

# 18 Unconditional Basic Income



## *Sustainable Ecological Transition is Impossible Without unconditional Social Security for All People*

### About the authors and their positions

The author is the co-founder of Netzwerk Grundeinkommen (the 'German Basic Income Network') and has been a long-standing member of the network council, a collective body that represents the interests of members between general members' meetings. He is also the co-founder of the Unconditional Basic Income Europe network, co-editor of several publications on the basic income and author of numerous articles covering poverty, the basic income, feminism and growth criticism.

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<https://www.degrowth.de/en/dim/>

### 1. What is the key idea of the movement for an unconditional basic income?

**The basic income is a way of unconditionally securing every person's existence and allowing each person to participate in society**

Behind the notion of a basic income is the conviction that every person has a right to an unconditionally ensured material existence and social participation. The basic income is a monetary form of this security. The four criteria that identify the unconditionality of the basic income are as follows. The basic income should:

- Be guaranteed to all people as a legal individual right,
- Ensure the existence of all people and enable their social participation,
- Not be subject to means testing, and
- Not be tied to any obligations to work or provide other services in return.

#### *Basic income – a long history*

The idea of a basic income was established by Thomas Spence in 1796. He combined it with the (re)collectivisation of the shared natural goods from human life, the securing of public infrastructure and the development of democracy, while ensuring the equal involvement of women.

In the 19th century, there were several proposals for a basic income in Europe, such as from Victor Considerant, from Belgian Egalitarians and from Joseph Charlier. These suggestions were always embedded in principally social change projects, such as developing a democracy and a cooperative economy, guaranteeing political freedoms and social rights, or nationalising important companies. However, these suggestions generally only referred to a partial basic income. They are not true basic incomes that ensure existence and enable social participation (see Blaschke 2016a).

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During the 20th century, the circle of suggestions for basic incomes or partial basic incomes widened enormously in Europe and the USA (e.g. from Bertrand Russell, Dennis and Mabel Milner, Erich Fromm, Martin Luther King, Philippe van Parijs, Herwig Büchele and Lieselotte Wohlgenannt, André Gorz, Michael Opielka, Georg Vobruba, Claus Offe). The justifications given by the protagonists in favour of a basic income are very different. For almost all of them, their basic income proposals are intertwined in other social change projects.

Since the second half of the 20th century, the relationship between the basic income debate and ecological and feminist issues has further strengthened, such as during the alternative-green discussion in Germany in the mid 1980s and the criticism levelled at an industrial society (see Schmid 1986; Opielka 1985). Previously, the independent unemployed movement in Germany had ignited the debate about the basic income –called *Existenzgeld*– together with a basic criticism of wage labour and power (see BAG der Sozialhilfeinitiativen 2000).

*Basic income – criticism of existing relationships of power in the economy, state and partnerships*

The principles behind the idea of a basic income, incorporating a criticism of the principles of power of current societies *and* current forms of partnership arrangements, are as follows: Nobody must do anything against their free will or must make themselves available in exchange for something due to material poverty, if they do not want to do so –be it on the jobs market or in a partnership. Furthermore, every person has the right to participate in the democratic organisation of public affairs, including the economy, and in the organisation of partnership arrangements, without fear or facing blackmail. In order to make these principles a reality, freedom from material poverty is necessary –as unconditional material security. Conditional material security (or its complete lack) open the floodgates to misery, poverty, marginalisation, despotism and dependence on the state and partners, as well as stigmatisation and discrimination.

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## **2. Who is part of the movement for an unconditional basic income, what do they do?**

**Heterogeneous and networked basic income movement – international, national and regional**

The basic income movement is as heterogeneous as other social movements. It includes libertarians, socialists, communists, feminists, critics of growth systems, critics of globalisation, trade unionists, self-employed persons, unemployed persons, business people and representatives of solida-

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city-economic co-operations, academics, religious and non-religious people, party members and non-party members. It is not currently possible to formulate a reliable quantitative statement about their structure or their location in certain social classes.

