

Philippe Van Parijs & Yannick Vanderborght

Basic income: the instrument of freedom

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Anyone committed to freedom will want to get all households out of poverty: freedom from want is a precondition for freedom tout court. How can this be achieved? The 20th century received wisdom is clear: through growth. The growth of production will provide jobs and thereby a decent income to the bulk of population, while providing indirectly an income to the others through social insurance benefits to which they are entitled thanks to their past work. The strong positive correlation between poverty and unemployment and the strong negative correlation between unemployment and growth are sufficient to make this strategy self-evident to many. However two facts should make us pause. Firstly, despite GDP per capita having doubled or trebled since the golden sixties, we are now struggling in many countries with greater joblessness and job insecurity than then. Might it only be the shortsighted who still believe that growth could do the trick? Secondly, given the ecological limits, does it really make sense to try to reduce the current level of unemployment through a growth of output that would outpace the expected increase in productivity? Assuming growth could secure an income through employment to all our contemporaries, would it be a fair thing to do if it means making the economic machine work at such a pace that it destroys the planet for our followers?

Basic income

Such doubts about the effectiveness and desirability of growth have fed interest in other ways of securing an adequate income to everyone. For people committed to freedom for all, we argue that the proper way of addressing today's unprecedented challenges is to make minimum income protection fully unconditional. In what sense? Not only in the sense that (1) it is paid in cash rather than in kind, as most existing minimum income

schemes now are. Also in the sense that (2) it is a strictly individual entitlement, rather than one linked to the household situation, (3) it is universal rather than subjected to an income or means test, and (4) it is paid no strings attached rather than tied to an obligation to work or to be willing to work. We call unconditional basic income or, for short, basic income, an income that is unconditional in all four of these senses.

Nothing in this definition of a basic income entails a specific amount. When discussing it within the context of a particular country, it makes sense to think of a monthly basic income pitched at about one fourth of that country's GDP per capita. For Belgium in 2014, this amounts to about € 700 per month. This amount can and in our view should be modulated according to age, with the children receiving less than this amount and possibly the elderly more. It can also be indexed to the cost of living, and is meant to be non-mortgageable and income-tax-free.

We do not advocate a basic income as a substitute for all existing social transfers. We advocate it as a full substitute in the case of individuals receiving benefits lower than the basic income and as a partial substitute in the case of individuals receiving more. In the latter case, the basic income provides an unconditional floor that can be topped up by conditional supplements. These supplements can be earnings-related social insurance benefits but also public assistance benefits to people in specific circumstances, with the existing conditionalities maintained and the post-tax levels adjusted downward so as to maintain the total incomes of the beneficiaries unchanged. A basic income even less meant as a cash substitute for the public funding of quality basic education and quality basic health care.¹

There is a profound difference between conditional and unconditional minimum income schemes. Both can be viewed as ways of addressing income poverty, but only the latter can claim to get to the root of the new challenges we face. It does not operate at the margin of society but affects power relations at its very core. It is not just there to soothe misery but to liberate us all. It is not a way of making life on earth tolerable for the destitute but a key ingredient of a society and a world we can look forward to. To see this, let us consider one by one the four unconditionalities that define a basic income.

A cash income

The first one is the least controversial. The basic income is to be paid in cash and not in the form of food, shelter, clothes and other consumer goods. The main argument in favor of in kind provision is of a paternalistic kind. The government wants to make sure that

¹Contrary to what is proposed by Charles Murray (2006) and sometimes presented as a defining feature of basic income.

the resources are used to provide for basic necessities for all members of the household rather than wasted on luxuries or worse. The same concern motivates providing the minimum income in the form of a special currency, such as food stamps or other earmarked vouchers.

On the other side, there is first the argument that a fair and efficient distribution of cash, especially in an era of electronic payments, requires far less bureaucracy than a fair and efficient distribution of food or housing. Cash distribution lends itself less easily to clientelistic pressures, lobbying of all types and waste through misallocation. Second, most fundamentally, if we care about freedom for all, there is a strong presumption in favor of a minimum income in cash, with no restriction as to the object or timing of its spending, leaving its beneficiaries entirely free to decide how to use it, thus allowing their own preferences to prevail between the various options available to them even with a modest budget.

