

CHAPTER 5: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Blaikie (2010:36) states that social research is the use of controlled enquiry to locate, describe, understand, explain, evaluate and change patterns or regularities in social life. Research can therefore be seen as an organised way to gain knowledge or to improve on existing knowledge. It is a way of making sense of something new, unfamiliar or completely unknown to us. The focus of this study is on the administration of social grants in SASSA, with specific reference to the strengths and weaknesses in the grant administration process from application-to-approval up to the payment of social grants at pay-points.

5.1 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Section 27 of the Bill of Rights contained in the Constitution (1996) of the Republic of South Africa 1996 (hereafter the Constitution) states that “everyone has the right to have access to social security, including appropriate social assistance if they are unable to support themselves” (RSA Constitution). There is therefore an obligation on the state to provide social assistance to eligible people of this country.

SASSA was established during 2006 as a Public Entity in terms of the Public Finance Management Act (Act No.1 of 1999) and in terms of the South African Social Security Agency Act (Act No. 9 of 2004). The objective was to render a comprehensive social security service with the emphasis on providing a more effective and efficient social security service and to combat fraud and corruption.

Nevertheless, since its inception SASSA has been faced with various operational challenges. At an administrative level, missing files and lost applications, lengthy turn-around times before social grant applications are approved and backlogs have unfortunately characterised to a large extent the day-to-day operations in many offices. Relentless challenges at pay-points, where beneficiaries collect their social grants are also still prevalent. In some instances, long queues at pay-points, inhumane conditions at pay-points such as no shelter, no running water or toilet facilities are in many

instances the norm rather than the exception. Broken payment machines at pay-points, late arrival by payment contractors and SASSA staff at pay-points, fraud and corruption, were all pertinent problems at the time of SASSA's establishment and still exist today.

Acute staff shortages and an organogram which does not necessarily complement the business processes with regard to grant administration remain a huge concern for the Agency. In addition, infrastructural challenges such as insufficient office space (too many staff in a specific office) and insufficient or no connectivity at certain service delivery points, are all organisational challenges which could bring operations to a stand still.

However, despite this state of affairs, operational efficiency (speed of service) should be a very high priority to SASSA given the importance of the services it renders to the poor and the destitute. Accordingly, Steele (2006:65) argues that speed of service depends not only on technical ability to provide the service applied for, but human resources, availability of infrastructure and the application process will all have an effect on the speed of service (efficiency). The writer further states that recipients expect to be paid their correct entitlement and since accuracy of cash benefits is an administrative matter, mistakes can often be made in the calculation of individuals' cash benefits.

Certain policy changes have been made since the inception of SASSA in order to expand its services and to reach more people in its desire to push back the frontiers of poverty. The following are some of the important policy changes:

- Age equalization where men and women could qualify for old-age pensions at the qualifying age of 60 years (previously men could only receive an old-age grant at the age of 65 years).
- Extension of the child support grant up to 18 years of age (previously children could only access the child support grant up to the age of 7 years).
- Applications with alternative proof of identity documents (previously a valid identity document was a prerequisite to access a grant).

Based on these policy changes, SASSA has run various vigorous communication campaigns, service delivery improvement strategies and outreach programmes to reach more people. However, Steele (2006:66) warns that large communication campaigns and the chasing of numbers such as the targets of the child support grant may put administrators at the implementation level under pressure which could compromise accuracy.

Considering that no evaluation has been done on the strengths and weaknesses of the application-to-approval process of grant administration in SASSA, it is regarded as desirable that such a venture be embarked upon. In view of this, the following research question emerges: What are the strengths and the weaknesses in the application-to-approval process of grant administration in SASSA?

5.2 AIM OF THE STUDY

The general aim of the research project is to assess the application-to-approval process of grant administration in SASSA up to the payment of social grants at pay-points. The specific objectives of the study are therefore:

- To describe the current application-to-approval process of grant administration
- To assess the strengths and weaknesses in the grant administration process of specified administrative procedures and structural issues as perceived by attesting officials (front-line staff responsible for taking down the grant applications), data-capturer officials (staff responsible for capturing the information on the application form onto the SOCPEN system, pay-point team members (staff responsible for rendering services at pay-points) and beneficiaries at pay-points.
- To provide a report on the strengths and weaknesses of the grant administration process from application to pay-out, to the top management of SASSA.

5.3 BASIC THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS

SASSA is responsible for the administration and payments of social grants in South Africa. Any administration has its strengths and weaknesses. The success of a social grant payment system depends largely on the competence and effectiveness of the management of the application system. An assessment of the grant administration process in SASSA from application to pay-out will highlight its strengths and weaknesses. Such an assessment can lead to improvement of service delivery and better customer satisfaction.

