

**#FoodPolicyOnTrial: Third in the dock – Universal Basic Income and food systems  
10<sup>th</sup> June 2020**

**JURY'S VERDICT AND SUMMARY**

This paper represents a summary of the Food Ethics Council's third *Food Policy On Trial* event, critically exploring the idea of UBI as a way of contributing to fairer food systems. The event was held online on 10<sup>th</sup> June 2020, with four expert witnesses being questioned both by a jury panel of members of the Food Ethics Council and the audience.

**1. JURY'S 'IN THE ROUND' JUDGEMENT – FOR THE ATTENTION OF PUBLIC POLICY MAKERS**

**1.1 Our jury judged that 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 and the food system more widely.

**1.2 UBI has the potential to make a major contribution to addressing household food insecurity**, which on its own makes it worthy of serious consideration. The starting point should be that good food is a basic need and fundamental right. Getting money into people's hands can make a big difference. However, empowering people and giving them agency within the food system is not just about money.

**1.3 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. Applying a food systems lens, the jury's initial judgement is that UBI seems an attractive option.

**1.4 UBI would need to be set at a decent level in order for it to be meaningful.** Setting the level and determining how and when it is updated are critical and need careful consideration. A 'purer' form of UBI at a level sufficient to meet all basic needs, without need for additional means-tested or top-up benefits was felt by the jury to be more attractive than a lower level basic income that would still require much of the current means tested benefit system to remain in place. A 'pure' UBI would be a substantial investment for any government. Although the jury has not done a detailed cost-benefit analysis, 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 extra expenditure required.

**1.5 It is a radical and idealistic idea, but those were felt to be positive and pertinent attributes in the current climate.** The jury recognised that UBI is likely to be fiscally and politically challenging in the UK at present – difficult, but *not impossible*. Many post WW2 UK governments – and allies in the media – have been seemingly ideologically opposed to the collective (despite the existence of the NHS and free schooling). Hence, UBI is likely to be resisted in some quarters. It may be less of an uphill battle in Scotland, where there is a longer tradition of support for social justice.

**1.6 UBI should not be thought of as a policy lever that will solve all of the ills of the food system – or society - on its own.** It is not a panacea. It should be part of a wider package of policy measures to address injustice and to create a policy environment that encourages and enables a food system that is fair and resilient for people, animals, and the planet. Hence elements of some of the proposed alternatives, such as Universal Basic Services, also seem attractive.

**1.7 A deeper dive into UBI and its implications for the food systems is needed.** Arguing about UBI versus Universal Basic Services may be counterproductive. Surely progressives should align around shared outcomes, including taking people out of deprivation and poverty?

## 2. CONTEXT

### What do we mean by Universal Basic Income?

2.1 A Universal Basic Income (UBI) is a guaranteed, no-strings-attached, recurring payment to every member of society, regardless of their income or employment status, sized to meet basic needs.

### The rise, fall and rise of UBI?

2.2 The idea has existed for a long time, with supporters from across the political spectrum, albeit with debates between 'progressive' and 'neoliberal' advocates of UBI. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a huge upsurge in interest. In the UK, over 170 Parliamentarians [called](#) for an "Emergency" UBI, a temporary scheme to mitigate some of the economic consequences of the pandemic. Having long been dismissed as unaffordable, some are reconsidering this 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 the recession.

2.3 Serious macro-economic backing exists from senior officials within the World Bank, alongside UBI proposals from UK institutions such as the RSA.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, opponents question issues such as UBI's effectiveness and cost – and argue that benefits could be better delivered in other ways, such as Minimum Income Guarantee and Universal Basic Services.

2.4 A full UBI, giving all members of society enough money to live on for life, has never been implemented or evaluated at scale. However, trials have taken place in many countries. These include completed trials in India, Malawi, Kenya, Brazil, Canada, New Jersey USA; schemes in Alaska, USA, Finland, Kenya, and the Netherlands; and prospective trials in Switzerland, California, Scotland, and Ireland. It should be noted though that 'trials' – and commentary – on UBI are often talking about different things, hence not all trials are testing the same thing.