A combination of mild paternalism and of concern for positive and negative externalities can easily override this presumption in the case of some specific goods such as basic health insurance and education at pre-school, primary and secondary level. Not only can such provision in kind be defended by reference to the long-term interest of the individuals concerned, but a healthy and well-educated workforce and citizenry constitute public goods that benefit the whole community. Analogous arguments hold for some other social services and for the provision of safe and enjoyable public spaces. In this sense and for these reasons, it can be said that part of the basic income needs to be provided in kind.

An individual income

A basic income is also unconditional in the sense that it is strictly individual. ‘Strictly individual’ refers to both of two logically independent features: paid to each individual and at a level independent of that individual’s household situation. Let us consider each in turn. A basic income is not paid to one person, the ‘head of the household’, on behalf of all the latter’s members. It is given individually to each adult member of the household. In the case of minors, it will need to be given to one adult member of the household. Essential is that each of the adults in the household should have an individual entitlement. Such direct payments to each individual member make a big difference in so far as it affects the distribution of power within the household. For a woman with low or no earnings, control over the household’s expenditures will tend to be greater and exit options will tend to be less forbidding if she receives a regular income as an

individual entitlement for herself (and, possibly, her children) than if her existence and that of her children entails a higher net income for her partner.

A basic income is also strictly individual in a second and more controversial sense. Existing conditional minimum income schemes are household-based in the sense that how much a person is entitled to depends on the composition of the household. Typically, adults are entitled to significantly higher benefits if they live alone than if they live in a household with one or more other adults. The argument behind this widespread feature is straightforward: when addressing poverty, one needs to pay attention to economies of scale in consumption. Single people need more to be lifted out of poverty, and it makes sense to differentiate entitlement according to household composition.

And yet we should go for a basic income that is strictly individual in this second, logically independent sense too: how much individuals are entitled to should be independent of the size of the household they belong to. Why? For two reasons. Firstly, there used to be a time where marriage and cohabitation could, for most administrative purposes, be regarded as synonymous. Checking whether two people are married is an easy job. Today, unregistered cohabitation tends to become far more frequent than marriage. Given that it is cohabitation, and not marriage, that justifies differentiation, preserving this differentiation now requires trickier, more invasive ways of checking the satisfaction of the relevant criterion. The more general the trend towards informality and volatility in the formation, decomposition and recomposition of households, the more authorities are stuck in a dilemma between arbitrariness and unfairness on one side and intrusiveness and high monitoring costs on the other.

Moreover, differentiation according to household composition amounts to discouraging people from living together. Paradoxically, the strictly individual character of a tax or benefit scheme makes it community-friendly. A household-based scheme amounts to creating a loneliness trap: people who decide to live together are penalized through a reduction in benefits. As a result, the mutual support and sharing of information and networks stemming from co-habitation is weakened, scarce material resources are being wasted, and the number of housing units for a given population increases. The sustainable pursuit of freedom for all demands that co-habitation should be encouraged, not penalized.

As characterized so far, a basic income is unconditional in the sense of being paid in cash rather than in kind and on an individual basis rather than on a household basis. But it is also unconditional in two further senses, at the same time more controversial

than the first two. Firstly, a basic income is unconditional in the sense of being universal, not subjected to a means test: the rich are entitled to it just as much as the poor. Secondly, it is unconditional in the sense of having no strings attached to it, of not being subjected to a (willingness to) work test: the voluntarily unemployed are entitled to it just as much as the employed and the involuntarily unemployed. The combination of these two unconditionalities is absolutely crucial. The former frees people from the unemployment trap, the latter from the employment trap. The former facilitates saying yes to a job offer, while the latter facilitates saying no. The former creates possibilities, while the latter lifts obligations and thereby enhances those possibilities. Without the former, the latter could easily foster exclusion. Without the latter, the former could easily foster exploitation. It is the joint operation of these two features that turns basic income into a paramount instrument of freedom. Let us now consider them each in turn..

