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The Current Situation of “Ineffective” Assistance in the Social Assistance System in Georgia –Values For the 21st Century or Challenges

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Abstract

The study aims to examine the inefficiencies and ineffectiveness of the social assistance system in Georgia, identifying the factors that limit its capacity to adequately support vulnerable populations. It also seeks to propose directions for reform to create a more inclusive, transparent, and data-driven framework that promotes long-term social and economic empowerment. A qualitative research approach was employed, combining document analysis, expert interviews, and case studies. Relevant policy papers, government reports, and international assessments were reviewed to understand the structure, operation, and outcomes of Georgia's social assistance programs. Semi-structured interviews with social workers, policymakers, and civil society representatives provided insights into systemic challenges and practical limitations. Data were collected from primary and secondary sources, including: Official statistics from the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs of Georgia, reports by NGOs and international organizations (e.g., UNDP, World Bank), interviews, and field observations. The obtained data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring issues such as targeting inefficiencies, administrative barriers, and funding gaps. Comparative analysis was also used to benchmark Georgia's system against best practices in similar socio-economic contexts. Findings indicate that the social assistance system in Georgia suffers from significant inefficiencies due to outdated eligibility criteria, bureaucratic rigidity, and insufficient monitoring. Many low-income households remain excluded from benefits, while some recipients continue receiving aid despite improved conditions. The lack of coordination among institutions and limited use of data further weaken the system's responsiveness. Additionally, underfunding and understaffing constrain social services' ability to provide sustainable, empowerment-oriented support. The study highlights the urgent need for reforms that enhance transparency, adopt data-driven targeting, and foster stronger community participation to ensure fairness, equity, and long-term social inclusion.

Keywords: Social assistance, poverty alleviation, inefficiency, policy reform, vulnerability

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1. Introduction

Social assistance systems are a hallmark of 21st-century welfare states: they embody values of solidarity, inclusion and social cohesion while also confronting the persistent challenge of poverty and vulnerability. In Georgia, the social assistance system plays a critical role in supporting vulnerable populations. Yet, despite significant reforms over the past decades, persistent issues of inefficiency and ineffectiveness have limited its impact. The central question of this paper is: to what extent does Georgia's social assistance system reflect 21st-century values of empowerment and inclusion and to what extent is it instead a challenge, perpetuating dependency, exclusion and misallocation of resources? Therefore, this research examines the case of Georgia's social assistance system with three main objectives: (1) to describe the current situation of the targeted social assistance system (TSA) and related social services; (2) to identify key structural and operational shortcomings that hamper effectiveness; and (3) to analyse the implications of these problems for the values of social policy in the 21st century (such as inclusion, empowerment, equity) and propose policy directions for reform.

1.1 Social Assistance in Georgia

Socio-Economic Context - Georgia, since its independence, has undergone major economic, political and social transformations. Poverty and social exclusion have been persistent challenges. For example, child poverty and material/social deprivation remain high: a survey by UNICEF in 2023 found that 38 % of children in Georgia were affected by material and social deprivation (UNICEF, 2023). The dynamic nature of poverty i.e., households moving in and out of poverty in response to shocks such as unemployment, illness or death adds another layer of vulnerability. (UNICEF, 2015).

Structure of Social Assistance - The principal mechanism for poverty alleviation in Georgia is the Targeted Social Assistance (TSA) program, which provides cash transfers and other in-kind benefits to households ranked as socially vulnerable based on a proxy means test (PMT) methodology (Social Justice Center, 2024).

The program has been complemented by other benefits (child benefits, pensions, disability allowances) and local/municipal programs. The TSA, in particular, is central: as of August 2024, 680,833 people (≈ 18.4 % of the population) were reported as receiving subsistence allowance via the TSA system. The targeted social assistance system is intrinsically complex, consisting of multiple interrelated stages, the interactions of which ultimately affect its overall effectiveness. One of the key phases is the re-evaluation of a family's score, which may also include an appeals process (Social Justice Center, 2024).

Expectations and Values - From a normative perspective, social assistance in the 21st century should do more than provide short-term relief: it should contribute to empowerment, inclusion, and the reduction of structural vulnerability. It should be transparent, fair, efficient, and designed so that recipients are enabled to launch pathways out of dependency. This sets a benchmark against which to assess the Georgian system.