5.4 METHOD OF INVESTIGATION

The research is a combination of explorative and descriptive processes (Rubin & Babbie, 2011:113) with semi-structured questionnaires (Desai & Potter, 2006:165). A descriptive design seeks to describe while an exploratory design seeks to explore. These methods were employed because they can be very useful in helping researchers to learn more about a given problem area or about the perspective and experiences and is useful for preliminary investigations where little is already known (Thyer, 2001:258). A pure quantitative research method, on the other hand, is defined as confirmatory, deductive, structured, controlled and linear research that results in quantitative data (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003:297).

The researcher firstly used the descriptive research design (Rubin & Babbie, 2011:113) with the aim of describing the current social grant administration process as well as the policy changes that have come into effect. Secondly, the researcher assessed the implementation of the said policy changes by the South African Social Security Agency. The rationale behind this approach is to identify the strengths and weaknesses in the administration of the social grants. In order to achieve this purpose, a quantitative research approach was used.

5.5 RESEARCH APPROACH

Literature reviews reflect the fact that one may use a qualitative or quantitative approach or a mixture of these two approaches. Grinnell and Unrau (2011:66) state that it is not unusual to see quantitative data used within a qualitative study or qualitative data in a quantitative study and that there is nothing wrong with including some open-ended questions to participants during a quantitative study. Although provision was made for some open-ended questions in the various questionnaires, the main focal point during data-collection and interpretation was quantitative in nature. Attention is therefore directed towards the quantitative approach because it serves at the framework of this research project. Alston and Bowles (2003:221) state that quantitative data analysis has clearly defined rules about how to go about data analysis; it involves mathematics and statistics and usually follows a single method of data analysis. Other writers such as Rubin and Babbie (2012:40) state that quantitative studies are more likely to seek to generalize precise and objective findings to a larger population.

This research approach was adopted because the researcher wanted to explore and describe the social grant application and payment processes in SASSA. This was done with the explicit aim to identify the strengths and weaknesses in the grant administration process. The objective was therefore to gain an in-depth understanding of social processes, but also to tap into the experiences of social grant administrators (attesting and verifying), social grant recipients and how they experience the services SASSA renders, especially at pay-points where they receive their social grants.

5.6 SAMPLING METHODS

SASSA comprises the nine provinces of South Africa, namely the Northern Cape, Western Cape, Eastern Cape, Limpopo, Free State, Gauteng, North West, Kwa-Zulu Natal and Mpumalanga. It often happens that studying a whole population is just not feasible or practical. For economic and practical reasons the study was conducted in two regions, namely the Northern Cape and the Western Cape. The Northern Cape comprises various Districts while the Western Cape comprises two metro areas.

According to Kumar (2005:178) the main consideration directing quota sampling is the researcher's ease of access to the sample population and the researcher is usually guided by some visible characteristics of the study population. The writer further maintains that this method of sampling has various advantages such as that it is the least expensive way of selecting a sample, one does not need any information such as population frame, the total number of elements, their location or any other information about the population, and it guarantees the inclusion of all type of people one need. All five Districts in the Northern Cape were included in the research project while only the urban areas in the Western Cape were elected to form part of the research by making use of quota sampling. According to Monette, Sullivan and De Jong (2011:135) sampling allows us to study a workable number of cases from a larger group to derive findings that are relevant to all members of the group.

Literature reviews reveal that the most important distinction about samples is whether they are based on probability sampling or non-probability sampling. Grinnell and Unrau (2011:225) state that probability sampling allows us to know in advance whether an element in a specific population will be selected in a sample whereas non-probability sampling does not allow us to know in advance. In addition, Grinnell and Unrau (2011:234) list a commonly used method; namely availability sampling. This method simply implies that elements are selected on the basis of their availability at the time of the study.

Staff members (front-line staff, data-capturers and pay-point team members) and beneficiaries were firstly selected by virtue of purposive sampling and thereafter on their availability and preparedness to be part of the research project at the time of the study. Non-probability, purposive sampling and availability sampling was therefore utilized to secure these participants. The reason for this approach was simply because the researcher knew which categories of staff to include in the study, but did not know in advance which front-line staff, data-capturers and pay-point team members would be at the office or which beneficiaries would be at the pay-point to collect their social grant payment at the time of the study.

The supervisors and team leaders of the front-line staff and data-capturers were addressed by the researcher in a meeting about what the research entailed and how it would unfold. The researcher basically explained to the supervisors and team members the various measurement instruments and that it was expected of front-line staff who were available and prepared to complete questionnaire one and data-capturers who were available and prepared to complete questionnaire two. The researcher also explained to the pay-point team members what the research entailed and how it would unfold. The researcher therefore explained to the pay-point team members the measurement instruments applicable to them. In addition, beneficiaries at pay-points were approached by the researcher or pay-point team members (who have assisted with the collection of data) and these beneficiaries were also explained in detail what the research entails and how it will unfold. Front-line staff, data-capturers, pay-point team members and beneficiaries were then included on the basis of their availability and preparedness to take part in the study.