A universal income

Existing minimum income schemes all involve some kind of means test. The benefit received typically amounts to the difference between the household's total income from other sources and the stipulated minimum income for that particular category of household. Consequently, its level is at its highest when income from other sources is zero, and it falls as income from other sources increases. Any such scheme needs to operate *ex post*, i.e. on the basis of some prior assessment, reliable or not, of the beneficiaries' material resources.

A basic income, by contrast, operates *ex ante*, with no means test involved. It is paid at the same level to rich and poor alike, regardless of the income they derive from other sources. The benefit is paid in full to those whose income exceeds the minimum that a basic income scheme guarantees to all, as well as to those whose income falls short of it. Consequently, if it is funded exogenously, for example by revenues from publicly owned natural resources, the introduction of a basic income increases by the same amount everyone's income. If instead it is funded endogenously through some form of redistribution within the population concerned, it is clear that high earners and big spenders will fund their own benefit (and more). The key difference between a basic income and an income-tested scheme is therefore not that a basic income would make everyone richer, and even less that it is better for the rich. Paradoxically, the key difference is instead that it is better for the poor.

This claim is far from obvious, including to some poverty experts. It is not difficult to understand why. If the aim is the eradication of poverty, the universal character of basic income, added to its individual nature, easily looks like a pathetic waste of resources. A conditional minimum income scheme that strictly targets the poorest by making up the difference between their income and the poverty line looks hugely superior to a basic income, which wastes valuable resources by distributing them to countless households above the poverty line. Yet, a basic income is to be preferred, for two distinct reasons.

The first reason has to do with universality as such, the fact that the benefit is paid to all, not only to those identified as poor. Many studies comparing how effectively universal and targeted benefits schemes reach the poorest members of society point to the superiority, in this respect, of universal systems.² In order to access benefits targeted at the poor, it is necessary to take steps that many people who are eligible risk not taking or not completing, whether out of ignorance, shyness or shame. With means-tested schemes, the information and awareness campaign required to achieve the same take-up rate among net beneficiaries as with the corresponding universal scheme involves a considerable human and administrative cost.³ Further, even with a scheme that uses nothing but low income as the relevant criterion, decisions to (try hard to) include or exclude leave a lot of room for arbitrariness and clientelism.⁴ With a basic income scheme, the automatic payment of benefits does not require any particular administrative steps. Society is no longer visibly divided between the needy and the others, and there is nothing humiliating about receiving a basic income granted to all members of society. This does not only matter in itself for the dignity of the people involved. It also enhances effectiveness in terms of poverty alleviation.⁵ Thus, by avoiding complication and stigmatization, a universal scheme can achieve a high rate of take up at a low information cost.

Universality as such, the fact that one remains entitled to the basic income no matter what, also matters to the attempt to tackle unemployment. For the uncertainty people face once they are no longer entitled to benefits contributes to trapping the beneficiaries of conditional schemes. Access of the most disadvantaged to paid employment is made difficult by the very nature of many of the jobs they would qualify

² See, for example, Skocpol (1991), Korpi & Palme (1998), Bradshaw (2012).

³ See Warin (2012) for a discussion of the low take-up rate of conventional minimum income schemes in the case of France. France Stratégie (2014: 85) reports that the rate of take up of France's means-tested minimum scheme ("*revenu de solidarité active*") is about exactly 50% and proposes 80% as an ambitious target.

⁴ A lesser vulnerability to clientelism is also sometimes mentioned as an important advantage of basic income. Thus, according to Zwolinski (2014), a basic income, in contrast to the existing welfare state, "allows virtually no room for bureaucratic discretion, and thus minimizes the opportunities for political rent-seeking and opportunism.

