

## RESEARCH ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

# The Impacts of Pensions on Older People's Socio-Spatial Care Relations as They Age in Networks in Rural Lesotho

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**Received:** 29 October 2025 | **Revised:** 22 April 2026 | **Accepted:** 25 April 2026

**Funding:** Economic and Social Research Council, Grant/Award Number: ES/M009076/1

**Keywords:** Lesotho | older people | pensions | social networks | socio-spatial care relations

## ABSTRACT

Social networks within Southern Africa's rural communities are often highly interconnected through kin relations. Research has demonstrated that historically older people age in place within kin networks, typically in multi-generational households, which are integral to their ageing experiences, such as through intergenerational contracts obliging younger generations to look after their older relatives. However, recent social policy favours aiding individuals experiencing poverty, including older people, with social cash transfers (SCTs) such as old age pensions. This paper explores the social and spatial impacts of pension payments on older people's care networks. In-depth participatory research undertaken in one rural community in Lesotho reveals the myriad interconnected and relational flows of cash transfers. We argue that SCT pension payments transform the position of older people within their social networks and transform interdependent communities spatially through their wider dispersal. The paper thus shows how the flow of pensions is changing socio-spatial care relations and re-positioning older people as economic contributors in their communities.

## 1 | Introduction

Social networks within rural communities in southern Africa operate in highly interconnected ways that shape practices of care for older people. The expansion of Social Cash Transfers (SCTs) in recent decades (including pensions in Lesotho, which are the focus of this paper) highlights a need to examine care beyond intimate relations and spaces, instead as embedded within broader social networks.

Social organization of families, specifically those co-located in households, can account for a multiplicity of kin relations beyond the nuclear family. For example, multiple generations may live in the same compound and/or eat from one pot (van de Walle 2015). Where migration for work occurs, older people and children may be the more prevalent form of household composition in rural villages, with other family members spatially dispersed. Yet, households can remain connected even when located at a distance, as members who work elsewhere may

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contribute to support through remittances, now increasingly through using mobile technology (Munyegera and Matsumoto 2016; Serrat 2017; Vera-Sanso and Hlabana 2023; Walelign et al. 2022). In Lesotho, at times, over 70 percent of rural households have been dependent on remittances (Tanga et al. 2017). Of course, spatial dispersal can fragment relations of care and create tensions between families and households based on reduced obligations to provide support (see Menjivar (2000) for a detailed example). Therefore, how older people creatively manage their care highlights the importance of activating different socio-spatial networks for ageing.

There are many functions around the support and care of older people that cannot be achieved at a distance. The nature of remote rural communities means that interactions between co-located household members are interwoven into the fabric of daily life. Supporting basic needs relies on physical proximity, including assisting with food (cooking, shopping, agriculture); self-care; overcoming loneliness; and many other household functions and repairs (Aboderin 2017; Avalos and van Blerk 2021), which Cliggett (2005) indicates may also be generated. Yet, migration patterns can change who is co-located and proximally available to provide support.

Pan-African research demonstrates that historically older people have been integrated within families and communities through intergenerational contracts, which are based on traditional social norms and relations of care that obliged younger generations to look after their older relatives through reciprocal relationships enacted over time (Aboderin 2017). The actual ways in which older people's care is ensured vary by gender and in response to changing patterns of migration (e.g., as Häberlein (2018) shows in rural Togo). In Lesotho, these reciprocal relations resulted in generational transfers of knowledge with younger generations receiving information on family traditions, as well as inheritance for property, including land and livestock. In return, older people relied on younger generations for care and support (Ansell et al. 2019). Older people are therefore seen to rely on social networks within families and households as key sources of care. Increasingly, social policy has favoured aiding individuals experiencing poverty, including older adults in remote rural communities, as recipients of social cash transfers (SCTs) - specifically pensions. The rationale for SCTs is to uplift the poorest and least able within communities to avoid destitution and enable them to support themselves (Granlund and Hochfeld, 2020; Huang and Zhang 2016). Research has also detailed the benefits of providing pensions, with South Africa leading the way in supporting older people in the region (see Case 2004; Case and Menendez 2007; Moore and Seekings 2019).

In 2004, the government of Lesotho introduced an old-age pension (Ministry of Social Development 2014). This redefined care responsibilities and support in and across many households. Lesotho's strong non-contributory pension scheme provides reasonably generous financial assistance universally to those over the age of 70 years, and by 2019, the time of this research, had risen to M750 per month (equivalent to US \$52.50). The old age pension continues to increase in line with citizens and politicians expectations and provides higher payments than other SCTs in Lesotho (Hemsteede 2023). Evidence

suggests that the benefits of giving SCTs to older people include the sharing of resources to other household members, particularly resident (grand)children (Case 2004; Case and Menendez 2007; Granlund and Hochfeld 2020). Yet, less is known about the wider social and spatial impact of pensions on older people's networks both *within* households and families, as well as *between* households in their communities. Where it is discussed, this is more often related to economic benefits than to impact on social relations (see e.g., Kidd and Tran 2017; Huang and Zhang 2016). Given the growth in literature demonstrating that older people age in networks (Gao et al. 2023; Ho et al. 2024), it is important to explore how ageing in the context of care networks is shaped by pension income.

