



STATEMENT: SAVING RANDS, COSTING LIVES

It's time for universal basic income

26 May 2026

The basic income policy must conceptualise social assistance as a critical foundation for sustainable livelihoods for all—including those outside the formal labour market, caregivers, and millions of people whom the economy continues to exclude.

The resourcing and effectiveness of the Department of Social Development (DSD) is a matter of life and death. Millions of adults and children depend on DSD to eat, and in the month of April alone, as the impact of the war in Iran began to kick in, the cost of feeding a child a basic, nutritious diet [increased](#) by over R30. Meanwhile, the Child Support Grant only increased by R20 for the whole year.

Following the tabling of DSD's Budget Vote in parliament by the Acting Minister last week, we have a very clear message for government: In a country with abundant food and ample resources, the starving of children, and the anguish of our impoverished communities is a choice made by our leaders.

It's a choice made by the Minister of Finance, who continues to [publicly celebrate](#) the fact that 35,000 people have been kicked off grants this year, to effect "savings", even while hunger and unemployment rise. These grants have been terminated as a result of the review process unilaterally imposed by National Treasury. The majority of victims have lost access to their grants, not because they were confirmed to be ineligible, but because they faced [insurmountable barriers](#) to proving their continued eligibility, like the cost of transport to, and interminable queues at, SASSA offices. Social grant holders are the primary targets of National Treasury's brutal campaign of cutting social spending—they bear the real, human costs of these so-called savings.

It's a choice made by the disgraced ex-Minister of Social Development, who failed to stand up for the rights of grant holders and those entitled to support. At a moment that demands urgent political leadership, she instead saw the Department consumed with instability and allegations of corruption. The bitter irony is that Sisisi Tolashe's legacy as Minister is rolling out National Treasury's "[fraud crackdown](#)" on grant holders, while she herself was, it appears, defrauding the Department. As UBIC has [pointed out](#) repeatedly, social grant fraud policing efforts



overwhelmingly target ordinary grant holders—mostly mothers, grandmothers and persons with disabilities—rather than addressing the systemic corruption and failures within the state itself.

It's a choice made by Cabinet, who, despite the [promises made ahead of the last election](#), have thus far failed to commit to a pathway to a comprehensive universal basic income. This is not only a social protection issue; it is a labour market issue. Millions of people, disproportionately young people, remain locked out of meaningful economic participation despite actively seeking opportunities to survive and support their households. In this context, social assistance is not charity; it is an essential economic and social infrastructure.

The basic income policy must be urgently progressed. It must transition the SRD grant to a permanent provision for working-age adults, increase it to at least the food poverty line, and do away with exclusionary means-testing and inaccurate automated verification processes. It must conceptualise social assistance as a critical foundation for sustainable livelihoods for all, including those outside the formal labour market and caregivers.

For this to happen, we need stable and focused leadership within DSD. The appointment of the new Minister, as well as permanent appointments in the executive management of the Department, must be a matter of priority.

We are confronting yet another cost-of-living crisis. Our economy is weak, inequality remains extreme, and our current economic strategy continues to prioritise fiscal restraint over human wellbeing, which is working for nobody but the financial markets. We can change course right now by taxing wealth, redistributing resources, and adequately financing basic services and social protection. This would cushion the population against the cost-of-living shock and pave the way for a collective, secure future. Social protection is both a right and a sound strategy. All it takes is for our leaders to make different choices.

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UBIC is comprised of the following organisations:

- Alternative Information and Development Centre (AIDC)
- Basic Income Earth Network (BIEN) – Africa UBI Observatory
- Black Sash
- Children's Institute, UCT



UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME COALITION

- Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU)
- Environmental Monitoring Group
- Global Reformed Platforms for Engagement (GRAPE)
- Institute for Economic Justice (IEJ)
- National Education, Health and Allied Workers' Union (NEHAWU)
- #PayTheGrants
- South African Federation of Trade Unions (SAFTU)
- The Family Caregiving Programme
- Women on Farms Project
- Youth Capital