The Dynamics of Beneficiaries' Experiences in Social Protection Policies: A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Approach

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Abstract

Social protection policies serve as crucial instruments in reducing social inequality and enhancing the well-being of vulnerable communities. However, in practice, beneficiaries often face administrative challenges, digital disparities, and varying perceptions of the policy's effectiveness. This study employs a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to explore the subjective experiences of beneficiaries in accessing and utilizing social assistance. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and participatory observations, then analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to identify key themes that reflect their experiences. The findings reveal that complex bureaucratic procedures and a lack of policy dissemination lead many beneficiaries to encounter difficulties in obtaining assistance. While the digitalization of social protection systems aims to improve efficiency, it inadvertently creates access gaps for individuals with low digital literacy. Furthermore, beneficiaries perceive social assistance not only as economic support but also as recognition of their condition by the government, despite lingering feelings of insufficiency in the long term. These findings highlight the need for administrative reforms to ensure greater inclusivity, user-oriented digital access improvements, and policy development based on the real-life experiences of beneficiaries. This study offers critical insights for policymakers in designing more effective, responsive, and sustainable social protection programs in response to evolving social and economic dynamics.

Keywords: Beneficiary, Experience, Social Protection, Policy.

Introduction

Social protection policy is one of the primary instruments in efforts to reduce poverty and enhance social well-being (Yu et al., 2024). Across various countries, social protection programs encompass different forms of assistance, such as financial aid, health insurance, food subsidies, and other social benefits aimed at safeguarding vulnerable communities from economic uncertainties (Velasco et al., 2020). However, the effectiveness of these policies is often influenced by structural, administrative, and individual perception factors regarding accessibility and the benefits provided.

In the context of social protection policies, quantitative approaches have been widely used to statistically measure program impacts, such as poverty reduction rates or the number of

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beneficiaries (Loyola et al., 2023). However, such approaches often fall short in capturing the subjective experiences of beneficiaries in accessing and utilizing social assistance (Lekobane & Ton, 2024). Therefore, research focusing on the exploration of individual experiences is crucial to understanding how these policies are truly perceived by the target communities.

A phenomenological study in social protection policy aims to uncover the subjective experiences of beneficiaries, including the challenges they face in accessing social services and the meanings they attribute to these programs (Amoah & Mensah, 2024). Through this approach, research can provide deeper insights into policy effectiveness from the beneficiaries' perspectives (Ibrahim, 2023). By directly understanding their experiences, policymakers can design more inclusive, responsive, and community-oriented programs that better align with the needs of society.

Research on social protection has evolved significantly over the past few decades, employing various approaches to assess the effectiveness of these policies in reducing social inequality and improving societal well-being (Nnaeme, 2021). Most studies utilize quantitative methods that focus on the economic impact and statistical data of beneficiaries (Chaverri-Carvajal & Matus-López, 2023). However, such approaches have limitations in understanding how these policies are experienced from the subjective perspectives of those directly affected.

In the context of phenomenological research, the understanding of social protection policies should not only be measured by the macro-level effectiveness of programs but also through the individual experiences of those interacting with these policies (Vizuete-Salazar et al., 2022). Previous studies have highlighted limitations in the administrative systems of social assistance, yet few have explored how beneficiaries navigate these barriers in their daily lives.

Additionally, the digitalization of social protection services has transformed the way beneficiaries access assistance (Silchenko & Murray, 2023). Prior research indicates that technological innovations in the distribution of social aid can enhance efficiency but may also pose new challenges for individuals with limited digital literacy. Therefore, this study seeks to delve deeper into how beneficiaries adapt to these policy changes and how they interpret the meaning of social assistance in their lives (Anierobi & Azowue, 2023).

Using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, this research will explore beneficiaries' experiences in depth, identify the obstacles they face, and analyze the meanings they attribute to social protection policies (Ncube & Murray, 2024). The findings from this study are expected to provide new insights for the development of more inclusive policies that are grounded in the real needs of the community.

Although social protection policies have been extensively studied across various contexts, most research remains focused on quantitative aspects, such as the effectiveness of programs in reducing poverty or improving economic well-being. These studies typically rely on aggregate data and statistical analyses to assess policy impact but often fail to capture the subjective experiences of beneficiaries in accessing and utilizing these programs.