Against this backdrop, we explore the impacts of pensions on older people's relational care networks within rural Lesotho. The paper explores older people's care relations as social networks within communities before outlining the original data collected and methods used in the research from which this paper is drawn. Rather than focus solely on older adults' perspectives, this paper uniquely draws on data provided by younger and older adults in the community. This data enables the paper to more fully explore the ways in which pensions impact rural life for older people within their families and communities, considering how they are changing traditional practices of family and community life, as well as creating new forms of independence for older people. The paper concludes by highlighting the complex nuances of older people's care relations as networks. It draws out the myriad ways in which pensions are influencing the social and spatial make-up of older people's care networks, through tensions and benefits created by the redistribution of pension cash both within families and beyond households to the wider community, uniquely shaping older people's interdependence and independence.

## 1.1 | Care as Social Networks in Older People's Lives

This section begins by examining the intersections between age and care, before exploring how this intersection is intricately bound up within social networks. Age is a critical intersecting factor in care. For example, references to care practices or care ethics often relate to how families and communities (and institutions) care for older people in light of declining physical capacities as people age, or through concern over the care of children as they learn to navigate management of their personal hygiene, take responsibility for personal care and safety, or through educational development over time (Razavi 2011). Across Southern Africa, including Lesotho, older adults often feature in such debates as either recipients of care through unwritten intergenerational contracts or providers of care to orphaned children. Care is seen to be relational, based on a premise of one person providing for the intimate needs of another in co-presence. Noddings (1984, 2002) discusses these caring relations as relating to a series of encounters between people in which care is expressed, such as one helping another through a pre-developed relationship. The focus on intimacy in understanding care practices means that across communities, care has been 'hidden' within families and confined to household spaces, discussed as an obligation between generations to

ensure all thrive; with the intricacies of these relations previously rarely considered (Raghuram 2012).

Yet, as the world has increasingly globalised and liberalised economically, debate over the changing nature of care relations has ensued (Robinson 2020). This has produced a rise in non-familial care through paid-for in-home or institutionalised care linked to increasing dual-income households. Within the global South, Razavi (2011) highlights that development policy has contributed to global influence on local care relations through the application of SCTs (either as child grants or pensions), offering individualised support for care through policy interventions. Although initially based on conditional arrangements across Latin American countries, such schemes, transferred to African countries, are often unconditional, beyond targeting those in need. Across Africa, including Lesotho, the expansion of governments providing pensions to older people experiencing poverty has shaped traditional care relations in remote rural communities through injections of cash via older people.

Feminist scholars (see Raghuram 2012, 2016) argue for greater exploration of local configurations of care to be situated within global contexts (of development policy) for understanding care relations and the social reproduction of families, households, and communities.

The ability to pay for care suggests a need to consider care beyond intimate relations and spaces as more fully embedded within social networks. Exploring care as relational social networks is therefore helpful for understanding the impacts of pensions on the social and spatial experiences of older people.

Social networks are often defined as connections between individuals rooted in specific places (de Haas 2010). Yet as Massey (2005) and others have elucidated, networks are relations that transcend fixed spaces, highlighting that social networks are instrumental in the flow of resources *between* places. Social networks are also *known* relationships. Bourdieu's (1986) thesis rests on the notion that social capital is:

*"[t]he aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively owned capital, a 'credential' which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word."*

(Bourdieu 1986:248–249)

Strong links between social networks and the transference of social capital between members elucidate their socio-spatial location. However, there remains an uneasiness with the potential fixity of the relationship between networks and capital, leading Schapendonk (2015) to suggest that networks require effort. Indeed, Putnam (2001) already indicates that social capital is gained through participation in networks. Therefore, following Schapendonk (2015), networks are not necessarily a social given for individuals, nor do they

automatically lead to a transfer of resources; rather, applying the notion of networks as 'changeable entities' that require effort. This is no less true for older people. In fact, Harling et al. (2020), from research in rural South Africa, highlight that as people grow older, their social networks decrease, largely due to shrinking non-kin connections, related to reduced mobility and participation in work, as well as the death of contemporaries.

Larsen and Urry (2010) explore the fluidity of social networks and their relationships to resource access as networking - the interactions over space and time that lead to strong bonds—through the work required—to maintain social networks that produce social capital. Although much of this approach has been developed from a standpoint of inserting migration into conceptualisations of the relationship between networks and capital, the reduced mobility of older people provides an equally important context to consider the maintenance of social networks within community spaces.

