UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME
A way through the storm?
Universal Basic Income
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Mainstream thinking on human trafficking and modern slavery tends to assume that people who find themselves in situations of exploitation do so primarily because ‘bad guy’ perpetrators coerce them. And while this does happen, research from around the world overwhelmingly demonstrates that individualized coercion is not the major pathway by which people end up in bad work.

Exploited workers – including those labelled by authorities as ‘victims of trafficking’ or as ‘modern slaves’ – typically consent to the work that they do, however abusive or unpleasant, because it represents the best or only option they have of making the money they need. This has been shown in Africa, Asia, Latin America, Europe and North America.

Which begs the question: if we really want to end ‘modern slavery’, and indeed if we’re serious about protecting people from all forms of exploitation (which the Sustainable Development Goals suggest that at least our politicians claim to be), then why not simply ensure that everyone always has a minimum amount of money in their pocket such that they can say no to bad work?

This isn’t a rhetorical question. Social protection scholars have long been making the case that we should just give money to the poor if we want to help them, and that doing so is cheaper, more effective and more humane than traditional policies which are costly, complicated and often regressively conditional.

Basic income advocates say the same things. A basic income is defined as a regular cash payment delivered unconditionally and individually to all people. Think of it as a small salary just for being human; it won’t make you rich but it should keep you alive in a world where you need money to survive. Because of this, thinkers since at least Tom Paine have advocated for it as a means of softening the edges of capitalist society. In addition, they argue that basic income would be simpler to administer, more efficient, and considerably more benign than traditional welfare policies, which often overlook those most in need and shame those who claim payment.

Four years ago, world leaders committed to eradicating ‘indecent’ and ‘unfree’ work by 2030 at the latest, and recent research shows them investing hundreds of millions of dollars every year to do so. Yet evidence also suggests that many of these efforts are failing, while some even make life worse for the very people they’re supposed to protect. We thus have a duty to ask ourselves what else can be done. Could basic income be an answer?

In this volume, we ask some of the world’s leading basic income thinkers – supporters and critics alike – whether they think it could be. Our respondents include theorists such as Kathi Weeks, Guy Standing, Philippe Van Parijs, Karl Widerquist and Rena Jhabvala, all of whom believe that basic income could be a pillar of a future, freer world. They think this in part because it offers people the power to say no as well as yes in the labour-market. Jhabvala and Weeks in particular highlight the power of this from a feminist perspective.

By contrast, three scholars who are more sceptical of basic income’s emancipatory potential – Ana Dinerstein, Jurgen de Wispelaere and Simon Birnbaum – all caution against exaggerating its prospects. De Wispelaere and Birnbaum take issue with the idea that it would necessarily enhance freedom in the labour market by meticulously questioning some of the presumed mechanisms though which it might. Dinerstein, for her part, highlights how structurally compatible basic income is with capitalism, the very system many than of its advocates seek to tame.
Going beyond the theoretical, we ask a number of people who are or have been involved in the many recent basic income trials what they think. This includes those like Caroline Teti, who is leading on a vast basic income trial in Kenya, and women such as Radha Davar and Jessie Golem who have actually received a basic income and are thus in a position to tell us what impact it had on their daily lives. From India to Canada the message is clear: it radically enhanced their freedom, alongside their dignity and sense of well-being.

Ultimately, whether one finds oneself for or against basic income as an idea, whether or not one believes that it is an idea whose time has come, what is clear is that it is now up for debate as a plank of future social policy in countries around the world. This book aims to speak to that debate. It brings policy-makers, activists, and ordinary citizens together to reflect on the potential of basic income to help forge a freer society for everybody. Their thoughts are found in the following pages. And yours? Do you think basic income could be a way through the storm?

– Neil Howard and Cameron Thibos
1 December 2019
DEBATE

What role could basic income play in the fight against unfree labour?
DEBATE
Basic income and the three varieties of freedom
Guy Standing

There are many arguments in favour of moving towards a basic income system as an anchor of a 21st century income distribution system. The primary arguments are ethical rather than instrumental. They are about underpinning a good society, not about poverty per se. It is fundamentally a matter of social justice. This is argued elsewhere, and is not the subject of this short contribution. Here I would like to focus on how a basic income could enhance freedom.

Freedom is a bit like the weather. As Mark Twain said, everybody complains about the weather but nobody does anything about it. Everybody says they are in favour of freedom, and no politician misses an opportunity to say how passionately he or she feels about it. But check on the policies they have supported. One is likely to find they have done very little to preserve or enhance it, at least not for large segments of society. Anybody supporting universal credit in Britain cannot plausibly claim they believe in people’s freedom from state control.

A basic income would be a modest amount of money, paid in cash or some equivalent. It would be paid to each person as an individual, regardless of household or family status. It would not be conditioned upon prior behaviour, such as a record of employment, nor on current behaviour, such as a proven record of job-searching, nor on any future behaviour. It would be an economic right, paid to every legally recognised usual resident of a country. As a right it would be non-withdrawable and permanent, only subject to change by democratically acceptable processes.

One aspect of the definition is that no specific level is necessary. Some advocates favour a large weekly or monthly amount; others favour a modest amount. I believe it necessarily must start at a low level, giving less than any conventional measure of ‘subsistence’ or ‘basic need’. But whatever the amount, as long as it is meaningful, it will enhance freedom.

There is no reason for it to replace existing state benefits, although an implied objective of any sensible basic income advocate is the gradual phasing out of means-tested and behaviour-tested social assistance, as long as nobody is made worse off by doing so. As the value of the basic income rises, the monetary value of other benefits could be determined mainly by the additional costs of living and loss of income associated with a person’s circumstances (disability, unemployment, etc.).

Three forms of freedom
There are three types of freedom a basic income would enhance. First, there is what might best be described as libertarian freedom. This is the freedom to make choices, the freedom from constraint, and the freedom to say ‘no’ to options one does not like, particularly in the labour market. That is the freedom on which Conservatives and Christian Democrats, and Republicans in the USA, have traditionally based their ideology. But most are intentionally or otherwise intellectually dishonest, since unless you have something like a basic income, you cannot have this form of freedom. Those without income security have to put up with what is on offer.

Those on the political left have also been lax in this respect, since Social Democrats and Socialists have singularly failed to give freedom of this sort any attention. Usually, they have pinned their hopes on full employment and the norms of labourism. This ignores those who are not their perceived norm and it denies the freedom that would come if workers and everybody had a basic income.

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The second form of freedom is more interesting, and is less articulated by politicians of any hue. This is classic liberal freedom. It is not freedom if the state provides the options and determines the choices, even if it sets out to be guiding people morally towards making ‘the right choice’. For a classic liberal, paternalism of any variety is unacceptable unless it is protective of the naturally vulnerable, as probably in the case of children, the mentally disabled, and the frail elderly. The great claim for a basic income is that it satisfies liberal freedom by enhancing the freedom to be moral – the freedom to make morally good decisions myself – and not because some state bureaucrat says that is what we should do.

The third, and related, form of freedom is best described as republican freedom. This is the freedom from the power of unaccountable domination by persons in authority or influence. It is not freedom if I can do something only as long as I have the permission or implied consent of somebody, be it a spouse or bureaucrat or community elder, or whoever. It is not freedom if a woman has to ask a husband if she can do something, and it is no more so if he is a benevolent man who rarely if ever intervenes. The fact that, should he wish, he could intervene is what limits republican freedom. This is what basic income aspires to provide by being individual, unconditional, and non-withdrawable. Having guaranteed basic security is, to recall a famous phrase, to pass the eyeball test: the ability to look at others as equals.

Nobody should be misled into thinking that what we propose is a panacea. Advocates of basic income certainly do not believe this is the case. A basic income by itself would not provide total or even adequate freedom in any of the three respects. We all also need agency or voice, to combat oppression and exploitation. However, a basic income is a necessary condition for advancing freedom.

There is one further aspect that should give all those with an interest in social policy a cause for supporting basic income. As we discovered in the course of our pilots in India, the emancipatory value of basic income is greater than the money value. In every other social policy, one could argue that it is the other way round, to a greater or lesser extent. Money matters, particularly money without behavioural conditions attached to its receipt. For someone in income poverty, and in low-income communities and households, money is a ‘scarce commodity’.

It is basic economics that for any commodity deemed to be scarce the price goes up. Thus, not only do low-income people and communities tend to drift into debt, but they also find that the price of loans and credit shoots up. If a basic income is introduced, the scarcity of money declines and the price of loans and credit shrinks, enhancing the income to a greater extent than measured by the basic income alone.

Experiments in several countries have demonstrated that people who have basic security become more altruistic and tolerant, and thus better citizens. Basic income also strengthens resilience to life’s shocks and hazards. In reducing feelings of stress, which I have depicted as one of the eight giants blocking our route to a good society, it not only improves health and thus frees up money for other purposes or needs, but it also leads to more rational and long-term decision-making.

There are other reasons why any basic income is emancipatory. By sharp contrast, all the means-tested and almost inevitably behaviour-tested social assistance schemes currently in vogue, most notably universal credit, impose costs on recipients than make the emancipatory value well below the monetary value. The trouble is that too many politicians and policy designers and evaluators do not care. We should.
The Left has a longstanding preoccupation with unfree labour, and rightly so. The canonical view, expounded by Marx and many since, is that the freedom of workers under capitalism is illusory given that they must sell their labour power to an employer in order to survive. Workers may be free to refuse a particular job, but they can only do so if they have another job lined up or if they are willing to suffer the dire consequences of ‘voluntary’ unemployment.

This fundamental unfreedom is shared by all those who lack the capital to exit employment entirely. In the case of privileged, often high-skilled workers, it is masked by generous employment contracts and wages, ample benefits, stable and supportive working conditions, job-related social insurance entitlements, etc. For the growing ranks of vulnerable and precarious workers this unfreedom manifests itself in having to accept jobs that pay poorly, offer little to no benefits, and come with unhealthy or dangerous working conditions. Once employed, they lack control over how the work is carried out and are subservient to the whims of management. The inability to escape those dead-end jobs for lack of a reasonable alternative, and having very limited power to resist domination in the workplace, is what characterises unfree labour today.

The radical promise of basic income is to alleviate unfreedom in the workplace by decoupling the means of subsistence from the employment relationship. It is easy to grasp how basic income could improve the lives of especially vulnerable, low-wage workers. It could supplement poverty wages and provide a buffer for those rotating from one low paid job to another. It would reduce the stress and vulnerability to exploitation associated with low income security. However, for Leftist advocates of basic income as an instrument of freedom, basic income is about more than making workers’ lives a little more bearable. It’s about giving people the keys to their own cages, and introducing a radical change in the power relationship between workers and employers.