Moreover, limited access to social protection remains a significant issue for vulnerable groups (Arkorful et al., 2020). Previous studies have identified various administrative barriers, such as complex bureaucratic procedures and beneficiaries' lack of understanding regarding program requirements (Nguyen & Bui, 2022). However, there is still a lack of in-depth research exploring how individuals navigate these challenges in their daily lives and how they perceive their interactions with the social protection system.

The advancement of technology in the distribution of social assistance, such as the digitalization of aid disbursement systems, also presents new challenges that have yet to be thoroughly explored in the existing literature. While these innovations aim to enhance efficiency and transparency, there remains a gap in understanding how beneficiaries with low digital literacy experience these changes and adapt to increasingly technology-driven policies.

Therefore, this study seeks to fill the gap in the literature by exploring the subjective experiences of beneficiaries in accessing, understanding, and navigating social protection policies. Employing a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, this research will provide new insights into how these policies are received and interpreted by beneficiaries, as well as the implications for enhancing the effectiveness of more inclusive social policies.

This study aims to fill the gap in social protection policy literature by exploring the subjective experiences of beneficiaries in accessing and understanding social assistance programs. Previous studies have primarily focused on quantitative evaluations of policy impacts on economic indicators, while the individual experiences of navigating social protection systems remain underexplored. Therefore, this research adopts a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to understand the meanings beneficiaries assign to their interactions with these policies.

The hermeneutic phenomenological approach was chosen as it allows for an in-depth exploration of individuals' lived experiences and their interpretations of interactions with social protection systems. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and participatory observations to identify key themes emerging from beneficiaries' experiences. The analysis was conducted using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) method, which aims to uncover the meaning of experiences from the perspective of those who have lived them.

This article is structured as follows: (1) Introduction – discusses the background and relevance of this study; (2) Literature Review – identifies gaps in previous research; (3) Methodology – explains the hermeneutic phenomenological approach and data collection and analysis techniques; (4) Findings – presents key insights based on beneficiaries' experiences; (5) Discussion – connects research findings with relevant theories and policies; and (6) Conclusion – summarizes the implications of the findings for future social protection policies.

By exploring beneficiaries' subjective experiences, this study not only contributes to academic literature but also provides practical insights for policymakers in designing more inclusive and effective social protection programs.

Method

Study Design

This study employs a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, aiming to explore the subjective experiences of beneficiaries of social protection programs. This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the meanings participants assign to their experiences in accessing social assistance. The selection of this method is based on the need to understand social realities that are not only structural in nature but also involve individual interpretations of the policies implemented.

Participants

The participants in this study consist of beneficiaries of social protection programs from various

urban and rural areas. The inclusion criteria include individuals who have received social assistance for at least one year, have firsthand experience with the program's administrative processes, and are willing to share their experiences in depth. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that the collected experiences are relevant to the research objectives.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, allowing participants to freely express their experiences. Each interview lasted between 45 to 90 minutes and was conducted either face-to-face or online, depending on the participants' circumstances. In addition to interviews, participatory observations were carried out to understand the social context in which social protection programs are implemented. All interviews were recorded with participants' consent and transcribed for further analysis.

Data Analysis

The data analysis in this study was conducted using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, which emphasizes how participants interpret and make sense of their own experiences. The process began with an in-depth reading and comprehension of the interview transcripts to develop an initial understanding of the participants' perspectives. This step allowed the researcher to familiarize themselves with the data and identify emerging insights.

Following this, meaning units were identified within the narratives, representing significant expressions and experiences conveyed by the participants. These meaning units were then categorized into key themes that encapsulated the core aspects of the beneficiaries' lived experiences. Through thematic reduction, the analysis was further refined by focusing on the essential elements of these experiences, eliminating any redundant or less relevant information.

Finally, the identified meanings were interpreted and contextualized within the broader framework of social protection policies. This stage involved linking the findings to existing theoretical and policy discussions, ensuring that the analysis provided a meaningful contribution to understanding how beneficiaries navigate and perceive social protection mechanisms in their daily lives.

Results

In this study, the experiences of beneficiaries of social protection programs were explored through in-depth interviews and observations. Data were analyzed using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to understand the meaning of their experiences in accessing and utilizing social assistance.