⁵ The stigmatization inherent in existing schemes was from the start an important impulse for the basic income movement. See, for example, Jordan (1973: 14, 16) on the stigmatization of "paupers" breeding resistance to their asking what they are entitled to.

for: precarious contracts, unscrupulous employers, and unpredictable earnings. It can be risky for them to give up means-tested transfers, as they are often unsure about how much they will earn when they start working, or about how quickly they may lose their job and then have to face more or less complex administrative formalities in order to reestablish their entitlement to a benefit. Even when the probability of this happening is relatively low, the prospect of triggering off a spiral of debt is likely to be perceived as a major threat by people who are ill-equipped to know, understand, and *a fortiori* appeal to rules that can often be changing and opaque. By contrast, they can take a job without fear when they can be sure that their universal basic income will keep flowing no matter what.⁶

This advantage of universality as regards access to employment is strongly reinforced by the effect of a second feature closely associated with it, but logically distinct: the fact that all earnings, however small, will increase people's net income. Why does this feature matter? In their attempt to be as efficient as possible, means-tested minimum income schemes use the available funds to make up the difference between the poor households' incomes from other sources and the level of income which the scheme aims to guarantee to all households of a particular type. This entails clawing back one unit of benefit for each unit earned by the poor through their own efforts. In other words, the concern not to waste any money on the non-poor amounts to implicitly imposing an effective marginal tax rate of 100% on any income they may get. This situation is commonly called a poverty trap or unemployment trap: the earnings people receive for a low paid job are offset by the corresponding reduction or suppression of the means-tested benefit.⁷ A basic income, being universal, creates no such trap. It is not withdrawn or reduced but kept in full when people earn extra income. Whereas a conditional minimum income scheme provides a safety net in which people get trapped, a basic income provides a floor on which they can stand. In this light, a basic income can be viewed as the core of a form of 'active' welfare state, one that activates people by freeing them rather than by forcing them to work.

It is true, indeed self-evident, that this is achieved at a far higher level of public expenditure. Paying a given sum of money to all costs far more money than paying it only to the poor. But there is cost and cost. Much of the cost, in this case, consist in taking money with one hand and giving it back with the other hand to the same households. And the rest simply reflects a redistribution of private spending between different

⁶This advantage of a basic income over existing means-tested schemes is well formulated by Thomas Piketty (1999:28): "By definition, an unemployed person living exclusively off a universal basic income can be certain to keep the benefit whatever happens." By contrast, it can take several months to establish a benefit entitlement that depends on one's economic situation, and "these few months can be very important for households whose everyday economic balance is very fragile. [. . .] As working for a few months might make me lose the benefit of the minimum income scheme for several terms at the end of this period of activity, then why take such a risk?"

⁷As Tobin (1965: 890) put it: "This application of the means-test is bad economics as well as bad sociology".

categories of the population. This is quite different from a budgetary cost that matches the use of real resources, such as the building of infrastructure or the employment of civil servants, and therefore implies ipso facto an opportunity cost: there are other things that could have been done with the material and human resources on which public money is being spent. Abstracting from possible administrative gains and losses, the shift from a means-tested to a universal scheme does not make the population as a whole either richer or poorer. It is, in this sense, costless.

An income with no strings attached

A basic income is a cash income that is individual and universal. It further differs from conditional minimum income schemes in having no strings attached to it, in requiring no obligation for its beneficiaries to work or be available on the labor market. In existing conditional schemes,⁸ this obligation typically involves denying the right to the benefit to those giving up a job at their own initiative, to those unable to prove that they are actively looking for a job, to those not prepared to accept a job or other form of 'integration' deemed suitable by the local public assistance office. Basic income, by contrast, is paid without any such conditions. Homemakers, students and tramps are entitled to it no less than waged workers or the self-employed, those who decided to quit no less than those who were sacked. No one needs to check whether its beneficiaries are genuine job seekers or mere shirkers.

Thus, while universality is addressing the unemployment trap, the absence of strings is addressing the employment trap. Without universality, dropping the strings could easily prove a recipe for exclusion: the basic income would just be hush money for those hopelessly stuck in the trap. But with strings attached, universality could prove a recipe for exploitation: the basic income would just be a subsidy to employers who could get away with paying lower wages to workers obliged to accept the job and stick to it if they want to retain the right to a benefit. Or again, because of its universality, a basic income constitutes a subsidy for poorly productive jobs, but because of the lack of strings, not for those among them that are lousy or degrading. The conjunction of these two unconditionalities enables us to see why there is some truth both on the side of those who argue for or against basic income on the ground that it would depress wages and on the side of those who argue for or against basic income on the ground that it would boost wages.

