	Other types of publications, e.g., non-peer-reviewed articles, reflections, and commentaries
Language	Publications available in English	Publications available in other languages

The application of these components resulted in a more manageable and relevant body of literature for analysis. Analysis of the extracted data was conducted thematically, allowing for the identification of recurring themes within the literature. The thematic analysis followed the process outlined by Creswell (2014): familiarisation with the data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and producing the report. Ethical approval for this review was not necessary, as this review is based solely on secondary data from literature sources that have been published and are available in the public domain.

5. Findings

Seven themes emerged from the analysis of the data. The themes and sub-themes are depicted in Table 3.

Table 3. Themes and sub-themes.

Themes	Sub-themes
Inappropriate and insufficient legislative arrangements for foster care grants (Section 5.1)	
The current foster care grant crisis in South Africa (Section 5.2)	
Shortage of social workers to process foster care grant applications (Section 5.3)	
Implications of providing foster care grants to more foster parents (Section 5.4)	Financial implications (Section 5.4.1) The discontinuance of foster care grant payments (Section 5.4.2)
The use of foster care grants in South Africa (Section 5.5)	Foster care grants as the only source of income and livelihood for foster families (Section 5.5.1) Foster care grants provide economic support and poverty alleviation to families (Section 5.5.2) Foster care grants are used to cater to the educational needs of foster children (Section 5.5.3) Matching the standard of living of other children who live with their biological parents (Section 5.5.4) Foster care grants are used to buy furniture, renovate, and extend houses (Section 5.5.5)

Table 3. (Cont.) Themes and sub-themes.

Themes	Sub-themes
Foster care grant dependency (Section 5.6)	
Lack of exit strategy for foster care grant recipients (Section 5.7)	

5.1. Inappropriate and Insufficient Legislative Arrangements for Foster Care Grants

The findings indicate the challenges with regard to the legislative frameworks for the administration of foster care grants. The main provision for determining the placement of children in foster care so that they can receive a foster care grant is section 150(1)(a) of the Children's Act. This section is full of ambiguity and subjectivity; it implies that a means test must be introduced for accessing foster care grants. Moreover, the legislative arrangements fail to address the current foster care crisis and the shortage of social workers in the country, which has inevitably led to the lapsing of foster care orders and foster care grants. Lastly, the legislative arrangements fail to address the plight of children who are "in need of cash and not much in need of care" (Sibanda & Lombard, 2015, p. 346).

It should be noted that the civil society of South Africa has called for the rejection and overhaul of the foster care legislative framework. They posed a rhetorical question about the legislation: What is "visible means of support"? (Sibanda, 2015). According to Matthews (2015), the phrase "visible means of support" is also equivocal and is likely to be interpreted by magistrates on a case-by-case basis, and hence lead to different standards being applied when assessing suitability for foster care placement and eligibility for receiving foster care grants. Matthews (2015) and Skelton (2015) conclude that the South African foster care grant legislation is legally flawed.

5.2. The Current Foster Care Grant Crisis in South Africa

The shortcomings of the foster care legislation contribute to the current foster care grant crisis in South Africa. Sibanda and Ndamba (2023, p. 45) articulate the following regarding the foster care crisis in South Africa:

For many decades, the number of children in foster care placements in South Africa remained below 50,000. But when orphaning rates started to increase rapidly in the early 2000s because of rising HIV prevalence rates and the failure of the state to roll out antiretrovirals, there was growing public concern about what would happen to orphans. The number of maternally orphaned children doubled from half a million to over a million between 1996 and 2004. In 2002, the former Minister of Social Development, Dr Zola Skweyiya, stated publicly that the Department of Social Development was encouraging relatives to take care of orphaned children under the foster care package. This shift towards using the foster care system (and the associated foster care grant) for orphaned children was echoed by politicians and policymakers on several other occasions, but without formal consultation or inquiry into the systemic consequences of such a shift.