### The food system context

2.5 The starting point for the Food Ethics Council's interest in this area is current food system injustice and our desire to bring fairness to the centre of our food systems. Part of our work involves critically exploring policy options – both food policies and social (and other) policies that have food system outcomes. UBI, whether as an emergency measure or a more permanent scheme, would impact the food system. Household food insecurity has long been a serious concern in the UK, and it has grown in prominence and visibility during the pandemic. We are interested in whether a UBI could help deliver a fairer food system – on its own or as part of other fiscal/ taxation changes, as part of a new economic approach to achieving equity.

2.6 [With over 600,000 jobs lost since the beginning of the lockdown in March](#) and a 125% increase in those claiming work-related benefits, many in the UK are struggling to make ends meet. The food system is relevant here both because it is a major source of insecure work and because those most at risk of food insecurity are those with inadequate, insecure incomes.

While debates about UBI are common, we are not aware of previous discussions reflecting on UBI in a food system context.

### 3. SUMMARY OF KEY EVIDENCE AND ARGUMENTS FROM EXPERT WITNESSES

The following is a summary of selected evidence and arguments from expert witnesses, who were chosen to provide a range of views and evidence on this policy idea, drawing on their own experiences and expertise. *To explore the full evidence presented, please refer to [the audio recording of the event](#).*

**3.1 What is UBI?** Having a clear definition of UBI is important not least to allow a meaningful debate about its merits and flaws. Whilst there are several forms of Basic Income, Universal Basic Income (as the name implies) should be (i) **universal** and serve all members of society (ii) be enough to cover **basic** needs and (iii) provide an unconditional recurring **income**.<sup>ii</sup>

**3.2 There is a strong ethical case for the idea of UBI** – The idea of UBI is grounded in a profound notion of citizenship which is universal. It aims to create a foundation stone of economic security beneath every single citizen, empowering people to participate in society with dignity. To have a system where the starting point is non-stigmatising was felt to be very powerful.

**3.3 How practical is the idea of UBI?** The evidence on this was conflicting. On the one hand, we heard that UBI costing (net) 1% of GDP will repurpose personal allowances in tax and national insurance to give every person £60 per week – thereby reducing poverty by 10% and destitution by half. It was argued that higher level of c. £100 per week for every person would reduce poverty by one-third and eliminate destitution completely.

In contrast, it was separately argued that a modest UBI would cost (gross) closer to 15% of GDP, thereby leaving no fiscal space for public investment in other measures or other collective services e.g. better housing, better transport or better social care. It was suggested that the level of most UBI proposals would not be enough to live on and would not do anything to address quality, accessibility, and affordability of food.

In addition, it would leave current economic and power relations undisturbed, including the power of major food retailers. At a time of crisis and with many years of economic depression likely to be ahead of us, are other options likely to be more affordable and more effective than UBI? Further research - and trials – may be needed to establish what a meaningful level of UBI is and how feasible the idea is in practice.

It was noted that some of the significant, larger anti-poverty organisations in the UK, including Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Child Poverty Action Group, have concluded UBI is *not* the solution to poverty in the UK.

**3.4 Those who are most at risk of food insecurity are people with inadequate, insecure incomes.** It was argued that is the single biggest driver of the problem. Buying food, as opposed to receiving food charity, was regarded by most people as better in terms of dignity, agency, and choice. However, the difficulty of food *access* will not necessarily be solved by UBI alone. For example, the poor quality of food provision on many Council estates, peri-urban estates and rural areas and the lack of access to personal transport would not be solved by income measures alone.