Under a basic income regime, the argument goes, workers gain the ‘power to say no’ to bad work. It is meant to give them the freedom to exit a poor job that is denied them under current arrangements. As such, basic income hopes to improve the fallback position of each individual worker and allows them to credibly threaten to leave a job if negotiations with employers don’t result in improved conditions. Employers anticipating workers may exercise their exit option are expected to offer better conditions, effectively offering workers more freedom in their jobs. The pinnacle of a basic income’s emancipatory potential is reached when it offers workers the freedom to leave the labour market altogether, if that is what they want.

This story of hope has understandably gathered considerable steam amongst those appalled by the adversities faced by many workers in the modern labour market. But can basic income as a tool for exit live up its radical promise? We’re sceptical, as we see three distinct but related problems with basic income that may prevent it from becoming an instrument of worker freedom.

The risks of walking away
First, we must be realistic about when a worker would follow through on leaving their job. A basic income might provide a short-term bridge between jobs, but how long could it keep a worker afloat if...
they end up jobless for longer? The answer, which is crucial to a worker’s decision-making, depends of course on the size of the basic income. The higher the basic income the more impact it will have on precarious workers, and the more workers might consider exercising the exit option. But the most feasible proposals under consideration in Europe and elsewhere suggest a level of basic income that would seem insufficient to allow most workers to leave a job without having a replacement lined up.

On top of that, jobs often come with other benefits that aren’t replicated by basic income – access to health care or pensions, for instance. Granted, many precarious jobs have progressively dismantled access to worker benefits. But even in these cases leaving one job in search of better employment elsewhere may come with costs, such as the loss of support networks when moving for work. The risk of losing these network benefits, such as unpaid child care provided by family members or neighbours, may make precarious workers think twice about exercising their exit option. Under such circumstances, a basic income will increase the quality of life of someone trapped in a precarious job. But it may do very little in terms of escaping precarious work itself, and thus will have no impact on that worker’s freedom.

The second problem relates to the realities of finding a better job, especially for those currently trapped in precarious labour. After all, meaningful freedom is presumably dependent on having a real choice to move horizontally but the prospects for mobility towards a better job are often minimal. And if the predictions of many basic income advocates about massive technological unemployment due to increased automation prove to be true, precarious workers will face worse constraints. Basic income may be part of a solution against a background of increased automation, but that doesn’t mean it increases the freedom of workers. After all, even under a basic income regime, being involuntarily replaced by a machine is not the same as gaining the freedom to work or not to work!

The third problem has to do with the response of employers to workers who, emboldened by a basic income, threaten to leave a job. The basic income story suggests that employers will respond to work-
ers threatening to leave their jobs by offering better wages, conditions, and so on. But why would they do this, especially if automation is offering a cheaper alternative? Here precarious workers face a double constraint. Each precarious worker threatening to exit not only can be easily replaced by other workers desperately looking for a job but also possibly by a machine.

To make matters worse, employers know fully well the sort of constraints precarious workers face. They would largely consider precarious workers with a basic income signalling their willingness to exit as a ‘hollow threat’. It’s unclear why employers would accommodate costly demands of workers threatening to exit with their basic income – at least when it comes to the precarious workers who are most unfree and who are the main concern of basic income advocates. On the contrary, the worry is that basic income might operate as a kind of ‘unemployment subsidy’, and counterintuitively make it easier for employers to get rid of troublesome workers and to replace them with either workers more desperate for a job or job-killing technology.

In short, we share with basic income advocates a strong sense that precarious workers are being exploited and dominated, and that resolute measures to address these conditions are urgently needed. We also see great potential in the basic income project for many reasons, including its capacity to improve the lives of many vulnerable and disadvantaged workers. But we do think the argument that basic income offers workers – especially precarious workers – radically increased freedom by strengthening their ‘power to say no’ is often overblown. Much more work needs to be done to understand the ways in which realistic forms of basic income affects power inequalities in the labour market.
The biggest threat to freedom in the world today is economic destitution. We need universal basic income (UBI) because destitute people are unable to sleep undisturbed, unable to urinate, unable to wash themselves, and unable to use the resources of the world to meet their own needs. Being unable in these ways makes them unable in all their economic relationships.

The destitute are unable in the most basic sense of the word. The destitute are not unable to wash themselves and they are not unable to use the resources of the world to meet their needs: they are unable to do these things. Because our governments enforce a property rights system in which some people control natural resources and other people do not, someone will interfere with them if they try to do these things that they are very capable of doing.

Poverty is not a fact of nature. Poverty is the result of the way our societies have chosen to distribute property rights to natural resources. For millions of years no one interfered with our ancestors as they used the resources of the world to meet their needs. No one failed to wash because they were too lazy to find a stream. No one urinated in a common thoroughfare because they were too lazy to find a secluded place to do so. Everyone was free to hunt and gather and make their camp for the night as they pleased.

No one had to follow the orders of a boss to earn the right to make their living. Our hunter-gatherer ancestors were not rich, but they were not in poverty as we know it today. Our laws today make it illegal for some people to satisfy their most natural and simple bodily needs, and our laws make homelessness such a fact of life that we can believably pretend that it's all their own fault. There are billions of people today who are more poorly nourished than their hunter-gatherer ancestors. It cannot be simply their own fault. We have chosen one way to distribute rights to natural resources; we can just as easily choose a system that does not create poverty as a side effect.

We have created the threat of economic destitution, and we have used it as a 'work incentive'. In doing so, we have made virtually everyone dependent on their employers or on the government or private charities for which they might be eligible. This policy allows a few privileged people to dictate the terms of employment to virtually everybody.

We need to stop judging people and restore the freedom people had before governments took away their direct access to the world's resources.

**UBI: Something for nothing?**

The most common objection to UBI labels it as something for nothing, and declares that something for nothing unacceptable. They say people have a moral obligation to ‘work’. Lazy people who will not work should not be rewarded with anything. Therefore, supposedly, any social benefits should be conditional on at least the willingness to accept employment.

This argument is filled with problems. I’ll just discuss two. The first problem with it is that UBI is the farthest thing from something-for-nothing. All societies impose many rules on every individual. Consider the discussion of homelessness above. Why can’t homeless people build their own shelter and their own latrine? Why can’t they drink out of a clean river? Why can’t they hunt, gather, or plant and harvest their own food? They cannot do these things because governments have made rules saying they don’t have the right to do these things.
Governments divided the Earth into ‘property’. The wealthy got a share, while most people got nothing but the opportunity to ask the wealthy for a job. Those of us who somehow managed to get a share of the Earth’s natural resources benefit every day from the state’s interference with virtually everybody else (i.e. the people who didn’t get a share). We pay them no compensation, no reparation, nothing to restore the freedom you get from the ability to work for yourself with no boss, no client, and no caseworkers. A state without UBI is the state that has something for nothing.

The wealthy got control of resources without paying their real cost, and control of resources gives them effective control over the labour of virtually everybody. UBI is not, and should never be seen as, something for nothing. It is the just compensation for all the one-sided rules of property and property regulations society inherently imposes on individuals.

The second problem with the work obligation argument against UBI is that it conflates two different senses of the word ‘work’ – one that means toil and one that means employment or time spent making money. In the toil sense, work simply means to apply effort regardless of whether it is for one’s own benefit or for someone else’s. In the employment sense work means to work for someone else – such as a client or a boss. Anyone with access to resources can meet their needs by working only for themselves or with others of their choosing. But people without access to resources have no other choice but to work for someone else. Furthermore, they have to work for the same group of people whose control over resources makes it impossible for the propertyless to work only for themselves.

Working for someone else entails the acceptance of rules, terms, and subordination, all of which are things that a reasonable person might object to. There is nothing wrong with working for someone else and accepting the conditions of work as long as the individual chooses to do so. But there is something wrong with a society that puts one group of people in the position where they do not have the power to say no to the jobs offered them by more privileged people.

When we take away access to the Earth’s resources and make no reparation, we are not forcing people to work, but to work for at least one of the people controlling the Earth’s resources. When we do this, we create a mandatory participation economy the makes people unfree, vulnerable, and miserable.

The evidence is found in every sweatshop, in every ‘trafficked’ person, in every on-the-job instance of sexual harassment, in every homeless shelter, and in every worker who can’t afford any basic necessity of life.

The solution is to create a voluntary participation economy based on truly free trade. In this sort of economy, each person would pay for the parts of the Earth they use and each would receive a share of the payment for the parts other people use. This principle is the basis of UBI. With a sufficient UBI to draw on, each person would have the power to say no to a bad job offer, and the power decide for themselves whether the offers in the job market are good enough to deserve their participation. And that’s what it means to enter the job market as a free person. Nothing protects a worker better than the power to refuse a job. This power will protect not only the poor and marginal but all of us.
The debate over whether universal basic income (UBI) should be a central project of the Left is intensifying. Regarded as a transitional demand, advocates suggest that UBI is the solution to the crisis of waged labour as well as a good, realistic utopia. Opponents disagree, myself included. I laid out the reasons why we should regard UBI as a bad utopia in an article for Development and Change. Here I will limit myself to pointing out – once again – the elephant in the room: the problem with money. We know that the imperative of money for human survival creates all sorts of problems and misery in this world. My question is simple: will the ‘universal’ distribution of money solve or reinforce these problems?

The celebration of UBI as the utopia for the Left in the present circumstances is most concerning. The question about what money is has disappeared from the horizon of the Left and it is now only discussed in small Marxist circles. That’s not good. The lack of debate about money prevents those who defend citizens’ right to an income from understanding what money really is. The real problem that we confront is neither the lack of money nor a good way to distribute it, of which UBI is an example. The problem is the human dependence on money for existence.

Polishing the gilded cage
Money is not just the means of exchange. It embodies the capitalist social relations of dispossession, exploitation and subordination. Marx criticised political economists like Adam Smith for believing that money was merely an instrument of administration with no economic importance. He revealed that in capitalist societies money is not an innocent mediation of market exchange. It is the concrete expression of value, the substance of which is abstract labour. Value is materially and visibly expressed in money form.

As the most abstract form of capitalist property, money is both the means of exchange among ‘equal’ citizens and the proof of the expropriation of labour. Money is not an economic phenomenon but a
form of political domination. Its existence requires us to need it to survive. Given that, it is bewildering that a massive redistribution of money is the best utopia progressive forces can come up with. UBI conforms to the command of money over humans, and if it comes to pass it will be administered by the capitalist state. That is no utopia.

The idea that UBI will fulfil a human right is preposterous. On the contrary, UBI will dilute – and thereby help hide – our daily contradiction of being both a part of the exploited proletariat and a pseudo free citizen in the political realm. This separation is more conceptual than empirical, and distinguishing the two is key to the continuation of capitalism. UBI does not challenge the conditions maintaining this separation. Instead, it reinforces the myth of the ‘free citizen’ and its ‘human right to money’.

