

How distinguishing between

*a 'narrow understanding' & a 'broad understanding'
of the basic income concept*

can contribute to the realisation of both”

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Presentation overview

Introduction : a “narrow” and a “broad” understanding of Unconditional Basic Income

- **Part 1** : Why care about the definition of UBI, and how does BIEN’s definition matter?
- **Part 2** : UBI’s “narrow understanding”, an extremely precious analytical tool

(or : why some NITs are UBIs, and why there are more actually existing UBI schemes than we commonly think)

- **Part 3** : UBI’s “broader understanding”, what UBI activist actually fight for

(or : Reclaiming the notion of “Basic Income in kind” against that of “Partial Basic Income”)

Conclusion : Reconsidering the list of “basic income’s cousins”,

Envisioning the future of BIEN

Introduction (1)

Who am I ?

- A UBI activist for over 10 years
 - Involved for about as long with ATD Fourth World as well as unemployed labor unions and organisations in France
 - Attended all BIEN congresses since that of ottobrun (munich, germany) in 2012
 - Participated in the creation of the french BIEN affiliate MFRB in 2013
 - Participated in the creation of the european wide BIEN affiliate UBI-E in 2014
- (two moments where the definition of UBI gave rise to intense debates)*
- Actively participated in the 2016 Seoul BIEN congress discussion leading to the first substantial modification of the network's definition of UBI since its creation in 1986
 - A member of BIEN's official working group on the clarification of Basic Income's Definition (CBID) since its creation at the Hyderabad congress of 2019
 - Obtained a masters degree in political science in September 2022 on the basis of a 250p. thesis entirely dedicated to the question of the definition of the notion of UBI and the stakes of the debates surrounding it

Introduction (2)

A “narrow” and a “broad” understanding of UBI ?

- My conclusion at this stage is that the notion of UBI actually has two meanings :
 - **A narrow understanding** : pointing to a very clearly defined (making it an invaluable analytical tool of social policy) way to distribute resources respecting 6 criteria, namely :
 - The distribution of a uniform (1) amount of cash (2) on an individual basis (3) to all, without means test (4) or work requirements (5), according to a clearly established periodicity (6)

Nb: A few social policies matching these characteristics already exist around the world today, and a great many social policies match a number of these characteristics, but not all/

- **A broad understanding** : the aspiration to the unconditional and universal guarantee of the material means of individual autonomy

Nb: An objective already attained for substantial sections of the population in countries successfully operating an extended welfare systems/

- The notion of UBI has had these two meanings at least since the creation of BIEN : the proposal examined at the 1986 Louvain la Neuve conference were not about distributing pennies in an intellectually intriguing fashion, but about original and somewhat similar ways of **satisfying a welfare objective**
- BIEN currently officially recognises only the narrow meaning above, minus the criteria of uniformity
- The recognition of the broader understanding of UBI would go a long way in facilitating UBI activism and fostering BIEN's future and importance in the crucial debates ahead of us.

Section 1 : Why & how does BIEN's definition of UBI matter

section overview

- 1.1 The creation of a field of study and exchange
- 1.2 1986, 1988, 2016 : BIEN's current definition
... and its discontents
- 1.3 The very concrete threat of UBI opponents'
repeated lexical assaults

Section 1 : Why & how does BIEN's definition of UBI matter

1.1 The creation of a field of study

- The Basic Income European Network was created in 1986 in Louvain-la-neuve at a meeting of academics and activist working in different disciplines and sectors and coming from different (european) countries
- The creation of the Basic Income European Network was a small revolution on the theoretical level by the very fact of establishing a widely agreed upon common definition
- That definition allowed activist and researchers to overcome the previously overwhelming diversity of :
 - denominations,
 - justifications, and
 - modes of implementation
- This definition thus made it possible to write histories of the idea, to build upon the debates of the past, and to open an intellectual conversation around it between scholars and activists coming from widely different background

Section 1 : Why & how does BIEN's definition of UBI matter

1.2/ 1986, 1988, 2016 : BIEN's current definition ... and its discontents [1/3]