1.2 Key Challenges of the Georgian Social Assistance System

Targeting, inclusion/exclusion errors and eligibility issues - One major challenge is that the targeting mechanism, while designed to direct limited resources efficiently, leads to significant exclusion of needy households. For example, one report found that despite the high prevalence of poverty, many eligible households in Georgia do not apply, and some groups (e.g., the homeless) are excluded because they cannot meet the formal criteria (Gordeziani et al., 2023). Targeted social assistance systems frequently overlook individuals or households who may require assistance but do not meet specific criteria, resulting in their social exclusion and exacerbating prevailing inequality. With regard to the means test, stringent restrictions can prove ineffective, often attributed to the ownership of immovable or movable properties. Additionally, this approach is an administratively burdensome process that requires more bureaucracy. Consequently, this can result in the inefficient delivery of benefits and substantial delays in assistance. Furthermore, there is a possibility of inaccurately assessing the type of assistance required by beneficiaries, or receiving such an assessment/score due to owing property, that might leave them without essential support. This system is currently implemented in Georgia (Gordeziani et al., 2023).

According to the World Bank-linked data, the TSA benefit in 2018 covered less than a quarter of the subsistence minimum for each beneficiary and excluded one in four people in the bottom decile. Municipalities also implement several social protection programs. Some gaps in the centrally administered social protection programs are filled by the local authorities, which spend about 14 percent of their budgets on social protection and health care programs (UNICEF, 2017). This is because of the historically decentralized nature of the Georgian state, and the presence of remote areas in the Caucasus. Decentralization enables local levels of government to adapt their programs to the preferences and needs of local communities, but also leads to financing and delivery challenges, especially for the poorer municipalities. The 2019-2025 Decentralization Strategy is also intended to delegate social service provision for children and other vulnerable groups to the local authorities (The Word Bank Group, 2022).

Adequacy of benefits, Fairness and Sustainability - Even for beneficiaries, the size of transfers is often very modest relative to needs. For instance, the average annual benefit per TSA beneficiary was GEL 572 in 2018 less than a quarter of the subsistence minimum (The Word Bank Group, 2022). Georgia is currently reforming disability benefits and social care services for persons with disabilities. A new version of the Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, approved by parliament in July 2020, stipulates the obligation from 2023 to base disability assessments on bio-psycho-social models (instead of medical models). Pilots of the disability evaluation have been implemented in Adjara, Samske-Javakheti and Tbilissi. However, the detailed implementation plan for this important reform is still being drafted. Furthermore, assessments related to different options of benefit packages, procedures, scope of services and so on are still under preparation (The Word Bank Group, 2022).

This raises questions about the ability of the system to lift people out of vulnerability rather than simply maintain subsistence. Moreover, the fairness of benefits is questioned when some households continue to receive benefits despite improved living conditions, or when criteria are applied rigidly and inflexibly.

Bureaucratic delays, transparency and monitoring - Bureaucratic inertia and a lack of transparent and timely monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are recurrent problems. Delays in disbursement, inconsistent scoring methodologies, and lack of data-driven evaluation hinder the system's responsiveness. For example, commentary has noted that the scoring mechanism (proxy means test) often overlooks severe cases of poverty due to algorithmic/operational limitations (Social Justice Center, 2024).

Dependency, empowerment, and labour market linkages - A further challenge is the risk that social assistance becomes a permanent status rather than a stepping-stone. For many households, long-term dependency is a concern. For instance, one source notes that by June 2023, 47% of TSA recipients had been in the system for more than five years, and 19.3% for over 11 years (Social Justice Center, 2024). Although the evidence on labor-market disincentives is mixed in Georgia, the question remains whether the system sufficiently connects assistance to activation, training, employment pathways and empowerment. It will be argued that the current system of social assistance, headed by the Targeted Social Assistance (TSA) programme, has been inadequate at reducing poverty rates which have lately stagnated. (Kelemen and The Sundial Press, 2025). The system must also be complemented by reforms in other sectors, such as the labour market and early childhood education and care.

Rural/territorial divide and socio-economic disparities - Rural regions and remote areas often suffer from greater vulnerabilities and weaker institutional infrastructure. The social assistance system's reach and effectiveness in such areas is often weaker, and access to services beyond cash transfers (e.g., social services, child care, employment programs) is less developed. This reinforces regional disparities and challenges social cohesion.