UBI bows to the master. It will contribute to the perpetuation and subordination of humans to money, which, as Marx once told us, “transforms all human and natural qualities into their opposites … the divine power of money lies in its nature as the strange and alienating species-essence of man which alienates itself by selling itself. It is the alienated capacity of mankind.”

The social power of money, which compels us to work, will continue distorting and eroding what is left of our humanity. Money is the material expression of capitalist property. The most important feature of capitalism, meanwhile, is the subordination of the social reproduction of life to money. Given both, how could UBI make us free, and free of what exactly?

**UBI will not bring dignity**

There is another argument that must be also reconsidered by UBI proponents: that UBI will bring dignity insofar as it will guarantee material existence. For a critic of capital, UBI cannot bring dignity. Material existence is not synonymous with dignity. Slaves had their material existence assured by the master who possessed them. Did they live with dignity? Rich business speculators have their material existence safeguarded, but do they have dignity?

We should look elsewhere for inspiration. The Zapatistas’ notion of dignity is exemplary. Dignity is synonymous with self-determination; it is subversive and revolutionary. It has nothing to do with possessing anything, let alone receiving money from a centre of power and violence that is crucial to the reproduction of class relations. Dignity comes from dignified rage. Those with dignity do not bow to the master. They spit at its face.

What then? There are many artistic, social, political, cultural, and economic projects that aim at creating alternatives to the world of money. Perhaps, instead of UBI, we should start planning how to support, expand, and multiply these experiments of the future in the present.

Capitalism cannot give us freedom or dignity. We must take them. Fortunately, those engaged in the ‘art of organising hope’ are opening fronts of political possibility. They follow a simple and powerful principle suggested by Audre Lourde: “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.”
Once treated as a pointlessly utopian fantasy, the demand for a guaranteed basic income is now being debated across multiple forums, from mainstream and alternative media sites to more academic venues.

There are many different proposals that travel under this label. The version I want to defend is a minimal liveable income regularly remitted as a social wage, paid unconditionally to residents regardless of citizenship status, regardless of their family or household membership, and regardless of past, present, or future employment status. Waged work would not be replaced by such a social wage, but the link between work and income would be relaxed.

I support this form of basic income because of its feminist potential to loosen the constraints our current system places on all of us but particularly on women. It is a tool that, if deployed correctly, would enable waged work, marriage contracts, and childrearing to be more a matter of choice than they are at present, where all three are subjected to a relentless, strict, and miserly economic calculus.

My case in favour of the basic income demand is deeply informed by the Wages for Housework movement in the 1970s, which advocated for a social wage to be paid to women for the uncompensated reproductive labour they perform. Many lessons for the basic income movement can be found in this earlier campaign, two of which I want to focus on here. The first lesson is that the wage system is wholly inadequate as a method for distributing income. The second is that because the wage system is inadequate, many people and especially women have little choice but to enter into families in precarious positions of inequality. Basic income has a chance to ameliorate, but will not in itself correct, both these wrongs.

The thinkers behind the Wages for Housework campaign insisted that we needed a broader understanding of the economy and of what counts as an economic relation in order to account for all of the productive effort involved in the creation of value. Their main focus was on showing how unpaid reproductive work acts as a subsidy for companies that boosts their profit margins. A capitalist society needs reproductive work to happen so that workers are fed and dressed, so that new workers replace old ones, and so that products are bought and consumed. They argued that since reproduction is not separate from the system of economic production but an indispensable part of it, those reproductive contributions should be recognised and remunerated.

But this is not how the wage economy currently functions. Wages, capitalism’s primary mechanism for transferring wealth back down the chain, are only given to a narrow subset of all those people engaged in maintaining a capitalist society: those who are employed. The wage system doesn’t come close to compensating all the people working for all the value they are producing; its blind spots are legion.

We can make a strong case for basic income if we update this argument to include other areas of activity from which a capitalist society derives value yet the wage system fails to reward. For example, employers make use of but do not remunerate the educational efforts that develop a worker’s general skills and aptitudes. Neither do they compensate for all the time a worker dedicates to developing communicative capacities, aesthetic embodiments, and even social networks.

This is no small matter in the present moment. The employment system is currently being restructured...
around the ideal of the independent, entrepreneurial worker who has invested heavily in their own human capital and future employability, often through the accrual of household debt. This would-be worker is expected to assume all the risk and costs of rendering themselves employable and for landing a series of job contracts while employers are largely off the hook for these expenses.

Employers also make use of social infrastructures produced through collective efforts over generations, commons reclassified as ‘natural resources’, assets accumulated through slavery and colonialism, and technologies first developed by governments. They appropriate the materials that create and add value to goods and services, including forms of scientific, communicative, technical, and social knowledge. Then, of course, there is prison labour, various forms of unwaged digital labour used to create data and algorithms, as well as old-fashioned wage theft. Neither wages nor taxes come close to compensating for all of this. The fear that there will be free riders who will receive a basic income is laughable given the truly massive levels of free riding on unremunerated labour, stolen property, and privatised commons for which companies are given a free pass.

In addition to all these types of unremunerated value creation, we must also remember that large, arguably enormous, numbers of people are excluded from or marginalised within the wage system because they do not conform to the model of the ideal waged worker. How many of us really possess the full list of capacities needed to devote 40 hours to intensive focused effort over the course of a five-day week? What about those of us with cognitive, emotional, neurological, or physical differences that mean we cannot always, or sometimes ever, work in the ways or for the durations that are expected? How can we be expected to work a lifetime without more than – and this is of course the best-case scenario – a little vacation time and a few sick days? The family is supposed to be our safety net, but for many it’s a last resort rather than a first option. Too many of us have nothing or little in the way of support when our bodies or our minds are rendered disabled by the standard forms of waged work.

A fundamental lesson of the Wages for Housework campaign is that that wage system does not account for all our contributions to economic production and excludes too many of us to function as a credible mechanism of income allocation. The already rather spectacular mis-accounting of productive activity they identified in the 1970s is arguably much more dramatic today, and the exclusions enacted by the wage system possibly even more damning.

Basic income, as a universal and unconditional social wage, offers a more rational and more equitable way to distribute income and reward forms of productivity.

Freedom to choose a family

A second key insight from the Wages for Housework movement regards the way the wage system interacts with the institution of the family to trap many, especially women, into dangerous situations and also benefits from the unwaged labour that takes place under its auspices.

The heteropatriarchal family may function as a haven in a heartless world for some; for others it is a sad and dangerous site. A 2018 UN report, which found that more than half of female homicides around the world were committed by intimate partners or relatives, was released with a headline that named the home as “the most dangerous place for women.” The statistics on domestic violence, including intimate partner violence, together with child and elder abuse are by any metric staggering. Without adequate means to support oneself and one’s dependents it can be difficult and sometimes impossible to leave such a situation.

The family is also where the majority of the labour necessary to reproduce workers on a daily and generational basis takes place. It is an institution that distributes income earned from waged work to others in a household and that allocates domestic tasks to its members along gendered lines. Enormous amount of time, skill, and energy are devoted
to childcare, eldercare, the care of the ill, the care of the disabled, self-care, and community care. Without this work whatever you want to delimit as the economic system would not exist, and it is provided disproportionately by women, free of charge, regardless of whether they also work for wages.

Wages for Housework advocates extended their critical examination of the family as a satellite of the system of production to the question of childbearing as well. They demanded wages so that they could, among other things, “decide if, when and under what conditions to have children”. Deciding not to have children because one does not have the money or time to raise them does not count as true reproductive choice: “As long as we have no money of our own because we work for nothing at home and for crumbs outside the home, none of us can choose whether or not to have children, and all of us face sterilization even if our tubes are not cut”.

A basic income, like wages for housework, cannot in itself create the conditions for truly meaningful choices about whether to raise children or not, or whether or not to enter into a household or form a family. It would, however, better enable individuals to make choices about whether to enter into a particular household division of domestic labour, as well as serve as a resource for exiting a physically or otherwise abusive household relationship. It would also give people a greater measure of economic freedom to either engage in or opt out of childrearing as they choose. As such, it is material support for the possibility of cultivating more sustaining and sustainable relationships of caring and sharing.

**Demanding UBI comes with risk**

Critics of a basic income have come up with many reasons why it is a fool’s errand, some more spurious than others. Now I will turn to what I see as most compelling critique, the challenge to the demand that I think should give everyone pause and that may well dissuade some from their support.

The problem as I see it is tactical: The danger is that, if a basic income is won at all, it probably won’t be first instituted just as we want it. Most likely it will be initially granted at a low level that serves to subsidise low wage employers by offering their workers a small supplement.

This means that the initial form a basic income programme takes, and whether or not we can then win it in the form we want, will depend on the power and endurance of the political forces behind its advocacy. Despite its appearance as a punctual event, as a win or a loss, the politics of a basic income will involve a longer process of winning it on our terms, as an unconditional, universal, livable wage. This makes it an undeniably risky endeavor. Whether this “foot in the door” incremental approach to political change is worth the risk is an important question, perhaps the critical question.

Here we might recall the feminist struggles about whether to pursue passage of the 15th amendment and the 50-year wait for the 19th, or think about whether the Affordable Care Act will or will not serve as a step towards Medicare For All. The foot in the door can serve as a wedge to help pry it open further or it can get broken off. The only thing of which I feel certain is at the heart of another insight from Wages for Housework: “Feminism must start from what women need, not from what it might be easier to gain.”
DEBATE

Basic income can transform women’s lives
Renana Jhabvala

The Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) is a women’s trade union in India, with two million members working in the informal economy. One of our on-going projects at SEWA has been to explore ways in which its members can overcome extreme insecurity. As part of this exploration we carried out three pilots, in which thousands of men, women, and children received a modest, monthly direct transfer unconditionally – a basic income. Their subsequent experience was monitored through surveys that compared their experience with a control group of thousands who did not receive the payments. The methodology and results are described in a book written by SEWA and the collaborators in the project, Guy Standing, Sarath Davala, Soumya Kapoor.

SEWA started its experimentation with a small study in Delhi. We substituted rations for poor families with cash put into bank accounts in the name of the eldest woman. We found that the women managed the cash well, choosing whatever their family needed. A group of women went together to buy food from the wholesale markets. They were not only able to afford better quality grain than usual, but were also able to add pulses, milk and eggs to their diet. Their nutrition improved.

SEWA’s experiments showed that neither of these claims is valid. On the contrary, we found that the transfers had five types of effect. Taken together, they show why a basic income could be transformative.