⁸For a general and recent overview, see Van Lancker (2015).

Universality facilitates saying yes to jobs that pay little, even so little or so unreliably that up to now they do not exist. People with a low immediate earning power are no longer priced out of a job. Average earnings, for this reason, may diminish. However, because of the absence of strings, the yes will only be forthcoming if the job is attractive enough in itself or through the useful training, gratifying contacts or promotion prospects it provides, irrespective of how little it is paid. For the lack of strings facilitates saying no to jobs that both pay little and are unattractive in themselves.⁹ If they fail to attract or retain enough incumbents, employers may choose to replace them by machines. If this is impossible or too expensive, the job will need to be made more attractive. And if this too proves impossible or too expensive, pay for these jobs will need to go up. Yes, those lousy, poorly paid jobs which you would not dream of doing will need to be paid better, perhaps even better than yours and ours. And this is good.¹⁰ Average earnings, therefore, may well go up.

What the net effect of these opposing forces on the average level of labor compensation will be cannot be said a priori. And what it turns out to be will of course not only be affected by the balance of market forces but also by such institutional factors as the regulation of part-time work and self-employment or the presence and scope of minimum wage arrangements, whether imposed by law or negotiated by social partners. One thing is certain, however: the combination of the two unconditionalities gives more options and therefore greater bargaining power to those with least of it. A basic income may add little to the bargaining power of those with valuable talents, education or experience, with strong insider status, influential connections or strong Union backing, and with few family constraints. But it will empower those with least power and most constraints, enable them to be choosier among possible occupations whose intrinsic quality they are better able to assess than any expert, legislator or bureaucrat, taking full account of what they like to do and what they need to learn, who they get on with and where they wish to live. Both through existing jobs being improved and through non-existing jobs becoming viable, this is why work quality can be expected to get a big boost. In particular, this is why the average quality of the jobs performed by the

⁹ Karl Widerquist's (2013) defense of basic income rests on its giving this "power to say no", i.e. the power to refuse unwanted cooperation. It is essential to our own argument that it emphasizes symmetrically the fact that (relative to means-tested schemes) it also facilitates saying yes.

¹⁰ This intended effect was already very present in the first plea for a country-wide unconditional basic income, written in Brussels by Joseph Charlier: "*Undoubtedly, by raising and improving the material condition of the masses, the implementation of a guaranteed minimum income will make them choosier in the choice of their occupations; but as this choice is usually determined by the price of the manpower, the industries concerned will need to offer their workers a higher wage by way of just compensation for the disadvantages attached to these occupations.*" The proposed scheme "*will have as an immediate consequence a reparatory remuneration for this class of pariahs presently condemned to misery by way of reward for their irksome and useful labor.*" (Charlier 1848: 37)..

most vulnerable can safely be expected to improve. This is also why people committed to freedom for all like this combination. This is why they want a basic income.

[Philippe Van Parijs is professor at the faculty of economic, social and political sciences of the University of Louvain (UCL) and directs the Hoover Chair of Economic and Social Ethics. He chairs the board of Basic Income Earth Network (www.basicincome.org). Yannick Vanderborght is professor at the University Saint-Louis and visiting professor at UCL.]

**philippe.vanparijs@uclouvain.be | yannick.vanderborght@uclouvain.be |
Twitter: @pvpbrussels**

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Respons: Steven Bulté

Evolutie, geen revolutie?

Philippe Van Parijs van repliek dienen, is niet evident. Van Parijs is een van onze belangrijkste intellectuele exportproducten, een toponderzoeker, en bovendien altijd origineel, scherp en integer. Een politiek filosoof die ook nog eens de gave bezit om zijn ideeën begrijpelijk en wars van enige pretentie uit te leggen.

