

Unconditional Basic Income, Health and Economic Degrowth

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The debate on unconditional basic income is closely linked with the question of welfare in general. If you reflect upon this, basic income obviously concerns people's health too. But within the basic income movement there has been hardly a debate about this special idea. Even less attention has been paid to the connection between basic income and degrowth. As far as I know, in Germany the first publication about this has been in 2007 in our book "Grundeinkommen. Soziale Sicherheit ohne Arbeit". During the congress on basic income in October 2008 in Berlin the matter has not been discussed at all.

Even today, when the different aspects are mentioned, it is not from an comprehensive understanding of their connections, but just in a way adding the one to the other. One might demand for unconditional basic income and for degrowth too. Sometimes it is pointed out, that there are links between the two aspects. A deliberately organized economic degrowth is required, to prevent the socially/economically disadvantaged from losing the battle over the distribution of scarce resources. In this sense the unconditional basic income represents the basis, to have the necessary debate in a *fearless* manner. This is quite right and I myself argued often in this way.

A comprehensive understanding of basic income however suggests it being more than just a means to facilitate a difficult social discourse. In that sense the basic income is nothing short of the first step to a completely different type of socialization. The integration of the members of our society would no longer be solely determined by their position in the system of paid labor. Instead, society itself would come into existence, because human beings consider each other parts of it. A basic income respects every contribution to societal productivity as well as sociality itself. Participation and a secure existence are fundamental civic economic rights. In a market society this can only be put into practice, if *every person* has an income. With the unconditional basic income everyone can avail themselves of this fundamental right.

As holders of fundamental rights all human beings are radically equal. No one can tell others what to do and what not to do. Taking this into consideration, every person's needs are equally legitimate. Only regarding human rights it will not be possible to say, that one should not drive a SUV or eat food carried all over the world by air cargo or throw one's toxic waste into the wood. So obviously, there are needs whose satisfaction can be harmful to society. Despite the formal equality of everyone's needs, society-wide debates and agreements will be necessary to determine specifically which actions should be encouraged, penalized, allowed and avoided.

But the aforementioned is not only about sanctioning socially or ecologically harmful behavior. If an unconditional basic income is understood as a global social right, this means in consequence that practices in order to assume said right are legitimate and welcome. It is frequently common for those that possess rights to often fail to exercise them. So it has to be legitimate to assume it in this case. This is only imaginable, if these rights, fundamental to overcome the misery, are society-wide debated and politically fought for.

On human rights grounds unconditional social security and participation of every human being has not only to be guaranteed in principal but also in practice. From this it follows that a society-wide debate, about the goods and services that are required to ensure a good life for all, is inevitable. Today there is sufficient wealth in the World, not just monetary but also in terms of goods, services, and knowledge, to allow a good life for all human beings. Despite the fact that the World is full of things that no one needs many people are unable to obtain their minimal necessities. In the context of a discussion to resolve this paradox both the social and the ecological question must be addressed at once. They are no longer separable, but identical with regard to the necessary measures. It is a

matter of what and how we produce as a society.

And it is a matter of what circumstances of living and what kind of society we want to have. If people have the most necessary things for a good life, they will not become happier and more satisfied with their life if they get more and more rich. On the contrary, there are a lot of studies showing that mental and physical health and life expectancy as well are higher in societies with less inequality than in those more unequal. People will become ill by defending their social status all the time, by being suspicious against their neighbors and fighting real or supposed rivals.

There is good proof that equality of income is much more important and has higher effect for people's health than the quality of medical system or the individual health-conscious behavior. In more unequal societies people in each class have worse life than people of the same class in more equal ones. Even individuals with high income live shorter and are more often sick in unequal societies than rich people in a more equal one. Crime rates and violence rise together with inequality and so does the risk of economic crises. Unconditional basic income could be a means for making society more equal. If the majority in a society really wants so it will not be very difficult to realize it and there are very strong human-rights-based reasons to do so.

Though all those effects are very well known, most decision makers do not care about. Organizations like the British Equality Trust try since a lot of years to convince politicians in several countries to establish more equality, but it seems nobody listens. Governments, great political parties and economic leaders all over the world keep telling us, that more economic growth in general and also growth of inequality will make the world a better place because inequality is regarded as a stimulus for economic growth. Some weeks ago even the NASA published a study that said, this kind of industrial civilization is headed for irreversible collapse.

Thus, again the relevance of the associated struggles becomes virulent. The social clashes represent the ground for a change of awareness. On human rights grounds it is unjustifiable, to a priori qualify the needs of others as wrong. Nonetheless it is obvious that the satisfaction of various needs could be considered negative from an ecological point of view, even if they are not formally criminal or condemnable. It would not only be dubious from the human rights perspective, if I or some one else put ourselves forward and said: „Hey folks, we know what is ecologically sound and what is harmful. So everybody listen to us!" Nor would this make any sense politically, since such conduct is unlikely to produce the desired effects due to few people actively responding.

Things, however, are quite different when it comes to common political practice. There are enough struggles world wide, in which the ecological question has become as significant as ever. Complete industries such as nuclear and genetic engineering have been confronted as being useless and unwanted. Senseless and superfluous traffic as much as large-scale projects have also been criticized. A lot of people insist against ruling politics upon their right for a good life. In several European countries people no longer accept the crisis management of the European Union and their Troika. It will be important for the basic income movement, to think those struggles as a unity and bring them together.

If people get involved in these struggles, it changes their minds. No one can be actively involved in such conflicts in the long run, without questioning themselves about what these erroneous social developments might have to do with their own behavior? But then it is not me any longer who demands them to do something, but instead it is them who undergo a process together with me. Sustainable economy and a just society are no longer the idea of somebody else, but people themselves are asking for them. Within these conflicts the question is always present: „If I do not want that, what do I want instead?" Here again social and ecological aspects are closely intertwined. Thus, from the unconditional basic income, radically derived from human rights, emerges an

independent socio-political awareness for the necessity of economic degrowth. And this will be very helpful for the health of society and the individuals as well.