Issues in Information Systems
Volume 27, Issue 4, pp. 644-656, 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.48009/4_iis_2026_158

A conceptual framework for the social security grant digital tracking System

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Abstract

There is increasing misuse and mismanagement of social assistance grants provided by the South African social security agency (SASSA). The challenges are caused by the lack of a system that can track and monitor the use of grant funds after the disbursement. This study aims to develop a conceptual framework that can guide the development of a digital tracking system to control the spending of the social assistance grant funds on essential products and services within defined geographical locations. From a qualitative perspective, document analysis was employed to collect the related literature. Actor-network theory and structuration theory were complementarily applied as lenses to guide the use of thematic techniques in the data analysis. The analysis focused on identifying themes such as structure, actors, actions, and consequences within the data. From the analysis, six main components: Location, Commodity, Validation (x2), Transaction, and Real-time interaction were identified as the influencing factors. The components demystify the processes and activities for the disbursement and use of the funds. The conceptual framework is developed based on the components. The framework is significant to the three main stakeholders: the Department of Social Development, SASSA, and social grant beneficiaries. The study contributes theoretically and methodologically to the academic field and to society and SASSA.

Keywords: actor-network theory, digital tracking system, social security grant and structuration theory

Introduction

The South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) is responsible for the administration and disbursement of social grant payments to vulnerable citizens in the country (Ncamane, 2023). Financial grants (security measures) are paid to beneficiaries monthly (Landman, 2024). The grants are aimed at alleviating poverty and addressing inequalities, including social stability in South Africa (Carswell et al., 2023). The security measures consist of two programs, which are social insurance and social assistance grants (Nzabamwita & Dinbabo, 2022; Haurovi, 2021; Van der Berg, 1997). This study focuses on the social assistance grants.
Social assistance grants are meant for vulnerable citizens who are unable to work, such as children from poor households, senior citizens, and people with disabilities (Qwede & Mofolo, 2023; Mackett, 2020). The grants are intended to help the beneficiaries with basic needs such as food, education, healthcare, and clothing (Hlwatika & Raseala, 2020). This includes accelerating and contributing towards the economic development of the country. Zikhali (2021) states that most South Africans live below the poverty line.

However, not all vulnerable citizens qualify for the social assistance grants. Criteria are used, and a test is conducted to determine the eligibility of applicants (Tricxy, 2024; Masilela et al., 2020).

Currently, there are over 18 million beneficiaries of the social assistance grants (Hollander et al., 2024). According to Miyajima (2024), there are indirect beneficiaries who benefit indirectly from grants paid to eligible household members, including guardians. Some of the indirect beneficiaries are caregivers, who often use the grant funds for their personal needs instead of the intended purposes (Tricxy, 2024). It therefore defeats the purpose and aims of the program. As a result, poverty alleviation is not fulfilled, and the affected beneficiaries continue to lack basic needs. This is compounding the country's challenges with poverty alleviation and citizen care. From this perspective, Leisering (2021) argues that social assistance grants cannot solve the poverty faced by the country. Therefore, it is critical to refocus towards the original aim of the grants. In doing so, an innovation that addresses financial disbursement is required.

Despite the importance of social assistance grants to the citizens, there are several challenges. This includes misuse and mismanagement of the funds (Ntsanwisi, 2024; Motsapi, 2021; Khosa & Kaseke, 2017). The challenges get worse because the funds can neither be traced nor controlled after they are disbursed to the beneficiaries. The current system does not enable tracing and tracking of the social assistance grants (Munir et al., 2022). Also, some of the beneficiaries are either too young or too old to understand how their money is spent. This results in fraud, theft, misuse, and mismanagement of funds (Mashaba & Saurombe, 2023). Haurovi (2021) argues that some of the challenges are caused by the legacy systems used by SASSA, which cannot detect fraud and malpractice. These challenges raise concerns about the sustainability of the agency and social grants.

Therefore, Luthuli and Nirmala (2024) suggest that SASSA needs an effective system that can improve the administration and reduce corruption within the social assistance grants. Mokoena and Ngwakwe (2022) argue that a good governance system is required to sustain the continuation of social assistance grants in South Africa. Thus, this study develops a conceptual framework that can guide the development of a digitalised system to control the spending of the social assistance grant funds on products and services within defined geographical locations. Digitalised tracking system is explained by Shah et al. (2021), as a technology solution that uses tools to track in real time, monitor, and manage items and activities performed by people. The conceptual framework for digital systems paves the way to gaining a better understanding of the types of products or services and locations where the recipients spend the social assistance grant funds. This assists in gaining a deeper insight into the locations and products or services in which the social assistance grant funds are spent. Also, it helps with comprehension in reengineering and reconfigured technologies used to disburse the funds.