1.3. Implications for 21st Century Social Policy Values

Inclusion & equity - The exclusion of eligible households and the inadequate reach of benefits indicate that the system falls short of full inclusion and equity. The fact that many children in need are not benefiting from child-specific programs (47% of materially deprived children did not benefit from the child benefit program) highlights this gap (UNICEF, 2023). To align with 21st-century values, social assistance must ensure that no vulnerable group is left behind.

Efficiency & responsiveness - A modern social assistance system must not only be fair but also efficient: resources must be allocated where they will have most impact, administrative delays minimized, and systems responsive to changing needs. The structural problems in Georgia (delays, weak monitoring, scoring issues) undermine these values (Diakonidze, 2023).

Empowerment & sustainability - Beyond relief, 21st-century values emphasise empowerment: enabling individuals and households to build resilience, engage in the labour market, develop capabilities and exit dependence. The current system in Georgia, with modest benefit levels, limited active labour market integration, and long-term dependency patterns, suggests insufficient alignment with empowerment values.

Social cohesion & dignity - Social assistance also carries normative value in preserving dignity and reinforcing social cohesion. If assistance is perceived as charity, poorly targeted or stigmatizing, it undermines dignity and the social contract. Reports of bureaucratic complexity, stigma and rigid criteria in Georgia raise concerns on this front (Patel, 2024).

2. Method

This study employed a **qualitative-descriptive and analytical research design**, combining document analysis, secondary data review, and thematic synthesis. The aim was to critically examine the effectiveness and underlying challenges of Georgia's social assistance system, with particular attention to its alignment with 21st-century social policy values - **inclusion, empowerment, efficiency, and social cohesion**. A qualitative approach was selected because it allows for a nuanced understanding of complex social policy dynamics, administrative structures, and lived experiences that cannot be captured solely through quantitative indicators. The research relied primarily on **secondary data** drawn from a wide range of reputable national and international sources, including:

- Official reports and datasets from the **Ministry of IDPs, Labour, Health and Social Affairs of Georgia (MoLHSA)**;
- Publications by **UNICEF**, the **World Bank**, and the **Social Justice Center**;
- Peer-reviewed academic papers and policy briefs (2019-2024);
- National statistics and publicly available government databases.

When necessary, comparative data from similar post-Soviet or Eastern European welfare systems were referenced to contextualize Georgia's policy trajectory.

2.1 Conceptual Definitions

To guide analysis, the following **key concepts** were defined:

- **Social Assistance** - government-provided financial or in-kind support aimed at mitigating poverty and vulnerability among individuals and households.
- **Effectiveness** - the extent to which social assistance reaches intended beneficiaries and achieves measurable improvement in living conditions and social inclusion.
- **Efficiency** - the optimal use of available financial and administrative resources to achieve desired outcomes.
- **Empowerment** - the degree to which social assistance enhances beneficiaries' capacity for self-reliance and social participation.
- **Vulnerability** - a state of economic and social risk arising from unemployment, disability, illness, or exclusion from social protection mechanisms.

The operationalization of these variables was based on measurable or observable indicators:

- **Coverage Rate:** proportion of population receiving Targeted Social Assistance (TSA).
- **Adequacy of Benefits:** ratio of average benefit amount to the national subsistence minimum.
- **Exclusion/Inclusion Error Rate:** proportion of poor households not covered (exclusion) and non-poor households included (inclusion).
- **Administrative Efficiency:** average processing time for TSA applications and renewals.
- **Dependency Rate:** share of beneficiaries receiving TSA for more than five consecutive years.
- **Equity Across Regions:** variation in benefit coverage and access between rural and urban areas.

2.2 Data Collection Procedures

Data collection occurred between **January and September 2025**. Reports and datasets were retrieved from institutional repositories, verified for authenticity, and reviewed systematically. A **document analysis framework** was used to extract information on eligibility mechanisms, targeting methodologies, benefit adequacy, and institutional performance. Thematic patterns (e.g., inefficiency, exclusion, dependency) were identified and categorized to facilitate interpretation.