Akin to Larsen and Urry (2010) networking, but specifically around care, the acceptability category in Noddings' (1984) categories of care (see also Engster (2009), is concerned with community and being socially and culturally acceptable, suggesting that social networks are central to care. Noddings (2002) argues that humans are interdependent and have a desire for affiliation or association. It is not enough to simply have basic needs met; people must also feel as though they are playing an important role within their relational network. People have both a need for affiliation and a need to be worthy of affiliation. Part of being worthy of affiliation also means that they have a need to receive and to contribute to the relational networks of which they are a part. This can be seen in the context of Singapore (Gao et al. 2023; Ho et al. 2024), where scholars suggest a concept of ageing in networks to show that older people maintain reciprocal relationships in a variety of localities, often beyond their immediate vicinity, as part of overcoming the shrinkage of resource relations in retirement, as noted by Harling et al. (2020).

Across Southern Africa, networking is important in care relations. Older people, reliant on their past effort as parents, for care in the present, demonstrate a moral altruism shaped by an ethics of care. Yet, as Bowlby (2012) notes, such reciprocity and interdependency within care obligations can also be imbued with unequal (often gendered) power relations, particularly regarding who gives and receives care and how this is shaped by resources. In Lesotho, the labour outmigration of specific community members also shaped the greater need for networking beyond family members.

This paper positions care relationally as social networks that require effort through networking with others over space and time to establish caring relations. Further, older people's engagement in care is based on a need to express care, while also receiving care in rural global South contexts (Raghuram 2016). The impact of pensions on these care networks within communities has not yet been explored, where the injection of pensions, as a resource, into this care network enmeshes both parties in a critical resource flow relationship. Taking a relational approach to care within contexts of poverty, and a networking approach to the connections between people and

resources, this paper explores the wider socio-spatial impacts, across communities and beyond individual households, of giving SCTs to older people. Building on the earlier survey work of Case (2004) in South Africa showing the benefits of pensions, this paper explores in qualitative detail the various interconnected and relational ways in which pensions flow through households and communities in rural Lesotho. The paper confirms that pensions transform the position of older people within their social networks. They not only provide independence and status to older people themselves but are also transformative in community spaces through their dispersal beyond supporting individual recipients. We show how the flow of economic resources in this way is changing socio-spatial relations within rural communities of Lesotho and re-shaping the position of older people.

## 2 | The Research

This paper is based on a larger research project focused on the impact of SCTs on young people's intergenerational relations and poverty trajectories in Southern Africa. In Lesotho, pensions given to older people emerged as an important injection of monetary resources to individuals, which had significant impacts across community social networks. The collection of the data analysed here took place in a remote rural community in the Lesotho highlands in April 2017 and 2018.<sup>1</sup>

The qualitative data used here draws from participatory activities and discussions conducted with groups of young adults (18–30 years), which explored two themes focused on the functioning of networks: *family networks*, support, and decision-making processes across generations and *community networks*, examining the flow of cash and support across rural village spaces. Each group participated in two creative exercises on poster paper: the first creating a hypothetical typical family and using stickers to highlight support networks, and the second a hypothetical typical village marking flows of resources and support between households. The ensuing discussions focused on the social relations and flows of resources between hypothetical individuals in these scenarios, based on the group members' collective knowledge and experiences. The research team facilitated the discussions and specifically asked about pensions. All group discussions were recorded, transcribed, translated, and coded thematically. Four groups of approximately six young women and four groups of approximately six young men participated in each activity, comprising a total of 48 participants. Collective research such as this does not seek personal accounts but rather explores consensus across groups around a topic. The aim is not to seek diversity of individual circumstances but rather to understand broad patterns of change. Research suggests that such apparent collective consensus should be interpreted with caution, as it may reinforce prevailing norms and portray norm-breaking practices as more extreme than is evident when individual-level evidence is considered. This is a concern we also take into account in interpreting the conclusions presented here.

In addition to participatory activities, a whole community meeting (termed *pitso* in Sesotho) was organized to discuss the emerging research results, offering an important forum for

prime age adults (30+ years) and pensioners (70+ years) to explore the findings, confirm, and add their own views and personal accounts. The *pitso* discussions confirmed the data emerging from participatory activities. Full notes were taken as a record of the meeting and coded for emerging themes. Uniquely, this paper explores pension-related networks from the perspectives of young adults and older people. This is important as it provides complementary perspectives across generations.