Similar observations regarding the foster care crisis in South Africa are documented by Fortune (2016, p. 14):

By May 2000, there were less [sic] than 50,000 children in court-ordered foster care....By May 2007, the number had reached 418,608. This means an increase of more than 700% in seven years, and long waiting lists for social work services and court dates. The system became burdened, and so did its social workers.

As noted above, it was envisaged by the architects of the South African foster care system that it would accommodate not more than 50,000 children at any given time. This is no longer the case as the number of children in foster care has skyrocketed. According to Vivier (2023, p. 1), "recent statistics available about the foster care grant suggest that nearly 400,000 children in South Africa are in foster care." This number is almost 10 times higher than what was envisaged. Due to the systemic failures in the foster care grant system that are caused by being stretched beyond its elastic limits, only half of the foster parents of children in foster care receive foster care grants. SASSA (2024, p. 25) states that, in 2024, there were 253,256 foster care grant recipients in South Africa. This was a huge reduction in the number of foster care grants in payment. The SASSA (2024, p. 25) shows that, in 2018, there were 416,016 foster care grant recipients in South Africa. The question that can be posed is: What is happening to these children's foster parents, who should be receiving the foster care grants but are not? In response to the question, Sibanda and Ndamba (2023, p. 44) postulate, "After 20 years, most of these children would have grown up without [their foster parents] receiving the foster care grant and lost the opportunity to guarantee their survival, development and protection." Similar concerns regarding massive delays in receiving grants by children in foster care are highlighted by the Children's Institute (2014, p. 1) as follows:

In the past few years, we have seen serious delays in the processing of new foster care applications. Those families who are taking care of orphaned children, who would under normal circumstances qualify, are being denied access by being sent from pillar to post. We have reports of caregivers being told by social workers to place adverts in newspapers. Social workers complain of having limited budgets in relation to advertisement as required by the law, files of those who have applied have just been lost, and other cases just sit for long periods of time with no progress being made. This puts a serious strain on families who themselves are living in poverty. The right to access adequate social assistance is grossly violated.

The foster care system has been overburdened and is being used for what it was not intended for; in other words, it is being "abused." Surely, it cannot cope with 1.5 million children. If we attempt to force it to cope, it will be a disaster; more and more children will continue to fall through the cracks in the system. More and more children who are hungry and thirsty for social work services will continue to be deprived of social work services, as social workers will be busy conducting the administration of foster care. Social workers under strain are forced into crisis intervention mode and end up running ambulance services instead of rendering proper developmental, child protection, and reunification services to children and their families.

There was a constitutional court case in 2011 (*Centre for Child Law v. Minister of Social Development and Others*, 2011a) that instructed the Department of Social Development to design and implement "a comprehensive solution to address the crisis in the foster care system" (Matthews, 2015, p. 7). Failure by the Department

to acknowledge foster care systemic challenges and to design a “comprehensive legal solution as instructed by the Constitutional Court is very disappointing [to civil society organisations]” (Sibanda & Ndamba, 2023, p. 44). The South African foster care legislation continues to miss opportunities to address the crisis in the foster care grant system.

5.3. Shortage of Social Workers to Process Foster Care Grant Applications

South Africa has a critical shortage of social workers, which is closely linked to the foster care grant crisis as aforementioned. Section 186 of the Children’s Act allows for children’s courts to make permanent foster care orders in specified circumstances. Permanent foster care orders reduce the costs and time of the biennial reviews by social workers and courts that were required by the Child Care Act of 1983 (Sibanda & Ndamba, 2023). Nevertheless, social workers and courts are still required for the first placement decision. The backlog in foster care placement is therefore set to continue. Proudlock and Jamieson (2008, p. 39) reflect on the impact of the shortage of social workers:

The result is that families caring for orphaned children will continue to wait for a long time before they receive the Foster Child Grant, while services for children who have been abused or exploited will also be delayed as social workers and the courts struggle under a heavy case load. The opportunity to promote the use of the administratively simple Child Support Grant for children placed with relatives and who are considered low-risk placements has been lost. Besides reaching more orphaned children faster and saving considerable costs for both the Departments of Justice and Social Development, it would also have freed up precious court and social worker time to deal with active cases of child abuse.

