

# How to build a basic income pilot research program in 2023?

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## **Introduction**

Research on basic income exists for a long time<sup>1</sup>. However, it can be difficult to gather all data available into a solid conclusion. That's what Rebecca Hasdell from the Stanford Basic Income Lab

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1 The first most relevant data come from the pilot in the rural Canadian community of Dauphin, Manitoba, in 1974. It is exceptionally early. Most of the other relevant data come from the XXI century.  
<https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20200624-canadas-forgotten-universal-basic-income-experiment> (15<sup>th</sup> August 2023)

did when publishing "*What we know about Universal Basic Income: A cross-synthesis of reviews*"<sup>2</sup>. This umbrella review enables the creation of hypotheses that can be confronted during the next research. But it does not include non-English-speaking research and neither does it provide 100% accurate guidance for pilot's research<sup>3</sup>. It is our responsibility to work with existing data, and build a research program that produces data that is relevant and useful for the international scientific community.

Imagine that you are building the research protocol for a basic income program. How to produce data that is compatible with common denominators used in other research? And what are those?

This article follows the initiative of a basic income program in West Africa where I currently work on a research protocol design. The questions this article answers are the ones I asked myself.

## 1. Most common data themes

According to Rebecca Hasdell's work, "*the most commonly investigated*"<sup>4</sup> themes are:

- **Poverty and expenditures**
- **Labor and employment**
- **Education**
- **Health and healthcare access**

These themes are the most with research available. They are the most commonly shared concerns about the outcomes of basic income. We are going to see how these themes answer both political and scientific questions, and which hypothesis they support. (see parts 2. *Scientific and political goals of research* and 5. *Hypothesis*).

Other outcomes frequently addressed in literature according to Hasdell:

- **Savings, investment and production**
- **Reproductive health**
- **Women's empowerment**
- **Civic participation**
- **Economic development**

**Savings, investment and production** can cumulate with **poverty and expenditures** as a way of building data on the economic activity and situation of individuals and their households.

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2 Hasdell, R. (2020) What we know about Universal Basic Income: A cross-synthesis of reviews. Stanford, CA: Basic Income Lab.

3 For more guidance on how to build a basic income project, see Kline S. (2022), Basic Income and Local Government; A Guide to Municipal Pilots. Stanford, CA: Basic Income Lab.  
[https://basicincome.stanford.edu/uploads/basic-income-and-cities-toolkit\\_digital.pdf](https://basicincome.stanford.edu/uploads/basic-income-and-cities-toolkit_digital.pdf) (16<sup>th</sup> August 2023)

4 Hasdell, Op. cit., p.9

**Reproductive health** is a subtheme of **health**, focused on the use of contraceptives.

**Women's empowerment** is a dimension that provided lots of interesting and positive results. It is worth to be improved considering the evolution of the occidental ideology about women's rights. Many institutions support projects that promote women's rights. Beyond the political incentive, basic income can make more difference in women's lives than in men's lives. It is a structural fact that women's decisions take more often the family and their relatives into consideration. Socialization has a huge impact on how we relate to our environment depending on our gender. Therefore, women can make drastically different decisions than men<sup>5</sup>. One of the most positive results from the program in Madhya Pradesh is to reveal that the nutrition of young girls improved a lot more than the one of boys. Basic income helped increase food expenditures that were before spent in favor of boys<sup>6</sup>. This result of better alimentation is also confirmed by the work of Clément Cayol<sup>7</sup>, who observed that 61% of the population receiving a basic income declared alimentation as their first budget item, just before housing.

**Civic Participation** is an important theme to foster our understanding of if basic income improves democracy and democratic decision-making, and how it does. So far, several research has been investigating this area<sup>8</sup> because most are looking at individual-level outcomes. Future research, ideally with a balanced quantitative-qualitative protocol, should provide more data on how basic income impacts civic participation.

**Economic Development** is another major concern, both in political and scientific terms. For the moment, it has been recorded by capturing the increase in local businesses<sup>9</sup>. It is one of the most important areas to investigate to finally answer the question about if the basic income is a means of economic optimization, and how it works. The answer depends on what is considered economically developed, but the underlying question is to know whether or not basic income can terminate poverty, that is to say, considerably reduce the importance of its concern for decades.

In the rest of this article, we will focus on the four most common research themes, **poverty and expenditures, labor and employment, education, health and healthcare access**, but we support the relevance of studying others, in particular **women's empowerment, civic participation and economic development**.