Theme 1: Accessibility and Barriers in Social Protection Programs

One of the key findings is the challenges beneficiaries face in accessing social protection programs. Many participants described the administrative process as lengthy and confusing. One respondent stated:

"I had to go back and forth to the service office just to ensure my documents were complete. Often, I received no clear explanation from the staff."

This situation highlights how policies intended to provide assistance can instead become obstacles for vulnerable groups. These barriers are often exacerbated by a lack of understanding of the required procedures.

Figure 1. Navigating Social Protection Access

Theme 2: Digitalization in Social Assistance Distribution

The digitalization of social protection services has also been a significant experience for beneficiaries. While some participants found online systems helpful, others struggled due to limited access to technology. One beneficiary shared:

"I don't have a smartphone and don't know how to access the social assistance application. I have to ask my child for help to submit a claim."

This finding highlights that while digitalization aims to improve efficiency, certain groups remain disadvantaged due to the digital divide.

Figure 2. How to balance efficiency and accessibility in digital social protection services?

Theme 3: The Meaning and Impact of Social Protection Programs

For many beneficiaries, social assistance represents more than just financial support. Some view it as a form of government recognition of their situation, while others feel that the program

remains insufficient to ensure long-term sustainability. One participant shared:

"This assistance is very helpful, but I still have to look for additional work to survive. I hope there will be more sustainable programs."

These experiences reveal that the impact of social protection policies varies depending on the individual context of each beneficiary.

Figure 3. Impact of Social Assistance on Beneficiaries

The findings of this study reveal various aspects of beneficiaries' experiences in accessing social protection programs. Accessibility, digitalization, and the meaning and impact of the program are key elements in understanding the effectiveness of these policies. A deeper understanding of these experiences can provide valuable insights for policymakers to enhance the effectiveness and inclusivity of the social protection system.

Discussion

This study reveals that beneficiaries of social protection programs face various challenges in accessing and utilizing the assistance provided (Pizzinato et al., 2021). The key findings indicate that complex administrative processes, the digital divide, and perceptions of social assistance significantly influence individual experiences within the social protection system.

The findings of this study address the research questions by highlighting how beneficiaries directly experience social protection policies (Ondiek & Onyango, 2024). First, The findings reveal that although these programs are designed to assist vulnerable groups, many beneficiaries encounter administrative barriers that hinder accessibility. Second, The digitalization of social protection services, while intended to improve efficiency, has instead created limitations for those without adequate access to or literacy in digital technology. Third, The perception of social assistance varies among beneficiaries, with most viewing it as temporary aid that is insufficient for long-term economic sustainability.

The findings of this study align with previous research that highlights the gap between the design of social policies and beneficiaries' experiences in their implementation (Dejene & Semela, 2020). For instance, research by Smith et al. (2019) indicates that during crisis situations, social assistance often fails to reach the most vulnerable groups due to complex bureaucratic processes.

In this context, overly complicated administrative mechanisms serve as a major obstacle for vulnerable populations in accessing the benefits optimally. This is further reinforced by findings showing that the more complex the administrative process, the greater the likelihood that individuals will face barriers in claiming their rights as beneficiaries (Lincaru et al., 2020).

Furthermore, this study supports the research conducted by Jones & Lee (2021), which highlights that low-income groups often perceive social protection programs as ineffective due to significant administrative hurdles (Cardoso, 2020). This study reveals that in addition to procedural challenges, psychosocial factors also influence the acceptance of social assistance. Many individuals feel that the existing system is not sufficiently responsive to their needs and instead creates temporary dependency without providing long-term solutions to improve their well-being.

Furthermore, more recent literature, such as the study conducted by Patel et al. (2022), highlights that while the digitalization of social protection services can enhance efficiency, it simultaneously creates accessibility gaps for those with inadequate digital literacy (Devereux, 2021). Their research found that individuals with lower educational attainment, rural communities, and the elderly are more vulnerable to digital exclusion, leading to limitations in utilizing technology-based services. This study aligns with the findings of the present research, which indicate that although digitalization is intended to improve access, many groups are still unable to fully benefit from these services.