The paper is organised into six sections. The introduction is presented in the first section, followed by the literature review in section two. The third section discusses the theories underpinning the study. The fourth and fifth sections represent the research methodology and the discussion of the conceptual framework developed in the study. The conclusion is presented in the last section.

Literature Review

Social Security Grants

Many countries across the world provide social security in the form of financial assistance to their citizens (Keng'ara, 2014). This includes South Africa and a few African countries such as Nigeria (Asuquo et al., 2021) and Eswatini (Raju & Younger, 2021). The grants are for specific purposes. Therefore, the beneficiaries must be qualified to enroll in the program and receive the financial grants. In South Africa,

the grants are administered by the Department of Social Development and distributed by agencies on behalf of the government (Matsoso & Gasela, 2024). Two challenges that could potentially derail the Social Security program were identified: disbursement and spending of the grants (Ntsanwisi, 2024; Zikhali, 2021).

Initially, the social assistance programs relied on manual cash disbursement. The grants were physically delivered to the beneficiaries through pay points such as post offices and government offices (Seekings, 2020). Challenges of maladministration, fraud and corruption arose, and a digital payment system was introduced (Gronbach, 2020). Masilela et al. (2020) associated the maladministration with system glitches and technical errors. Haurovi (2021) states that there were ghost beneficiaries who received monthly payments. Similar corrupt practices confront countries such as Nigeria (Asuquo et al., 2021) and China (Wang, 2022). Digital payment technologies were introduced to reduce fraud and corruption. These technologies include distributing grants to the beneficiaries via smart cards or directly to the beneficiaries' bank accounts (Gronbach, 2020). Despite this effort, the challenges remain (Kajiita & Kang'ethe, 2024; Landman, 2024).

Digitalised tracking system

In addition to the challenges identified with the disbursement of the grants, there is a bigger problem. The current system lacks monitoring and control of how and where the social grants are spent. According to Zikhali (2021), on one hand, caregivers who are working use the grants for their own needs and not those of vulnerable beneficiaries. On the other hand, the social grants are supposed to facilitate the development of poor communities (Nnaeme, 2024). However, that has not been the case due to the beneficiaries spending the money outside of their geographical locations.

Some beneficiaries spend the money on non-essential needs such as gambling, stokvels, and loans (Luthuli et al., 2022; Khosa & Kaseke, 2017). This could be attributed to the high unemployment rate in South Africa. Ketani and Tanga (2019) state that the social grant money is the only income for some families where none of the members is employed. In other circumstances, beneficiaries use the grant funds as seed money to support livelihood activities such as buying and selling goods (Garidzirai & Chikuruwo, 2020). This is to generate income using the grant money, to sustain themselves economically because the social grant is insufficient to provide the beneficiaries a decent living (Haurovi, 2021). As a result, the money is diverted to other courses, which sometimes contribute to the growing challenges experienced by the beneficiaries and the country at large.

Currently in South Africa, there are no digitalised systems to monitor and track the use of social grants (Kumaraswamy, 2024). Havouri (2021) highlights a need for a system that can track and monitor how the grant funds are spent beyond disbursement, to encourage a culture of accountability and continuous improvement. According to Sarjito (2025), digitalised tracking systems enhance transparency, reduce fraud, and improve efficiency in financial transactions and service delivery. Omotoye and Holtzhausen (2025) highlight that digitalised tracking systems provide innovative ways to deal with the misuse of public funds. Based on the significance, digitalised systems are increasingly deployed by governments of many countries.

A digitalised system was employed to automate the system for awarding child benefits automatically in Norway (Larsson, 2021). In India, Kumari et al. (2022) proposed a digital tracking system to track the use of funds donated to charities and non-profit organisations by donors. The proposed system provides accountability and transparency, whereby the donors can see the utilisation of the funds by the recipients. From the Swedish perspective, Andersson et al. (2022) explained how digitalisation of public services involves the transformation of the relationship between public service providers and clients, from the angle of practical outcomes. In Indonesia, a digitalised system called SIKS-NG was implemented to track and

monitor the financial transactions between the Ministry of Social Affairs and citizens (Sarjito, 2025). The reputation of digitalised systems is growing. It helps to fortify and promote trust between the government and citizens while strengthening the credibility of social assistance programs.