First, there are welfare effects. The nutrition, health and schooling of girls improved more than for boys of similar age and social background, although boys also gained. The nutrition effect was greatest for girls aged from two to five years old. The gain in schooling was greatest for teenage girls, whose registration and attendance in secondary school rose significantly during our experiment.

The second effect can be described as equity. Not only did women benefit more in welfare, partially redressing deeply ingrained inequities, but women and men in lower-caste and tribal households tended to gain most. For many families, their basic income was their way out of exploitative debt.

Prejudice is not an argument
The benefits of having this extra money were once again plain to see, and as a result of these experiments SEWA became one of the earliest advocates of basic income in India. It is a way to reduce poverty and empower women at the same time. However, we find ourselves continually facing criticism for this view.

The arguments against cash transfers are emotionally appealing. One we hear frequently is that women will become disempowered because men will seize the cash to increase their consumption of liquor. Another argument is that women will drop out of employment with UBI, thereby reducing India’s already low female labour force participation rate even further. UBI will thus disempower women by pushing them back into the home.

Prejudice is not an argument

Renana Jhabvala is an Indian social worker based in Ahmedabad, India, who has been active for decades in organising women into organisations and trade unions in India.
saw no change in women’s labour force participation during our pilots, we observed that the sort of work women did changed to increase their incomes and agency. This happened through a diversification of production, with a big increase in own-account activities, especially farming, livestock and small businesses. Situations in which women engaged in multiple activities grew. This raised household earnings and further increased economic security, since if one activity had a setback they could rely on others.

In the tribal village covered by the pilots, 30% of women who received the basic income switched from wage labour to own account work like farming and livestock, and 73% reduced their debt burdens. Consider the example of Tulsa Bai, whose meagre wage was rarely enough to cover her family’s needs. When she started receiving a basic income, Tulsa Bai saved the money, borrowed some more, and bought two buffaloes. She condensed the milk, which she sold to a sweet shop that used it as a raw material. The business strategy worked and Tulsa Bai does not need to work as a wage-earner anymore.

Fourth, for women there was an empowerment effect. Evidence from the pilots showed that an unconditional basic income helped women gain a voice in their relationships, in their families, and in the wider community. Many reported that the individual payments enabled them to participate more in household spending decisions. For example, over 54% in villages where the basic income was paid reported that household income was shared equally, compared to only 39% in villages where it was not paid.

Finally, the transfers had a positive effect on social ‘bads’. Several examples may highlight this. In many poor households, men’s drinking habits contribute to misery within the family as the men spend the money and become violent at home. Street crime and sexual harassment in public places also tend to increase with alcohol consumption. Now, UBI does not suddenly transform alcoholic men – that requires other measures. But over the 18 months of the pilot there was no increase in alcohol or tobacco consumption, and in some villages alcohol drinking actually decreased.

When asked why, many women attributed the change to the fact that families were investing more in productive assets and raw materials. This meant that the men had to work more and, according to the women, thus had less time to sit around and drink! At the same time women became more assertive. It was a common sight to see women, who previously had rarely left their homes, having meetings in public places to discuss their cash transfers, and in some cases protecting other women who had alcoholic and abusive husbands.

"Unconditional basic income helped women gain a voice in their relationships, families, and wider community."

UBI for all

In recent years, there has been a considerable change in public discourse about UBI in India. When we started our first experiment in 2009, we were reviled as people who wanted to upset a pro-poor system of food rations. We even faced violence in the areas where the experiment was happening. We persevered because our members were frustrated with the existing schemes. There are more than a thousand schemes operating in India, each promising to reduce poverty,
and some promising to empower women. And every year, more schemes are added with their own target groups and multiple conditionalities, confusing beneficiaries and make them prey to unscrupulous operators who often siphon off the benefits. Basic income is different. It is simple to understand, does not have conditions, is universal within a group, and is a cash transfer into the beneficiary’s bank account without the need for intermediaries.

In 2017, SEWA organised a major conference in Delhi to promote these ideas to Indian policy makers. The Indian Network for Basic Income was set up following the conference. That same year, the India Economic Survey recommended that UBI be made available to all women in India. In the run up to the 2019 Indian general election, we saw an amazing transformation in which many political parties because to announce their support for cash transfers as a new way forward in poverty reduction and income security programming.

Although the SEWA experiments were only for one year, their effect lasted much longer. A study conducted five years after the experiment ended found that while a few families had dropped back to their previous conditions, usually due to subsequent health shocks, many of the specific outcomes persisted due to sustained growth of income. The reasons this elevated income was sustainable was that during the first year of the pilot many households bought livestock and other assets, or began to farm their small plots that had hitherto been left fallow. Basic income had in effect paid for their start-up costs, and once the ball was rolling they were able to keep it going on their own.

Four years later, alcohol consumption seems to have continued to decline as well. Similarly, the villagers’ access to and understanding of health care had continued to improve, as has their attitude towards children’s schooling. Intra-household decision making also appeared to be becoming ever more balanced. Our pilots showed that basic income has the power to transform the lives of whole families, and especially those of women. Now it is time for India to take the next step and make basic income a reality for all.
INTERVIEWS
Voices from the basic income movement
The basic income movement is split over what sort of community a universal basic income would produce. Would it lead to greater fragmentation of society, or to a utopia in which care for the other sits at the centre?

As with many questions about the possible effects of a basic income, the immediate answer is always to ask some questions in return. What level of basic income? What does it replace? How is it being funded? Where is it being introduced? There is no general question, and there is no general answer. Nevertheless, there are two important dimensions in the debate about basic income that are relevant to communal relations.

One is that, contrary to the standard sort of minimum income or social assistance scheme that exists in a large number of countries, basic income is strictly individual. Paradoxically, it is this characteristic that encourages communities. It encourages living together. This is because standard social assistance schemes take economies of scale into account. A person living on his or her own gets a benefit that is higher than what that person would receive if they were part of a larger household.

This doesn’t happen with basic income. You remain entitled to the same level of basic income even if you move in with someone else, and even if that person has an income from another source. That encourages people to live together as they will benefit from economising on housing, on washing machines, etc. The economics of scale found in joint living are not undercut this time by an income reduction. That’s one dimension.

The other dimension is related to the common charge that basic income is hostile to participation in the labour market because it’s obligation free. The theory is that basic income would thus hinder a major mechanism for community formation, namely working with others.

I’m not among those who say that we are going towards a work free society, but I do see the potential for an increasing number of people to be excluded from the labour market in the future. The combination of globalisation and technical change generates a polarisation in earning power. As a result, an ever-increasing part of the population is at risk of falling under the threshold of poverty.

Basic income is a way of addressing these trends. It introduces an income floor. This can then be combined with income from work, or used to make combining employment with training and education much easier. This latter aspect is what will enable them to keep contributing to society in the form of paid work.

Basic income shouldn’t be seen as an alternative to the right to work. Basic income as opposed to means-tested schemes is a way of helping everyone to access meaningful work, and to participate in collective paid activities throughout their lives as long and as much as they wish.

You’ve written a great deal about the potential of an unconditional basic income for advancing freedom. Where do you think it could make the most change?

Basic income as commonly defined is unconditional in several distinct senses.

First, it is given in cash rather than in the form of food stamps, or free housing, etc. That’s already one
way in which you could say basic income is freedom-friendly. It says that the people, and not bureaucrats, are best qualified to decide what is better for them. If you give cash to people they’ll decide what the best use of it is. That’s one.

Second, basic income is strictly individual. No one needs to come and check with whom you live in order to determine whether you are entitled to a basic income or not.

Third, it’s universal. You get it whether you are rich or poor. That’s also enhances freedom, because it means that if you get a job you don’t lose the basic income. What frequently happens is that people are offered a job that pays somewhat better than their benefits, but they don’t dare take it because it will mean losing the benefits. That might seem strange, but remember that benefits are more stable sources of income than many jobs. If they end their benefits to take a job and then are sacked, they have a problem. Basic income is given irrespective of your income or employment status and so it won’t constrain choices in this way.

Fourth, it’s not restricted to people who are willing and able to work. It’s obligation free. If you give up your job because you think it is a lousy job, or because you are treated badly by your boss, you remain entitled to it. No administration can oblige you to take on a job if you don’t want to take that job.

The combination of all these features means that basic income is more than a way of acquiring some purchasing power. It’s a way of empowering people, of enabling them to choose from among a wide range of options that otherwise would not be available to them.

You’ve written a book with Yannick Vanderborght about how basic income could help us create a more sane economy. What do you mean by that?

What is a sane economy? An economy that is sane is an economy that doesn’t make people sick, and doesn’t make our planet sick. Basic income is a way of making the economy more sane. With respect to the health of people, it enables those who work too much to work less, allowing them to reduce their working time before they burn out or when they need to re-train. It’s also a way for them to slow down at the moment that their children may need more of their time.

It’s also a way of making our economy more sane with respect to the planet itself. Worldwide there are the problems of unemployment and the working poor. People on both the left and right regard these as problems. So what do you do? The traditional answer on both the right and left was, and to some extent still is, growth. We need growth because growth will produce well-paying jobs. If growth slows down there will be less jobs overall, and those that do exist will be less well-paid. So let’s go for growth and growth and growth.

This is crazy, as the relentless quest for growth gradually destroys our planet. Basic income pushes back again this by giving people an income that is independent of their contribution to growth. This would allow some people to take voluntary unemployment, involuntarily unemployed people to find jobs, and anybody to reduce their work hours. It’s a radical alternative to the standard way of thinking that would enable our economy to be more sane and to treat our planet in a less destructive way.

Some people go as far as to talk about basic income as a pathway towards degrowth. Are you of a similar mind?

I have sympathy for the values underlying the degrowth movement, but I think that its rhetoric and campaigns can often be over-simplifying. If you go to a country like India and look at the state of the public infrastructure, the level of remuneration for teachers, the overall level of poverty, you can see that degrowth isn’t the answer there. India still requires massive public and private investment to improve the standard of living. Degrowth cannot possibly make sense all over the world currently.
Nevertheless we need a sane economy that doesn’t destroy the planet, and growth everywhere is definitely part of the problem. So I have a lot of sympathy for the more limited claim that we need to reduce the average level of consumption in the wealthy countries. This doesn’t have to happen evenly – those consuming least cannot be under the same obligation as those consuming most – but the average level of consumption must decrease.

It’s important to note that reducing consumption doesn’t mean that the level of production in rich countries must decrease as measured by GDP. We must also realise that we won’t have a fair and sustainable world without permanent transfers from richer to poorer countries. We can’t expect all parts of the world, even within a couple of centuries, to have reached a high enough level of production to lift their standard of living to what can be regarded as a decent level. That means we must combine degrowth of consumption in the wealthy countries with continued growth of production, and then accept that part of that value must be redistributed to other countries.