## 3 | Rural Community Life and SCT Interventions for Older People in Lesotho

Rural life across much of Southern Africa, including Lesotho, has historically focused on subsistence farming (often supported by labour migration remittances), with a small group of houses consisting of related members farming and eating together, forming a 'household', commonly referred to as '*le-lapa*' in Sesotho (Ansell and van Blerk 2004). Murray (1981) describes Lesotho's rural extended household/family units consisting of a head of household with male descendants, their spouses, and unmarried children (Murray 1987). Yet, as O'Laughlin (2014) also highlights, the complexity of household structures is apparent as households are constantly evolving and ever dynamic with fluid movements of (usually related) individuals between households for support purposes, and/or the remittance of resources from members (temporarily) located elsewhere. Changing marital patterns, such as marriage breakdown, separation, and widowhood, can also dynamically impact household make-up. Therefore, families and households in rural Lesotho are intricately connected across generations and enmeshed in social and economic relations that stretch across space, related to gender and socio-cultural norms and values.

Older members of the community have traditionally been supported *within* households, where social networks of support are principally through adult children and grandchildren, with long-standing cultural taboos against institutional care for older people. A simple notion of a generational contract of care (Aboderin 2017), where adult children look after ageing parents, does not account for the complexity of social relationships and fluidity of families. Participatory data from the family network activity revealed that although older people were seen to be important *receivers* of help from family members in all cases, in most they were also *giving* help and, in a few groups, still involved in taking family decisions as custodians of family traditions, akin to Noddings' (2002) acceptability category of care or Larsen and Urry's (2010) notion of networking where there is an interdependence in the relationship.

In the data, decisions around marriage were particularly mentioned as involving older people: "you know it may happen that, when you have quarrelled with your wife, that very same grandmother... comes to the rescue by reconciling everything... yes, they will help you a lot, more especially because they have wisdom" (Young men (G3), family networks). Yet decision-making for younger family members was intertwined with monetary flows, including through providing *lobola* (bride price) for grandchildren: "even the grandfather... can still give

them the final decision... the grandfather can give cows for *lo-bola*" (Young men (G6), family networks). Often, the source of their help and decision-making power was related to an ability to share economic resources, but not always. For instance, grandchildren may be sent to live with (great) grandparents because the older adults need help with errands and household chores, as is customary practice, but also because grandparents receive pension payments, and are better placed to pay for children's needs in the context of high unemployment among working-age adults. Young women and young men collectively suggested pensions as an important element in transforming this practice:

*"Just like we had said that she lives with a grandchild, it could happen that the grandchild is the child of these newly married people, so he/she stays with the grandmother because the grandmother could buy her clothes and food with the pension money."*

(Young women (G7), community networks)

*"Even the grandchildren can now ask for two rands that may be needed at school, so she is able to give it to them, prior to getting the money, the grandchildren will be complaining that if they visit the grandmother, she will be shouting at them and telling them to do this and that."*

(Young men (G8), community networks)

This latter statement illustrates that with pensions, older people have redefined their role in households not as burdens or advice-givers only, but also as providers of financial support for younger generations. This is important given the high reliance on pensions as a main source of income in many rural households in South Africa and Lesotho (Moore and Hlabana 2024). It supports early impact evaluations of pensions introduced in South Africa, which found pensioners empowered to have more say in household matters, their pension benefitting everyone nutritionally when income is pooled and improving household health and education outcomes (Case 2004; Case and Menendez 2007).

Mugomeri et al. (2017) highlight that Lesotho's state pensions are an important source of older people's quality of life, as the majority have this as their only source of reliable income. Support for the value of pensions in care networks was revealed through the community meeting (*pitso*), where members outlined that pensions help in schooling, feeding, and clothing grandchildren. Where others disagreed, indicating that older people do not share their resources, one older woman illustrated the complexity of such networks by alluding to notions of increased decision-making powers due to the pension. She stated that if her adult children behave well, she will share her income, and they can eat from the same pot. 'Behaving well' here suggests that there are (traditional) expectations around care, in contrast to the argument that pensions erode traditional care responsibilities, e.g., Ansell et al. (2019) demonstrate the monetarisation of care responsibilities for older people in households and communities. Yet, younger adults highlight that sometimes they must ensure older family members are using their pensions to attend to

their own basic needs and may intervene if required: *"I will still make decisions for her; when I arrive at her house and find her eating papa [maize porridge] only, I will say she should bring the money so that I can buy vegetables for her; also ask why is she living in hunger yet she has money..."* (Young women (G1), family networks)

Universal state-provided pensions are changing the nature of interactions and social networks for older people in Lesotho, creating complex social networks that fuse traditional moral practices with cash-based economics. The following two sections explore these networks further, re-conceptualising older people's care networks, first by teasing out the tensions created by pensions within families and communities, and second, by exploring how pension income flowing into remote rural villages has transformed older people's status, complexly shaping their interdependence and independence in new social networks.