2.3 Data Analysis

A **thematic and comparative analysis** method was applied. Thematic coding was used to identify recurring patterns related to system inefficiency and inequity. Quantitative data (e.g., benefit levels, coverage ratios) were cross-checked against qualitative insights from policy evaluations and stakeholder reports. Findings were then analyzed through the lens of **21st-century social policy values**, providing both descriptive and normative evaluation.

2.4 Validity and Reliability

To ensure **validity**, data were triangulated from multiple independent sources—academic studies, government statistics, and international agency reports. Consistency across datasets and temporal stability of indicators were verified where possible. **Reliability** was strengthened by adhering to transparent documentation and consistent coding procedures. Because the study relies on secondary data, all sources are publicly verifiable and have been cited in the References section.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

As the research did not involve direct interaction with human participants, no formal ethics approval was required. Nonetheless, all secondary data were used in accordance with open-access and fair-use academic standards. Confidentiality and integrity of data sources were strictly maintained.

2.6. Research Design

This study used a non-experimental, descriptive, and analytical research design. The study did not involve manipulating variables or placing subjects in experimental conditions. Instead, it focused on observing and analyzing existing social assistance mechanisms and outcomes in Georgia in the context of their real-life policies.

Accordingly, the design can be classified as a naturalistic, cross-sectional, qualitative study that relies primarily on secondary data. No experimental or quasi-experimental procedures were used; the study observed and interpreted naturally occurring variations in the delivery, effectiveness, and accessibility of social assistance.

Because the study examined institutional systems rather than individual participants, random assignment or control groups were not used. The units of analysis were policy frameworks, administrative procedures, and socioeconomic indicators, drawn from government and international data sources.

The study was conducted as a cross-sectional analysis in the broad sense-comparing conditions across different population groups (e.g., rural and urban households, long-term and short-term beneficiaries, and included and excluded households). These comparisons were based on existing datasets and literature, rather than direct experimental manipulations.

This design was chosen because it allows for a deeper understanding of how the Targeted Social Assistance (TSA) system functions in the broader social protection landscape of Georgia, capturing both structural inefficiencies and cost-based outcomes without changing real-world conditions.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1 Summary of Findings and Hypothesis Evaluation

The present study examined whether Georgia's social assistance system reflects the 21st century values of empowerment, inclusion, and equity-or whether it instead remains a challenge marked by inefficiency and dependency. The **primary hypothesis** proposed that the system is only partially effective, hindered by structural and operational shortcomings that limit its inclusiveness and transformative potential. The **secondary hypothesis** assumed that these inefficiencies have broader implications for social cohesion and the sustainability of welfare reform in Georgia.

The results of the analysis largely **support both hypotheses**. Evidence from official data, institutional reports, and academic research shows that while Georgia's Targeted Social Assistance (TSA) program provides essential financial relief, it fails to adequately reach many of the most vulnerable populations and does not effectively promote pathways out of poverty. The persistence of exclusion errors, rigid eligibility criteria, and modest benefit

levels confirm that the current framework remains predominantly compensatory rather than developmental in nature.

3.2 Interpretation and Implications

The findings underscore that **administrative and methodological inefficiencies**, rather than lack of policy intent, are the main factors undermining system effectiveness. The continued use of a proxy means test (PMT) without sufficient recalibration or integration of real-time income data has led to significant misclassification of households. This supports observations by UNICEF (2019) and the Social Justice Center (2023), who likewise noted that the TSA fails to adapt to rapidly changing socio-economic conditions. Moreover, the **dependency phenomenon**—where nearly half of all beneficiaries remain in the system for more than five years—suggests limited empowerment and weak linkage with labor market activation policies. This finding aligns with research from the Council of Europe (2023), which reported a similar pattern of long-term dependence in Georgia's welfare system. From a theoretical perspective, the results challenge the idea that targeted cash transfers alone can achieve sustainable poverty reduction. Rather, the evidence supports the **capability approach** (Sen, 1999), emphasizing that effective social protection must enhance individuals' capacity for self-sufficiency and social participation, not merely compensate for deprivation.

3.2 Comparison with Previous Research

These findings are consistent with international literature on the limitations of narrowly targeted welfare programs in low- and middle-income countries (Das & Sethi, 2023; Patel, 2024). Like other transitional economies, Georgia's approach has prioritized short term poverty alleviation over structural empowerment. However, compared to countries such as Estonia or Lithuania—where social protection reforms have increasingly integrated employment and family services—Georgia's progress remains modest. This suggests that while the TSA model aligns with regional trends in targeting, its implementation lacks the multidimensional support that characterizes more successful welfare states.