## 2. Scientific and political goals of research

Research on basic income has this particularity that it is highly tightened with political convictions. The positive aspect is that this research is specifically relevant to political decision-making. The

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5 Bastagli Francesca and others, *Cash transfers: what does the evidence say? A rigorous review of programme impact and of the role of design and implementation features*, 2016

6 <https://en.unesco.org/inclusivepolicylab/learning/indias-quest-basic-income> (16<sup>th</sup> August 2023)

7 Cayol, Clément. " Les expérimentations de revenu(s) de base », *Multitudes*, vol. 74, no. 1, 2019, pp. 92-98. [http://www.ville-grande-synthe.fr/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Analyse-MSG-N1-C.Cayol\\_.pdf](http://www.ville-grande-synthe.fr/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Analyse-MSG-N1-C.Cayol_.pdf)

8 Owusu-Addo, 2019

9 Taafe, 2017

negative aspect is the risk to confirm bias that we have to mitigate by splitting the scientific conclusions and the political conclusions.

Scientific conclusions belong to the temporality of science. They can be debated with self-criticism, complexity, and beyond binary oppositions. It is the place of eternal doubt where everything is regarded through the lenses of suspicion, even and especially our own affirmations.

Political conclusions are drawn to federate people on specific affirmations. They belong to a time of immediacy. It is the language of emotions and convictions. The goal is to persuade or convince others that we are speaking the truth. Therefore, there is no place for doubt, as these conclusions feed on self-conviction.

Scientific and political conclusions can coexist inside the same speech. There is a relationship between them. Scientific conclusions feed the conviction of political ones, and political conclusions circumscribe the relevance of scientific ones. It is important to identify each as they are not to be treated at the same times and spaces.

The "*most commonly investigated*" themes of research on basic income also create data for political monitoring.

For more information on data available to support political positions, see part 5. *Hypothesis based on available data.*

## **a. Poverty and expenditures**

This theme answers questions about the life conditions of populations and evaluates needs and their actual costs. It provides more accurate data than the relative poverty threshold<sup>10</sup>. It informs on the actual stakes of the population below a chosen poverty threshold. These data enable conclusions on the effect of basic income on long-lasting poverty, both scientifically and politically. It answers the questions "Is basic income effective to reduce poverty?", "Is basic income the best solution to deal with poverty?", "Do the effects last after the end of the program?". It is about society optimization. What needs to be optimized, however, is a political decision.

So far, we can conclude that basic income has a strong effect on poverty. It increases spending on food and housing, thus impacting the health of citizens. The effects on economic development have to be investigated further. We start to have data to confirm that positive effects last after the end of programs, but we also need to investigate this further.

## **b. Labor and employment**

The question of labor and employment is a never-ending gimmick of the basic income debate. The classic opposition states that giving money unconditionally will allow people to stop working. Data

<sup>10</sup> The poverty threshold is a relative data. It represents a part of the population that falls below a certain level of income which is calculated relatively to the rest of the population. In France, for example, the poverty threshold is considered below 60% of the median income: 1 128€ per month. This data is relative and not absolute, which complicates understanding the stakes of this population.

is available, from different sources, to pronounce that there is no diminution of labor where basic income has been implemented. Of course, in these programs, basic income is never eternal. People can not stop being concerned with money and need to anticipate the end of this unconditional support. However, even if the quantity of labor doesn't diminish, some people shift to part-time jobs to deliver care services for people in need, especially women. In a way, people tend to reappropriate the importance of their work. Therefore, the political debate can shift upon the questions " What work is used for?", "How can we measure the benefits of unemployed work?". More data on these questions are always good as this debate is far from being over. This theme may be the one where scientific conclusions can build trust in rational political decisions.

### **c. Education**

Education is a pride for a territory. Education is also a means of social ascension. Thus, it is important, in order to create economic diversity, to foster the impact of education on children. There is a large data available to support the benefits of basic income on education. It improves school results and attendance. The precise outcomes depend on the program design but it is worth investigating to build trust in results with the institutions we work with.

### **d. Health and healthcare access**

Health is one of the most important and useful metrics for taking political decisions. Being able to inform policymakers on the effects of social innovations on health is a great tool to build trust with institutions. This theme addresses moral and economic concerns. In a way, it is an ever-winning argument for basic income political conclusions. The impact of basic income on health can be easily measured quantitatively by capturing through surveys the frequency of medical consultations, the reasons for consultations, and the evolution of health problems (frequency and importance). Psychological well-being is also measured even if it is more difficult to build trustworthy data. The economic impact of psychological health is also less obvious in a political debate. Available data strongly confirms the positive effects of basic income on both physical and psychological health. People take better care of themselves when able to project themselves in the future.

## **3. Common variables of different programs**

Basic income programs can share characteristics and not share others. Rebecca Hasdel classified these characteristics that we can understand as variables to compare different experimental programs. The results of the research must be compared while sharing variables.