Apart from the officials in the value chain of the grant administration process, managers are also found at each regional and district office level to oversee the grant application process. These managers were also initially included in the sample and a questionnaire was also developed for them to complete. Explanations about the research project were done telephonically with these managers and questionnaires were electronically sent to them through e-mail. However, despite various reminder telephonic calls and e-mails none of the questionnaires were completed or returned to the researcher.

5.7 RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

For economic and practical reasons the study was conducted in two regions, namely the Northern Cape and the Western Cape. The Northern Cape comprises various Districts while the Western Cape comprises two metro areas. All five Districts in the Northern Cape were included in the research project while only the urban areas in the Western Cape were elected to form part of the research.

The grant administration process, from application-to-approval, includes various steps. The staff members include the screening official (step one) who checks the completeness of required documentation, followed by the attesting official (step two) who takes down the application and captures it on SOCPEN and then forwards it to the next level, namely quality control (step three). Thereafter a verifying official verifies the information captured on SOCPEN against documentation submitted and approves or rejects the application on SOCPEN (step four). Apart from the staff at various SASSA offices, staff at pay-points (where beneficiaries receive their payments) and beneficiaries at pay-points were also part of the research focus. Staff members (front-line staff, data-capturers and pay-point team members) and beneficiaries were elected by virtue of their availability and preparedness to be part of the research project. Availability sampling was therefore utilized to secure these participants because it was appropriate considering the purpose of the research and its design. A total of 82 front-line staff from various offices in the Northern Cape and Western Cape completed the first questionnaire. There was a zero response from only one office. A total of 62 data-capturers from various offices in the Northern Cape and Western Cape completed the second questionnaire. A total of 32 pay-point team members from various offices in the Northern Cape and Western Cape completed the third questionnaire. However, there are no dedicated staff members in the Western Cape who perform pay-point services and the services rendered at pay-points are rather done on an ad-hoc basis. In addition, it does happen at certain offices that the same staff members perform the task of pay-point services at the various pay-points, hence the low numbers of participants in this third category. A total of 213 beneficiaries from four different pay-points in the Northern Cape and Western Cape completed the fourth questionnaire. Since there are no dedicated staff members who perform pay-point services in the Western Cape, it was rather a challenge to secure a high response rate from beneficiaries. The researcher managed to visit some pay-points in the Western Cape and completed the fourth questionnaire with the beneficiaries. Only three out of the five districts in the Northern Cape returned the fourth questionnaires, despite various reminder telephone calls.

5.8 MEASURING INSTRUMENT

The development of an appropriate and accurate data-collection instrument is of crucial importance in order to ensure that the research project is successful. Hall (2008:147) states that data-collection instruments can be designed to collect qualitative, quantitative or a mixture of data. In accordance, Johnson and Christensen (2012:163) also state that questionnaires are useful to collect quantitative, qualitative or a mixture of data. Semi-structured questionnaires were used during this research project; with both open-ended questions for exploration purposes and close-ended questions that provided quantitative data. Four different questionnaires were designed as a result of the uniqueness of the research project. The emphasis was mainly quantitative by nature because this research has a combination of explorative and descriptive purposes.

The first instrument, namely questionnaire front-line staff, was designed to collect data on the actual grant application process and problems and strengths in this regard. The second questionnaire, namely questionnaire data-capturer, was developed to collect data on the capturing of the application onto the SOCPEN-system. The third data-collection instrument, namely questionnaire pay-point team member, was developed to measure services at pay-points and to determine the problems experienced at pay-points. The fourth questionnaire, namely questionnaire beneficiaries at pay-points, was developed to target the beneficiaries who receive grant payments at pay-points. In order to make provision for a lack of basic literacy, the fourth questionnaire was designed in checklist format and was completed with the assistance of pay-point officials or the researcher. The Statistical Consultation Services of the Potchefstroom Campus, North-West University assisted with the development of the different questionnaires in order to bring it in line with the objectives of the research.