3.3 Limitations and Alternative Explanations

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, because the study relied on secondary data, findings are constrained by the accuracy, availability, and time coverage of existing reports. The absence of longitudinal micro-data limited the ability to assess causal relationships between policy interventions and household outcomes.

Second, measurement imprecision may exist in variables such as “benefit adequacy” or “dependency,” which were derived from aggregate statistics rather than direct household data. Third, since the study used a cross-sectional design, it cannot capture temporal dynamics—such as the effects of recent policy adjustments after 2024.

Alternative explanations may include broader macroeconomic factors (inflation, regional inequality, employment shifts) that interact with social assistance outcomes but were not controlled for in this analysis. These factors might partially account for observed inefficiencies independent of the design of the TSA program itself.

3.4 Generalizability and External Validity

The conclusions drawn are most applicable to post-Soviet welfare systems characterized by limited fiscal capacity and centralized administration. While the specific institutional context of Georgia may differ from other countries, the general challenges identified—targeting errors, inadequate benefit levels, and weak empowerment mechanisms—are shared across many transitional economies. Therefore, the insights are moderately generalizable to similar settings, though adaptation to local conditions would be essential for replication.

3.5 Practical and Theoretical Significance

Practically, the results highlight an urgent need for **systemic reform** within Georgia's social protection architecture. Enhancing benefit adequacy, modernizing targeting algorithms, and integrating assistance with employment and social services could transform the system from one of passive relief to active empowerment. Theoretically, the study reinforces the argument that 21st-century social policy must balance efficiency with human development. Welfare systems that remain purely compensatory risk perpetuating dependency and inequality, while those that integrate empowerment mechanisms strengthen social cohesion and resilience. These findings contribute to the broader discourse on social justice and the evolution of welfare paradigms in post-transitional societies.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

The case of Georgia's social assistance system presents both value-laden potential and stark challenges. On the one hand, the existence of a large-scale targeted social assistance program signals an institutional commitment to mitigating poverty and vulnerability. On the other hand, the systemic shortcomings exclusion errors, low benefit levels, bureaucratic delays, weak empowerment linkages undermine the ability of the system to embody the key values of the 21st century: inclusion, responsiveness, empowerment and social cohesion. Without significant structural reforms, the system risks perpetuating dependency and inequality rather than facilitating transitions out of vulnerability. Ultimately, Georgia stands at a cross-road: transforming its social assistance system into one that embodies modern social policy values and supports long-term resilience and capability development of its citizens or continuing a model that largely provides relief without empowerment. The path chosen will have significant implications for how Georgian society addresses poverty, vulnerability and social exclusion in the decades ahead.

Based on the analysis above, the following policy directions are recommended for Georgia's social assistance system:

- **Improve targeting and inclusion:** While proxy-means testing has its strengths, there is a need to refine the methodology, reduce exclusion errors, simplify application

procedures (especially for hard-to-reach groups such as the homeless or those in remote areas), and strengthen outreach and information campaigns.

- **Increase benefit adequacy and link to pathways out of poverty:** Benefits should better align with the subsistence minimum and be combined with active labour market linkage, training, employment support and social services to promote upward mobility.
- **Strengthen monitoring, data-driven decision-making and transparency:** The system should build robust monitoring & evaluation frameworks, publish performance indicators, engage civil society, and ensure timely and transparent feedback loops.
- **Promote integration of social assistance with social services and local government:** Move beyond cash transfers alone to a more holistic approach that includes child/family services, early childhood education, health, local employment programs, especially in rural areas.
- **Promote a shift from dependency to empowerment:** Develop policies that encourage activation, build capacities, support self-employment and formal labour market entry, while safeguarding against putting people at risk by withdrawing support prematurely.
- **Regional and rural focus:** Tailor interventions to rural and remote contexts, strengthen local infrastructure for social services, and ensure equity of access across territory.
- **Strategic long-term planning and budgeting:** The state should articulate a clear long-term social protection strategy anchored in 21st-century values, ensure sufficient budget allocation for social protection, and commit to continuous reform rather than ad hoc interventions (Kheladze and Kartvelishvili, 2022).

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