Zijn levensproject, een universeel onvoorwaardelijk basisinkomen, is een eeuwenoud idee, maar momenteel springlevend. Thomas Paine wilde het en later toonden economen als James Tobin, John Kenneth Galbraith en Milton Friedman zich voorstander. Recent wordt het basisinkomenidee vooral door politiek links gepropageerd, al tonen liberale partijen toenemende interesse. Die algemene belangstelling illustreert dat zo'n maatregel op heel verschillende manieren kan uitgewerkt worden. Rutger Bregman, de Nederlandse opiniemaker en auteur van *'Gratis geld voor iedereen'*, stelt terecht vast dat er niet zoiets bestaat als hét basisinkomen. Het gaat eerder over een concept met meerdere varianten.

De voortdurende hoge werkloosheid en de oprukkende automatisering maakt het basisinkomenidee aantrekkelijk. Zullen er door de robotisering straks nog genoeg banen zijn voor iedereen? Hoe tackelen we de ongelijkheid als gevolg van een toenemende arbeidsmarktpolarisatie? Het basisinkomen zou daarvoor een oplossing kunnen bieden. Het universeel basisinkomen maakt ineens ook komaf met de exploderende kosten van onze *'workfare state'*. België geeft meer dan 2,2 miljard euro per jaar uit aan zogenoemd *'activerend arbeidsmarktbeleid'*, of, wat we doen om werklozen aan een baan te helpen (0,72% van het BBP). Als eenieder recht heeft op eenzelfde basisinkomen, zijn nalevingscontroles, reïntegratietrajecten en sollicitatie-inspanningen niet meer nodig. Weg bureaucratie. Weg stigmatisering ook.

Er zijn echter ook bezwaren. Een aantal daarvan houden geen steek. Een aantal wel. Bezwaar 1: *"het basisinkomen leidt tot luiheid en vadsigheid."* Een eeuwenoude vrees bestaat erin dat meer vrije tijd uitspattingen allerhande in de hand zal werken. Zo'n vaart zal het wel niet lopen. In twee eeuwen tijd is de arbeidstijd drastisch verminderd van meer dan 15 uur naar minder dan 8 uur per dag. Tot een epidemie van luiheid heeft dat niet geleid. De nieuwe vrije tijd die ontstond ging naar zelfontplooiing, cultuur of wat men heden ten dage niet meer *'volksverheffing'* durft te noemen.

Bezwaar 2: “*wie zal de dirty jobs doen in een wereld met een universeel basisinkomen?*” Wat gebeurt er als niemand meer wc’s wil schoonmaken of achter de vuilniswagen wil lopen? Met weinig gegadigden zullen de lonen voor dit soort jobs stijgen. Wie gaat dit betalen? Ook dat hoeft voor veel jobs geen probleem te zijn. De kans is reëel dat als caissières of vuilnismannen 80 euro per uur kosten, robots of zelfscankassa’s vrij snel hun werk overnemen. Niet toevallig ligt in landen met een hoge loonkost, zoals België, het gebruik van robotica in de industrie het hoogst.

Bezwaar 3: “*het toekennen van een basisinkomen is suboptimaal.*” Een universeel basisinkomen is niet efficiënt, in die zin dat het geld dat nu alleen gaat naar mensen die het werkelijk nodig hebben, verdeeld wordt over iedereen. De fijnmazigheid van onze sociale zekerheid wordt erdoor ondergraven en ook met de verschillen in behoeften en noden wordt geen rekening gehouden.

Bezwaar 4: “*een universeel basisinkomen is te duur.*” Een dooddoener die elk debat over het basisinkomen onmiddellijk de kop indrukt. Toch wringt daar wel degelijk het schoentje. Welk bedrag is nodig om mensen vrijheid te gunnen? Om elke volwassene in België 1.100 euro te geven zou het 118 miljard euro kosten. En zelfs indien rekening gehouden wordt met forse besparingen allerhande (uitkeringen die zouden vervangen worden door een basisinkomen, minder administratie nodig, afschaffen belastingvrije som...) zou een basisinkomen van 900 euro – volgens eigen berekeningen – een te financieren gat van ongeveer 37 miljard euro slaan.

De hoge financieringskost leidt daarnaast tot de terechte vrees dat het basisinkomen ten koste zal gaan van andere sociale prioriteiten. Met de grote hap die een universeel basisinkomen neemt uit de overheidsuitgaven, zal de welvaartstaat potentieel moeten kiezen tussen ofwel een hoog basisinkomen ofwel goede publieke voorzieningen, zoals toegankelijke gezondheidszorg en onderwijs.