**3.5 An adequate income was argued to be the best solution to income-related household food insecurity.** A basic income could address problems of inadequate, insecure income that lie at the root of chronic household food insecurity. Even before COVID-19, an FSA survey of UK, Wales and Northern Ireland found 10% of respondents lived in households with marginal food security and 10% in households with low or very low food security (known as 'food insecure')<sup>1</sup>. In the first two weeks of

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.food.gov.uk/sites/default/files/media/document/food-and-you-wave5-combined-report-web-revised.pdf>

the COVID-19 lockdown in the UK, over 28% of adults surveyed reported experiencing an income shock, according to a YouGov, Food Foundation and Food, Farming and Countryside Commission survey<sup>2</sup>.

**3.6 Addressing household food insecurity may have positive benefits on health.** It matters that so many people are living in food insecure situations (even before COVID-19) because it is such a potent social determinant of physical and mental health. People in food insecurity are more likely to have a poor diet and suffer from various health issues and illnesses.

**3.7 Is there evidence that UBI ‘works’?** Evidence here was disputed. The pension programme in Canada was cited as one live example of basic income that was universally applied to everyone when they turn 65<sup>3</sup>. Evidence there shows that to be a senior (over 65) is to be protected from food insecurity in Canada, as they have the lowest rate of food insecurity of any age group. Even those at high risk of household food insecurity before, notice a plummet in this risk because they suddenly have an income indexed to inflation. Similarly, in international development, there is quite a lot of evidence that the most effective poverty-alleviation measures are direct cash transfers to poor people (particularly women) rather than goods, trusting people to be sensible with it. However, some of the UBI trials cited as being ‘successful’ were challenged, including for not being a meaningful level of UBI.

**3.8 UBI could become a tool to blame the poor.** Concern was expressed that the state might say people have been given UBI and that becomes the limit of government’s responsibility – ‘if people mess up, it is their fault.’ Would UBI allow governments to retract from other duties and responsibilities? It was also argued that it puts too much onus on the individual ‘to make the right choice’.

**3.9 The likely impact on work incentives is unknown.** The food system currently relies on large numbers of low paid, insecure workers, which is deeply problematic. However, if UBI reduced work incentives, as some claim, would such jobs be filled? Or could a basic income shift employment circumstances in a favourable direction? It was argued that implementing a basic income would have a positive impact on the wages and employment conditions of people doing essential work in the food system currently, but in exploitative, precarious employment arrangements. The evidence presented about the impact of UBI on work incentives and on the labour market relating to food was incomplete.

**3.10 UBI could liberate society to get rid of food charity.** There is currently a burgeoning second tier of the food system – where a large segment of society are expected to somehow be satisfied with being given hand-outs of free food in a country like the UK, where the divide between the ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’ is stark. UBI would enable a more intelligent conversation about the management of food waste. In its absence, the moral imperative to feed the hungry keeps us caught in a dynamic of rescuing waste food and putting it into charity programmes so that poor people can eat.

**3.11 Universal Basic Services (‘UBS’) was pitched as an alternative to UBI.** UBS would expand universal free services such as the NHS and free education to include others, such as basic housing, transport, social care, and utilities. It is argued that collective provision offers more socially just and cost-effective ways of meeting people’s needs, leaving individuals to buy what they can afford in the marketplace. A move to UBS would include a reformed social security system providing a secure, guaranteed minimum income for all those who claim it, rather than cash payments to all (including ‘those who do not need it’ in the case of UBI).

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<sup>2</sup> <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/new-food-foundation-survey-three-million-britons-are-going-hungry-just-three-weeks-into-lockdown/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/27526215/>

#### 4. JURY'S REFLECTIONS

*See jury verdict above for the conclusion that jurors reached.*

**4.1 Getting money into people's hands can make a difference.** UBI has the potential to address deprivation and to make a significant contribution to addressing household food insecurity in the UK (and beyond). The jury felt UBI had strong potential to do good in alleviating household food insecurity and helping people that 'fall through the net'.

