

Press release: EMBARGOED UNTIL 00:01 BST Friday, 19th June 2020

Universal Basic Income could be the single most powerful tool to eliminate household food insecurity

Universal Basic Income ('UBI') is a powerful idea with the potential to deliver significant net benefits for our food systems – and society. It could help transform people's lives as well as food and farming more widely. That was the verdict of the Food Ethics Council jury at its recent Food Policy On Trial event which critically explored whether UBI as a policy idea could positively contribute to fairer food systems.

There has been a resurgence of interest in UBI, which is a regular, no-strings attached and unconditional payment to every member of society to cover basic needs. The Irish Government is the latest to commit to a UBI trial. But very few have joined the dots between UBI and food – until now. In this public policy debate, expert witnesses were questioned by a jury of members of the Food Ethics Council, a UK-based independent think tank. The jury's verdict? UBI is a powerful tool that has potential to radically reduce household food insecurity and to have a cushioning effect for those otherwise at risk of sliding into food insecurity, particularly in the context of COVID-19.

The jury agreed the starting point should be that good food is a basic need and a fundamental right. Empowering people and giving them agency within the food system is not just about money, but nevertheless getting money into people's hands can make a big difference. UBI has the potential to enable positive shifts in the food system at large - helping people to get better access to good food and healthier diets, reducing the need for emergency food aid provision, enabling investment in new enterprises (at an individual level), changes in livelihoods and potentially helping the transition towards a new economy.

UBI would need to be set at a decent level for it to be meaningful. Setting the level and determining how and when it is updated are critical and need careful consideration. UBI would be a major investment for any national government. Although the jury did not perform a detailed analysis of costs and benefits, it was persuaded by witnesses that there would be considerable savings in health, social care and other welfare costs that would mitigate if not completely offset the additional expenditure required.

The jury acknowledged that the idea of UBI is likely to be fiscally and politically challenging in the UK – difficult, but *not impossible*. Having long been dismissed as unaffordable, UBI has been reconsidered in the context of the enormity of the bailouts offered, the rock-bottom cost of borrowing, and a Treasury committed to doing "whatever it takes" to get the country through. It is a radical and idealistic idea, but those were felt to be positive and pertinent attributes in the current climate. The jury felt that a deeper dive into UBI and its implications for the food systems is urgently needed.

UBI should not be considered a panacea for all food system failings but rather as part of a wider package of policy measures geared at addressing injustices and building a more resilient, fairer food system. Without to-scale examples of UBI in practice, there remain open questions about the practicalities of UBI. However, evidence from countries such as Canada is convincing that income schemes can have an overwhelmingly positive effect on household food insecurity.

Jurors included writer and philosopher Julian Baggini and Emeritus Professor Liz Dowler, while expert witnesses included Anthony Painter of the RSA and Anna Coote of the New Economics Foundation.

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Dan Crossley, Executive Director of the Food Ethics Council, commented that:

“Our food system needs a booster seat rather than the current safety net which has too many holes. UBI would not be a cheap fix and wouldn’t solve the ills of the food system on its own, but our jury felt that now is the time for radical policy interventions like UBI.

One of the benefits of UBI would be to encourage a shift away from the current food charity model. UBI could empower people to participate in society and provide a non-stigmatising, equal footing for all. UBI would bring dignity back to the table.”

Notes to editors

For further information and interviews please contact Dan Crossley, Executive Director; 0333 012 4147/dan@foodethicscouncil.org

[Food Policy on Trial](#) is a series of events organised and promoted by the Food Ethics Council. Designed to explore and scrutinise selected emerging food policy ideas at inquiry-style sessions, expert witnesses provide evidence and are then questioned by both a Food Ethics Council jury panel and members of the audience. Those attending can make their own considered judgements of whether the policy idea ‘on trial’ is likely to contribute to or hinder progress towards healthy, fair, environmentally sustainable, humane food and farming. Our Food Policy on Trial work is kindly supported by Polden Puckham Charitable Foundation.

The Wednesday 10th June 2020 event put UBI in the dock. The full audio recording is available to listen back to [here](#). The full jury’s verdict is available [here](#).

Expert witnesses:

Anthony Painter, Chief Research & Impact Officer, the RSA

Anna Coote, Principal Fellow, New Economics Foundation

Niall Cooper, Director, Church Action on Poverty

Professor Valerie Tarasuk, University of Toronto

Note: this press release does not necessarily represent the views of the expert witnesses.

Food Ethics Council jury:

[Dr Julian Baggini](#), freelance writer, author and philosopher

[Dr Nigel Dower](#), Honorary Senior Lecturer in Philosophy, University of Aberdeen

[Professor Liz Dowler](#), Emeritus Professor of Food and Social Policy, University of Warwick

[Ruth Layton](#), founder, sankalpa

[Albert Tucker](#), independent consultant, advisor and social entrepreneur

[The Food Ethics Council](#) is an independent UK think tank whose purpose is to bring ethics to the centre of the food system. Our mission is to accelerate the shift towards fair food systems that respect people, animals and the planet. Twitter [@FoodEthicsNews](#). Facebook [@FoodEthicsCouncil](#).