De hoge kostprijs leidt tot een resem aan light en afgezwakte basisinkomen-voorstellen. Sommigen stellen voor om het basisinkomen te financieren met significante btw-verhogingen maar ondergraven daarmee onmiddellijk de waarde van het uiteindelijke basisinkomen: voor hetzelfde geld kan je immers veel minder kopen. Anderen verlagen het bedrag, bv. tot 500 of 700 EUR per maand. Een compromis dat mogelijk slechter kan uitpakken dan het status quo. Met een gestript basisinkomen dreigt men namelijk het doel voorbij te schieten. De administratie neemt er niet door af. Met een basisinkomen van 500 euro heb je nog altijd aanvullende uitkeringen nodig voor arbeidsongeschikten of werkzoekenden. En dus ook extra tegenprestaties, toegangscriteria en controles. Bovendien kan je voor zo’n lager bedrag niet echt ‘vrij zijn’.

Een *light* basisinkomen zou eventueel wél toelaten om wat minder te werken en mensen minder afhankelijk te maken van de grillige arbeidsmarkt, zoals voormalig topman Guy Standing van de Internationale Arbeidsorganisatie oppert. Daarbij wordt er dan wel van uitgegaan dat de lonen of vergoedingen voor geleverde prestaties niet lager worden. Nochtans schijnen verschillende voorstanders van het basisinkomen daar wel op te rekenen (bv. door te stellen dat het minimumloon met een basisinkomen kan afgeschaft worden). Zo'n situatie zou nadelig kunnen zijn voor werknemers of zelfstandigen. Met het basisinkomen voorziet de overheid in de bestaanszekerheid van mensen. In een periode van recessie – hoge werkloosheid, zwakke onderhandelingspositie van werknemers of kleine zelfstandigen – kunnen werkgevers, bevrijd van een minimumloon, hun (lager geschoolde werknemers) een lagere vergoeding voor arbeid gaan betalen. Op die manier kan een goed bedoeld basisinkomen loondumping in de hand werken. Bovendien is het mogelijk dat een overheid in recessie beknipt op de enorme kostenpost van het basisinkomen.

Het hoeft natuurlijk niet te gaan zoals hierboven beschreven. Wel moeten we onderkennen dat er veel onzekerheden gepaard gaan met een toch dure maatregel. Hoge overheidsuitgaven voor een maatregel die waarschijnlijk te beperkt zal zijn om van te leven, laat staan om de uitkeringsbureaucratie op te doeken. Voor een idee dat in het slechtste geval leidt tot het neerslaan van onze fijnmazige sociale zekerheid en andere sociale verworvenheden zoals het minimumloon.

Er zijn beproefde alternatieven denkbaar. Ons relatief genereus verlofstelsel – wat België een plaats in het koppeloton van de OESO opleverde wat privé-werkbalans betreft – maakt het mogelijk om rustpunten in te bouwen in de loopbaan. Daarnaast hebben ruime en toegankelijke sociale voorzieningen zich al veel langer bewezen als middel tegen ongelijkheid. Ook op vlak van gelijkheid scoort België niet slecht. Tenslotte is het ook mogelijk om via allerhande belastingskredieten of met een ruimer leefloon mensen in bestaansonzekerheid te ondersteunen.

De intellectuele eerlijkheid gebiedt te stellen dat in de praktijk de strijd om het basisinkomen niet zal uitmonden in een radicale keuze. In de verschillende experimenten die momenteel in Finland of Nederland worden opgestart, lijkt het meer te gaan om varianten op een 'onvoorwaardelijke bijstand'. Als dat tot minder stigmatisering van uitkeringsgerechtigden leidt, valt dat toe te juichen. Van een universeel, gegarandeerd inkomen voor iedereen staan zo'n oefeningen echter nog ver af.

[Steven Bulté is adviseur arbeidsmarkt & sociaal overleg bij Ceder, studiedienst van CD&V.]

sbulte@cdenv.be | Twitter: @Oppergod