Similarly, a study by Sibanda (2013, p. 73) underlined the shortage of social workers in the implementation of foster care services:

Implementation is a challenge, because we are working with a population of over 49 million and we have a drop in the ocean number of social workers, who are supposed to render, not only child protection services, but also family preservation services ...and a lot of other services in the welfare sector.

September and Dinbabo (2008) note that social workers are critical in the implementation of foster care services. Unfortunately, the number of social workers in South Africa is insufficient to provide adequate foster care services (Cronje, 2015). The National Development Plan states that South Africa will need 55,000 social workers by 2030 (National Planning Commission, 2011, p. 361). With 2030 just around the corner, this target will likely not be met. Researchers are concerned that the use of professional social workers to process foster care grant applications is an inappropriate use of scarce human resources; foster care grant applications could be processed by administrative staff (Hall et al., 2016; Sibanda & Lombard, 2015; Sibanda & Ndamba, 2023). The Children’s Institute (2014, p. 2) states:

Child protection social workers and courts should be providing services to raped, assaulted, neglected, abandoned, and orphaned children. There is no need for them to have to spend their skills and time processing paperwork for foster care grant applications for children, the majority of whom are quite safely living with their grannies or aunts. South Africa has a very effective social security agency with an

army of social grant officers who could be tasked with processing these foster care grant applications and reaching orphans quickly.

The shortage of social workers leads to massive caseloads, which forces many social workers to implement foster care services from a remedial approach at the expense of comprehensive and holistic services embedded in the social development approach (Sibanda & Ngwabi, 2025).

5.4. Implications of Providing Foster Care Grants to More Foster Parents

5.4.1. Financial Implications

There are dire financial implications of providing foster care grants to more foster parents. The costs include the direct costs of the foster care grants, plus very high operational costs. According to Matthews (2015, p. 11):

If the nearly 1 million maternally orphaned children who are not yet in receipt of the foster care grant successfully applied for the grant, the direct cost would be around R11 billion [€534 million] annually, plus enormous costs for court personnel and social workers for the administration of the grant.

The processing of foster care grants is costly because it requires the involvement of the children's courts and social work services in the issuing of a foster care order, which then qualifies the child for receiving a foster care grant (Sibanda & Ndamba, 2023). Moreover, the foster care placement must be supervised regularly, and periodic reports submitted to the children's court to renew the foster care order so that the foster care grant can continue being active (Republic of South Africa, 2005; Sibanda & Lombard, 2015). The administration of more foster care grants is thus an expensive endeavour.

5.4.2. The Discontinuance of Foster Care Grant Payments

Should the current status quo of accessing foster care grants remain in practice, many orphaned and vulnerable children in South Africa will continue to lack access to the foster care grants. Immense pressure will be exerted on the over-stretched foster care system and social workers. According to Sibanda and Ndamba (2023, p. 47), "the presiding officers require voluminous and unnecessary documents to be attached to the section 159 (extension of orders) reports." These reports are for extending foster care orders, which allow the continued payment of foster care grants. The challenges associated with the extension of foster care orders and the administration of foster care grants are well documented (see Dhludhlu, 2021; Sibanda & Lombard, 2015; Sibanda & Ndamba, 2023).

Social workers managing high caseloads cannot have all documents and attachments to reports for extending orders ready for courts on their due dates (Sibanda & Lombard, 2015). It is therefore inevitable that foster care orders will lapse. According to Du Toit (as cited in "Court order to end," 2011, p. 1), an estimated 123,236 children's foster care orders had lapsed by the end of January 2011 without being extended, and many such orders were due to expire each subsequent month. News24 ("Court order to end," 2011) attributed the lapsing of foster care orders to "a building up of backlogs at the various provincial departments, the children's courts and the child protection organisations." In light of this catastrophe, and touched by the plight of large numbers of children who were consequently facing discontinuance of foster care grants, the Centre for Child Law at

the University of Pretoria made an urgent application to the High Court. Delivering his court ruling on the case of *Centre for Child Law v. Minister of Social Development and Others* (2011a), Judge Classen recognised the urgent need to provide a temporary solution for “pre-Children’s Act foster care orders requiring renewal, until the Children’s Act is amended to provide for a more comprehensive legal solution.”