- BIEN's 1986 definition (in the letter sent after the meeting to the participants) read:
 - « *a guaranteed minimum income granted on an individual basis, without means test nor willingness-to-work requirement* »
- BIEN's 1988 definition (in the first ever BIEN Statutes) read:
 - « *an income unconditionally granted to all on an individual basis, without means test or work requirement* »
- We thus notice three changes:
 - The notion of “minimum” has disappeared
 - The notion of “unconditionality” has appeared
 - The notion of “willingness-to-work requirement” has been replaced by simply “work requirement”

Section 1 : Why & how does BIEN's definition of UBI matter

1.2/ 1986, 1988, 2016 : BIEN's current definition ... and its discontents [2/3]

- BIEN's 2016 definition reads:

« a periodic cash payment unconditionally delivered to all on an individual basis, without means test or work requirement »

That is, Basic Income has the five following characteristics:

Periodic: it is paid at regular intervals (for example every month), not as a one-off grant.

Cash payment: it is paid in an appropriate medium of exchange, allowing those who receive it to decide what they spend it on. It is not, therefore, paid either in kind (such as food or services) or in vouchers dedicated to a specific use.

Individual: it is paid on an individual basis—and not, for instance, to households.

Universal: it is paid to all, without means test.

Unconditional: it is paid without a requirement to work or to demonstrate willingness-to-work.

- A thus much more elaborated definition, which mainly consisted in the addition of two criteria over the historically recognised first three (**individual**, no means test [**universal**], no activity test [**unconditional**]):

Periodicity = aimed at distinguishing Basic Income proposals from Basic Endowment (or 'basic capital') ones, though it is debatable whether it has succeeded in doing so

Cash payment = which distinguished Basic Income proposal from voucher hand outs ... but therefore also lead to the problematic denial of "Basic Income in Kind" talks

- Our own definition of UBI's narrow meaning adds to this definition the criteria of uniformity : a UBI policy scheme, by definition, pays the same amount of money to all of its recipients (when a proposal offers to pay unequal amounts, to adults and children for instance, it is actually two proposals with different definition of the universality to which they are to apply) — see the def° used by any pilots & experiments.

Section 1 : Why & how does BIEN's definition of UBI matter

1.2/ 1986, 1988, 2016 : BIEN's current definition ... and its discontents [3/3]

- The 2016 modification was the result of a campaign led by european activist to include in BIEN's definition of UBI a notion of sufficiency
- This campaign obtained the first ever modification of BIEN's definition of UBI, but was frustrated in its fundamental objective
- A motion was voted by the 2016 BIEN General Assembly affirming :

A majority of members attending BIEN's General Assembly meeting in Seoul on July 9, 2016, agreed to support a Basic Income that is stable in size and frequency and high enough to be, in combination with other social services, part of a policy strategy to eliminate material poverty and enable the social and cultural participation of every individual. We oppose the replacement of social services or entitlements, if that replacement worsens the situation of relatively disadvantaged, vulnerable, or lower-income people.

- This motion does not currently appear on BIEN's website, and much discontent has been expressed at the 2016 compromise (with some members of the german BIEN affiliate pushing for their organisation to leave BIEN)

Section 1 : Why & how does BIEN's definition of UBI matter

1.3 The very concrete threat of UBI opponents' repeated lexical assaults

- France has a somewhat complicated history with BIEN (created by french speaking belgians)
- BIEN's French affiliate, like many others, has its own definition distinguished from BIEN's
- This (arguably weaker) definition, in part by the very fact of its divergence, has made it possible for the french government to advance policies that run contrary to several characteristics of UBI's narrow understanding while generally representing a move away from the realisation of its broader understanding
- This is not only the case in France, and it is a risk that should be taken seriously and dealt with by BIEN and its affiliates

