



November 2020

## A Call for Dignity and Solidarity

Contribution to GTI Forum [Universal Basic Income: Has the Time Come?](#)

Azfar Khan

Among the many benefits of a universal basic income, the one that has, perhaps, been the least touted is the restoring of personal dignity, enabling freedom from control and the reawakening of a solidaristic culture. In one of his earlier papers, Guy Standing had expressed a vision that “the ideal to which societies should move towards is a set of circumstances in which more and more people can pursue their own sense of occupation, blending a variety of activities, formal and informal. To move in that direction, combating controls that characterize labor is a necessary part of the process.”<sup>1</sup> The true political sense of UBI lies in its recognition of power relationships that oversee social and economic life. The power relationships that characterize extant working conditions exercise various degrees of control over different occupational categories and, hence, hinder the realization of necessary freedoms.

Freedom is a fundamental human right, and freedom from controls determines people’s sense of security and induces a consciousness of opportunities and shapes behavioral adaptation. UBI is, perhaps, the only measure in modern times that has considered guaranteeing the material well-being of entire populations. Working people trapped in a world of controls where they are forced to sign “service contracts” (which the late David Graeber called “shit contracts”) can most effectively break the chains when they have a choice between a “job” and “work” made possible by an unconditional grant from the state. And that brings dignity to work.

If UBI provides, or enhances, social solidarity—which evidence suggests it does, as confirmed in the pilot projects conducted in India, Finland, Canada, and Iran—that challenges the prevailing “modes of controls” and then indeed would be a blessing for those socially excluded and those made insecure in the pursuit of the neoliberal agenda. That is why it promotes the idea of

effective resistance to controls through a collective agency of some sort where one can count on the support of strong collective and individual “voice.”

A secure life is synonymous with dignity, and the advancing of “autonomy” through UBI and the fundamental control over self and one’s labor can also augur a subversive agenda, where we may begin to envisage change and not merely adapt to the dictates of globalization, labor flexibility, libertarianism, and privatization of social policy that shape our lives presently.

## Endnotes

1. Guy Standing, *Modes of Control: A Labour-Status Approach to Decent Work*, Socio-Economic Security Paper no. 4 (Geneva: International Labour Organization, 2000).

---

## About the Author



Azfar Khan was with the International Labour Organization (ILO) for more than two decades, where he served as Head of Policy Research in the Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work (FPRW) Branch, Senior Migration Policy Advisor in the International Migration Programme, Development Economist and Deputy Director of the Programme on Socio-Economic Security, and Technical Advisor on Population and Poverty in the Development Policies Department. Previously, he was Senior Lecturer at the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague. He has written widely on social policy, employment and poverty, labor migration, and the interplay of demographic and macroeconomic issues. He holds a PhD in economics and development studies from the University of Sussex.

---

## About the Publication

Published by the [Great Transition Initiative](#).

Under our Creative Commons BY-NC-ND copyright, you may freely republish our content, without alteration, for non-commercial purposes as long as you include an explicit attribution to the Great Transition Initiative and a link to the GTI homepage.



Cite as Azfar Khan, "A Call for Dignity and Solidarity," contribution to GTI Forum "Universal Basic Income: Has the Time Come?," *Great Transition Initiative* (November 2020), <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/basic-income-khan>.

---

## About the Great Transition Initiative

The [Great Transition Initiative](#) is an international collaboration for charting pathways to a planetary civilization rooted in solidarity, sustainability, and human well-being.

As an initiative for collectively understanding and shaping the global future, GTI welcomes diverse ideas. Thus, the opinions expressed in our publications do not necessarily reflect the views of GTI or the Tellus Institute.