That’s another way in which basic income is crucially relevant when we think about a sustainable and desirable future. The form taken by transnational transfers must be extremely simple. It cannot be a means-tested transfer to the poor, it cannot be linked to some sort of enforceable obligation. So, the only form it could take is the form of an unconditional dividend. This could be presented and funded in all sorts of ways, such as a worldwide carbon dividend, but this is the way in which we must think about the future. Production growth must continue all over the world, consumption in wealthy countries cannot, and transnational transfers must grow in importance.

Politically we are far from this becoming a possibility. That’s why I attach great importance to the current debate within Europe about the Eurodividend. The idea of having a modest basic income funded at the level of the European Union, which would work as an individual, transnational, redistributive system. This has never existed in the world. It is one of the many utopias we must strive to realise.
INTERVIEW

Basic income is paving a path to freedom in Kenya

Caroline Teti

Tell us about the basic income trial that Give Directly, your NGO, is conducting in Kenya right now.

I’m very excited about this experiment. It’s an opportunity to test basic income in a non-Western setting, to bring it down to the South were the challenges of poverty are greater than the challenges mostly talked about in the West: automation, artificial intelligence, etc.

We are currently sending money to 20,000 Kenyans in different communities. It’s a randomised control trial, which means these 20,000 people are divided into three different groups. Those in the first group receive the basic income as a lump sum. In the second group, everyone 18 years old or older receives $22 per month for two years. Adults in the third group also receive $22 per month, but this time for twelve years. This experiment began a year and a half ago.

Both the scale and ambition of this project are truly massive. Now that you’re eighteen months in, do you have some preliminary results you could share?

We don’t yet have statistical data, but we have already had many conversations with participants about how their basic incomes have impacted their lives, work, risk-taking, migration, financial planning, personal relationships, and even experiences with domestic violence.

In terms of work, we’ve been told that the basic income has given people their first feeling of what it’s like to be an employed person. To feel what you and I feel when we earn money every month. And what they say is that for the first time, they’re able to plan. They don’t just spend money at the spur of the moment because it came, or live each day as it comes. They plan for their month, and they are even working harder because they realise that this money has given them a head start. They need more than just what the money can offer.

We have seen situations where recipients have moved from their original villages to small towns or lake sides to look for work. People who previously were grounded in their villages now say, ‘You know what? I have some little money. I can travel. I can afford a house for $5, and so I can take the risk to stay in a neighbouring town and look for a job. And if I get that job, it can supplement what I’m doing.’

I remember one lady who, the moment she started receiving the basic income, left her baby with her mother. For six months she went to the nearest town and started a small business. That business grew, and today she has taken back her baby. This money gave her a head start in opening a small business, and now that business can take care of the two of them.

We also see parents taking their children to school, responding to their medical needs, including taking out government medical insurance so that they can better handle risks. It’s as if basic income is giving people a new lease of life. I have seen them become vibrant, as if they’re living life anew. Why? Because basic income has increased the number of meals people take in a day. Nutrition has improved across board.

While fully acknowledging that these results are preliminary and anecdotal, it appears that the recipients are experiencing a positive, emancipatory effect in terms of autonomy and wellbeing. That confirms the results of some of the other trials that have taken place around the world.
I can’t agree more. Basic income is empowering, and especially if it is unconditional. By the wonder of basic income, people get a choice. They get their dignity back. It increases trust, it brings about peace, it promotes unity within the community.

Mobilisation within the community has also taken on a new dynamic. People come together to save or lend each other money, and are able to buy goods on credit because they know they can pay. That confidence and increased purchasing power helps local businesses to thrive.

One of the things that we’re particularly interested in at Beyond Trafficking and Slavery is this idea of freedom in relation to work. In your conversations with recipients, are people speaking about a change in experience in the world of work as a result of their basic income?

Most of the people were not working in the villages we’ve gone to. A few people had income of some sort, but I can say that over 90% of them did not have jobs. These are people who still had to find food, send their children to school, and occasionally go to hospital, yet they didn’t know where the next coin was going to come from. To mend that, they left their homes to go out and look for whatever came their way. Those whatevers ranged from making charcoal to working on construction sites or farms, cleaning people’s compounds, working as maids or servants. They had no choice but to accept what they were offered.

The people who have now stopped working in those construction sites say, ‘I went there because I needed something for my family to start from. Even though I owned a farm I had to work for other people. Today, they have something to start from. Therefore I can work on my farm. I can produce food on my farm. I can provide food from the resource that I have.’

The population that has it the worst are elderly widows living with orphaned children. Life does not know if you’re old; you still have to be the caregiver. Old women have said to me, ‘I toiled, I have arthritis, my back is aching, but I had to go and work on somebody else’s farm so that I could bring my grandchildren food.’ That is where the story used to end for these women. But now that they have a basic income, they’re able to also say, ‘Today, I don’t have to do that. I took a little part of that money and started a small business in my house. People can come and buy what I make, and I use that money to feed us.’ For these women, growing the business into a big enterprise is not the dream. The dream is, at the end of the month, to start the cycle all over again. To have recouped the money they’ve spent so that they can feed themselves in the coming month as well.

“Life does not know if you’re old; you still have to be the caregiver.”

It’s a really humbling situation listening to the stretches that people went to in the labour market to be able to provide for themselves and their families. Getting a basic income has changed that dynamic. It has given them the freedom to find alternative work that they think is more rewarding.

It’s inspiring and exciting, and it makes me wonder what this might mean for advocating politically for basic income in Kenya if the results remain as positive.

We pray that the results remain positive, and strongly positive for that matter. If they are just positive the advocacy angle will be very difficult. If they are strongly positive, then it means we will be starting from at a different level. What I am riding on right now and hoping will be sustained is the fact that, in
Kenya, the government already has a social protection programme targeting old people, orphans and vulnerable children, and people with disabilities. This means that the government has already dedicated resources from the exchequer that go to this population every single month. The value is not so different from what we’re giving as a basic income.

For any advocacy to be successful we need to find a policy perspective that makes basic income attractive to policymakers and to bureaucrats. In Kenya’s case, that might mean letting them see the cost-benefit analysis and the economic advantage of a basic income over this other programme. It shouldn’t replace public service provision like health education, but it could be a scale up alternative for other types of existing government safety net programmes.

Basic income by its nature is a disruptive idea. It’s disruptive because when it comes, people have to make significant changes in the way they think about public policy, social policy, development programmes. At this point, people in the basic income space need think about re-packaging the evidence these pilots are producing in a way that is easy to consume for policymakers and for citizens. It can’t remain a boardroom affair and an academic affair that only a few people talk about. We need to start building global momentum, and that for me is a rallying call.
Your research really gets to the heart of why a universal basic income is so contentious. What is it you're looking at?

I'm interested in why wage labour is still so important to people, and why people are so resistant to getting money without working for it. I think this is a big impediment to reforming our welfare systems, and it's the most common intuitive objection to doing something like a universal basic income. ‘Why would you give people money if they don't work for it? You can't give people money for nothing.’ I'm curious as to why we keep on insisting that you can't give people money for nothing.

What are some of your key findings?

Work continues to be a central moral category for people. The way that people understand what they deserve and what they don't deserve, and how they're valuable to the world, is still really tied to work. Because when you're working and you get a wage, you know exactly how much you're worth in the world. It's your wage, right?

I've spoken a lot about this with poor, unemployed people in South Africa and Namibia. These are countries with really high unemployment rates, almost 40% in the case of South Africa. What's interesting is that even the long-term unemployed who have almost no prospect of getting a formal sector job say similar things. 'You can't get money for nothing.' Work stands in the centre of people's political imagination and people's moral imagination. It penetrates so deeply that, even if you have almost no prospect of getting a job, you still cling to the idea that work is how I'm valued in society.

This kind of moral attachment to wage labour is also one way that the wealth of the very wealthy is justified. When I asked people in South Africa, which is the most unequal major country in the world, whether they think that wealth inequality is a problem there, a lot of them actually said no. They said that the wealthy must have worked for their wealth and thus deserve it. This was said to me by poor Black people, in a country where much of the wealth was acquired via a process of racially-based dispossession and exploitation.

Of course, equally ironic is that the wealthy do get money for nothing – it's called investment income.

What do you think could shift that mindset?

I was thinking about this while reading about abundance and scarcity. It slowly dawned on me that we are now living in a world of abundance, and have been for a while. So why are we still clinging to the idea that, by the sweat of our toil, we have to get our basic needs met? Economists were predicting way back in the early twentieth century that, with enough productivity growth, we would eventually have a society of leisure and abundance. In this new society people may work a little bit, but there will be a lot of time for leisure and doing what you will. That productivity growth happened, but society hasn't moved on.

To me, what's fundamentally necessary for that to happen is for us to move away from the idea that the only valuable things you can do are things you're paid for, and that your activity has to be bought and sold on a market. In other words, we need to move away from treating meaningful activity as a commodity.

Liz Fouksman is an academic at the African Studies Centre in the Oxford School of Global and Area Studies, University of Oxford.
Once we decommmodify work, we can do things that are meaningful and important not because we're paid to do them, but for other reasons, such as social recognition. Or because of the inherent value of these activities to ourselves, or because we enjoy them. Only then, I think, can we shift the conversation away from its current fixation on wage labour.

The power of basic income is that it takes that first step. It says that for your basic livelihood, for you to get enough food as not to starve and to have a roof over your head, you don’t need to do anything. It’s your right as a person, and you don’t need to prove to us by toiling somewhere that you deserve to stay alive. That would be a first step in divorcing the relationship between livelihood and labour.

Many basic income advocates argue that a basic income could also redistribute reproductive and care tasks within society. Do you see that potential as well?

Feminist circles have been debating the question of recognition in care work for a long time. Some, like the Wages for Housework campaigns of the 1970s, argued that care work needs to be recognised by being paid for via a wage. The idea was that, under capitalism, you recognise activities by paying people to do them. So when we pay people who are doing housework, that's a form of recognition.

I would rather use basic income as a stepping stone in a different direction. Instead of commodifying care and paying people to do it, let's decommmodify all important activity and recognise that a lot of things are done not for a wage, but for other reasons. Let’s find ways of recognising, valuing and rewarding work (caring or otherwise) beyond the wage.

There are plenty of feminists who say, hang on a second – basic income will potentially have the opposite effect of entrenching gendered relations of care.

The counter-argument goes more or less like this: if we give everyone a basic income, you are indeed supporting women who choose to do care in the home rather than to enter the formal wage labour markets. But, in enabling them to do this, you are perpetuating the gendered division of labour in which women are culturally and socially encouraged to stay in the home and men are encouraged to go out into the work force. And because of patriarchy, men generally earn more than women, so that would add an economic reason for women who are in families with men to be the ones to give up their (smaller) wage and choose to do the unpaid care-work. While I agree that this could be a potential problem (though I'd be interested to see what actually happens), I don't think this is a reason not to have a basic income. UBI just has too many other important benefits, including for women. But this is another reason why I think basic income needs to be paired with a broader conversation around the nature of work.

