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Income Floor, Ecological Ceiling

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

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Although others in this forum have counterposed universal basic income and universal basic services, I would assume, as a matter of course, that they must go together. UBS without UBI deprives people of sufficient choice about how to use their time and energy, while UBI without UBS puts them at risk from problems arising from inequality of power and the limitations of money. If the two were introduced together, an additional benefit would be that they would probably bring each other's costs down.

However, as UBI, UBS, and a jobs guarantee are all economic stimulus programs, they all pose a danger of exacerbating environmental damage (in the case of a jobs guarantee, even if the jobs themselves were "green," people might still spend their income in "non-green" ways). How do we get around this dilemma?

This danger could be addressed by introducing upstream measures to reflect resource limits. These would include a hard cap on fossil fuel production—and imports, if the cap is applied to nation-states—that would limit, and gradually phase out, the amount of fossil fuel that was available to the economy. This would not be hard to implement in practical terms, since a large proportion of fossil-fuel emissions originate from a rather small group of companies which are already monitored. The only real obstacle is political, but intense public pressure could help with that.

An upstream cap on fossil fuel supply would affect everyone's decisions—states, businesses and individuals—about what to spend money on. It would heavily affect transportation, and so would automatically make it more attractive to buy locally produced goods (and would be

far less complicated to implement than a currency that could only be spent on local goods). An upstream cap could be implemented on a national level or as a partnership between blocs of countries, or—much better—globally.

With regard to the need for global solutions, I would share the concern expressed by some that nationally introduced UBIs could exacerbate global inequality and generate pressure on a country with a UBI from incoming migrants—and again, this problem would also apply to UBS and a jobs guarantee. The only feasible long-term answer that I can see to that is to gradually introduce a world UBI. The group World Basic Income, which has a great deal of experience with cash transfer programs in the Global South, recommends introducing a very modest worldwide UBI of approximately 10 US dollars a month with the help of the mobile phone network and then scaling it up gradually. Meanwhile, individual countries could also introduce their own UBIs, and they could gradually be brought into sync with each other and with the world basic income.

There would obviously need to be an opt-out available for people or groups, such as indigenous tribes, who prefer to avoid being involved in the cash economy at all. I am very wary, however, of arguments that imply that people like us, who are all involved ourselves to a greater or lesser extent in the cash economy, know better than others whether or not they should have access to cash. “Ordinary” people need to be treated with respect and trust. Evidence strongly suggests that recipients of cash transfers tend to spend them in responsible ways.

Some UBI critics have expressed concern that a UBI could inflate property rents. I have come across a fair amount of discussion about this, and the most viable solution is a land value tax, which could help prevent the UBI income stream from automatically flowing to landlords. This would obviously be quite a challenge, however, if we are considering a global UBI; it would need to be introduced gradually and on a national level, with a long-range plan of synchronizing taxation between countries.

Kate Raworth’s “doughnut economics” model offers a useful way of conceptualizing how a UBI, UBS, and upstream resource caps can work together. Upstream caps on fossil fuels and other limited or dangerous resources, and a land value tax, would help to define the outer limit of the economic doughnut, while UBI and UBS would prevent us from falling into the doughnut hole.

The type of infographic that is used by Kate Raworth in her doughnut model and by many other researchers, including those in the Planetary Boundaries Institute, was originally devised by Florence Nightingale. Nightingale was able to devote time to developing easy-to-understand statistical tools, as well as promoting public health measures that have saved millions of lives, because she received a guaranteed income which was supplied by her wealthy father— despite the fact that her family actually disapproved of her activities.

It is useful to turn the UBI/UBS question upside down and ask, what would human society be like if no adult had ever had their basic needs met for free? We would not have had the contributions of scientists like Nightingale or Blaise Pascal, or of artists such as Vincent Van Gogh. (Van Gogh's tragic suicide was probably linked to the fact that his brother Theo had recently told him that he might have to cut off his modest financial allowance.)

To paraphrase Jane Austen—who was completely dependent on her family until she published her first book in her mid-thirties—this discussion has given me more patience, though I wouldn't go so far as to say that it gives me hope.

About the Author



Caroline Whyte is a writer and editor at for the Foundation for the Economics of Sustainability (Feasta). She represents Feasta in the global Wellbeing Economy Alliance, serves as a director of the Irish Environmental Network, and helped launch the CapGlobalCarbon initiative at COP-21. Her interests include financial system reform, international climate justice, and basic income. She holds a master's degree in ecological economics from Mälardalen University.

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