## 4 | SCTs as Tensions for Older People's Care Networks

### 4.1 | Pensions as Disruptive to Family Practice

Older adults attending the *pitso* suggested that they are losing the support of their children and grandchildren. Any moral obligation to provide support is being eroded as younger generations now want to be paid for chores undertaken or help given, thereby commodifying these inter-generational social relations. One older woman attending the *pitso* provided an extreme example of the negative impact of pensions on family relations, describing how younger people may even fight with their grandparents over payment for chores to the extent that some older people are hurt or killed. Although anecdotal (yet see reports of murders of older people for pension income in Lesotho's media—Lesotho times 2018; Lena 2023), the illustration is pertinent in demonstrating the strength of feeling older adults have towards the impact of pensions on the breakdown of traditional moral obligations of care and support within families. When asked what would happen if pensions were terminated, young women indicated that the tensions already created would be hard to overcome:

*"Their children will have to assume the responsibility of helping them, but it isn't easy, because the very same children, when they have been sent by these older people, to collect the money on their behalf, they embezzle it."*

(Young women (G1), community networks)

Distrust has emerged between generations over how pensions should be distributed within families and who should have access to the money. The critical issue here is that pension payments are given to older individuals (unlike the other common and lesser value SCTs, such as the child grant, which is targeted at households), yet, as indicated earlier in this paper, families are complexly interconnected, with household definitions of eating together central to understanding their interdependence. Young women highlight this interdependence, indicating that pensions are used to feed families: *"We source*

food from the grandparents. They get the pension now" (Young women (G1), family networks).

An older woman at the *pitso* explained that problems have arisen because previously families 'did things as households,' but the flow of money through pensions has changed this dynamic, and now older people are often unwilling to share. She continued that when requested by younger family members, who may be cash poor, to purchase essentials such as food items, older people may say that they do not have money, even if they received their monthly pension payment the day before, choosing to withhold and save the money in situations of extreme poverty. This creates distrust, and so if the younger person then gets money from elsewhere, they might in turn not feed the older relative, causing accusations that the younger generation is starving them. While older people may prefer to use some of the money to buy 'nice' things (like tea) for themselves, this can lead to conflict. A tension is created between what is expected, according to traditional relations of care, and what is considered outside this. Young women and young men highlighted that older people expect to be cared for by their families and therefore consider the pension as their personal income. Yet, in contexts of rural poverty and high unemployment, the pension is viewed by the wider extended household as part of their interdependence. While, at times, older people do use their pensions to support family members (see later section on building community networks), tensions emerge due to a mismatch between how older people are supported individually by the state with pensions and how households operate in rural areas. Nonetheless, when asked if older people deserve the pension, there is consensus that they do, and that younger generations must work for money. These examples demonstrate how cash, in the form of pensions, intervenes in relationships of care within families, in ways that can be disruptive of conventional practices. Novel resource flows reshape the encounters between people in which care is expressed, as Noddings (1984) defines care relations, altering expectations and generating tensions.

## 4.2 | Creating Community Tensions

Although most elder care traditions rest with families and households, remote rural communities in Lesotho are generally also interconnected socially, as well as spatially, and it is well known in social circles who is receiving a pension. The blanket high levels of poverty across rural villages, coupled with the disbursement of other significantly smaller SCTs to only select households, creates general tension as those not receiving any SCT are usually also experiencing significant challenges to meet their basic needs. In such contexts, pensions are a welcome injection of support to rural areas, and community members feel confident that the money is needed and should continue. However, they are unreconciled over whether and how such support can, or does, benefit the wider community. The individualisation of support to older people, and therefore the tendency for pension income to be viewed as 'their money', can cause an unwillingness to share, which is perceived negatively by younger people: "They are so stingy... This money, I have seen it to get spent all on the old people themselves" (Young women (G2), community networks). While another highlights that they

hide the money on their person and so it benefits no one else: "it is hard for it [the pension] to come out from the old people, here where they put it beneath the breast... it doesn't benefit other people" (Young women (G2), community networks). Community members at the *pitso* confirmed this potential for 'stinginess', also going further by saying that older people may deny receiving the pension to avoid sharing. This can cause additional problems when older people refuse to seek help with chores because they do not want to pay, and so they struggle to carry out the chore and end up injuring themselves.

The knowledge that money is flowing into the community through pension payments means older recipients become a focus of attention and receive requests for support or offers of help in return for payment. This has the potential for support networks to transcend family responsibilities, but at a cost. When such requests are denied, distrust and undesirable relations emerge. As young women indicate, family members and other non-related neighbours can feel somewhat entitled to a share of the income, which is not enough to be shared widely (Young women (G4), below). Different perceptions of who should receive what and why then cause bad feelings towards others. Yet, it may be that many requests have been made and there is no money left, but villagers still accuse older people of hoarding (Young women (G7), below). These examples highlight the ways in which traditional family obligations of care, both for and from older people, spread out socially and spatially from family/household networks and become enmeshed with wider non-kin community networks due to older people's monetary resources. Networking (Larsen and Urry 2010) may determine who performs such functions, previously reserved for family members, and removes the co-location of those within a caring network to be resident in the same household.