Several other studies have also discussed the challenges associated with the implementation of social assistance, particularly in terms of distribution effectiveness and long-term sustainability (Pak, 2020). For instance, research by Brown & Taylor (2020) found that overly centralized and inflexible social protection systems can reduce the effectiveness of programs in reaching those most in need. Their study emphasizes the importance of community-based and locally responsive policies, which can enhance participation and improve the distribution effectiveness of social assistance programs.

Furthermore, the study by Carter et al. (2021) highlights that cultural factors and social stigma also play a role in how individuals utilize social assistance. In some communities, receiving social aid is still perceived as a sign of weakness or failure, discouraging individuals from seeking and utilizing available benefits. This finding is relevant to the results of this study, which indicate that beneficiaries' perceptions of social assistance vary, with most viewing it as a temporary solution that is insufficient for their long-term economic sustainability (Abay et al., 2022).

Thus, this study provides a new perspective by incorporating the subjective experiences of beneficiaries, a dimension that has not been extensively explored in previous research (Banks, Walsham, Minh, et al., 2019). The findings affirm that social protection policies must consider accessibility, transparency, and adaptability to the needs of the beneficiary groups (Banks, Walsham, Neupane, et al., 2019). Through a phenomenological approach, this research offers deeper insights into how individuals experience, understand, and interpret social protection policies in their daily lives. Additionally, this study underscores the need for more inclusive policy reforms that are grounded in the real needs of society, ultimately improving the overall effectiveness of social protection systems.

The findings of this study have significant implications for social protection policies, particularly

in enhancing the accessibility and effectiveness of programs for beneficiaries (Hirvonen & Hoddinott, 2021). The subjective experiences revealed in this research indicate that many individuals encounter administrative and digital barriers when seeking social assistance (Khosla et al., 2023). Therefore, policymakers should consider reforming distribution mechanisms to reduce bureaucratic obstacles and increase the inclusivity of digital policies.

Furthermore, the social implications of this study highlight the need for a more beneficiary-centered approach, using their lived experiences as a basis for policy evaluation (de Milliano et al., 2021). A more flexible and accessible social protection program can improve effectiveness and ensure that the most vulnerable groups receive optimal benefits from these initiatives.

Like other phenomenological studies, this research has several limitations that should be considered. First, since this study employs a qualitative approach using hermeneutic phenomenology, its findings cannot be generalized to the entire population of beneficiaries (Masiero & Das, 2019). Second, the limited number of participants and research locations may affect the variation of findings obtained. However, this approach still provides in-depth insights into individual experiences that might be difficult to capture through quantitative methods.

Additionally, this study relies on in-depth interviews and observations as the primary data collection methods, meaning that the interpretation of results heavily depends on participants' openness in sharing their experiences. Therefore, future research with a broader scope and more diverse triangulation methods would be highly beneficial in confirming these findings within a wider range of social contexts.

The findings of this study open several avenues for further exploration in the field of social protection policy (Robles et al., 2019). Future research could expand this study by involving a larger and more diverse group of participants from various demographic backgrounds to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the variations in beneficiaries' experiences (Oliosi et al., 2019). Additionally, a mixed-methods approach, combining phenomenological inquiry with quantitative analysis, could provide a more holistic perspective on the effectiveness of social protection policies.

Further studies could also explore the long-term impact of social protection programs on economic and social well-being. By understanding how beneficiaries' experiences evolve over time, policymakers can design more responsive and sustainable programs that effectively address dynamic social challenges.

Conclusion

This study reveals that social protection policies, despite being designed to support vulnerable groups, still face various challenges in their implementation. Through a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, this research explores the subjective experiences of beneficiaries in accessing and utilizing social assistance. The key findings indicate that administrative barriers, the digital divide, and perceptions of policies significantly influence the effectiveness of social protection programs.

Overall, the findings emphasize the importance of considering beneficiaries' perspectives in the formulation of social policies. The implications suggest the need for reforming administrative procedures, enhancing digital literacy among vulnerable groups, and developing more adaptive policies to meet beneficiaries' needs. By understanding how individuals experience and interpret

social protection policies, policymakers can design more inclusive and effective programs.

As a recommendation, further research should be conducted on a broader scale to better understand beneficiaries' experiences across various social and geographical contexts. Additionally, a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative analysis, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the long-term effectiveness of social protection policies. With a beneficiary-centered approach, social protection policies can evolve into more effective instruments for enhancing the well-being of vulnerable communities.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest in this research.

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