Reflecting on the matter of expired foster care orders, the Children’s Institute (2014, p. 3) states:

In 2011, the Department [of Social Development] was taken to court by civil society because approximately 120,000 foster care grants had stopped being paid to children. Social workers and courts had not kept up with extending the children’s foster care court orders. The Department agreed in a court-ordered settlement to reinstate the lapsed grants. The court order placed a temporary moratorium on any further lapsing of grants. The court ordered the Department to design a comprehensive legal solution by December 2014.

On 12 December 2014, realizing that the deadline was approaching and that they had not yet developed a comprehensive solution to address the crisis in the foster care system as ordered by Judge Classen, the Department of Social Development applied to the North Gauteng High Court to request that the Classen order be renewed to avert the discontinuance of the foster care grants for children whose foster care placement orders had expired (Skelton, 2015). According to Sibanda and Ndamba (2023, p. 48):

It showed a sense of desperation and further proved that there is a crisis in the foster care grant system when the Department of Social Development approached the court to renew an order that was obtained against them by the Centre for Child Law. This was an indirect admission that the foster care grant system was failing to cope.

Nonetheless, the High Court reviewed the application and renewed the order to 31 December 2017 (Skelton, 2015). According to Sibanda and Ndamba (2013), this meant that the Department of Social Development had to address the backlog of all lapsed foster care orders and develop a comprehensive solution for the foster care grant system by December 2017. The Department of Social Development (2015) notes that four years after the court order was issued, the Department provided the following update to the high court in 2015:

Out of 108,479 orders that lapsed between April 2009 and December 2014, 58,246 were outstanding nationally by June 2015. This means that 50,233 foster care orders were issued since 12 December 2014.

Sibanda and Ndamba (2023, p. 48) made the following observations regarding the above update:

This indicated that the Department of Social Development had managed to attend to only half the lapsed orders in seven years (2009 to 2015), and it was very doubtful that they would be able to attend to the remaining half in three years (2015 to 2017). Logic suggested that they needed at least seven more years (2015 to 2021) to deal with the outstanding backlog. Again, this further proved that there was a huge crisis in the foster care system. Pencil-beating the foster care system is not enough; the system needs a complete overhaul.

Similar concerns of a slow progress in addressing the foster care back log and designing a comprehensive legal solution as ordered by the high court were raised by Skelton (2015), who observed that the South African foster care grant system was being kept from collapsing by the court orders and that without the intervention of the high court and the litigation of the civil society, the foster care grant system would have crashed a long time ago. The continued failure to renew foster care orders means that foster families will continue not receiving foster care grants, which means that they will have to relinquish certain necessities that were being covered by the foster care grant. According to Dhludhlu (2021), the discontinuation of foster care grants engulfs children and families back into a pattern of terrible deprivation and places them in danger of being unable to maintain sustainable livelihoods. The contribution of foster care grants towards the household income, livelihoods, and welfare of South African foster care families is an uncontested and undeniable fact (Sibanda & Ngwabi, 2025; Tladi & Setlalentoa, 2020). Matthews (2015) noted that the conflation of the need for care and protection with the need for social assistance entrenched and probably increased the use of the child protection system for the administration of foster care grants. This is worrying because the child protection system is already not coping with the workload of foster care grant applications (Sibanda & Ngwabi, 2025).