*"The bad thing is that, you will find that this granny's children, or grandchildren perhaps being her daughter or son's children or any other person, the bad relationship/misunderstandings brought by this money, is on who should collect it, and whom she helps, if the granny gives one relative some soap, that hurts to others, so who should be collecting the pension, is really an issue."*

(Young women (G4), community networks)

*"Sometimes, I could go there to borrow from someone [a pensioner], only to find that someone else has borrowed it [money] already... so I won't be believing that, I will say, it is just they don't want [to share]; whereas someone has been helped already... so sometimes it could happen that one borrows or ask for the money, then the pensioners refuse, so when they refuse, you kind of hate them, saying how could this person refuse with the money yet I know she/he has it."*

(Young women (G7), community networks)

Tensions around pensions are multi-directional. Young women (G7 above) highlight how younger people do not believe that older people have no money left, while below they indicate that older people may also distrust younger community members

who help them in return for payment. For example, in remote areas, pensions are disbursed on specific days in one location for a cluster of villages. This means many older people must travel long distances, often on foot, to receive their money or have a nominated individual collect for them. This can be a named family or community member. When others go, accusations can ensue, as noted by one young woman during the community networks activity.

*“Given that these old people collect their money at [the small town], and they will be moving from [the village] here to [the small town], when you have gone there to collect on his/her behalf, and you come back having bought them something, they are going to say you have used that money for yourself, so that is something I have seen causing.... the bad relations.”*

(Young women (G7), community networks)

These accusations are not unwarranted, as one of the young men's groups of cattle herders, who are often highly impoverished, highlighted that collecting pensions for older people can be tempting in contexts of poverty. The temptation of holding a generous sum of money (M750) for even a short period can be overwhelming. Young men (G5), in discussing (hypothetically) their community networks, indicate that:

*“Yes, it can happen that an old lady or grandfather sends me to collect their pension, but on the payment day, I go there already having my own plans, and after getting the money, I disappear... I go and spend that money somewhere.”*

(Young men (G5), community networks)

Furthermore, more violent criminal acts related to pension stealing were discussed by both older people at the *pitso* and during the community networks activities, with one older person indicating that “there are criminals who attack the pensioners for their money”. Young men also elaborated on the severity of these attacks in their discussions:

*“You may find that one guy can't make ends meet, then he finds that one grandmother has just received her pension, then at night he goes there and attacks her, then takes that money... There is even a saying that, they just get this money for free, they didn't work for it.”*

(Young men (G5), community networks)

Evidently, poverty can make people desperate, and they may resort to acquiring resources by any means, even violent or illegal means. It is not surprising then that pensions, while welcomed and viewed as necessary for older people by whole communities, create inequalities in villages in relation to who has cash resources and who does not. This access may be time-bound, even for just a few days, until the funds run out, but scarcity results in a collapse of support networks based on moral judgements around relations of care towards a more transactional relationship based on principles of a cash

economy. Care relations, therefore, remain a series of encounters between people as outlined by Noddings (2002), but where the ethics of care (Razavi 2011) are rather enmeshed with transactional exchanges of cash for care. Rather than care relations hidden within families (Raghuram 2012), under circumstances of pension provision, these care networks are changing for older people to include more public and wider support options from kin and non-kin that are spatially dispersed beyond the household. This demonstrates that these networking relationships are complex based on diverse interdependencies. Cash flowing to individuals through pensions can also enable positive outcomes for older people through engagement with more diverse community networks, as the next section elucidates.

## 5 | Supporting Households and Building Community-Based Networks for Older People

Within co-resident households where there are strong social networks, moral obligations to care for and help older members do exist, e.g., younger family members discuss undertaking chores without expecting payment (young woman (G1) below). They note that reciprocity is an important part of such care, with older adults providing food due to pension income that can be shared with the household. Young women further highlight how pension income flows intergenerationally through households as part of older people's care networks. They discuss how middle-generation adults help older family members when they are unable to undertake chores, such as doing laundry, collecting water and firewood, and agricultural tasks. These relations of care apply multi-directionally as pension recipients also help their middle-generation adult children with monetary support, which in turn is channelled to younger generations (often young adults with small children) when they are in need.

