

## Mind the People: Automating Social Security – English Transcript

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00:16

Hey everyone, thanks a lot for joining our session on automating Social Security. I'm Duduetsang Mokoete, a researcher looking into how artificial intelligence is being used in Social Security. Today, I'm joined by an activist and the Deputy Chairperson of #PaytheGrants. So, my interest in this case study is that it really has both local and national aspects, but it also connects globally. We're seeing more and more that governments around the world are...

00:56

Agencies, along with their private sector partners, are using algorithms to determine who qualifies for public benefits. This research is supported by the Mozilla Foundation, especially through the Mozilla Africa Madi program, which aims to focus on community-based and grassroots analysis of AI's impact on communities. Before we dive into the session, let me share my screen and give you a bit more background on what the Social Relief of Distress Grant is.

01:54

Alright, let me quickly run through the five main points that I think will help everyone, especially those who aren't familiar with the Social Relief of Distress (SRD) Grant. First off, the SRD Grant is the South African government's emergency measure in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. They had to move fast, and you can really see that in how quickly they acted. The first COVID-19 case in South Africa was found in March 2020, and by May 2020, the SRD system was up and running.

02:39

In less than six months of lockdown in South Africa, a decade's worth of jobs was lost. Right now, the unemployment crisis is pretty severe, with the latest figure at 33.5%, which translates to about 8.4 million people out of work. But if you consider a broader definition of unemployment, including those discouraged job seekers who have stopped looking for jobs, the number is even higher.

03:16

"Check out the 42.6% figure, especially in relation to this project. The main thing we're producing is a full-length documentary, which you can find linked on the page. Audience members can watch it whenever they have some free time. We filmed most of it in the Northwest Province, which has the highest unemployment rate in South Africa at a shocking 54.2%. Lastly, I think we should mention..."

03:58

Government assistance for the SRD Grant is available for unemployed South Africans, refugees, asylum seekers, and other special permit holders aged 16 to 18. This group is important because, normally, they wouldn't qualify for any social grants. They're too old to get child support grants but too young to receive pension grants.

04:36

The SRD Grant pays out 370 Rand, which is about \$21. Another key point about the SRD Grant is that the whole process—from applying to getting reviewed, decisions made, payments processed, and filing appeals—is done online. As I'll explain, there seem to be ongoing issues at every stage of this process. Finally, according to the South African Social Security Agency, which handles social grants in South Africa, there are about 8.5 million people involved.

05:24

People get paid every month, but as we'll discuss, there's a catch: payments can be inconsistent. So, 8.5 million people who qualify for the grant don't always get it every month. Just to set the stage, I think we can kick off our chat now. Elizabeth, thanks a ton for being here for this discussion! It's really great and fitting to have you with us.

06:09

"Hey everyone! So, I've been catching up on the news, whether it's through newspapers or watching it online. #PaytheGrants is really at the forefront of fighting for the rights of people who are having a tough time accessing their SRD Grant. I think it's super important to understand the background and what led to the creation of #PaytheGrants. My name's Elizabeth Raiters, and I'm the deputy chairperson of #PaytheGrants. I also work closely with the community, so I'm in touch with beneficiaries every day."

06:54

So, what we do at GRS is act as the middleman between the beneficiaries and Sasa, which is the Social Development organization. We handle all the questions from the beneficiaries, take them to Sasa, and then bring the answers back. The grant program kicked off in 2020,

but after the first year, the government tried to shut it down. That's when HTE by the Grounds was formed, and they really started fighting for it.

07:36

"Just to wrap things up, I appreciate it, and I think it's important for the audience to understand that #PaytheGrants is really focused on grassroots efforts. It's not just about advocating for applicants to get grants; it actually started with you all as people who were struggling to get those grants yourselves. Honestly, we're all beneficiaries here. Most of us coordinators come from different provinces—all nine provinces in South Africa—and we're all beneficiaries of the SRD Grant. So, we really understand what it's like."

08:20

We've had some problems, and while some got resolved, a lot of us are still part of the majority who are getting unfairly denied benefits every month. And based on that, you know, technology is being integrated into services like Social Security. Whether it's the government that buys and helps design these technologies or the tech companies in the private sector that create and manage them, they're all marketed as being easy and straightforward.

09:04

The idea is that the systems will work better, and people will feel more empowered because they'll have access to government services right at their fingertips. From a marketing and PR angle, it all looks great, but the question is, how easy is it for someone from rural areas, townships, or informal settlements to use and engage with the SRD system? This is actually one of the main points in our lawsuit against the government.

09:46

Not everyone who's eligible for the SRD Grant is tech-savvy, and unfortunately, you can only apply for it online. So, first off, you need a smartphone. Then, you need to have data. Plus, you've really got to be comfortable with technology because, even though it sounds simple since the grant is just R370, it's actually pretty complicated. There are a lot of issues that beneficiaries might not even be aware of, and that's where we come in to help.