For me, a lot of that also boils down to a conversation around working hours. I think that in the 1970s, when labour force participation rates of women went up dramatically in the West, there was a missed feminist moment. I think at that point, we should have said, ‘hold on. All of these women are now in full-time work, but who is actually doing the care work at home? And now that our labour force has more people participating in it, surely we can shorten everyone's hours and get the same amount done?’

That never happened. Instead, you have everyone in formal work full-time and then…what happens at home? It gets squeezed into the cracks, and typically lands unequally on women. What also happened is that care got more commodified. Women now had to hire, usually, other women to come and do the care work that really should have been done by both men and women, if they had had more time.

You mentioned that you’ve seen massive resistance to the idea of ‘getting money for free’ among your interview subjects. Has your research pointed to a way in which advocates could frame basic income so that it receives a warmer reception?
I’ve found in South Africa that people resist what they see as charity from the state for a whole host of reasons. One reason is distrust of the state, but also because no one wants to be a charity case. No one wants to have the sense that out of the goodness of their heart, the state has given me some philanthropic grant or something. This is where framing is really important.

South Africa already a social grant system, and in my research people have been quite resistant to a universal grant. However, sometimes I change the framing and say, ‘look, South Africa has all these natural resources, don’t you think every citizen or every resident of South Africa should get a share of the wealth that’s generated by the gold and the platinum and the diamonds? What if there was a monthly cash payout of the revenue from selling these resources?’ Suddenly, people flip, and they say, ‘oh, that’s a great idea.’ It’s fascinating what happens when you shift the framing just a little. One common objection I hear is the idea that if you give poor people money they’ll spend it on alcohol. I’ve heard even the poor themselves say this, though there is almost no evidence that ‘sin spending’ goes up with cash transfers. However, the same people who were against giving poor people grants because they’ll drink it away were suddenly completely fine with poor people getting a share of national wealth, because it’s their money -- they can do whatever they want with it.
Basic income is becoming a real and tangible policy consideration in India. In the past decade, many prominent Indian economists have put forward proposals for how a basic income could resolve the country’s chronic and widespread poverty. Several pilots have already taken place at the national and state levels. In 2017, the concept of a universal basic income (UBI) featured in one of the most important policy documents in India: the annually published ‘Economic Survey’ of the Union Budget. And although what has been proposed so far has not been truly universal, the other four key characteristics of UBI have been there: money should be given periodically, as cash, to individuals, and unconditionally.

How did we get here? The twists and turns of the debate, the economic, political, and moral arguments that have been deployed, and the experiments that have taken place are the focus of this piece.

Arguing for a paradigm shift
The story begins in 2008, when the former chief economic advisor to the Government of India, Arvind Subramanian, and his colleagues Devesh Kapur and Partha Mukhopadyay published a paper titled ‘The Case for Direct Cash Transfers to the Poor’. They argued that the combination of weak local administrations and apathetic public officials had made existing programmes frightfully inefficient. Gatekeepers and middlemen needed to be eliminated, they continued, and this could best be done by directly transferring money straight to those who need it. KMS’s radical proposal launched the nation into a decade of discussion around cash transfers, the problems of the current system, and the possibility of a basic income for all.

Subsidies have long been a welfare strategy of choice for the Indian government. At the top of list stands subsidised food staples and kerosene for India’s poor, which are made accessible through the Public Distribution System (PDS). The PDS began in 1947 as a universally accessible programme to deal with shortages post-independence. In 1997 it began to restrict access to certain groups. Today, about 527,000 ration shops across the country provide discounted rice, wheat, sugar or kerosene to anyone carrying a special card that identifies them as poor.

Two other hallmarks of the Indian welfare system are subsidised fertiliser and liquid petroleum gas (LPG). The fertiliser programme, created in the 1970s to make domestic fertiliser production more competitive while increasing food grain output, pays fertiliser companies a top-up so that they sell their products at below-market prices. The LPG subsidy lowers the cost of this fuel for all Indians and, until 2015, was also paid directly to the gas companies.

Few deny that the PDS and these other subsidies have played a role in reducing poverty. The World Bank estimates that extreme poverty declined in India from 46% to 13.4% between 1995 and 2015. Researchers have also shown that the PDS’s wheat and rice have reduced caloric deficiency over time. However, there is also evidence of large-scale inefficiency and corruption in these programmes. Resources have been illegally diverted, grains have been of inferior quality or left to rot in storage, and the targeting is rife with inclusion and exclusion errors. It is estimated that 38.6% of kerosene from the PDS ends up on the black market.
to this, it was recently found that the storage and distribution authority, the Food Corporation of India, is both underfunded by the government and in debt to banks. KMS saw this system as beyond repair, and thus argued to replace it with a whole new paradigm.

**Right to food under threat?**
KMS’ suggestion to remove food subsidies proved particularly controversial among food activists. Seven years earlier, in 2001, the People’s Union for Civil Liberties in Rajasthan had successfully petitioned the Supreme Court to consider the ‘right to food’ as a legal right under the constitution. Now proponents of cash transfers were, in the eyes of food activists, seeking to abolish the main government mechanism for putting that right into practice.

They were also catching the ears of government. Many officials, it turned out, were enthusiastic about replacing welfare subsidies with cash transfers. In 2011, two major steps were taken in this direction that posed a threat to the work of the Right to Food campaign. First, in February, the minister of finance at the time used his 2011-12 budget presentation to announce a shift from fuel and fertiliser subsidies to cash transfers:

> The Government provides subsidies, notably on fuel and food grains, to enable the common man to have access to these basic necessities at affordable prices. A significant proportion of subsidised fuel does not reach the targeted beneficiaries and there is large-scale diversion of subsidised kerosene oil. … To ensure greater efficiency, cost effectiveness and better delivery for both kerosene and fertilisers, the Government will move towards direct transfer of cash subsidy to people living below poverty line in a phased manner.

This announcement set off a minor earthquake in India’s social policy community. Although it was not yet an attack on the right to food, it was the first time that the government committed to moving away from in-kind welfare and towards direct cash transfers. The minister further announced that the initiative would be operationalised by linking bank accounts to biometric identification cards (the Aadhaar card). Establishing such a system, food activists feared, would set the stage for experimentation with food subsidies as well.

These fears were soon to become more acute. In December that same year the lower house of parliament began to debate the National Food Security Bill, which contained a new clause calling for the “right to a food security allowance”. This gave state governments, with approval from the central government, the right to give a cash equivalent in lieu of food to beneficiaries. This new move greatly alarmed Right to Food campaigners. A group of civil liberties activists, development professionals and academics published a joint open letter to the then-prime minister Manmohan Singh that rejected the idea of scaling down the PDS and replacing it with a cash transfer. They expressed concern that food availability would no longer be guaranteed and suggested the move reeked of corporate conspiracy.

The Right to Food campaign apprehends that the dismantling of the PDS is being done deliberately to paved the way for the entry of organised retail into the country. Giving cash without ensuring proper food availability is putting people at the mercy of food retailer sharks and cartels. We see the replacement of food grains with cash in conjunction with the decision of your government to raise the foreign direct investment limit for international capital in the retail business. This could lead to bigger retail corruption than the supposed leakages in the PDS, apart from putting farms at risk.

Despite the strong resistance, the National Food Security Act passed in 2013 with the right to food security allowance intact.

**India’s first basic income experiments**
While the debate over the PDS raged in the foreground, the Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) took the initiative to set up two basic income experiments in different parts of India. One took place in New Delhi, in partnership with the
United Nations Development Program, and the other in rural Madhya Pradesh with backing from the United Nations Children’s Fund. They were designed and executed by a group of academics including Guy Standing, Renana Jhabvala, Sarath Davala and Soumya Kapoor Mehta.

These two experiments yielded strong positive results for beneficiaries on nutrition, debt, asset building, and several other livelihood measurements. In the New Delhi experiment, 100 families categorised as below poverty level were selected to receive 1,000 rupees per month over the course of a year in 2011. In the Madhya Pradesh experiment, 6,000 men, women and children were given between 150 to 300 rupees per month between 2011 and 2013. In this second, longer-term experiment, the modified randomised controlled trial found that households receiving the cash transfer were more likely to engage with banking institutions, make improvements to their dwellings, reduce indebtedness, increase spending on assets such as livestock, and switch from manual labour to own-account farming and/or small-scale business. The households receiving cash transfers also spent money on farm inputs, transport to school, health needs, and private tuition for children.

The Indian government also began to experiment with direct transfers as a method for reducing the cost of welfare to the state. In early 2013, a shift to cash transfers for scholarships and old age pensions began. Shortly thereafter, the government began the process of replacing the universal subsidy for LPG with payments into people’s bank accounts. This was quickly halted by the Supreme Court on the argument that possession of an identity card cannot be a prerequisite for access to any welfare scheme. But despite this setback, these experiments marked the beginning of a shift in social policy towards cash transfers.

When Narendra Modi became prime minister in 2014 he accelerated the pace of change in this direction. He reduced the obstacles to opening bank accounts for the poor – 18 million accounts were opened within one week of the changes coming into effect – and modified the stalled LPG scheme to provide an option for those without identity cards. According to government estimations, the scheme resulted in savings of Rs. 9,211 crore ($1.3 billion) by eliminating the system of paying subsidies to oil companies.12

One year later, the government piloted direct transfers in lieu of subsidised food in the three territories of Chandigarh, Puducherry and Dadra and Haveli. The pilot was not without problems. According to an independent analysis, many of the beneficiaries were unable to access the money and experienced welfare losses. It also cost those living far from ATMs more time to access the money through banks than it would have to acquire goods from the PDS.

Nevertheless, the analysts found that beneficiaries preferred the transfer to in-kind benefits. And, similar to SEWA’s results in MP, they also found that nearly all beneficiaries improved their diet by using the money to buy higher quality grains and vegetables. The government’s experiment was certainly not a failure, but it did point to the need for improvement in banking infrastructure and beneficiary coverage. The analysts concluded with a recommendation that the government should implement a “choice-based” subsidy programme, wherein beneficiaries could choose to receive cash or in-kind benefits.13

These experiments between 2011-2015 provided some empirical data to the debate around basic income. The government has remained enthusiastic about the idea, presumably because eliminating inefficient subsidies results in massive savings of public money. SEWA and its academic team, meanwhile, have been greatly encouraged by the evidence showing that cash is emancipatory and that it allows people to pursue healthier diets.