Section 2 : UBI's “narrow understanding”, an invaluable analytical tool

section overview

2.1 Universality stops at the limits of the universe

2.2 Uniformity & Universality : the other ‘crucial conjunction’ (why some NITs are UBIs)

2.3 UBI Pilots & Already existing Basic Income schemes

Section 2 : UBI's "narrow understanding", an invaluable analytical tool

2.1 Universality stops at the limits of the universe

- BIEN's definition of UBI says « to all » – but when dealing with concrete social policies, the « all » in question needs to be defined
- The universe of applicability of universal social policies always needs to be defined and is almost never self evident
- In a policy setting, the classic example is of universal voting rights (at first limited to male citizens of over 21 yrs ...)
- But this is true even far beyond the confines of policy & social science talk :
 - The actual extent of the universe escapes the confines of human understanding
 - To the point that it is actually easier to conceive that we are living in a computer simulation than to conceive of the actual universe
 - Thus all talk about the universe are actually limited to the known universe (and even then, as 99% of the visible light in the sky comes from bodies having already passed the so called 'even horizon', beyond which they moving away from us at a relative speed that is faster than that of light, making their belonging to the « known universe » a matter of debate
- Cf. Nancy Fraser's talk of « Boundary Struggles »

Section 2 : UBI's "narrow understanding", an invaluable analytical tool

2.2 Uniformity & Universality : the other 'crucial conjunction' [1/3]

- The 'crucial conjunction' of universality & unconditionality has been put forth by Van Parijs since 2012 as the fundamental defining element of UBI
- However if this applies to UBI as a whole, there is arguably another conjunction crucial to UBI's narrow (and thus concretely applicable) meaning : that of universality & uniformity
- Both notions of universality and uniformity are arguably contained in the « To all » of BIEN's definition, which can be understood as meaning that all those concerned will receive an equal/ uniform amount (as the assumption clearly is that they will receive 'the same thing')
- This explains why a 2016 World Bank report, amongst other sources, explicitly defined UBI as a uniform payment – as do all working definitions used by pilots and experiments
- In practice, many UBI proposals offer to distribute different amounts to children and adults, but much fewer make differences between children and adults – and when those differences are introduced (on age, geographical, gendered, or other sorts of basis) the assumption is always that each of the members of the sub-groups thus distinguished will receive an equal (or 'uniform') amount
- Admitting that a UBI is (in its narrow understanding) *by definition* of a uniform amounts, therefore, leads to analytically distinguishing several 'narrow meaning' UBI proposals (or 'sub-proposals') within the proposals offering to pay different amounts to different groups
- This analytical decomposition of UBI proposals into sub-proposals is thus an invaluable theoretical and practical import of UBI's narrow understanding
- And it also opens the way towards the analytical decomposition of existing welfare state policies in order to be able to discern the narrow meaning UBI policies that these regime contains under other names

Section 2 : UBI's "narrow understanding", an invaluable analytical tool

2.2 Uniformity & Universality : the other 'crucial conjunction' (why some NITs are UBIs) [2/3]

- Admitting that a UBI is by definition of a uniform amount also has very significant implications with regard to the much debated distinction between Negative Income Tax (NIT) schemes and Unconditional Basic Income (UBI) schemes
- A Negative Income Tax (NIT) is an income tax scheme that directly pays money to at least some of the people being taxed (instead of taking money away from them)
- It generally works as a form of universal tax exemption, with people paying income tax seeing the amount they owe reduced by the amount of the tax exemption, and people paying an amount of tax smaller than the figure of the exemption receiving the difference between the two as a direct transfer on their bank account
- NITs however can take many different shape or forms (individualised or household based ; activity tested, etc.) – but they are, crucially, capable of meeting all six criteria of UBI's narrow understanding, in which case they simply are also basic income schemes
- The criteria of uniformity plays the most central role here, as a NITs can be seen as distributing different amounts of money to people on the basis of a means test
- NITs of a uniform amount, however, by definitions distribute the same amount to all of its recipients

