

## **Abstract**

This paper considers the dynamics of informal social protection in the context of chronic poverty and vulnerability in post-apartheid migrant networks. It argues that in poor and marginalised households in South Africa, the indirect impacts of social grants cannot be adequately understood by focusing simply on either individual or household decision making. Instead, the paper concentrates on the central role of the elaborate and spatially extended network of reciprocal exchange within the informal social protection systems. These networks link rural and urban households, and enable hybrid livelihood profiles to evolve that bridge rural and urban as well as formal and informal economic activities. These depend crucially on elaborate and gendered 'care chains' involving not only monetary remittances, but also paid and unpaid care work and household reproductive labour. The arrangements help the poor to survive, alleviate poverty and reduce vulnerability by allowing costs and resources, opportunities and shocks to be shared and redistributed. At the same time, these strategies have limitations, and are structured by deeply entrenched power relations pivoting on gender, age, status and other markers of exclusion. They may also increase the vulnerability of some individuals. This highlights the importance of the formal social protection system existing alongside the informal systems.

**Keywords:** Structural poverty, Social policy, Informal social protection, Vulnerability, Social capital, Migrancy, South Africa

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