On a global scale, those in favour of the basic income are organised as part of the [Basic Income Earth Network](#) (BIEN, founded in 1986), and on a European level, they are part of the [Unconditional Basic Income Europe](#) (UBIE, founded in 2014). They are also organised in national, regional and local networks and initiatives, as well as cross-regional organisations and associations that work towards achieving a basic income. The largest network in Germany is the [Netzwerk Grundeinkommen](#) ('Basic Income Network', founded in 2004), and it currently unites 119 larger member organisations and smaller regional initiatives, and over 4300 individual members. It is also the largest national basic income network in the world. The *Netzwerk Grundeinkommen* is one of BIEN's partner organisations. It is a members of UBIE, of *Attac Deutschland* and the *Care Revolution* network. Certain larger associations (such as the *Katholische Arbeitnehmer-Bewegung*, [Catholic Workers Movement], which is also a member of the *Netzwerk Grundeinkommen*) and more active smaller groups (such as: *Attac-Arbeitsgruppe Genug für alle*, *Gewerkschafterdialog Grundeinkommen*, *Labournet*, *Freiheit statt Vollbeschäftigung*) influence the basic income debate in Germany, as well as individuals (such as Adelheid Biesecker, Ronald Blaschke, Katja Kipping, Michael Opielka, Werner Rätz, Antje Schrupp, Götz Werner, Gabriele Winker). Alliances and networks for the basic income within the *DIE LINKE* and the *BÜNDNIS 90/DIE GRÜNEN* political parties also influence the debate.

It can be ascertained that there is no 'single' basic income movement, just like there is no 'single' basic income concept. There is also no 'single' degrowth movement, just as there is no 'single' degrowth concept. However, within both movements – provided their supporters feel committed to an emancipatory aim<sup>1</sup>– there are concurring or similar views that could be fruitful for shared political engagement.

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<sup>1</sup>There are (market-)liberal and conservative aims that could be associated with a partial basic income or a criticism of growth systems, but they have no basis in either movement. For a basic income from a neo-liberal point of view, there is a concept devised by Thomas Straubhaar, for example, which orients itself to the partial-basic-income approach devised by Milton Friedman. For a conservative to neo-liberal critical approach to growth systems, you can refer to Meinhard Miegel. The specific structure of each basic income concept, as well as its association with other social changes, suggests whether an emancipatory or a (market-)liberal/conservative approach is being taken (see [Blaschke 2012: 25-42](#)).

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### 3. How do you see the relationship between an unconditional basic income and degrowth?

#### **The basic income movement in Germany is active within other social movements, including the degrowth movement**

The basic income movement in Germany is involved in demonstrations, public political campaigns, educational and discussion offers, political lobbying work and (popular) academic conferences and publications.

Supporters of the basic income in Germany take part in discussions, conferences and campaigns within feminist and solidarity-economic movements, as well as in movements critical of globalisation and growth, the movement for global social rights, the movement for increased plebiscitary democracy, the unemployed movement, and the trade unionist movement for a basic income –both in Europe and in Germany itself.

One such example was their involvement in preparing the [Citizens' manifesto for European democracy, solidarity and equality](#), which was brought into the public debate in Europe by [European Alternatives](#) and other social movements. It contains specific suggestions for political changes within the European Union, was compiled by European citizens in a participatory bottom-up process and was presented to members of the European Parliament in Brussels in December 2013. It also included the suggestion of a basic income –alongside calls for a right to high-quality education for all, a minimum wage, changes to the banking sector so it serves the public interest, the introduction of a financial transaction tax, a fight against tax avoidance, the democratisation of the EU on all levels, the protection of common goods, an energy transition and a ban on harmful chemicals, the implementation of women's rights and the rights of lesbians, gays, bisexual and transsexual persons, as well as rights for ethnic minorities. A further example of joint activities with other social movements is the joint organisation of the Campaign and founding conference for the Care Revolution network and an international feminist workshop on the topic of 'Feminist and post-patriarchal demands for the basic income' in 2014.

Certain basic income activists are active in the working and coordination bodies of the other aforementioned social movements, and in turn, activists from these movements are active in the basic income movement.

