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## Merits and Demerits of Social Assistance Programs to Poor People

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### ABSTRACT

Social assistance programs have increasingly expanded and become a vital tool for poverty alleviation and promoting equitable society, particularly in developing countries. The merits of these programs are well documented in the literature including human capital development, poverty reduction and economic stability and growth. However, such programs are not without demerits; critics argue that social assistance programs have created dependence syndrome among developing countries, implementation challenges due to poor design, low coverage, and limited impacts on the community. This paper discusses the merits and demerits of social assistance programs in developing countries, offering suggestions on how these programs can be refined to foster equilibrium between supporting poor people and promoting sustainable socio and economic self-sufficiency.

### INTRODUCTION

Social assistance refers to the government programs designed to support underprivileged communities, aiming to enhance their welfare and address inequality. Social assistance programs are designed to be selective, ensuring that aid reaches those in genuine need, often requiring recipients to have/adhere to specific guidelines (Alba *et al.*, 2023). It encompasses various forms of aid such as financial support (financial transfer), food subsidies, community work projects, and local nutritional programs targeted at poor children and women (Midgley, 2019). It's often implemented through structured communication and coordination among government bodies and other Non-governmental organizations. Social assistance has its origin in charitable aims giving; it has expanded and become a crucial tool for poverty alleviation playing a role in achieving Sustainable development goals especially in the global south (Midgley, 2020).

Speaking of Global South, social assistance programs have expanded, with many countries implementing conditional cash transfers to reduce poverty and improve livelihood (Sakala *et al.*, 2022). Paying attention to Tanzania as one of the Global South Countries, recent studies reveal that social assistance programs provided by two-tiered systems (formal and informal sector) had many impacts on health, education, and labor markets. However this social assistance programs such as Tanzania Social Action Fund (TASAF) are largely influenced by international donors which shapes program design and targeting methods to achieve effectiveness (Niño-Zarazúa, 2019; Dodlova, 2020). In the context of Uganda there is Social Assistance Grants for Empowerment (SAGE) programs which have gained traction since 2019 (Haynes & Merttens, 2017). Senior Citizen Grants (SCG) for older people households (Namboozee *et al.*, 2021). I hereby submit a critique asserting that depending on international donors for financing and dictating terms

for the social assistance programs ultimately result in the degradation of indigenous community based initiatives and self-sufficiency over time, thereby raising a concerns about the sustainability of such programs in the long term. This stance contradicts one of the fundamental tenets inherent in the developmental social work emphasizing the importance of community based self-sufficiency.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

#### Search strategy

A comprehensive search was performed across multiple academic databases to ensure a wide coverage of relevant literature. The selected databases included Google Scholar, research gate and academia. Keywords were identified as the main components of the search queries; these included 'social assistance, poor people, merits, demerits, and developing countries. The separate search queries were constructed using identified keywords in the context of a research paper. The following search queries were developed:- 'merits and demerits of social assistance programs' AND poor people in developing countries. The searches were restricted to articles published in developing countries.

#### Search Criteria

The search results were screened based on their titles and abstracts to evaluate their relevance to the research topic. Articles that specifically addressed the merits and demerits of social assistance to poor people in developing countries were included for further analysis. A total of 28 papers and reports were utilized in this review based on the following criteria. First, relevance to the research topic; only articles that directly addressed and provided substantial information related merits and demerits of social assistance programs to poor people in developing countries were deemed eligible for this review. Second, alignment with research objectives; only articles

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that contributed relevant findings, insights, theories, or discussions that aligned with either merits or demerits of social assistance programs in developing countries were included. Third, peer reviewed and scholarly; preference was given to articles published in reputable peer-reviewed journals, conference proceedings, or scholarly books, as these sources undergo rigorous evaluation by experts in the field. Lastly, research design and methodology; depending on the nature of this literature review, articles employing different research designs including empirical studies, case studies, and systematic reviews were included to provide a comprehensive overview of the topic. Articles that did not identify with either of the scholarly design were excluded.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Notwithstanding the assertion that social assistance programs particularly in the African countries signify reliance in international donors, these programs possess a numerous merits as elucidated in the subsequent discussion.

Human capital development, consists of the knowledge, skills, and health that individuals accumulate throughout their lives, enabling them to realize their potential as productive members of society (World Bank, 2024). Funds from social assistance are allocated to education and health, fostering long term benefits for beneficiaries (poor people) (Gutura & Tanga, 2014). This leads to the improvement of their quality of life as poor children get access to education and access health needs contributing to the human capital development among poor people. For stance in Uganda, Social assistance positively impacts the quality of life of older poor people by helping them fulfill basic needs, gain access to credit and reduce isolation (Byaruhanga & Debesay, 2021).