5.5. The Use of Foster Care Grants in South Africa

5.5.1. Foster Care Grants as the Only Source of Income and Livelihood for Foster Families

Some foster parents who are not employed depend solely on the foster care grant and see it as their only source of income and livelihood. In a study by Tladi and Setlalentoa (2020), some foster parents indicated that in the absence of foster care grants, they would not have applied to become foster parents. Tladi and Setlalentoa (2020, p. 15049) note the views of foster parents regarding the use of foster care grants as follows:

Sometimes you cannot help but use the foster care grant for [everyone] at home. If you use it for electricity, you cannot say it is only for the foster child; it also helps others in the household. The grant helps the foster child and others. It is not easy when there is not much income to use the grant only for the foster child. I think that it is okay as long as it also benefits the foster child.

I do not work; we depend on the foster care grant for everything. I think it should be increased because right now it does not meet all the needs of the foster child.

I use the foster care grant for food, electricity, clothes, and school things. I combine it with the child support grant for my child to cater to all of us.

I pay for burial societies, electricity, and buy food, how will I also pay for school fees and buy her clothes? These children nowadays wear expensive clothes and do not understand when you say there is no money.

5.5.2. Foster Care Grants Provide Economic Support and Poverty Alleviation to Families

The foster care grants assist foster care families in providing for the needs of the children under their care and in relieving them from experiencing extreme poverty (Fortune, 2016). Participants in a study by Dhludhlu

(2021, p. 146) shared that the foster care grants contributed to economic support and poverty alleviation. One of the participants shared that he dropped out of school after the termination of his foster child grant, but once it was reviewed, he was able to go back to school:

Therefore, from 2009 to 2012, I did not attend school because I [my foster parent] was not receiving any grant, and my family was without any source of income. My foster mother used to blame me for going to the initiation school, and as a result, the family put a lot of pressure on me. Moreover, those were the most difficult years of my life. It was very difficult for me because I had to work during weekends to make ends meet. In 2012, fortunately, I met the new social worker called Bridgett, and she was able to assist me [my foster parent] in processing my foster care placement and the renewal of the grant again.

Furthermore, foster care grants have been pivotal in reducing indigency in families. A social work participant in a study by Dhludhlu (2021, p. 147) stated:

I would say that with foster care, you would see when they come to apply for foster care placement and during the investigation, that this family needs assistance. In addition, most foster care placements that we have, the foster child grants help the family to alleviate poverty. For some families, you find that this is the only source of income that they have, no one is working, and it helps them.

A foster parent in a study by Tladi and Setlالتها (2020, p. 15045) explained the importance of the foster care grant in enabling her to buy household items as follows:

Yes, the grant is important in the lives of foster children because we can buy what the child needs. I use it for groceries, clothing, electricity, and cosmetics for her. When spending the grant, I consider her needs first, I know that it is meant for her. I also know that I should focus on her needs rather than her own wants, which may not be important.

The above quotations denote the pivotal role played by foster care grants in providing income support to families and in enabling families to meet their basic needs. This is in line with the Constitution of South Africa, which states, "Every child has a right to social security, family or parental care, shelter, social services, basic education, including adult primary education and to further education" (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996).

5.5.3. Foster Care Grants Are Used to Cater to the Educational Needs of Foster Children

Foster care grants are used by foster parents to buy school necessities such as school uniforms, stationery, and books for the children in foster care. Participants in a study by Tladi and Setlالتها (2020, p. 15052) highlighted the pivotal role played by foster care grants in enabling them to put their foster children through school. Some professed that in the absence of foster care grants, it would have been impossible for them to meet the educational needs of the children in their foster care placement. One foster parent was quoted by Tladi and Setlالتها (2020, p. 15052) saying:

The grant helps our children to get a better education than us. We could not go to school because there was no money for that. They are lucky now because there is the foster care grant.

This finding is consistent with the views of Leatt and Budlender (2006, p. 5): “Grants assist in overcoming financial barriers to school attendance, in terms of fees and other costs—school supplies, uniforms and transport, etc.”

5.5.4. Matching the Standard of Living of Other Children who Live with Their Biological Parents

Foster care grants are being used by foster parents in a manner that makes their foster children also look like those children living with biological parents. Foster parents in a study by Tladi and Setlalentoa (2020) indicated that they bought expensive items for their foster children so that they would not feel unloved because of their orphanhood status. According to Tladi and Setlalentoa (2020, p. 15051), one foster parent in their study remarked:

I do not want him to see himself as different from his peers. I try not to make him look different from others, so that he also knows that he is loved.