*“I spend 2 days at my grandmother's place, helping her with harvesting, the following day, then I go to my home, I then fetch wood for them, then do laundry for them... I help my grandmother with laundry. When I get to her house and find that there are some holes, I smear the floor, and I ensure that I leave having cooked and cleaned. I fetched wood so that she could cook. ... We source food from the grandparents. They get the pension now... when they have groceries, they share with us. They are the ones who help mostly.”*

(Young women (G1), family networks)

*“She does laundry for them, especially the grandfather... The grandfather still helps because he gets the money... then this grandmother is receiving the pension, and she offers help to those parents, who in turn help their daughter, when she runs out of things she needs.”*

(Young women (G2), family networks)

The flows of support (in practical and financial ways) cut across generational lines, going beyond simple linear two-way reciprocal relations. Not only do adult children and/or adult

grandchildren help their parents/grandparents in return for some direct benefit as discussed in the previous section, but often, as the extracts above demonstrate, the older people then support the family more broadly with multi-generational benefit, such as all eating from food provided from pension purchases. Additionally, young women (above) and young men (below) elucidate this further, exploring how multi-generations can be involved, with pension support to one generation then directly enabling the helper to care for their own adult or child offspring. Where there is conflict, generations can also be skipped when asking for help (young men, below). Further, young men (below) highlight that these interconnected networks may also benefit all generations in a family, whereby children are sent to live with their grandparents to be more materially cared for, which also alleviates parents' struggles to provide for all the children's needs, and benefits the grandparent with help for chores.

*"Or sometimes, the [adult]grandchild will go and collect the pension money on behalf of this grandfather... He might say, "My son has just collected my pension, please take fifty rands [R50] so that the [younger]child can [buy soap to] bath."*

(Young men (G3), family networks)

*"If I have some problems in my family... my parents... seem stuck, I will go to my grandparents, who will then give me some help and advice."*

(Young men (G8), family networks)

This section illustrates how family networks are complexly enmeshed across generations. There are multiple ways in which material and financial resources obtained through pensions are supporting several younger generations either directly or indirectly through their practical care for older people. The data also reveals how older people are important in these inter-generational family support networks, not just in terms of requiring help, but also in their ability to offer reciprocal support through the sharing of pension-backed resources. This demonstrates interdependence for older people in their family social networks, moving beyond age as a family burden of the ethic of care (Razavi 2011). Pensions are enabling multi-directional care relations in rural communities, enabling all generations to benefit with care supporting older generations and cash, facilitating young generations to maintain essential standards of living. This interdependence resonates with Noddings (2002) acceptability category of care networks; however, when these networks are explored beyond families and households, pensions offer older people status that is both interdependent and independent in their communities.

## 5.1 | Independence in Interdependent Community Care Networks

The increasing fragmentation of families in remote rural communities in Lesotho, with younger adults often leaving villages, at least for some time, to seek employment in urban or

industrial areas, coupled with a predominantly cash-based economy, means that not all families have strong social support networks across generations locally resident, and gaps in familial care relations emerge. Yet older people age in their communities. As noted earlier, issues of distrust have crept into some intergenerational relations over access to and use of older people's pensions. While older people do provide and receive support within their families, our research further illustrates that pensions are enabling support networks to be important across communities, creating care practices that encourage older people to have more independence in their interdependent care. Pensions now offer older people options in how they take care of their daily needs, as they can offer payment in return for help with chores or meeting personal care needs (young men (G8) below). They remain interdependent with their social networks but have greater independence in who makes up these networks. They are no longer locked into relying on family or household members to provide that help, particularly when family relations are spatially dispersed due to migration (young woman (G1) below).

*"Yes, the old lady would be sending the grandchildren to the well, but now that she gets the pension, she sometimes hires a person [neighbour] who knows that each day she has to deliver a twenty-litre bucket of water."*

(Young men (G8), village networks)

*"Given that this grandmother is old, and these people have got children, they can help this grandmother by doing laundry for her, as well as asking the children to fetch water for her, because perhaps this grandmother's grandchildren are somewhere far."*

(Young women (G1), village networks)

*"She sends you to the well, then gives you some five rands... out of the pension.... Or when you fetch wood for them. The family next to them could fetch water for them..." Even catching chicken... sometimes they can ask me to plough their field."*

(Young men, (G6) village networks)

This greater independence in communities further supports the importance of networking for older people through a wider network of individuals, which may be spatially dispersed throughout the village, as some non-kin young adults can also benefit from the pension income. Providing services or running errands for older people who need help and can pay benefits to a wider range of individuals can lead to resources spreading socially and spatially beyond the immediate family or household into other households across the community. Having cash in the village means there can be circulation of resources, including lending and borrowing of money to enable more families to purchase goods that cannot be produced from subsistence farming. Local businesses also benefit from more sales of goods. Pensions create a desired ripple effect of resources that flow through communities in a myriad of ways, as outlined by young women and young men.

