

The child support grant: Are conditions appropriate?

Katharine Hall

Children's Institute, University of Cape Town

South Africa is widely acknowledged as having a social grant system that is unusual in the developing world in terms of its scope and effectiveness in reducing and alleviating poverty. The grants are recognised for achieving major impact without imposing conditions on grant recipients. Despite this acknowledged success, there are repeated suggestions that South Africa should consider imposing conditions. The suggestions arise, in particular, in respect of the child support grant.

This Children Count brief looks at the arguments and counter-arguments for having conditions attached to the child support grant (CSG):

- On this page we explain what is meant by conditions, and present the main arguments offered for introducing conditions.
- The inside pages provide an overview of the CSG – its growth, reach and impact in the absence of conditions – and then discuss whether conditions are appropriate in South Africa, using evidence from national surveys.
- On the back page, we summarise attempts to impose conditions.

What is a condition?

A condition exists when a person must behave in a specified way – for instance ensuring that their child is immunised or attends school regularly – in order to receive or continue receiving a social grant. Conditional cash transfers, often referred to as CCTs, are particularly common in Latin America, although agencies such as the World Bank are now encouraging their introduction elsewhere. In South Africa, social grants have generally been unconditional in that recipients have not been required to comply with behavioural rules in order to continue receiving their grants.

What are the arguments for attaching conditions to social grants?

Those who advocate for conditional grants offer four main reasons:

- **Bigger effects:** by forcing recipients to take action to improve the education and health of themselves or their children, the cash transfer can accomplish longer-term and more wide-reaching benefits than immediate poverty alleviation.
- **Socio-cultural biases:** in a male-dominated society where girls suffer discrimination, conditions may be used as an incentive to encourage parents and other caregivers to send their girl children to school.
- **Stigma:** those who receive grants may feel ashamed or stigmatised if they receive 'something for nothing'.
- **Political acceptability:** those who are not eligible for grants will be more willing to accept the distribution of public funds (including their taxes) to the poor if this is not seen merely as a hand-out.

Are the arguments applicable in South Africa?

- South African grants have achieved substantial impact without conditions. The positive effects include the areas of child health and education, which are seen as critical to longer-term poverty reduction.
- Concerns about gender parity in school access are not relevant in South Africa, as school attendance rates are the same for boys and girls.
- Concerns about stigma are also not relevant, as the prevalence of poverty means that a large number of households qualify and grant recipients are therefore not an exceptional group.
- The argument for conditions in South Africa is therefore mainly a political one.



Clarifying terminology

What is the CSG?

The child support grant is a government grant paid each month to primary caregivers of children in South Africa. To be eligible, the applicant caregiver must pass an income means test. The value of the grant is R270 per child per month in 2011.

What is the difference between ‘eligibility requirements’ and ‘conditions’?

All cash transfers that are not universal use some kind of eligibility criteria, such as age requirements or an income threshold (means test) for applicants. There are also usually other requirements, such as possession of an identity document. All of these define the characteristics or qualifications necessary to access the grant. But they are not conditions.

Conditions (also called ‘conditionalities’) are imposed in addition to the eligibility requirements, and require that the beneficiary must behave in a specified way. The condition may require once-off performance, such as getting the child fully immunised. Or it may require ongoing behaviour, such as ensuring that the child attends school.

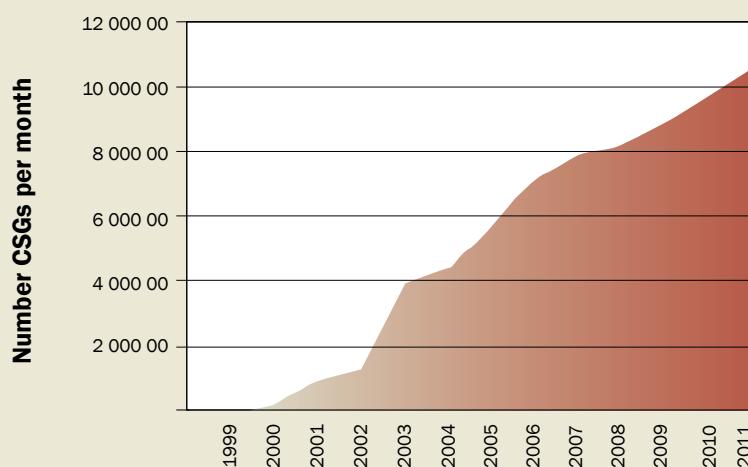
What is the difference between ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ conditions?