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I think this leads pretty well into the discussion about agency and power, or the lack of it. In my opening comments, I mentioned that this is supposed to be a tool for empowerment. But when I was doing community-based interviews for this project, a lot of the applicants

and people trying to get benefits expressed feelings of hopelessness. They just didn't seem to believe in themselves or understand what they wanted.

11:12

"Get how the whole thing works and how decisions are made, especially since you're dealing with marginalized folks who are uncertain about their next meal and living in tough situations. It's a lot to handle. You're talking to people just trying to survive, not to mention thrive. So, from your experience as someone who's been struggling to get benefits, and considering the thousands who rely on the grants from #PaytheGrants, what do you think about the power dynamics at play? Well, here's what I'd say."

11:50

The SRD isn't really a reliable grant that people can count on. You can't say you have any real power because you never know if you'll get the grant one month or if you'll be turned down. There's this unfair situation where if a family member gives you R100 for food, you'll definitely be denied your SRD that month. And honestly, the SRD is only R370; it's just not enough.

12:30

"Getting by on 370 Rand is tough because it doesn't really hold any value in South Africa right now. Elizabeth, you mentioned a policy issue—I've heard the Institute for Economic Justice and the Universal Basic Income Grant Coalition discuss this a lot. When it comes to policy, if you dig into what income actually means, a lot of the feedback I've gotten is about the question of what qualifies as income. Just because I have a certain amount credited to my bank account doesn't necessarily mean I have real income."

13:11

"Just because there's money in the account doesn't mean it's income. Like you said, I could've borrowed it from somewhere. This is exactly why we're fighting this in court right now. We want the government to clarify what actually counts as income. If a family member or a friend is helping you out, or if you're selling something from your house to buy food and the money goes into your account, how is that considered income? You're not employed, so income should mean you're actually working."

13:48

If you're supposed to be getting the SRD, how can the government say no because of some other income? Also, I've noticed something concerning out there: for those who might not know, you're supposed to earn less than 624 Rand a month. But some people who really

need help are finding that even when what gets put into their bank accounts is way under 624 Rand, they're still being flagged for income and might get denied.

14:30

"My neighbor's son lives in KwaZulu-Natal, and if he wants to send her money, she can't because she doesn't have a bank account since she's an old lady. I'm her neighbor, and I'm saying she can use my bank account, but that would actually take me out of the SRV for that month. Even if your family helps you out, the treasury is saying it's 624 rand, but beneficiaries are getting much less—sometimes it's just 100 rand or even 150 rand. Some people aren't getting any money at all."

15:09

You can't even have a bank account, right? So, there are two ways to get paid. One way is through retailers like Pick n Pay, Shoprite, and Checkers, where beneficiaries can go and withdraw their money. The other way is to link your personal bank account for payments. But how can you get declined if you don't even have a bank account? Where is SASSA getting this info from? I think that raises some questions.

15:48

Things like trust and explainability are important. Trust is pretty straightforward, but when we talk about explainability in AI systems—especially in situations involving marginalized folks and Social Security—it really needs to be clear. Applicants should know exactly, down to the nitty-gritty, why their application didn't go through. That's absolutely true, but unfortunately, our agencies aren't great at communicating this to beneficiaries.

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Basically, a lot of people don't really get the SRD Grant because it's super complicated. Since AI is taking over, it seems like there's this group of beneficiaries who have been getting declined since 2022, even though nothing's changed for them. It's like there's an "automated decline button" being pressed on their applications.

17:09

It's all set with the ID numbers; it's just waiting for someone from the staff to hit the button. So it's not like they really know your financial situation. What I'm getting from this chat is that there's some automation happening with Social Security. It looks like some of the admin work on the agency's end has lessened, but now some of that burden is falling on these marginalized communities, and these burdens show up in different ways.

17:55

We talked about how easy it is to use the system, which you could think of as a learning cost. Basically, it's up to you to figure things out and learn how it works. Also, what #PaytheGrants has highlighted is the financial burden that comes with it. It feels almost wrong and contradictory that people who are already struggling financially would face these costs just during the application review process. Can you help clarify this?

18:36

So, here's the deal: for the identification verification process, beneficiaries need a smartphone with a decent camera and internet access. The problem is, a lot of South Africans still have the old green ID book. Unfortunately, since this process uses facial recognition, if you have the green ID book, you won't be able to complete the verification. You'll need to go and apply for a smart ID card instead.

19:22

You're getting a grant of 370 R, but you need to go and apply for a smart ID card, which costs 140 R. That doesn't include the transport money you have to spend to get the ID, and then you'll need to pay again to collect the identity document. Without that ID, you can't verify your identification. Unfortunately, back in June, about a third of the beneficiaries had their Sassa grants blocked due to identification issues.