**4.2 Having basic needs met is a right,** not something that should be 'earned'. The welfare system was intended as an entitlement system, but culturally it has changed to make benefits frowned upon. Entitlements should be there already, in the way the system works.

**4.3 UBI would only be helping to address one part of a complex set of problems.** Ultimately systemic change is required and a range of 'interventions' – not just UBI in isolation. Universal Basic Services ('UBS') could have a role to play as well as UBI – although the jury recognise the economic challenges. The jury challenged the notion that a decision has to be made between UBI and UBS.

**4.4 Basic income will not on its own deliver nutritional wellbeing and security.** Household food security does not equate to 'enough calories' and 'not being hungry'.

**4.5 UBI could bring benefits beyond addressing economic poverty.** Giving everyone a secure basic income liberates people to make decisions about how they organise their lives, which enables them to have greater fulfilment. So, those in unpaid caring roles would have greater financial security. People would be able to pursue creative, meaningful activity outside of work whilst others would be able to top up their income through employment. In this way, a diverse range of incentives are mobilised and UBI could be a 'hand up', rather than just a 'hand out'.

**4.6 Setting UBI at the 'right' level is critical** – and determining what constitutes an appropriate level is likely to be heavily contested. Also determining how and when it is updated is critical and need careful consideration.

**4.7 Further work is needed to resolve practicalities of implementing UBI, including resolving conflicting evidence about the likely costs.** UBI is not a cheap fix – rather it is a long-term investment. Proponents argue it will bring net benefits in the long-run, while opponents argue that it is too costly and limited public funds are better spent elsewhere. Given contradictory evidence, the jury felt it was not able to pass judgement on net costs and that further independent research may be needed.

**4.8 Can UBI be part of new economic thinking?** There are different views about whether UBI is part of the old individualistic economic approach and how far it can be seen as part of a new paradigm not predicated on economic growth above all else. Part of the theoretical issue is over what proper agency involves. A more libertarian approach would claim that a person's agency is properly exercised by his or her recognition that what they do with their lives crucially affects how well their lives go, so everyone having a basic income deprives them of that aspect of agency (and handouts e.g. through UBI could be regarded as a kind of failure of real agency on the part of those helped). However, under a different economic model, the UBI platform can provide a basis on top of which real agency can be exercised, just as we already accept that we can get on with our lives in the sure knowledge that if we have an accident or fall ill, the National Health Service will help us without our having to pay for it and the insecurity that engenders. This new model depends on a corollary which the libertarian mindset is dead against, namely higher levels of taxation to fund the scheme. Getting past this hurdle is likely to be a key ideological challenge for those actively promoting UBI. On balance, the jury felt UBI is not simply a replication of the old way of thinking, but should be part of a new way of thinking (linking to Kate Raworth's 'doughnut economics' and models not predicated on economic growth above all else).

**4.9 Empowerment, agency, and self-determination:** In our current society, agency is mostly accessible via the market economy, and hence income and a secure cash flow, including via UBI, is potentially empowering because it allows people to make their own decisions, participate in and contribute to better food systems. Within this context, UBI allows for dignity and liberty. UBI gives basic security and could allow more people to do what they want e.g. seek work they would like to seek (actualisation, more fulfilled people).

**4.10 It's not all about the money.** Our current society is driven by a consumerist mindset, which limits our power within the constraints of the economy. The food citizenship mindset allows us to think of agency beyond money. How is agency, purpose and belonging nurtured outside the market economy? How can we diversify access to our human needs beyond the market economy?

**4.11 Jurors did not agree with the fear that UBI is likely to justify low wages in the food sector - and beyond.** On the contrary, it may give people an opportunity to do work or start their own business that might not otherwise be viable. It could allow for the skilling of people in the new economy. Arguably food banks (and other forms of charitable food aid) prop up low wages in food retail and other parts of the food sector.

**4.12 UBI could be encouragement for creativity & fulfilment** that is not bound to earnings, including engagement in unpaid labour & care work.