5.5.5. Foster Care Grants Are Used to Buy Furniture, Renovate, and Extend Houses

Foster parents in a study by Tladi and Setlalentoa (2020, p. 15052) revealed that they used the foster care grant to extend their houses in a quest to create additional rooms to accommodate and cater for foster children in their care. The foster parents stated that it is not right for children receiving foster care grants not to have their own bedrooms and furniture. Tladi and Setlalentoa (2020, p. 15045) quote foster parents who use the foster care grants to buy furniture, renovate, and extend their houses:

My children and foster children are both aware that the foster care grant is being used to extend my house. My children will not kick them out, saying it was my house and not the foster children's home. We all agreed.

How can a person receive the grant and not buy a bed for her foster child? What does she do with the money? The child must have a bed to sleep on.

When I started with this grant, the social worker who was assisting me said I should ensure that my foster children have a place to sleep. I have bought beds and cupboards for them with the grant.

5.6. Foster Care Grant Dependency

Social workers in a study by Sibanda and Ngwabi (2025) indicated that due to the high rates of poverty and unemployment, most foster parents are dependent on the foster care grant. This has led to desperate measures on the part of prospective foster parents who submit fake documents and foster parents who are unable to save money for the foster children's future. According to Sibanda and Ngwabi (2025), the desperation and culture of dependency are illustrated by the following statements from participants:

The foster care grant has created a culture of dependency. When it comes to the financial side, they are too dependent, especially those who don't work; the foster care grant is the only source of income in most homes.

People take advantage of the foster care system—some mothers with two deceased children, who are male and female, use the death certificates of these children since they have the same surname. They will claim that the deceased are parents of the child they are applying for foster care for—when you go through the documents, you then realise that the deceased were not married but were siblings.

The service is not sustainable; we only have a few foster parents who save money for these foster children, and we need more community development projects to help them.

Social grants reduce poverty and promote human rights (Hall et al., 2012). However, Lombard (2008) observed that the government still places greater focus on social grants instead of socio-economic development, which has created a dependency syndrome among grant recipients, instead of fostering self-reliance by connecting grant recipients with productive sectors of the economy. However, the challenge, as observed by Patel et al. (2012), is that social workers have a limited understanding of economic development concepts and of their role in promoting the establishment of microeconomic development initiatives. Failure to embrace their role in economic development is likely to result in the continued entrapment of families in unsustainable foster care grants (Sibanda & Lombard, 2015). This then erodes all attempts to transition to developmental social welfare (Sibanda & Ngwabi, 2025).

5.7. Lack of Exit Strategy for Foster Care Grant Recipients

Social workers in a study by Sibanda and Ngwabi (2025) indicated that there is a barrier in the non-availability of an exit strategy for foster grant recipients. Foster parents receive the foster grant up to the time the children in their foster care placement complete secondary school, and there is no income afterwards (Dhludhlu, 2021). The social workers in a study by Sibanda and Ngwabi (2025) indicated that if these foster children could be empowered with practical skills, given scholarships, or exposed to self-income generating projects, this would ensure that they would not be dependent on the foster grant and that they would be equipped with skills and opportunities that would make them self-reliant, even after the foster grant is terminated. According to Sibanda and Ngwabi (2025), this was explicitly captured in the following statement:

People who are aging out of the foster care system are a challenge to us because they come back to us and we don't know how to help them, we don't have programmes that are sustainable for them.

This finding is supported by Lombard (2008), who indicates that although social grants alleviate poverty in many households, the government admits that no exit strategies were formulated for social grant recipients. It is imperative to engage in social security that empowers grant recipients to reduce dependency on the state. Lack of exit strategies for grant recipients limits efforts to transform the foster care sector.