Theory Underpinning the Study

Structuration theory (ST) and actor-network theory (ANT) were complementarily used to underpin the study. From a structuration perspective, the concept of structure was applied. While three tenets from ANT follow the actors', irreversibility and obligatory passage point were applied to guide the data analysis.

Structuration Theory

Structuration Theory (ST) focuses on social structure, agency, and reproduction of social systems (Giddens, 1984). Social structure and agency are mutually constitutive in duality (Jones & Karsten, 2008). Meaning a social system is a combination of both structure and agency (Hughes et al., 2022). According to Iyamu (2021), structure, not in a linguistic term, refers to rules and resources, while agency refers to technical and non-technical agents. The South African grant funds are disbursed based on requirements using various facilities (e.g. technological solutions) such as the bank cards, which are enacted by rules.

Reproductively, structure enables and at the same time constrains actions performed by agents (Shao et al., 2023; Garnsey, 1994). According to Meneklis and Douligeris (2010), there is no prioritisation of importance between agency and structure because they depend on each other equally. The interaction of human agents in a social system produces and reproduces social structures over time (Rose,1998). In addition, the continual transformation of structures creates the reproduction of new systems (Nnaeme, 2024). Hence, the theory was used to understand the interaction and relationship between social assistance grants disbursement and the spending of the funds by the beneficiaries.

Actor-Network Theory

Actor-Network Theory (ANT) is a sociotechnical theory that focuses on actors, the formulation of networks, which are consciously or unconsciously formed, and the heterogeneity of these networks (Latour, 1996; Callon,1986). The core elements of ANT include actor-network and translation, and they are related to each other (Cai & Guo, 2020). In ANT, actors are both human and non-human and have the capacity to make a difference (Couldry, 2008). This means that an actor can be a person, technology or a document (Quattrone & Hopper, 2005). Also, both human and non-human are equal since they contribute equally to the network (Wernick et al., 2008). From this perspective, the theory offers to explain the conflicting viewpoints of different actors in the same terms by using vocabularies that work the same way for both human and non-human actors, as Iyamu (2024) symmetrically puts it. This is essentially important in gaining an understanding of the challenges confronting the disbursement and spending of the South African social grant funds.

Some other important aspects of ANT that are critically useful for this study are translation, obligatory passage point (OPP), irreversibility, and the theory's mantra, which is 'follow the actors' (Latour, 2005). Mlambo and Iyamu (2024) argued that the challenges can be better understood by following the actors, because only then would insights into the significance and impact of the events be gained. Translation transforms meanings associated with an activity from one stage to another (Latour, 2005), which helps to gain an understanding of how technologies are created and the associated meaning by actors (Birke & Knierim, 2020). OPP refers to the points in a network where actors must negotiate or collaborate in performing their tasks (Pandey & Ravishankar, 2022). In summation, Callon (1991) argues that irreversibility refers to the extent to which it is impossible to go back to alternatives. Thus, ANT is most

appropriate and useful in this study, as it offers a process of following the actors and explaining the translations of their activities and actions, to gain a deeper understanding of how and where the South African social grants are disbursed and spent.

Research Methodology

Qualitative Methods

From the interpretive perspective, qualitative methods were used in the study. Qualitative methods focus on the interpretation of non-numeric data such as words, images, and videos (Susanto et al., 2024), using different explanations to gain knowledge (Alhojailan & Ibrahim, 2012). This is done to understand social events, issues, and practices involved in the phenomenon (Saunders et al., 2019). According to Davies and Fisher (2018), the qualitative method is subjective by nature, and it is rooted in multiple realities of truth. This has influenced the selection of the method for this study to understand the multiple realities about the disbursement and use of the South African social grants. In addition, the method helps to unpack how and why the South African social grant funds are disbursed and spent by the government and beneficiaries, respectively, as they do currently.

Document analysis technique was employed to collect existing literature related to the phenomenon under investigation. The techniques focus on reviewing existing documents or books to gain a comprehensive understanding of a concept (Furidha, 2023). Documentation such as conference papers, books, book chapters and journal articles were collected from academic databases. The databases included Google scholar, Ebscohost, Tylor and Francis, and Emerald. The documents covered the period of ten years, from 2016 to 2026. The rationale for this period is to understand the historical background of the phenomenon. According to Iyamu et al. (2016) document analysis technique helps to provide background and history of the phenomenon over time. From the title of the study, keywords were identified and used to search for documents. The keywords included social grants, social security and digital tracking system. Based on the criteria, a total of 42 documents were collected as a set of data and used for the study.