**4.13 Whilst UBI may not change food production systems directly, it could have important indirect impacts.** UBI would (in principle at least) allow more people to have access to better food – higher animal welfare, high environmental standard and fairly traded. It would not solve all problems of food access, but it could be an important part of the jigsaw, if couple with promoting good access to good and investment in food production and high standards. Changes in demand should translate to positive changes in food production systems, as demand for 'better' food increases.

**4.14 The jury wants others to build on this discussion.** Considering the arguments, interconnections and trade-offs further has the potential to transform the debates, about UBI and food systems. In this Food Policy On Trial, we have only scratched the surface and there are many elements of the links between UBI and food systems that it would be beneficial to explore in more depth.

#### **AUDIENCE JUDGMENT:**

The audience consisted of c. 50 people, a mix of people working on policy and in the third sector, academics and interested individuals. At the end, a smaller subset voted in a poll about whether the idea of UBI as one way of moving towards a fairer food system was powerful, promising, neither positive nor negative, flawed or harmful. 67% felt it was a promising idea; 11% neither positive nor negative and 22% flawed. Note – this was a small, snapshot audience poll and should *not* be taken as a representative sample of the UK population.

#### **5. PROCESS**

5.1 Food Policy on Trial events are intended to allow a quickfire evaluation of a policy idea, consider different arguments and explore whether the idea has potential to make an 'in the round' positive contribution to fair food systems. The Food Ethics Council believes it is important to take an 'all things considered' perspective and to consider likely impacts of particular courses of action for the UK, within a global context. There are unlikely to be many interventions that are win-win-win-win (across environment, human health, animal welfare and social justice dimensions), hence weighing up trade-offs may be necessary. In doing so, it is important to understand who the biggest losers are likely to

be from any policy intervention, whether those losses are justified, and where they are not, to take mitigating steps.

5.2 There are many arguments for and against UBI – both at a general level and relating it more directly to food system outcomes. In this event, we sought to unpick some of these arguments and have a nuanced debate that allows people to come to their own judgements.

5.3 This *Food Policy On Trial* event adopted a select committee style format (but held online during the COVID-19 lockdown). A panel of members of the Food Ethics Council took evidence from, and asked questions of, four eminent expert witnesses on the idea of UBI. This was enriched by additional insights and questions from the audience, before jury deliberation and judgement the following day.

5.4 List of 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 (Val) Tarasuk**, University of Toronto

5.5 Jury of [members of the Food Ethics Council](#):

- **Dr Julian Baggini**, freelance writer, author and philosopher (chaired the discussion)
- **Dr Nigel Dower**, Honorary Senior Lecturer in Philosophy, University of Aberdeen – interest in global ethics
- **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

5.6 Caveats to the process:

- Evidence was limited to four expert witnesses, chosen by the Food Ethics Council, and comments from audience members and the panel.
- It was a short process, not a comprehensive analysis. It was designed to raise important ethical concerns and encourage ‘in the round’ deliberative thinking about policy.

5.7 Nevertheless, we believe it is possible to come to an initial broad-based judgement founded on the evidence and viewpoints raised, to help with developing policy in this area. As well as the outcome, the *process* of encouraging ‘in the round’ consideration of food policies is in itself important. The Food Ethics Council is committed to ‘joining the dots’ across public health, animal and human welfare, and the natural environment, in consideration of the food system. It provides space to help people come to practical, ethical decisions, with an ‘all things considered’ approach.