The German basic income movement is also involved as part of the national and international degrowth movement, particularly since the Beyond growth?! Ecological justice. Social rights. Good life congress in Berlin in 2011 and the [Degrowth conference in Leipzig in 2014](#). Cooperation with the degrowth movement comes through working in organisational bodies, through joint

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publications and educational and discussion offers. Examples of this include participating in campaigns and discussions at the conferences in Berlin and Leipzig, at the [Group Assembly Process](#) at the Degrowth conference in Leipzig, as well as publishing documents on growth change (see Woynowski et al 2012). In May 2016, mutual understanding was further strengthened at a [European-wide conference in Hamburg](#) as part of a participatory process dealing with ‘unconditional basic income and degrowth’. Content-related overlaps between the basic income movement and the movement critical of growth were discussed (see below). The [16th BIEN Congress in Seoul in July 2016](#), which focussed on the social and ecological transition of society, picked up on the results from the conference in Hamburg.

Firstly, as part of these joint processes, the unconditional material security of all people as an essential requirement for individual freedom *and* actual solidarity, i.e. a solidarity that feels committed to people’s needs and reinforcing their autonomy, has been highlighted from the perspective of the basic income movement and has made this approach valid for the various approaches from other social movements. Secondly, basic income concepts are tested to see whether they help or hinder the concerns of other social movements. Thirdly, it has been highlighted that a social, economic, ecological and cultural transition of society is not a single-topic event, but that it unites different advancing approaches and makes them necessary. One such example is the identification of content-related overlaps between the basic income movement and the degrowth movement.

*Content-related overlaps between the basic income movement and the degrowth movement: Social security and redistribution, democracy, alternative and solidarity-based economy, time sovereignty*

Concurring or indeed similar political approaches are shared across four areas within both movements (see [Blaschke 2016b](#)):

1. *Social security and redistribution*<sup>2</sup>: The basic income movement believes that the basic income is part of reliable, preventative, and most importantly human-rights-compliant social security for all. This presupposes a comprehensive redistribution of social wealth. In relation to this, an ecological basic income or an eco-bonus (see Schachtschneider 2014) is discussed as an independent basic income or as part of the financing of the basic income. This relates to an offset social component or redistribution that is financed by an eco-tax. This component is included in certain basic income models discussed in Germany.

In the degrowth movement, it is believed that it is not possible for all to have a good life without there being sufficient and unconditional social security for all members of a society. People’s fear of losing their livelihood,

<sup>2</sup>Redistribution means distributing social wealth, which was acquired privately or collectively through exploitative practices.

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precariousness and social divisions block important transformation processes, including ecological ones.

Furthermore, the relationship between climate change and poverty in the Global South is discussed here and there. Just like the degrowth movement, sections of the basic income movement that are critical of globalisation in particular see a relationship between prosperity of the Global North and poverty in the Global South, namely as a consequence of the Global North's economic imperialism. They are therefore pleading for an alternative international economy and division of labour, as well as for redistribution to poor countries.

2. *Democracy*: The basic income movement assumes that the basic income promotes people's political and democratic participation in all public-political opportunities, including the economy. By recognising the basic income as a transfer payment, to which everyone is entitled, everyone is firstly recognised as being an equal member of the community. And secondly, it allows all persons to participate politically and democratically, without material susceptibility to blackmail. However, the basic income must be introduced democratically and said introduction requires a high level of social acceptance.

The degrowth movement assumes that the transition to a society that uses significantly fewer natural resources and does not damage the environment is only possible via democratic means, and that sustainable production and consumption require a democratic organisation.

3. *Alternative and solidarity-based economy*: Sections of the basic income movement that are critical of capitalism in particular have discussed how it is possible to produce beyond the principles of profit and competition, and how production and distribution can be democratic and show solidarity, so that they are oriented towards the common good and the needs of people. Social security and individual freedom arising from a basic income would promote participatory and democratic participation and an attitude based on solidarity –including in the economy. Furthermore, the basic income ensures material security and free time for development and activities in the area of an alternative and solidarity-based economy.

Parts of the degrowth movement argue that –in contrast with profit and competition-driven economies– it is only possible to stop excessive consumption of resources and environmental damage by democratically organising production and consumption, i.e. as a solidarity-based economy. Moreover, the necessity of having time for different types of cooperative individual work in the informal, unpaid sector has been discussed. Practical approaches will need to be tried.