Analysis of the data

Qualitative data analysis is concerned with transforming raw data into meaningful information. This is done by coding, mapping, and identifying patterns and themes from the collected data (Mezmir, 2020). Data analysis under qualitative research is complex due to the lack of a universal methodology that can be employed to conduct data analysis (Dufour & Richard, 2019). Thus, techniques used, such as theoretical lenses, add rigour to the study.

The thematic technique was used to analyse the data. The analysis focused on identifying themes such as structure, actors, actions, and consequences within the data. According to Guest (2011), thematic analysis is a technique used to rigorously analyse qualitative data that is collected using techniques such as semi-structured interviews, focus groups and observations. This is done by identifying patterns of meaning and describing ideas within the datasets (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Hence, it was used to find meaning associated with things and actions in the data, to understand why and how the social grants beneficiaries use the funds the way they do. Structuration theory and Actor-network theory (ANT) were used as lenses to guide the data analysis. The theories were used complementarily.

Structuration theory helps to identify the structure, which includes the resources (social grant funds and facility) and the rules that apply to the structure. This guides **Validation #1.** Structuration theory helps to understand the relationship between the resources and rules, which is based on **Validation #2**, in the disbursement and spending of the grants. ANT was used to differentiate the **Locations** (networks) to

understand the actor-networks that are formed when disbursing social grant funds. Thereafter, using ANT concepts of 'follow the actors' to understand what the beneficiaries do and why they do it, which is the **Transactions**. Obligatory passage point (OPP), which is an ANT tenet, help to understand how the rules of social grant disbursements can be formed and enforced, including how the digital system can make them irreversible.

Conceptual Framework and Discussion

The conceptual framework is a diagram that consists of ideas and concepts that are logically arranged to display their relationship and interconnections (Mensah et al., 2020). The diagram serves as a roadmap that provides a structure and guidance of the solution path (Adom et al., 2018). According to Varpio et al. (2020), a conceptual framework provides clarity towards the final solution. This helps the readers to understand the objectives of the study and how they will be achieved. Oyewobi et al. (2024) state that in the absence of a conceptual framework, the final solution may remain challenging.

Based on the study's aim, which was to develop a conceptual framework that can guide the digitalised systems for the disbursement of social security grants, a set of data was analysed. From the analysis, complementarily using structuration theory and ANT, a conceptual framework was developed (Figure 1). The theories helped to demystify the processes and activities into various components, as shown in Figure 1.

The conceptual framework for this study is presented in Figure 1. It consists of six main components: Location, Commodity, Validation (x2), Transaction, and Real-time interaction. Location is the residence of the beneficiaries, within which they must spend funds. This is intended to support small businesses in the areas and contribute to alleviating poverty. The second component, Commodity, covers the commodities that are listed for the funds. This includes only essential commodities such as food and electricity. The location and commodities are validated, respectively, in the fourth and fifth components. A successful validation allows Transactions, which are the use of the funds. Real-time interaction happens between the database (beneficiary information) and the other components, as illustrated with arrows in the conceptual framework.