These findings helped substantiate UBI’s place of honour within the 2016-17 Economic Survey, as mentioned at the beginning of this piece. Although the chapter does not argue for immediate implemen-
tation, the authors deem it a “powerful idea whose time even if not ripe for implementation is ripe for serious discussion”.

The bandwagon gains pace
The Economic Survey 2016-17 was led by Subramanian – one of the authors of the KMS article – and its chapter on UBI launched a new round of discussion over basic income and direct cash transfers in India. It core suggestion was a quasi-universal basic income of 7,260 rupees per year to 75% of India’s population.

Several more cases for basic income as well as a number of concrete proposals were put forward at this time from other senior economists in India. Pranab Bardhan argued that basic income is more desirable in a poor country like India, due to the “lower poverty threshold” and poor implementation of existing welfare schemes. Vijay Joshi thought that India’s welfare schemes were creating fiscal deficit and crowding out public spending, which could be solved by a UBI. Abhijeet Banerjee found that, across pilots from six different countries, there was no relationship between cash transfers and reduced incentive to work. And Debraj Ray suggested in Ideas for India that each recipient should receive a fixed share of gross domestic product – a “universal basic share”.

Opponents to a basic income at this time were most vociferously arguing that the government needed to focus more on the provision of public services. These include the Nobel laureate Amartya Sen, who saw basic income as a perfect excuse for the Government of India to abdicate their responsibility to do so. Their fear is that a basic income would divert resources away from government schools and hospitals, and even basic rural infrastructure. The economist Jean Dreze also expressed scepticism, un convinced that it should replace the existing welfare system and concerned that Subramanian’s proposal would not even cover basic subsistence.

Basic income for farmers: a proof of concept?
In early 2019, the Indian government launched a minimum income for small and marginal farmers. India’s farmers face a variety of struggles, such as market failure, drought, and floods. To address this, Modi introduced a scheme called Prime Minister Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM-Kisan) that pays farmers owning up to two hectares of land a minimum income of 6,000 rupees per year in three instalments. According to the information available on the PM Kisan website, a total of 74,883,255 have received at least one installment from the new scheme, though its performance across the states and actual reach have been questioned by agricultural experts.

This nationwide programme was preceded by similar initiatives at the state level. One, introduced in Telangana in 2018, gave farmers 8,000 rupees per year unconditionally if they possessed a land title. The scheme has so far benefited 5.7 million farmers collectively owning 14 million acres of cultivable land.
A second initiative trialled in the state of Madhya Pradesh, where SEWA also conducted its experiment, attempted instead to institute a price support model for farmers. This gave farmers ‘price deficiency payments’ that made up for the difference between the market price and the sale price of certain products. One of India’s most respected agricultural economists, Ashok Gulati, declared the scheme a failure and suggested income support rather than price support was the better way forward. Gulati asserted that direct income support programmes are “easier to implement, more transparent, more equitable, crop neutral, and less distortionary” than price deficiency payments. His team approximated the cost of a national direct income support scheme for farmers in India to be $27.9 billion, or Rs. 1.97 lakh crore, if all farmers were given 10,000 rupees per hectare per year.28

The national minimum income programme for farmers has yet to reach all its potential beneficiaries, and whether it does or not will largely determine its success as a scheme. The attempt, however, does demonstrate just how far this idea has come in the past decade. It’s a proof of concept that, if successful, will undoubtedly offer a further boost to advocates of a basic income for all Indians.

**Where Do We Stand Today?**

The year 2019 has, in many ways, been the Year of the Basic Income in India. Rahul Gandhi’s proposal for a minimum income guarantee, coupled with Narendra Modi’s income guarantee to farmers, indicate that the political tides are quickly shifting in favour of a basic income in India.

There is now express support for cash transfers over subsidies and the government is ramping up financial inclusion in conjunction with the introduction of biometric identity cards. Evidence from the two major SEWA experiments discussed earlier,29 as well as from other studies,30 also show that the poor frequently prefer cash to in-kind transfers.

As yet, no basic income proponent has suggested a system that would diminish the government’s responsibilities towards public healthcare, education and infrastructure. These responsibilities of the government are enshrined in the Indian Constitution. Nevertheless, a section of the Indian intellectual elite fears that implementing a basic income will cause the state to neglect public services; that privatisation will result in worse outcomes for the poor than for the rich; and that the Indian government lacks the necessary technology and infrastructure to deliver cash to its population. These are all outcomes to be guarded against and, to ensure they do not come to pass, advocates on all sides must remain vigilant. But they are worries over the perils and pitfalls of implementation, rather than conceptual objections to basic income or arguments in defence of the current system.

In the Economic Survey, Subramanian calculates that 5.2% of India’s GDP is spent on some 950 centrally sponsored schemes run by the government, eleven of which account for 50% of expenditure. It’s a complex and overburdened system. Basic income, according to its proponents, offers a new way forward. One which gives people choice while streamlining public spending in more efficient and equitable ways. If it can achieve this in India, then it might be the country’s best chance to help people out of chronic poverty and ensure a rights-based, unconditional, and more compassionate system for all Indians.

A considerably longer version of this piece was first published by the India Network for Basic Income (INBI) on the occasion of the 19th World Basic Income Congress, held in Hyderabad, India, in August 2019.


3. ‘The World Bank in India...Overview’.


INTERVIEW

‘Even my husband envies my freedom’

Radha Davar and Manguben

What did it mean to you to participate in the Self Employed Women’s Association’s BI pilot?

**Manguben:** All together, our family received around 5,000 rupees. We have a farm, so with that money we saved for three months and bought water for irrigation. The basic income meant we didn’t have to borrow money to get water, so having this kind of cash in hand has been extremely important for us. Many families were not cultivating their land at all, but basic income enabled them to start to do so.

Others opened up small shops to sell groceries and small items. One such shop, a small grocery store, is run by a couple who are both physically challenged. They saved for six months and bought a refrigerator, so that they could stock more things to sell in the village.

Another important thing that happened during the eighteen months of the pilot was that my daughter, after she completed the tenth class, was able to continue her schooling. She had to go to another village to continue her studies. We bought her a bicycle and she was able to go to the other village every day. She has now completed her twelfth class as well.

**Radha Davar:** Our village is around 60 kilometres from the nearest town. All of us have land, but because it is so expensive to buy seeds and fertiliser many of us could not actually cultivate that land. To buy such things you had to go to the money lender, which only loaned at a very high interest rate. So instead our family lived and worked on a brick kiln, some fifteen hours a day.

Once this cash started coming to our house, we started really thinking about whether we should continue that kind of work or not. First I came away. Then my children came away. Within a year even my husband didn’t want to continue that work.

Our entire family received about 1200 rupees, and by saving that money we were able to buy two buffaloes and five goats. We condensed the female buffalo’s milk to sell at the market and rented out the male buffalo to other people in the village, giving ourselves a small income.

Having that cash in hand actually changed our life. We hope that in future, this kind of policy will come in our country.

What does the word freedom mean to you?

**Manguben:** For me, freedom means not just getting restricted to my village, but also being able to go out anywhere that I would like to. I was trained to completely veil my face and remain in the village. Just to be able to remove that veil, to be anywhere outside, and not to fear anybody – that for me is freedom. My husband says, ‘You’re a very lucky woman. You have gotten the freedom to go out and learn so many new things.’ I am now very free, and even my husband envies my freedom. I even got to fly in an airplane.

**Radha Davar:** For me, freedom means not being restricted to my household, which I was and my mother was. Freedom for me is to be able to come out of the household and to meet people in the world. My husband told me that your courage can only increase if you go out. That’s what I’ve done in my own life. I came out of my household and started coming to places like this [the 19th World Basic Income Congress in Hyderabad]. I feel that I now have more courage and that I’m stronger. My children say that even they want to be like the way I am now.
How did the UBI help this freedom?

Manguben: This process only began after we started to receive basic income. I was able to reduce my wage labour work and my husband and I started up and now run a shop of our own. That has allowed me to meet so many people.

Radha Davar: Receiving a basic income and also coming into contact with the Self Employed Women’s Association was quite something. Now that I had this money I was able to reduce my wage labour, and now I am able to even talk to the government officials with so much courage and strength.

Translated on site by Sarath Davala.
The radical combination of degrowth and basic income

Gabriela Cabaña

What is degrowth?

Gabriela Cabaña: Degrowth is a critique of our current obsession with economic growth. Whether we admit it or not, most of the policies in both rich and less rich countries seek to increase our wealth in terms of currency and in terms of monetary value. That has many negative consequences. At the ecological level, for instance, it means destroying our ecosystems for the sake of continuing to grow. It also transforms people into means for the economy. Only those people who contribute to GDP growth are taken care of or are allowed to live well, and all the other things that people might find meaningful are made invisible.

Degrowth argues for stopping this eternal growth. It pushes instead for a sustainable degrowth that would reduce our ecological footprint and put care for people at the heart of policy. It’s more democratic and more fair. It would also improve everyone’s quality of life by giving them more time for leisure and lessening their obsession with waged work and consumerism, which wastes society’s resources on things that we don’t really need.

Tactically speaking, how do people think sustainable degrowth could look, and how does basic income fit into the framework of degrowth thinking?

Most of the world’s political and economic effort over the past 50 years has gone to creating a massively intricate network of trade in goods. We have built our economies around this. As a result countries in the Global North can have bananas and mangoes all year round, while other countries – like my home country of Chile – have become heavily dependent on the export of food. This co-dependency is detrimental to both our environment and our economies.

Sustainable degrowth would start to dismantle these dependencies on things from elsewhere. It would reduce this massive trade, which comes with a huge ecological footprint, and focus on more localised production and consumption. It would create a simpler, more local model of economy that ensures there is enough to go around without putting the right of some to accumulate at the centre. Degrowth, done right, would be a radically local and horizontal process.

How does a universal basic income fit into the degrowth movement?

One of the things you hear whenever you talk about degrowth is that, if the economy doesn’t grow, people are going to be without jobs, people will go hungry, and no one wants that. Rich countries might be able to afford slowing down their economies, but not poorer ones. You hear this argument mostly in countries from the Global South, like my own. This misses the point. Degrowth is a critique of our dependency on work. This idea that people have to work to stay alive, and thus the economy needs to keep growing for the sake of keeping people working.

Basic income goes well with the ideas of slowing down the economy, of becoming less dependent, and of stopping the increasing and continuous production of stuff that we don’t really need. A UBI would precisely allow individuals the freedom to work less and to say no to negative jobs, for instance in the fossil fuels industry. It would also al-
allow them to have more free time to take care of the people they care about.

You’ve mentioned care and freedom a couple times now. They seem central to your vision of a degrowth future. Could you say a little more about those?