20:07

So, up until now, there are some beneficiaries who haven't received their grants for the past four months. Their accounts are still blocked, and they can't unblock them because they don't have the money to apply for a smart ID card, which costs around 370 rand. What are these beneficiaries supposed to eat if they have to spend all their money on applying for the grant? And speaking of costs, maybe we should shift focus a bit.

20:44

When it comes to financial costs, there are also psychological costs. I'm not really sure how the audience feels while they're listening to you. My experience in the field really opened my eyes and touched me deeply. I've come across people who are struggling; it's known as the social relief of distress. We have to acknowledge that it works for some people, especially those with better internet access and who know how to navigate the application process, etc. So, it does work for them.

21:22

About 8.5 million people get the grant every month, but when you're talking about the majority of the poor in society, you'll find that a lot of them don't have access to these

resources. I saw a lot of distress out there; some of the words that kept coming up were anxious, anxiety, stress, burdensome, and annoying. It felt like it was really tough, if not impossible, for them to get out of this situation.

22:10

Precarity, so that was really clear to me. I mean, with the way you're diving into the details about the experiences of the applicants and the beneficiaries who are struggling, it's a really heavy burden to bear. Could you please share more about the psychological toll it takes on the applicants? What's going on here is that the emotional impact is really severe when it comes to the SRD. The fact that the SRD grant isn't permanent is a big deal. Plus, it's not like our usual grants in South Africa.

22:51

You know you're definitely getting that grant this month, but I live in a community where the unemployment rate is sky-high, and every household relies on the Social Development system in South Africa. It's heartbreaking when a mother comes to me crying because her kids don't have food because she got turned down for the grant this month. The emotional toll is really tough, and it's stressful for me too since I'm also a beneficiary.

23:35

"I get what you're saying about being left out of the grant every month. It's tough, and it's heartbreaking to see a mom in tears, not knowing what to do. The emotional toll from the SRD Grant situation is huge, no doubt about it. So, Elizabeth, I think we're really diving into how public digital systems are set up and how people feel about them on a personal level. It's real, this is how it affects lives. And just to clarify for some of the audience, we're not..."

24:21

So, when we talk about a single system, here's how the algorithm works: the applicant puts in their details for their application review, and then the algorithms connect with a bunch of databases from both private and public sectors. After that, an automated decision gets made. What makes this tricky is the struggle with interoperability. When we say a system is interoperable, we're referring to the ability of different systems to work together.

24:59

The ability of computer systems or software to exchange and use information is crucial. One big issue that comes up when designing public digital systems in partnerships between public and private sectors is the problem of inaccurate databases. You mentioned

that grant availability checks are done monthly, but it turns out that some of the other databases used to check someone's application aren't always up to date.

25:39

"Every month, you're making decisions based on old and wrong data. So, Elizabeth, my question for you is, from your experience as an activist and as someone who's been struggling to get by, and when you talk to the different beneficiaries you meet, how do you think this can be improved? Honestly, I think the Social Development department should at least double the grant because living costs are just too high right now."

26:24

In South Africa, the grant is quite low. It was introduced in 2020 at R350, and this past April, after three years, it only went up by R20. We really want the grant to be below the food poverty line so that beneficiaries can at least get proper nutrition every day. It should be at least R795, so let's round it to R800. The issue with the databases is that you could have been employed 20 years ago, and you're still listed as employed.

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The unemployment database hasn't been updated, so you'll never get access to the SRD Grant. We've asked Sasa multiple times to check with our labor department and update their systems to remove people who aren't employed anymore. It's the same issue with SARS; some beneficiaries are still on their database even though they're not working, just because they have a tax number.

28:00

I know we're running out of time, but I really want to talk about trust. From my conversations with nearby communities affected by the SRD Grant, it seems like there's a serious lack of trust—not just in the public sector, but also in private institutions. Beneficiaries really don't trust any department, especially with the high rate of fraud in South Africa. It's like the current cases we're seeing...

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I'm working on this issue where some beneficiaries never applied for the SRD Grant, but it shows they've already applied. It's happening a lot right now. The thing is, beneficiaries really want a personal touch when they explain their problems. That's why many of them come to my home for help. I actually assist them every day, and even right now, there are some waiting at my door for me. It's hard to believe!

29:25



Beneficiaries just don't trust the government at all, and unfortunately, we're out of time—it's just a matter of seconds. But I think this discussion highlights that while governments around the world create these systems with people in mind, they need to be grounded in reality; otherwise, they don't make sense and are too disconnected from what's actually happening. Plus, there's a strong message for banks and fraud prevention services involved—they might be limited by bigger social issues.

30:06

"Alright, so let's keep in mind the people involved. Thanks a lot, Elizabeth, and thanks to everyone in the audience. Really appreciate it, everyone, and thanks for tuning in!"