**5.8 We strongly encourage people to listen to the evidence from the Food Policy on Trial event (and other evidence) and to form their own judgements.**

## USEFUL RESOURCES

The following are some of the books, articles and blogs mentioned during the course of the Food Policy on Trial – by expert witnesses, jurors and/ or participants. This is not an exhaustive list. It is intended to highlight just some of the key resources relating to this topic:

- A link from New Economics Foundation to the book Anna Coote has written with Andrew Percy on the case for Universal Basic Services (2020), which offers an alternative to UBI and contains a short section on food: Anna Coote & Andrew Percy, Polity, (2020): <https://neweconomics.org/2020/02/the-case-for-universal-basic-services>  
<https://www.wiley.com/en-gb/The+Case+for+Universal+Basic+Services-p-9781509539840>
- A report for Public Services International (2019) which reviews evidence and arguments for UBI. Anna Coote & Edanur Yazici, New Economics Foundation (2019): ‘UBI A Union Perspective’ [http://www.world-psi.org/sites/default/files/documents/research/en\\_ubi\\_full\\_report\\_2019.pdf](http://www.world-psi.org/sites/default/files/documents/research/en_ubi_full_report_2019.pdf)
- ‘CONSIDERING BASIC INCOME THROUGH THE LENSE OF AGRICULTURE’ (Research Paper): Elena Ambühl, Aurélie Hampel, Jérémy Rodrigues, Nicole Teke (2017) [https://basicincome.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Aurelie\\_Hampel\\_et\\_al\\_Research\\_Paper\\_Agrarian\\_Basic\\_Income.pdf](https://basicincome.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Aurelie_Hampel_et_al_Research_Paper_Agrarian_Basic_Income.pdf)
- JRF argues UBI would increase poverty unless modified beyond recognition: Chris Goulden, (2018) <https://www.jrf.org.uk/blog/universal-basic-income-not-answer-poverty>
- The RSA model, Compass, Basic Income Trust models of UBI do not preclude support for housing, childcare, and disabilities. In fact, they insist upon these additional supports. There are alternatives to income tax as means of paying for it. Climate taxes, wealth taxes, etc. They are outlined and costed here: A Basic Income for Scotland by Anthony Painter, Jamie Cooke, Ian Burbidge and Aima Ahmed May (2019) <https://www.thersa.org/discover/publications-and-articles/reports/basic-income-scotland>
- ‘Association between household food insecurity and annual health care costs’, Valerie Tarasuk PhD, Joyce Cheng MSc, Claire de Oliveira PhD, Naomi Dachner MSc, Craig Gundersen PhD, Paul Kurdyak MD PhD (2015) <https://www.cmaj.ca/content/cmaj/187/14/E429.full.pdf>
- Ontario Society of Nutrition Professionals in Public Health – Position Statement on Responses to Food Insecurity (2015) <https://www.osnpph.on.ca/upload/membership/document/2016-02/position-statement-2015-final.pdf>
- Impact of a guaranteed annual income program on Canadian seniors’ physical, mental and functional health: Lynn McIntyre, MD, MHSc, FRCPC, FCAHS, Cynthia Kwok, PhD, J.C. Herbert Emery, PhD, Daniel J. Dutton, PhD (2016): <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/27526215/>
- The Global Food Donation Atlas – Harvard Law School Food Law & Policy Clinic and The Global FoodBanking Network (2020): <https://atlas.foodbanking.org/atlas.html>
- ‘Vulnerability to food insecurity since the COVID-19 lockdown’ Rachel Loopstra, Food Foundation and Kings College London (2020) [https://foodfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Report\\_COVID19FoodInsecurity-final.pdf](https://foodfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Report_COVID19FoodInsecurity-final.pdf)
- Rutger Bregman (2017) ‘Utopia for Realists’ - a book in which Rutger Bregman advocates for UBI: <https://www.rutgerbregman.com/books> He has a new book coming out, Humankind.
- GiveDirectly examines the case for and against UBI, what we know about how it could work, and what remains to be seen. It includes a comprehensive overview of UBI trials around the world. GiveDirectly is delivering cash transfers to 20,000 people as part of the largest experimental test of UBI ever conducted. <https://www.givedirectly.org/basic-income/>

<sup>i</sup> <https://blogs.bath.ac.uk/iprblog/2020/04/03/is-it-time-for-an-emergency-basic-income/>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.givedirectly.org/basic-income/>