Section 2 : UBI's "narrow understanding", an invaluable analytical tool

2.2 Uniformity & Universality : the other 'crucial conjunction' (why some NITs are UBIs) [3/3]

- Once the NIT is of a uniform amount, therefore, the only specificity of NIT forms of UBIs is the modality of the distribution of the grant's amount to *some* of the scheme's recipients : some recipients receive a positive transfer on an account, others get taken less out of their accounts
 - > This modality aspect is important, but many UBI schemes argue for yet other special modalities of distribution (such as alternative local currencies) without their status as UBIs being questioned
- Another criteria sometimes advanced to distinguish NITs from UBIs is that of the ex post/ ex ante (UBIs would be paid before taxes and NITs afterward)
 - > However some UBIs are paid after taxes (the Alaska PFD, eg.) and NITs of a uniform amount can be distributed before taxes, making the criteria void
- As a general rule, the modernisation and digitalisation of tax and benefits systems makes NIT forms of UBI schemes ever more simpler to implement and manage, and ever more obviously a form of UBI (as many systems are currently aiming at calculating benefits and taxes an individual basis in real time or on a weekly/ monthly basis)
- Even on a practical level, reforming a tax & benefit system to make it simpler and clearer by the introduction of a NIT form of UBI is often easier and more practical than adding a UBI scheme to a complex tax & benefit system and issuing extra special rules for all of the way the schemes has to interact with it

Section 2 : UBI's "narrow understanding", an invaluable analytical tool

section overview

2.3 UBI Pilots & Already existing Basic Income schemes

- Thus the necessity of this narrow understanding of Basic Income becomes apparent when dealing with UBI Pilots, UBI experiments, and when looking into the introduction of UBI policy schemes in developed and intertwined tax & benefit systems
- ... As hinted at earlier however, the implications of this other crucial conjunction (of uniformity & universality) arguably has applications carrying UBI policy design into the analysis of currently existing welfare systems :
 - Just As making the narrow understanding evident it becomes necessary to analytically distinguish several sub-schemes within those UBI schemes that offer to pay different amounts (to adults & children, eg.)
 - It also becomes possible (and arguably necessary) to distinguish many narrow meaning UBI schemes within other form of social policies (generally not perceived as forms of Basic Income schemes)
- Thus, in particular, the reasoning deployed with regards to NITs of a uniform amount allows one to understand several apparently means tested yet universal schemes (such as universal basic pensions or universal child benefit policies) as being in practice forms UBI — lacking only a form of PR campaign to officially become UBIs, by the distribution of the amount they pay to the richest who would in exchange be paying exactly as much more taxes
- This sort of PR reforms would therefore actually imply no money transfers, and only a modification of the given state's accounting book
- Likewise, many forms of universal state services can legitimately be understood under this analytical lens as **forms of (narrow meaning policy schemes) Unconditional Basic Incomes *in kind***

Section 3 : UBI's "broader understanding", what UBI activist actually fight for

section overview

3.1 Reclaiming the notion of Basic Income in kind

3.2 Refusing the notion of "Partial Basic Income"

3.3 Reconsidering the Basic Income discussion

Section 3 : UBI's "broader understanding", what UBI activist actually fight for

section overview

3.1 Reclaiming the notion of Basic Income in kind

- The notion of Basic Income in Kind was used extensively before the 2016 modification of BIEN's definition (eg. Van Parijs 1995, Stirton & de Wispelaere 2005)
- Completely disappeared from Van Parijs & Vanderborght 2016
- ... where it was replaced by the notion of « partial basic income » (itself entirely absent from Van Parijs 1995)
- Primary example of UBI in kind = socialised healthcare
- Everyone contributes to it and receives in proportion to their needs, just as in the case of an income tax financed basic income (as are NIT forms of UBI schemes)

Section 3 : UBI's "broader understanding", what UBI activist actually fight for

section overview

3.2 Refusing the notion of "Partial Basic Income"

- The meaning of "Partial Basic Income" used in most activist writings is: **not high enough ... to "ensure a life in dignity and participation in society"**
- The meaning of "Partial Basic Income" used in all the official state agency reports which have used it so far is: **not high enough ... to replace all other state provided cash transfers, including insurance transfers**
- Crucially the two meanings are only partially conflicting : a UBI high enough to replace all other state provided cash transfers and insurances is likely also high enough to do without a job ... until something happens and you have to go to pay USA style university tuition fee or hospital bill
- The notion of "Partial Basic Income", furthermore :
 - Encourages "single scheme thinking"
 - Encourages the focus on the amount of money paid and the caricatural opposition between "left wing proposals" (paying a lot) and "right wing proposals" (paying less), thus
 - breeding counter productive divisions within the UBI movement, &
 - driving the attention away from **the one really important question : How will a given UBI scheme modify the distribution of wealth in the social embedding in which it is introduced ?** (or: will it bring that social embedding close or farther from the realisation of UBI's broad understanding ?)

