

South Africa: Civil Society Uses Budget Analysis & Advocacy to Improve the Lives of Poor Children

In 1996, two years after the end of apartheid, the Government of South Africa established a committee to recommend a new approach to social security grants for children. A new approach was needed because the apartheid-era grant did not reach children from the majority black population despite the fact that black people were the most likely to be poor. Government told the committee that the new approach must not cost more than the old approach although it would need to reach far more children.

The committee proposed that the old grant be replaced by a new Child Support Grant (CSG) that would cover more children but with a lower monthly grant payment. The CSG was introduced in 1998 for children up to their seventh birthday. The monthly amount was R100.

Over the following years civil society organizations did advocacy to improve the grant. Their advocacy included budget analysis, other research, informing and mobilizing the public, engaging with policymakers and government officials, and court cases.

Civil society groups did research because they believed that advocacy based on evidence would be stronger than demands without evidence. Some of the organizations had evidence because they provided assistance to CSG applicants in poor communities. Other organizations did research through surveys, interviews, examining documents, and budget analysis. Organizations with different skills worked together to make the advocacy stronger.

The budget-related research included calculations that showed that the value of the grant decreased in real terms (after adjusting for inflation) in the first years. Government responded quickly by increasing the size of the grant, and there have been regular increases at least once a year ever since. Other budget-related research estimated the budget that would be needed for the age group to be increased and the means test changed to make more children eligible.

Some of the research done by civil society organizations was commissioned by government. Some of this research showed that even though there were no conditions for the CSG, the grant resulted in increased school enrolment and improved health and nutrition and other benefits that other countries (in Latin America, for example) reported for conditional grants.

In some cases when changes did not happen after the research and advocacy, civil society brought cases before the courts. For example, a court case was needed before the rules were changed to allow people without identity documents to use other documents when applying for the grant. This change was important because government was not delivering identity documents efficiently.

Civil society's advocacy helped achieve important improvements in the grant. For example, the amount of the grant is now R280 per month, and children can receive the grant up to their 18th birthday. The means test was also increased. In 2012 nearly 11 million children receive the grant, compared to less than 2 million in 2001.