4. *Individual and collective time sovereignty*: The basic income movement ass-

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umes that the basic income enables your own and the collective working time and lifetime to be handled confidently, since fundamental material security and social participation are a given. Time sovereignty can be seen as both quantitative and qualitative: Quantitative refers to the duration, such as how long you are in gainful employment; whereas qualitative time sovereignty is determined based on the (aims of the) activities which are (achieved or) performed in a specific period of time. The concept of time sovereignty is therefore closely linked with the social security of people, together with the question of democracy and approaches to a solidarity-based economy –also in their respective gender-specific dimension.

The degrowth movement is of the opinion that shortening the period of gainful employment and having more time available for other activities is a transition project on the way to a degrowth society. Many feminist approaches combine the question of time with ecological and democratic questions, as well as with the revaluation and redistribution of work. The aim is to carefully handle the natural bases of life, to overcome the current division between paid and unpaid work, and the gender-equal distribution of care work (see Biesecker/Wichterich/von Winterfeld 2012; Blaschke/Praetorius/Schrupp 2016).

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#### 4. Which suggestions do they have to each other?

##### **Achieving unconditional material security and halting the exploitation and destruction of the natural bases of life are necessary for a social-ecological transition**

Representatives of the basic income movement always point to the following: When it comes to the social-ecological transition of society, it is not related to creating any form of social justices. Social justice, which does not include people's unconditional material protection, falls short of humanistic and democratic principles for organising society and cohabitation. A sustainable ecological transition of society as part of a society that uses significantly fewer natural resources and does not damage the environment cannot be achieved through a dictatorship, nor through the existential blackmailing of people, nor in a socially divided society. On the other hand, the following growth-critical principles are important for the basic income movement: A good life and unconditional material security for all cannot be sustainably achieved by exploiting, depleting and destroying natural resources.

In a globalised world, these principles of social justice and ecological reason can only be implemented politically with a global social movement that takes both of the aforementioned aspects into consideration.

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### **5. Outlook: Space for visions, suggestions or wishes**

#### **An emancipatory social movement is possible**

Human emancipation could be an aim shared by the basic income movement and other social movements: Emancipation in terms of people empowering themselves cannot be the result of compulsion, violence or power. It must rely on solidarity, which recognises the needs and autonomy of individuals –an autonomy that nevertheless incorporates the dependence of others. The same solidarity-based principle must prevail between individual countries around the world and between groups of people. Emancipation calls for inclusive democracy which does not exclude any person, any group of people, nor any country. Undemocratic global and continental institutions, which currently exert power over the economy, trade and social matters, must give way to legitimate and democratic bodies. In turn, the solidarity-based relationship between individuals, groups of people and countries is inconceivable without a relationship between people and nature where human beings are seen as a part of nature and nature as the foundation of human life. Or in feminist terms: Treating one another carefully and treating nature carefully are two sides of the same coin.

On the basis of these principles, economic-imperial, nationalist and racist aspirations, the exploitation and destruction of nature, discrimination against women, as well as physical and psychological violence against human beings are to be rejected.

An emancipatory social movement would be plural but bound by these principles. It would seek commonalities and acceptable solutions for each (sub-)movement –anything else would weaken it. There are no simple solutions for complex social problems. There can be no sustainable social change without different strategies that promote one another. That is also the conclusion drawn by many academics and activists, who have furthered the basic income debate with their contributions, including Erich Fromm, André Gorz, Robert and Edward Skidelsky, Naomi Klein, Adelheid Biesecker and many more besides. For them, a basic income is *one* constituent part of a concept promoting a social-ecological transition within society/societies.

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### **Literature**

#### *Links*

Basic Income Network Germany, including glossary, models, historical background, FAQs, literature, latest news: <https://www.grundeinkommen.de>  
(English page: <https://www.grundeinkommen.de/services/english-page>)



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Unconditional Basic Income and Degrowth conference, incl. texts, videos and photos: <https://ubi-degrowth.eu/>

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