Poverty reduction and social assistance have significantly contributed to reducing poverty across African countries, with large-scale initiatives like Ethiopia and South Africa benefiting millions of poor people (Adato & Hoddinott, 2008). Evidences shows that these programs help to prevent poor people from sliding deeper into poverty and interrupt the intergenerational transmission of poverty (Shepherd *et al.*, 2011). Coming to East African countries like Tanzania, social assistance programs have also positive impacts on the reduction of poverty and vulnerability with shifts towards more efficient cash-based and targeted interventions for poor households (Ajwad *et al.*, 2018). Interestingly, recent study shows that social assistance particularly SAGE has contributed to the reduction of poverty and enhances the wellbeing of the vulnerable populations potentially up to two-thirds of the current poverty in Uganda (Ulrich *et al.*, 2024).

Economic growth, stability and resilience, Investment in social assistance to vulnerable population act as an automatic stabilizer during economic downturn assisting poor people to mitigate the impacts of shocks (Gasior *et al.*, 2024). This can act as an example during COVID 19 period, also in Tanzania when they experienced

massive landslides in Manyara Region. Moreover, social assistance program not only addresses equity issues but also stimulates economic growth encouraging savings and creating community assets (Wouterse & Taffesse, 2018). I agree with these argument as many poor people at least own assets with the little cash assistance that they receive from the government, and some have even started to diversify their means of earning income, which in turn contributes to economic growth. Furthermore, in South Africa a comprehensive social assistance programs have been acknowledged as a model for promoting socio economic stability (Ojukwu-Ogba & Nombulelo Lubisi, 2019). On the basis of this, I argue that in the design of this social assistance program, the people in authority should increase the participation of local individuals and the community as it will lead to more effectiveness and increase its sustainability in addressing the needs of the poor/vulnerable.

### **Despite the Evidence Showing the Advantages of Social Assistance to the Poor, Concerns Persist about its Disadvantages, as Discussed below**

Low coverage and limited impact. Much social assistance especially in African countries has low coverage relative to the needs of the populations particularly in rural areas (Nowak-Garmer, 2023). Adding on, Gasior *et al.* (2022) reveals that the poverty reducing impacts of the benefits is generally low with programs often failing to stabilize income during economic crises. In my view, I agree with the fact that social assistance program coverage is low because even those who are living in a vulnerable condition are not all covered, but also, the poverty reduction goal of this social assistance program is not fully realized because of a lack of engagement with the local community.

Implementation challenges. Developing countries faces unique challenges such as high cost of living in urban areas and severe poverty, complicating the outreach and registration of beneficiaries (Moreira, 2017). Moreover, (Niño-Zarazúa, 2019) asserts that implementation challenges are due to complexities of African countries reflecting on demographic transition and rapid urbanization. Furthermore, there's a lack of cohesion and communication channels further impedes effective programs implementations (Moreira & Gentilini, 2016). Another challenges presented in the literature including insufficient funding and inadequate coordination's among institutions (Guloba *et al.*, 2017). On the basis of all of these arguments as a Social Worker I can argue that each arguments presented by the authors above leads to deeper understanding of the systemic barriers that need to be addressed. Therefore, there's a need for holistic approach that will consider demographic, institutional and economic factors to improve effectiveness of social assistance programs in African contexts.

Social assistance program has created dependence syndrome among African countries. This is due to the fact that most of the social assistance programs are influenced

by the external policies which made African societies to diminish local governance and African ways of providing assistance which is communal based. According to (Shepherd *et al.*, 2011), social assistance has created dependency and misuse of funds. This raises concerns about the donor-driven dependency policy “merchandizing of cash schemes” in Africa which promote a limited view of development focused on poverty alleviation rather than structural transformation (Adesina, 2020).

I agree that Social assistance has disrupted African ways of providing social assistance and diminish community ways of providing assistance to each other which has disrupted social cohesion and in the end vulnerable populations ends up depending on the government to provide for them while on the same time government cannot provide sustainable social assistance to all people because of insufficient funding. I argue for African countries to put emphasizes on the indigenous ways of assisting each other and using our own resources in order to avoid intergenerational dependency.

Social assistance programs in African countries have been criticized in relation to its governance, effectiveness and cultural relevance. According to (Mthethwa, 2014) many social security institutions suffers from poor governance and management as many of them were inherited by from the colonial government, He continues to argues that excessive interference in social security undermines their effectiveness and accountability. Moreover, Devereu (2013) argues that cash transfer schemes while provided as an alternatives to food aids, have been criticized for failing to tackle chronic food insecurity in many African countries. On the basis of these critiques, I agrees that social security has not been able to provide a holistic interventions that covers all population to promote wellbeing of the populations as whole, therefore I argue for critical examinations of these social security programs in African countries in areas of its management and governance and advocates for further dialogue and research in order to develops a holistic social assistance programs that will be sustainable by using indigenous and innovative approaches by using community resources so as to promote sustainable changes and improves the standards of living among vulnerable populations across African countries.

## CONCLUSION

A social assistance program in African contexts has to deal with a significant challenge which needs a refined understanding of local needs and realities. By adopting development social work or social development, we can be able to address the challenges of poverty and insufficient resources by paying attention to empowerment, engagement of community, and culturally relevant practices. Through developmental social works we can create different interventions that are not only sustainable but address the unique needs of our community and develop resilience to enable community to thrive in the times of adversities.

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