When conditions are enforced, they are called hard conditions and beneficiaries who do not behave in the specified way risk losing the benefit. When non-compliance does not result in loss of the grant – and perhaps also results in measures to assist the beneficiary to comply – we talk about ‘soft’ conditions.

What is the reach of the CSG?

The CSG was introduced in 1998 and expanded rapidly. In 2011, it is received by over 10 million children each month and is South Africa’s largest grant in terms of number of beneficiaries (children covered). However, it provides the smallest benefit (R270 in 2011) – only about a quarter of the amount of the old age pension and disability grant.

Fig. 1 Growth of the CSG 1998 – 2011



Source: South African Social Security Agency: Monthly SOCOPEN reports

What is the impact of the unconditional CSG in South Africa?

Advocates for conditional cash transfers (CCTs) point to the beneficial impact conditional grants have on the children and families that receive them. They note that CCTs in other countries have resulted in decreased levels of poverty, increased levels of children’s school enrolment and attendance, and improved health of children. However, there is little evidence that the conditions, rather than the grants, bring these benefits.

In South Africa, research has shown that the ‘un-conditional’ CSG has achieved similar impacts:

- The CSG decreases the child poverty headcount and contributes substantially to the income of the poorest households (Hall & Wright 2010; Woolard & Leibbrandt 2010).
- The CSG increases school enrolment levels among child beneficiaries (Case et al 2005; Budlender et al 2008; Williams 2007). There is also some evidence that it increases enrolment of the siblings of child beneficiaries (Budlender & Woolard 2006).
- The CSG improves children’s health and nutritional outcomes as measured by the well-known measure of height for age (Coetzee 2010; Agüero et al 2005).
- The CSG reduces the incidence of child hunger (Williams 2007).
- The CSG may reduce the likelihood of older children engaging in child labour (Budlender & Woolard 2006).

The fact that the CSG has achieved these impacts calls into question the usefulness of conditions.

Are conditions appropriate in SA? An evidence-based enquiry.

In this section we examine the following condition, which has repeatedly been proposed:

“Children who receive child support grants must attend school.”

This may seem reasonable, but existing evidence shows the flaws in the assumptions behind this condition.

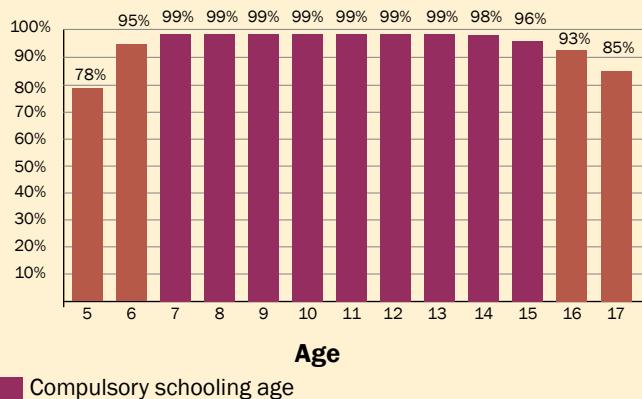
Assumption 1: School-age children are not attending school

(*There is a problem that needs to be addressed*)

Conclusion: Incorrect

Evidence: School enrolment and attendance rates in South Africa are already high, for both boys and girls. 97% of children aged 7-17 years attend an educational institution. Similarly high enrolment rates are recorded by the Department of Basic Education.

Fig.2 Proportion of children reported to be attending school, by age



■ Compulsory schooling age

Source: Own calculations from General Household Survey 2009

Assumption 2: Non-attendance at school is the result of bad choices by caregivers

(*The ‘problem’ is the result of undesirable behaviour by the poor*)

Conclusion: Incorrect

Evidence: The main reasons for non-attendance relate to the quality of education and the circumstances of the family. Conditions would risk excluding the most vulnerable children from both education and social grants.

Fig. 3 Main reason for non-attendance

(Based on school-age children who are not attending school)

No money / unaffordable	24%
Education is useless	17%
Illness / disability	15%
Unable to perform at school / failed	11%
Working / family commitment	11%
Pregnancy	6%
Completed education / sufficient	4%
Not accepted – too young / old	3%
Can't get to school / too far	1%

Source: Own calculations from General Household Survey 2009

Absenteeism rates are fairly low amongst enrolled learners: a national survey found that 86% of learners did not miss more than 5 school days in the year. The main reason for temporary absence was illness (84%), followed by physical access problems caused by weather conditions (9%) (Strassburg et al 2010).