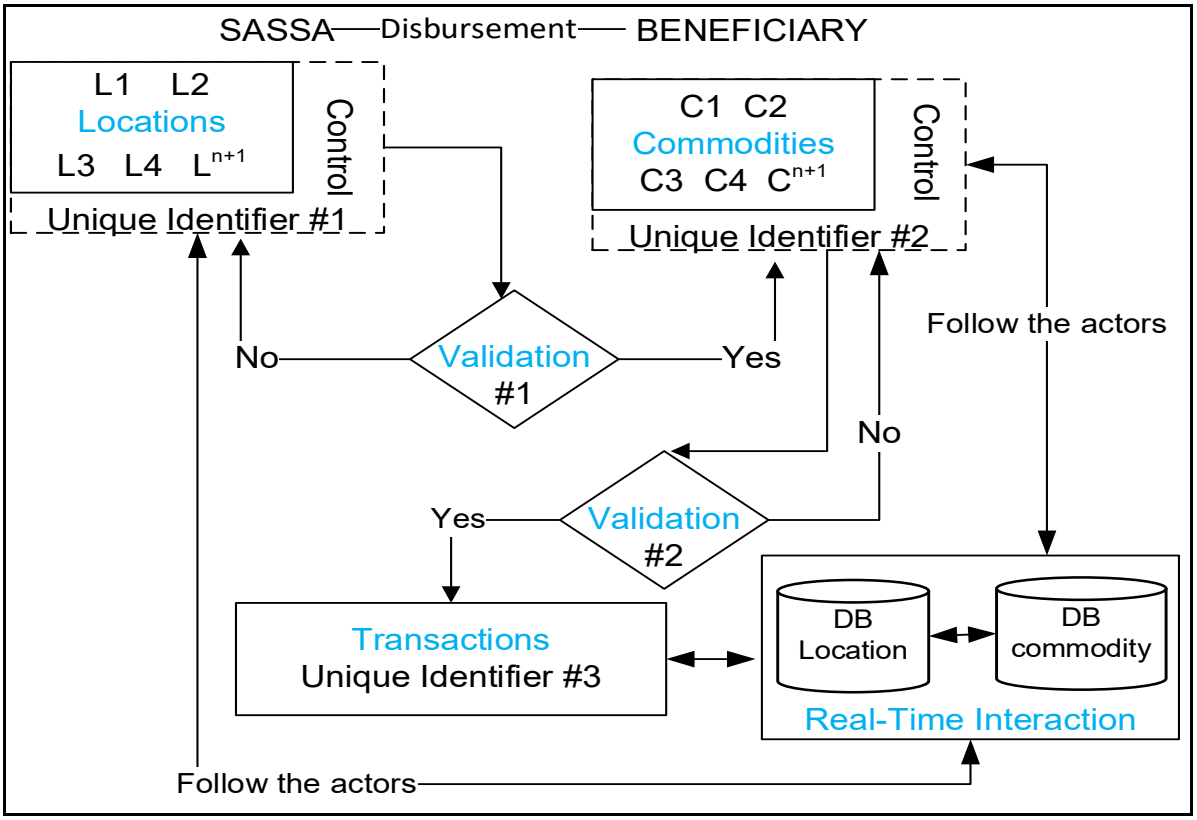


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

The misuse and mismanagement of the funds by the recipients for non-essential needs manifest in three main ways (Ntsanwisi, 2024; Khosa & Kaseke, 2017). Firstly, the problem undermines the purpose of the social grants, which is to improve the living conditions and the quality of life of vulnerable individuals. One of the implications is that the government loses the opportunity to invest in the lives of vulnerable individuals (Motsapi, 2021). Secondly, the problem exacerbates the poor living conditions of vulnerable individuals (Malatji & Malatji, 2021). Thirdly, government resources and taxpayers' money are misdirected and wasted. This hinders the efforts to address poverty and inequalities in South Africa (Garidzirai & Chikuruwo, 2020; Blake, 2018). Consequently, this has an impact on the economy of the country. This conceptual framework is intended to address these problems.

Based on the implications of the problems, it is crucial to adopt a digitalised system to control the spending of the social assistance grant funds on products and services within defined geographical locations. This helps to provide transparency and accountability between fund providers and recipients. Also, the system helps to minimise the abuse of the funds and ensure the optimal utilisation of social assistance grants, to improve the living conditions of vulnerable individuals.

Limitations and Future Studies

Although the study is comprehensive and achieves its objective, there are limitations. One of the limitations is that the study does not include empirical data. This means that the stakeholders were not involved in the study. Future work could involve interviews with beneficiaries, administrators or policymakers to ensure that the proposed system addresses stakeholder needs and practical constraints. The study proposes a

conceptual framework, which means further development is required. The development of the framework will include what it does, what technology it assumes, how it connects to adjacent components, and what failure conditions could be expected.

Conclusion

The study seeks to develop a conceptual framework that can be used to guide the deployment (development and implementation) of a tracking and monitoring system for social grant funds. Therefore, the conceptual framework is significant to the three main stakeholders: the Department of Social Development, SASSA, and social grant beneficiaries. Firstly, based on the framework, the Department of Social Development and SASSA can formulate both technical and non-technical requirements for a new system. Secondly, the framework is significant to the beneficiaries who are not in control of their grant funds. Since it can help to develop a system that can control the use of social grant funds. Lastly, the framework can guide the development of new policies on the use of social assistance grants.

The study contributes theoretically and methodologically to the academic field and practically to society and SASSA. Theoretically, the study contributes to the body of knowledge by adding to existing academic literature on social grants and digitalised grant tracking systems. Even though there are existing studies on social grants and digital systems, those studies do not focus on grant or funds tracking systems. Practically, the study contributes to society by building a system that can track and monitor the use of social grant funds in South Africa. Based on the factors influencing the components presented by the study, a national policy framework can be developed. The contribution is to the government, agency, and vulnerable beneficiaries who are not in control of their funds.

Lastly, the study contributes methodologically by providing a method of using Actor-Network and Structuration theory for a study focusing on social grants. At the point of conducting this study, no study was guided by ANT and ST to develop a framework that can be used to develop a grant tracking system (IT solution) for social grants.

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