6. Conclusion

Foster care grants in South Africa provide the much-needed income support to families since some foster parents are not employed, and the foster care grant is seen as a lifeline and the only source of income in the house. Although very low in value, foster care grants are used to cater to the shelter, clothes, education, electricity, and basic needs of foster children. However, the ways in which foster care grants are used and the range of needs they are expected to cover are too extensive to be supported by the grants alone. Some

foster parents use foster care grants to buy household furniture, beds, and cupboards, while others use the foster care grant to renovate and extend their houses so that it has many rooms for the benefit and comfort of the foster child. Although relevant to the needs of the child, this is not what the foster care grant is meant for; it should be used for the direct upkeep of the child in foster care. If foster parents overly stretch the use of foster care grants, then there are concerns that foster children might end up being neglected financially, because foster parents are focusing on their expensive endeavours and needs at the expense of the needs of the foster children. The overreliance on the foster care grant contributes to the dependency syndrome. There is a need to devise exit strategies for foster care grant beneficiaries and connect them with productive sectors of the economy so that when the grant stops, they will not be left with no source of income. As such, it can be concluded that the South African foster care grant system is unsustainable and is overstretched. Moreover, the foster care grant system is riddled with deep flaws, faces overwhelming challenges, and produces serious unintended consequences.

The legislation that guides the foster care grant system in South Africa should be amended to address the ambiguity and subjectivity associated with it. Moreover, such amendments are necessary to address the current foster care grant crisis and the shortage of social workers in South Africa, which has inevitably led to the lapsing of a huge number of foster care grants. Lastly, the legislation should be amended to address the plight of children who are “in need of cash and not much in need of care” (Sibanda & Lombard, 2015, p. 346) and to future-proof the South African foster care system from abuse, manipulation, and misuse.

The foster care grant is utilised for the basic needs of foster children. As such, foster parents should be trusted that they are responsible and that they will not abuse or misuse the foster care grant, and that they will spend it in the best interest of the foster children. However, since the foster children are placed in one household with the biological children of foster parents, they cannot differentiate or separate what is for the foster child and what is for their biological children. It is unrealistic and unfair to expect foster parents to make this distinction; food and consumables are for every household member. What matters is that all children (whether foster care or biological) have what they need and are well taken care of; it should not matter from which exact pocket or grant the money came from. Enforcing such an expectation on foster parents might result in unintended consequences, where foster children might end up being treated differently from other children in the family.

6.1. Significance and Implications of the Study

This article is significant for both policy development and practical implementation, as it sheds light on critical systemic challenges that currently hinder the efficient delivery of foster care grants in South Africa. By thoroughly examining obstacles in the foster care grant system, the article underscores the need for targeted reforms and strategic interventions to ensure that vulnerable children receive timely and adequate support. Addressing these systemic issues is essential not only to improve the functionality of the foster care system but also to promote social equity and protect the rights of some of the country’s most at-risk children.

6.2. Recommendations

Recommendations to address challenges in the foster care grant system include introducing a kinship care grant system that operates in parallel to the foster care grant system, allowing for non-court-ordered care by

relatives (Sibanda & Ndamba, 2023). The kinship care grant system should be designed in a way that ensures that orphans in the care of relatives receive an adequate social grant in the shortest possible time. The kinship care grant system should not replace the foster care grant system, but should act as a parallel system. Thus, it should ensure that children who need care and protection are referred to the foster care system, and children who need cash are catered for by the kinship care system. This will free up the time of social workers to ensure that they provide proper foster care grant administration services and prevent the lapsing of foster care grants. Moreover, the foster care grant system should be linked with income generation activities to avert the dependency syndrome and lack of economic sustainability associated with foster care grants in South Africa.

Since the findings indicate that in some households the foster care grant is the only source of income and that its value is too low to cater for all the needs of the child, the foster care grant should be increased so that it can meet all basic needs of the foster children. Future studies should focus on designing and developing a foster care grant supervision and monitoring framework to guide social workers and to enable them to identify indicators on the current use of the foster care grant and on assessing whether foster care grants are used in the best interests of the children in foster care.

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Conflict of Interests

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