In the economies that we have now, many of the policies that we have towards care are implicitly instrumental. Conditional cash transfers, for instance, revolve around the idea of building human capital. You give money to mothers to take care of their children, to send them to school, to send them to health check-ups, etc. This is not completely altruistic. It’s also about creating able citizens that will participate in economy.

Policies that truly care for others have freedom at their centre, and basic income seeks to enhance or maintain other people’s freedom. It gives them something, some livelihood, and a base from which to do something that might not necessarily contribute to GDP. It allows them to work if they want, but they might also chose to write poetry, take care of their garden, or do something else. This is the ultimate act of freedom – choosing what you do without anyone judging if you’re actually contributing to the economy or to society.

You’ve recently been working on how basic income could be implemented without the state. This is different to most other proposals, and I’d like to hear more of your thoughts in this area.

Most current proposals involve asking states or central governments to implement a basic income with an already existing currency. This would put the state in service of a basic income. It’s certainly a step in the right direction, but a truly revolutionary UBI would also change the nature of money itself, right?

If you have a form of money that goes to everyone, regardless of what they do, then the meaning of money starts to change. Money is just a way of signifying something else. If we give it to everyone, then you’re actually changing what money is and you’re changing the value of human life.

To be able to truly change the nature of money, we should also change the way in which it is produced. Here is where the more bottom-up perspective comes in. There are multiple experiments right now happening in different parts of the world in which a basic income is being implemented at the same time as a currency is being created. A localised currency that is managed by the people of a given territory. It’s basically a way of keeping track of what services or goods they can provide to each other.

In that way, they create an autonomous space in which they can decide democratically how this coin is going to work. For instance, if you can save it or if it perhaps loses value over time. It really brings to life the radical possibility of basic income and of the idea of being grounded in your community and in what you need and what you can do. That would be a way for me to have an alternative both to capitalism and to the nation state at the same time through basic income.
INTERVIEW

Basic income denied in Ontario

Jessie Golem

You were, for a short time, a recipient of a basic income in Canada. What was the program you were part of?

In 2017, the Ontario provincial government under the Liberal premier Kathleen Wynne introduced a three-year basic income pilot. They chose 4,500 people in four cities in Ontario, all of whom were making under C$30,000 a year, to receive an unconditional guaranteed basic income. The size of the income was put on a sliding scale. You could receive up to C$1,400 a month, but if you were working then it was reduced by 50 cents to the dollar. Because I was working, I received about C$700 a month.

What did receiving a basic income change for you, for good or ill?

It changed a lot for me in really tremendously good ways. Before I was on basic income, I was working four jobs and they were all contract work. I was living right in the middle of the gig economy and that was my entire life. I would be up in the morning and wouldn’t get home until late at night. I was trying to build my business as a freelance photographer but was really struggling to do so. I just didn’t have the time to put into my photography because I was so busy working.

Receiving a basic income gave me that time. I was able to reduce my hours and focus on my photography business, certain that my rent would always be covered every month. I saw my photography business grow. I was actually making more money than I was before because I wasn’t locked into those low-end jobs. I was booking more clients, building my business, doing photo shoots, and just seeing everything grow in positive ways toward the things that I really wanted to do with my life.

Many basic income advocates say that it is a way of bringing people more freedom in terms of what they do with their lives. Would you agree with that claim?

Absolutely. Apart from my own experience, I have friends who were able to move into safer, cleaner housing. They were able to go back to school. They were able to provide better opportunities for their children and buy healthier food. Being able to do these things gave them a huge sense of freedom and also a sense of dignity.

Tragically, this story doesn’t have the happiest of endings. How did the Ontario pilot end?

So in the middle of the Basic Income pilot, there was an election in the province of Ontario and Kathleen Wynne was replaced by a man named Doug Ford who is very, very similar to Donald Trump. He promised during the campaign to not cancel the basic income pilot, and then he very abruptly broke that promise less than a month after being elected.

His decision to end the program more than a year early threw everybody’s lives into turmoil. People were locked into leases or schools that they could no longer afford. There were quite a few people who were on the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) who were able to get out of poverty while on Basic Income. They were all of a sudden thrown back into poverty. It’s quite scary. I honestly do believe that some of my friends will die, and I really don’t want to have to go to funerals because of this turmoil and this stress that it caused.

It’s such a huge abuse of government power. It is absolutely disgusting and disgraceful for somebody to make a promise and then break it because he...
feels like he can get away with it without any consequences.

**Where can people go to learn about the actions you folks are taking as you resist this treatment?**

There are numerous basic income networks and groups all over the world, such as the Basic Income Earth Network and the Basic Income Canada Network. My own project, which I created in response to the program’s cancellation, is called Humans of Basic Income. I went and I took pictures of as many basic income recipients in Ontario as I could possibly find. I got around 70 portraits in total. You can see it on my website under the name Humans of Basic Income.

We have launched a class action lawsuit against the government for acting in bad faith and breaking a contract. That will take a very long time to complete unfortunately. It’s really hard to find justice, but we have a lot of hope.

In the meantime, we’re raising awareness about basic income, advocating, and really showing the government that what they did was an absolute disgraceful thing. It’s really brought a lot of strangers together.

**One final question. You’ve experienced basic income as a force for good, but you also have a lived experience of the state not necessarily being trustworthy. How do you advocate for basic income in places where people quite rightly don’t necessarily trust the state to follow through?**

It’s very hard in the face of untrustworthy governments to see any progress happening. When you break promises and you lose the people’s trust, then other governments have to rebuild that trust unnecessarily. A lot of trust has been broken in Ontario. There’s now a candidate for the Liberal leadership who has promised that he will implement a basic income pilot should he succeed. I’ve talked to a lot of former recipients about it, and every single person has said, “Well, I don’t trust him.”

We need is more transparency and honesty. We need less power in governments and more power to the people because really we are the government’s boss. Doug Ford is supposed to work for me and the fact that he is not is absolutely shameful.
What is the state of activism and thinking on basic income in Australia today?

Australia has a long history of activism around basic income, but its current prospects are a bit grim. There is an extraordinary focus on punitive welfare in Australian politics, almost a desperation to continue making benefits conditional at any cost. Given that, the proposition of a basic income that would be unconditional seems rather far away.

White Australia has been set up on the idea that, to be a productive member of society, you have to work. If you’re not working, then you are punished through the welfare system. How harsh that system has been changed over time, but recently there’s been an extraordinary shift towards being more restrictive. The state has put all sorts of conditions on what people have to do to receive income support, as well as on what people can do once they’ve been given the money. It’s a two-pronged approach with conditionality on both sides.

You’ve done a lot of work with First Nations people and have been openly critical of some of the welfare policies targeting them. This is especially true of the cashless debit card programme championed by Andrew Forrest, the Australian mining magnate, which you’ve singled out elsewhere as a prime example of Australia’s punitive approach to welfare. Could you explain why welfare is of special concern with regard to First Nations people, and why you single out the card for criticism?

A lot of Australia’s welfare programmes primarily target First Nations people. Australia is a settler colonial society. Sovereignty was never ceded and has never been given back. This is an ongoing struggle, and welfare is now being used as a weapon in neo-assimilationist attempts by the settler state.

Andrew Forrest is a billionaire who made his money by mining stolen Aboriginal land. A few years ago, he was tasked by the then prime minister, Tony Abbott, to review the government’s Aboriginal training and employment programmes. His magnum opus, the 2014 Forrest Review, came with a whole set of policy recommendations. One that I’ve looked at in detail is what he originally called the healthy welfare card.

The healthy welfare card is centred around the idea of controlling how welfare payments are spent. Now, the state had already tried this, and the subsequent evaluation showed that quarantining people’s money and allowing them to use it only on certain goods didn’t achieve anything. But instead of taking that evaluation and saying, “okay, this is not a good idea,” Forrest decided to ramp it up. He suggested increasing the proportion that is quarantined and also proposed a national rollout.

The government didn’t call it the healthy welfare card. They called it the cashless debit card, and they first trialled it in predominantly First Nations areas. I’ve looked at one of those trial sites in the East Kimberley, and it’s been an absolute disaster.

Even on the indicators where the government says that it has worked, it actually hasn’t. They say that domestic violence decreased, but the opposite is true. They said that it was financially empowering, but it was actually disempowering. People reported not being able to feed or buy essential goods.
for their kids. It has really fractured the community, but the government continues to roll it out. Forrest has played a big role in lobbying the government and lobbying other areas to take on the cashless debit card. It's not just predominantly in First Nations communities anymore, but also in poor white communities across the country.

One of the big arguments for basic income is that it increases people's freedom. It sounds like what we're seeing in Australia, both with the cashless debit card and with welfare policy in relation to First Nations people more broadly, is actually the opposite – a radical decrease in what is already constrained freedom.

Mm-hmm. A lot of First Nations people say that this has been a long story. Some of the people that spoke to me about the cashless debit card in Kimberley call it the white card, although it's actually grey. They called it that because, for them, it's a symbol of how settler colonial intervention continues. People said to me, "It's like going back to the ration days." It's a strange situation. Australian society is starting to recognise some of the historical violence, but cannot see how that continues today with something like the cashless debit card.

Why do you think that basic income would be different when it comes to supporting First Nations people?

Basic income would challenge the Australian settler state's obsession with work. Its unconditional element would completely revolutionise the deeply held belief that you've got to do something for the money. In its place, a basic income would introduce the idea of a rightful share. A dividend for all people.

For First Nations people I think this is a very important idea. As I said before, sovereignty was never ceded, and there's an ongoing battle for that sovereignty to be honoured. Unconditional basic income has an emancipatory element that acknowledges rather than rejects self-determination, so it could be a small step in the right direction. That said, only First Nations people themselves could make that decision.

So in your view basic income has the potential to be more emancipatory than current welfare policy. However, you'd argue that any attempt to advocate for one must include the participation of First Nations people, so that it is not yet another top down imposition on this population.

That would be absolutely key.

That said, there was a period in the 1970s where there was a programme called the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP). This was implemented in regional and remote parts of the country, and it involved giving First Nations people and community organisations a lump sum for doing work. What exactly work entailed was defined very, very broadly and in some places the programme was only loosely monitored. The result was that everyone ended up getting the payment regardless of whether they turned up for work. My colleague John Altman and I have written about this programme as a sort of basic income.

The CDEP was a very powerful and important social policy in some of these remote communities, where there was no or only a very limited labour market to speak of, because it provided an economic base. Poverty went through the roof in these communities when the programme was replaced with these more punitive, work for the doll schemes. People do talk about those CDEP days as being really important, and there's memory and recognition there of the importance of economic security.

So, there are some little glimmers of possibility and hope that programmes can be done well in Australia, despite its terrible history. Moving forward though, it has to be about honouring people's sovereignty.