5.9 PROCEDURES

The following procedures were followed in this project:

- A pilot study was conducted to determine the feasibility of the study. Provisional enquiries indicated that there was a need for an assessment. Discussions were held with the then acting Regional Executive Manager, Mr. Stalin Links, as well as with district managers in the Northern Cape.
- Role-players were identified in SASSA who would be able to provide the data necessary for the project. Telephone calls were made to SASSA regional offices in the Northern Cape and Western Cape as well as to various district offices to determine who are the officials and managers in the grant administration value chain.
- Permission was requested from the then acting CEO to conduct the research project. Approval was granted to conduct the research in SASSA (see attached as an addendum).
- Staff members were identified in the various districts such as grant administration supervisors, team leaders, pay-point team members as well as grant administration managers.
- Explanations were given to these grant administration supervisors, team leaders, pay-point team members and grant administration managers on how to complete the questionnaires.
- The data-collection instruments to be used by the participants were either e-mailed or personally delivered to the various districts, including the questionnaires for the recipients of grants at the pay-points in the Northern-Cape and due dates for completion was agreed upon. Telephonic follow-ups were done as well as e-mail reminders to offices with low or non-response.
- The questionnaires for the recipients of grants at the pay-points in the Western-Cape were administered by the researcher during the grant payments because there are no dedicated SASSA staff who render pay-point services in that region.
- The questionnaires for the recipients of grants at the pay-points in the Northern Cape were administered by the pay-point team members. Completed questionnaires were dropped-off at the office of the researcher by the pay-point officials or other staff.

- All completed questionnaires were mailed to the Statistical Consultation Services of the Potchefstroom Campus, North-West University for validity and control purposes.

5.10 DATA ANALYSIS

According to Leedy and Ormrod (2009:245) in quantitative research we try to make better sense of the world by using numbers. We do this by summarizing and interpreting the numbers by using statistics. These writers state that we can think of statistics as a group of computational procedures that allow us to find patterns and meaning in numerical data. In this study, the quantitative data-processing was done by the Statistical Consultation Services of the Potchefstroom Campus, North-West University while the qualitative data was analysed annually by the researcher according to emerging themes.

5.11 RESEARCH ETHICS

Researchers should have an ethical responsibility when conducting research. According to Bless, Higson-Smith and Kagee (2006:140) research ethics help to prevent research abuses and it places an emphasis on the human and sensitive treatment of research participants who may be placed at various degrees of risk by research procedures. With regard to this particular research project, the Ethics Committee of the North-West University approved the study.

David and Sutton (2004:19) highlight the following ethical principles that researchers should be aware of when conducting research, namely informed consent, recognising and respecting the privacy of the participants (equally important is the protection of privacy during the storage and use of collected data). With reference to the privacy and use of gathered information, these writers maintain it can be achieved by means of anonymity and confidentiality. Anonymity basically implies that one does not record the identifying details of the participants whereas confidentiality implies that one knows the details of the participants, but does not reveal it.

With regard to the research project, privacy was maintained because the identifying details of the participants were not requested. Another useful tool proposed by these writers includes coding where codes are assigned during the filing of data. Lastly, these writers advise that researchers should be mindful when writing their research reports and ensure that participants are protected from personal identification and those researchers are available for the claims that they make (David & Sutton, 2004:19).

With reference to no harm to participants, Ruane (2005:18) states that any research activity that harms or poses unreasonable risks to subjects is incompatible with a fundamental ethical obligation to safeguard the physical, psychological and emotional well-being of participants. According to Ruane (2005:19) informed consent refers also to the right of research participants to be fully informed about all aspects of a research project that might influence their decision to participate and that freedom of choice and self-determination are at the heart of the informed consent principle.

During this research project all these principles were adhered to. Participation was voluntary, all participants were fully informed about the research and their right to withdraw from the project. Explanations were given to all participants before the research project has unfolded and they were explained that they could withdraw from the study at any given moment without suffering any consequences. The identity of participants and identifying details of districts were preserved and districts are presented in alpha-numerical order.

5.12 SOME FUNDAMENTAL CHALLENGES DURING THE RESEARCH PROJECT

Any research project has its own unique challenges. This section seeks to reflect on some of the major challenges that were experienced during the research project. Some of the major challenges experienced include the following, namely:

- To acquire approval to conduct the research in SASSA and the lengthy period to get a response from SASSA Head Office;

- The long distances among the various districts in the Northern Cape and between the Northern Cape and Western Cape;
- The researcher was unfamiliar with the organisational and structural arrangements in the Western Cape and needed somebody from SASSA in the Western Cape to travel with the researcher to the various offices and pay-points to conduct the research
- The reluctance from senior officials in both provinces to complete the specific questionnaire regarding social grant policy and management matters

5.11 CONCLUSION

Research can serve many purposes, but the most common and useful three purposes, as alluded to, are exploration, description and explanation. An explorative and descriptive research design was followed since quantitative research approaches usually implement descriptive and/or explorative research designs. The researcher firstly used the descriptive research design with the aim to describe the current social grant administration process as well as the policy changes that have come into effect. Secondly, the researcher assessed the implementation of the said policy changes by SASSA. The rationale behind this approach is to identify the strengths and weaknesses in the administration of the social grants.