*“Given that this wife no longer has a husband, sometimes when these older people have to go to get their pension and come back having bought some three litres of paraffin, they will share some paraffin for this woman to light her house.”*

(Young women (G7), village networks)

*“Even that person who sells, he will benefit, hence see how he makes ends meet, because these older people will go there and buy...”*

(Young men (G3), village networks)

*“He can be able to help, more especially because now the old people are getting the pension, so it may happen that I am at work, and it is not yet month end [pay day], my wife calls me, and tells me that they have run out of groceries, I can then say, please go to the old man [father], and ask him to borrow you hundred rands, and buy twelve and half [kilos] maize meal.”*

(Young men (G5), village networks)

Beyond obligation, pension-enabled independence is facilitating both kin and non-kin networking (Schapendonk 2015; Larsen and Urry 2010), highlighting older people's social and economic acceptance within care relationships and their important contributions to communities beyond sharing traditions and advice. They are also playing a role in their networks, returning to Noddings (2002) notion of interdependent care relations, where older people are providing a much-needed monetary injection to villages, at the same time increasing their worth as integral parts of community social networks. The complexity of social relations is such that older people, at least in part due to pension income, are enmeshed within the functioning of rural life, supporting villages to thrive.

## 6 | Conclusion

This paper has explored the myriads interconnected and relational ways in which social cash transfers in the form of pensions flow through families and communities, creating potential for shaping the position of older people within local care networks. Pensions not only provide independence and status to older people themselves, or cement interdependent traditions, but are transformative in communities through their social and spatial dispersal beyond supporting older recipients and their families, rippling into the community and creating a more independent status for older people within their community care networks, elucidating the complexities of elder care.

This network of relationships is diverse, impacting, and shaping familial bonds in new ways while also having impacts on non-related households and businesses. Previous work has explored older people's contributions to communities as advisors, under the premise that age brings wisdom or highlights their situational vulnerabilities, often exacerbated by reduced capacities to engage and contribute physically to meeting daily needs

(Kpessa-Whyte and Tseko 2020). This research, however, highlights that, as in neighbouring South Africa (Case 2004; Case and Menendez 2007), pensions have enabled older people to be valued and contribute in new ways. On an individual level, pension cash has enabled a newfound independence that is shifting families and societies from a traditional moral economy based on generational relations of care, as older people are now able to look after their own needs through purchasing power despite reduced physical capacity. This integration of older people within a cash economy is not without challenges, however, and our research also shows that economic independence for older people creates tensions within families and across communities where poverty is pervasive. The inequalities around having and not having money mean that social networks are eroded and/or redefined as elements of distrust emerge both intergenerationally and across neighbour relations. However, older people do remain connected and integral to the functioning of communities, using their pensions to support others through employment, purchasing resources, and by displaying general kindness through sharing with those in need. They are therefore both interdependent and independent, demonstrating a complex web of local care networks. Akin to other contributions in this special issue, networks are central to older people's ageing experiences. They are using pensions to ‘age in place’ (usually a specific rural community) and ‘age in networks’ (across kin and non-kin community), building their own care network that emerges from their household, to engage a wider range of actors across diverse community spaces.

In conclusion, through exploring the impacts of pensions on the nature of care relations within rural Lesotho, this paper demonstrates that providing pensions to older people is transformative in three ways. First, pensions offer older people greater independence in their choice of care. They no longer must rely on their children and grandchildren for support but can flexibly engage help through their networks depending on their needs. Second, pension income reconfigures older people's position within families and communities by enabling forms of interdependence in which they act as valued contributors, reciprocating care through material support. Third, pensions facilitate the circulation of income socially and spatially through families and communities, enabling people in need of resources to benefit through providing care services to older people.

This paper further reveals that pensions are not a panacea for poverty reduction and highlights that pensions as part of care relations create tensions among care networks due to limited income and high levels of poverty. Broader options for the formation of care networks mean that strong family networks may be eroded through competition for care. The paper reveals that networking (Schapendonk 2015; Larsen and Urry 2010) is important for older people and that pensions enable their networking to stretch socially and spatially beyond kin relations and expand care ethics to include pay-for-care options (Razavi 2011). Pensions counteract the diminishing networks of older people (Raghuram 2016) and rather encourage the growth of new networks supporting the work of scholars that indicate older people age in networks (Ho et al. 2024). Pensions are enabling these new older age networks to be socially and

spatially expanded: located throughout communities, transforming the role of families and households as sole providers of care.

## Acknowledgements

We acknowledge our thanks to the rural Lesotho community that welcomed and hosted us and to all participants who gave their time, personal stories, and insights for our research. We also gratefully acknowledge the contribution to this work of our field assistants, translators, and transcribers: Kekeletso Toebe, Mamefane Letooane, Masechaba Moshoeshoe, Masefabatho Sula, Ntseliseng Ntene, Teboho Letuka, and Thabang Hloele. Finally, we thank the special issue editors and anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. For the purpose of open access, the author has applied a Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) licence to any Author Accepted Manuscript version of this paper, arising from this submission. The research for this paper was funded through the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)-DfID Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research grant number (ES/M009076/1).

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in the UK Data Service at <https://reshare.ukdataservice.ac.uk/854106/>, reference number 10.5255/UKDA-SN-854106.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Ethical clearance for the research was obtained from Brunel University London.

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