

THE BLACK SASH  
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JOHANNESBURG

SOME COMMENTS ON SOCIAL PENSIONS IN THE AFRICAN COMMUNITY

TRANSVAAL REGION

Although the old age pensions for Africans was raised in October 1976 to a maximum of R18,50 per month (payable every second month), the free income allowed is only R6,66 per month, giving a total maximum of R25,16 per month. (Survey of Race Relations in South Africa 1976). Africans are further penalised by the government expectation of support by the children or by a younger spouse. Another hardship is the low level of the "free asset level" at R2450 as opposed to the white free asset level of R9800. Added to this, the possession of animal stock or the production of crops limits the Africans pension.

The level of State pensions in South Africa is very low by the civilised standards of the West but one has yet to have an explanation by government of the differentials in scale of payouts for the different race groups. Necessities, and that is all that can be bought from even the white pension, do not vary in price for the different race groups.

Case records in the Johannesburg Advice Office fall into different categories.

RURAL APPLICATIONS

Affidavits were made for several people living in the Msinga district of Natal. The onus of proof of birth date is on the person applying, and as they did not have birth certificates, the officials tended to send them away on the grounds that they were not old enough to merit a pension. This, of course, is an arbitrary assessment by the official zealously guarding against payouts. The distance of the Commissioner's office from the area in which the people lived further complicated the matter for these old people and no success was achieved.

URBAN APPLICATIONS

These are contingent on having a lodger's permit, and the application triggers off a vicious circle of application, search for a permit and lodgings, and rejection.

Payment of tax: Once a man has paid his poll tax for the year he may not apply for a pension until the following year when he can apply for exemption from the tax and for his pension.

Delays in granting of pensions: The provision of the necessary documentation and the general tardiness of officialdom can make the period between application for the pension and its receipt very long and arduous. We have had several cases where dire poverty, destitution and starvation resulted.

Transfer of pensions: Difficulties are encountered either on transferring people into or out of the urban areas; always hardship is encountered.

A new complication is that several people claim that their applications were destroyed in government offices burnt during the Soweto unrest. Obviously, their applications would have had any documentary proof attached.

Some industrial and commercial firms in their pension scheme have a clause which requires a long wait between termination of service and the start of the pension payment. At the salary levels current in Johannesburg, few people can save to tide themselves over a period of anything up to six months.

It is still a matter of concern that long service workers for large firms and even municipalities are not part of a pension scheme and may at best only receive a small ex-gratia payment on the termination of their jobs either due to old age or ill-health.

The whole issue of pensions for old people or the disabled must be reviewed immediately and discrimination on the grounds of colour, both financial and by the arbitrary behaviour of officials, investigated and removed.

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