Section 3 : UBI's "broader understanding", what UBI activist actually fight for

section overview

3.3 Reconsidering the Basic Income discussion

(A) The total rejection & the partial rejection

- [NO to Broad] & [NO to narrow] (the 'feudal mentality')
- [NO to Broad], **but** [YES to Narrow] (the 'minarcho-capitalist' position)

(B) The limit-cases

- [YES to Broad], **but only** if ensured exclusively by a narrow understanding (the 'anarcho capitalist' hypothesis)
- [YES to Broad], **but only** if ensure exclusively by in kind provisions (the 'money abolitionist' hypothesis)

(C) The partial endorsement & the total endorsement

- [YES to Broad], **but** [NO to Narrow] (the 'traditional social democrat')
- [YES to Broad] & [YES to Narrow] (the 'typical UBI supporter')

Conclusion (1)

Reconsidering the list of Basic Income's cousins

- The second chapter (p.30-50) of Van Parijs' & Vanderborght's seminal 2017 Basic Income book is dedicated to isolating the concept of "Basic Income" from its "cousins"
- There, they distinguish UBI from:
 - Basic endowment (p.29-31)
 - NIT (p.32-40)
 - EITC (p.40-43)
 - Wage Subsidies (p.44-45)
 - Guaranteed Employment (p.46-48)
 - Working-Time Reduction (p.48-50)
- We have seen that their treatment of NIT is problematic, and so is that of EITC (which are just a form of non-ubi NIT)
- More importantly, it strikes us as rather problematic that they labeled each section "basic income vs (...)" — thus foregoing the possibility of complementarity

Conclusion (2)

Reconsidering the list of Basic Income's cousins

- More importantly still, it seems to us that the policies they list do not belong to the same degree of generality
- Which arguably explains why they are missing the point of the emergence of “weakly conditional income guarantee” proposals
- This family of proposals strikes us as having emerged in the very debates opened since the creation of BIEN
 - eg. 1: Antony Atkinson’s Participation Income
 - eg. 2: Andre Gorz’s pre-basic income support proposal of radical lifetime work time reduction
- Likewise, a striking similarity of these proposals is that they have so far almost always been presented as alternatives to UBI, rather than as possible complementary proposals to restore the welfare state
- (to my knowledge) Only one exception in that regard: Bernard Stiegler’s participatory income

Conclusion (3)

Reconsidering the list of Basic Income's cousins

- Thus, once it has been accepted that the notion of UBI has two meanings :
 - A narrow & technical one, pointing to a way to distribute resources, a policy tool
 - A broad & aspirational one, pointing to a welfare objective, a policy objective
- Then the list of UBI's cousins (in the narrow understanding of UBI) probably looks something like this :
 - UBIs in kind
 - Weakly conditional forms of income guarantees
 - Modifications of the employment norms
 - Modifications of the socio-fiscal framework
- ... and the realisation of UBI's broader understanding is likely to come about only by a coordinated combination of these different forms of policies with narrow understanding UBI schemes
- Such a combination as that advocated by the Social Guarantee network (cf. www.socialguarantee.org) – a network born from the campaign for « Universal Basic Services » launched in the UK in 2017 ... a year after BIEN rejected the notion of Basic Income in kind, and the year when Van Parijs & Vanderborght endorsed this move by not mentioning « basic income in kind » in their book
- BIEN should strive to integrate such partners in the UBI conversation
- And the recognition of UBI's broader understanding would go a long way in this direction