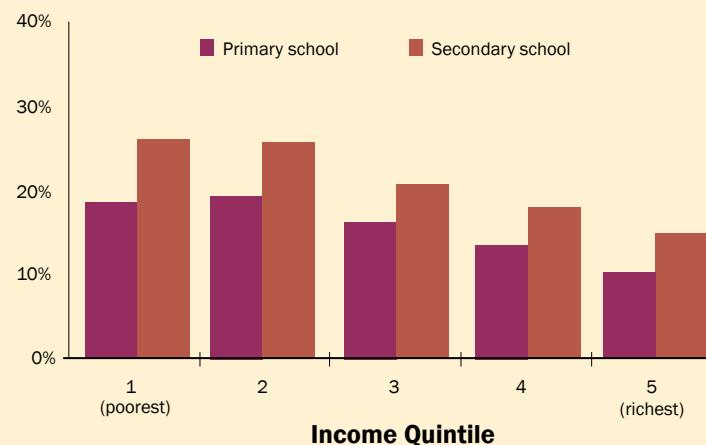
Assumption 3: All children are able to attend school

(*Beneficiaries are able to comply with the condition*)

Conclusion: Incorrect

Evidence: Although schooling is compulsory in South Africa, supply-side problems make it difficult for some children to attend. Every year some children are turned away from schools that are full. Over 2 million children do not have schools within a 30-minute radius of their home, and the vast majority walk to school. The high attendance rates reflect great effort and determination to reach schools.

Fig 4. Proportion of school-age children who live far from school, by income quintile



Source: Own calculations from General Household Survey 2009

Assumption 4: School attendance = education = long-term poverty reduction

(*Compliance with the behavioural requirements will lead to the desired outcomes*)

Conclusion: Not necessarily

Evidence: While school attendance rates in South Africa are high, educational outcomes are poor. Government acknowledges that this is the result of institutional failings: absent teachers, badly managed schools, problems with the syllabus, text book delays and so on. Just going to school does not mean that children are getting educated and will subsequently find a job.

Assumption 5: Conditions are legal

(*The condition is not in conflict with a legal entitlement*)

Conclusion: Not true without changing the law

Evidence: Children have a constitutional and statutory right to social security. The Social Assistance Act does not give the Executive (government) the authority to limit children's rights.

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A history of attempts to condition the CSG

Government has made several attempts to introduce conditions over the years.

- 1998 Introduction of the CSG.** Initially, the CSG had a range of conditions, including that applicants provide proof that their children had been immunised. This requirement was dropped when it became clear that the requirement discriminated against children who were already disadvantaged and struggled to access health care services.
- 2004 Draft regulations to the Social Assistance Act.** The draft regulations stated that the child must receive immunisation and, if of school-going age, must attend school regularly. It also included less measurable conditions or ‘normative injunctions’ which described things that caregivers are normally expected to do such as provide food, clothing and shelter. All these conditions were dropped from the regulations in recognition that they were both unnecessary and impossible to implement.
- 2009 Draft amended regulations to the Social Assistance Act.** Later draft regulations introduced a behavioural condition requiring proof every six months of the child’s enrolment and attendance at school. If the child failed to attend regularly, the CSG would be suspended. Following urgent submissions from children’s sector and human rights groups about the implications of these conditions, which would be punitive if enforced, the conditions were softened.

The current regulations to the Social Assistance Act 2009 state that:

- (5) *The primary care giver must:*
- in respect of a child between the ages of seven and 18 years, cause such a child to be enrolled at and to attend school;*
 - within one month of approval of a child support grant ... provide proof of school or an educational institution enrolment and attendance to the Agency;*
 - every six months ... submit to the Director-General ... that child's recent school or educational institution report signed by the principal or head of that school or institution; and*
 - where a child referred to in paragraph (a) is not enrolled or fails to attend school, notify the Director-General of the National Department of Social Development, in writing.*

These are ‘soft’ conditions because the grant may not be suspended if a child fails to attend school. But the conditions still cause problems:

- They impose time and financial costs on caregivers, who are required to provide regular ‘proof’ of the child’s school attendance.
- They impose on the Department of Basic Education the impossible task of reporting any CSG beneficiaries who are not in school.
- They place a duty on social workers to investigate and resolve all instances of non-attendance. Yet social workers are already in short supply and unable to cope with cases of abuse, neglect and other critical child protection issues.
- Even if the conditions are intended to be ‘soft’, there is a risk that they will be enforced punitively by social security officials.

For more information contact
kath.hall@uct.ac.za

Proofing: Charmaine Smith & Lori Lake
Design: Designs4development, www.d4d.co.za
© July 2011 Children’s Institute
University of Cape Town
Tel: + 27 21 689 5404
Fax: + 27 21 689 8330
www.ci.org.za

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