### **a. The first variable is *the unconditionality***

Unconditionality can not be shared by all programs, because of the laws of a country for example.

In France, "helicopter money" is not legal. Clément Cayol conducted research on the experiment of guaranteed minimal income in the city of Grande-Synthe, North, in 2019<sup>11</sup>. The mayor has built a media image by promoting the experiment as a basic income program. In reality, French law forbids distributing money without justification. Thus, the income had to be justified through social workers, and people's eligibility could be withdrawn, for example, if they found a job. In this case is closer to a negative income tax, or guaranteed minimum income<sup>12</sup>.

## **b. The second variable is *the universality***

This variable is particularly relevant to distinguish programs according to their cost of money. Places where money costs less, like rural Africa or rural India, tend to introduce programs concerning everybody in a given area. There are different approaches to watching "spillover effects", effects that do not concern the individual benefiting from the scheme itself, but rather the effect of "free work" on other people. These effects are supposedly different, or less remarkable, if the scheme selects people relative to their income, thus creating situations where are frequent interactions between recipients and non-recipients. In places where money is more expensive, eligibility is more restrictive and programs target specific people within the same population. Yet, we have not seen a program that targets richer people. The variable of universality is, inherently, the variable of the eligibility policy of the scheme. From a macro-perspective, the literature treats universality and non-universality as the primal binary choice, that separates countries depending on the expensiveness of the program.

## **4. Qualitative and quantitative research**

### **a. Community-level and individual-level outcomes**

Rebecca Hasdell states that most English-speaking data is focused on individual-level outcomes and that little research on community-level outcomes, such as spillover effects, is available. She declares:

*"A small body of evidence examines the pathways or mechanisms by which UBI programs trigger particular outcomes. There has been limited research on the impact of UBI-type programs at the community level. [...] Outcomes are not simply the result of changes to individual factors, but rather their interactions with contextual factors that operate at multiple conceptual levels—from local neighbourhoods to the broader policy environment."*<sup>13</sup>

*"There has been limited research on the impact of UBI-type programs at the community level. Research to date has focused on more proximate impacts for individuals and households. The*

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11 Cayol, Clément. " Les expérimentations de revenu(s) de base », *Multitudes*, vol. 74, no. 1, 2019, pp. 92-98.  
[http://www.ville-grande-synthe.fr/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Analyse-MSG-N1-C.Cayol\\_.pdf](http://www.ville-grande-synthe.fr/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Analyse-MSG-N1-C.Cayol_.pdf)

12 Hasdell, Op. Cit., p.14

13 Hasdell, Op. Cit., p.19

*question of what happens in a community when some or all of its members receive unconditional cash remains to be answered.*"<sup>14</sup>

## **b. Random Control Trials**

This discrepancy can be partly explained by the generalized use of Random Control Trials to measure the effects of basic income. RCT is a method that compares a population with another one when one is given something and the other, the control group, nothing. It is an experimental method that has been spread by biology and medicine. It is what social sciences have at their disposal which is the closest to experimental procedures from other sciences. It is currently promoted by the NGO GiveDirectly and International Development Specialist Dr. Esther Duflo. However, it raises questions of ethics. Some program designers are not comfortable asking people to be studied without expecting something in return<sup>15</sup>. That is why some RCTs provide smaller amounts of cash to control groups. But then, it requires a load of workforce to build data from these control groups, as it takes time and people to gather and work on the information. In the end, it is also a question of available resources and of optimization.

## **c. Quantitative and qualitative research**

Quantitative research allows us to quickly build a lot of data that is easy to communicate. On the contrary, qualitative research takes more time, requires work on restricted groups inside the population, and the data codification is slower because data must be analyzed prior to being classified. However, it allows us to understand the dynamics of basic income and community-level outcomes. Quantitative data can picture community outcomes but can not seize the dynamics between individuals. Qualitative data can detect differences in context and culture that might induce what happens with basic income. It is about questioning the assumption that individuals will take decisions based solely upon their individual needs when given money, and would therefore act the same, as long as we consider individual needs to be universal. Collecting qualitative data about contexts also challenges the premise that our needs are universal.

## **d. Conclusion on methods**

We advise building research protocols that are balanced between qualitative and quantitative data. It will answer questions, it will connect research, and synchronize it. This is important to foster the quality of the public debate on basic income. Epistemologically, building data comparable on a world scale could be a choice equal to RCT.

## **5. Hypothesis based on available data**

Taking the conclusions of Hasdell's cross-review, we can turn them into a list of hypotheses that is to be infirmed or confirmed while designing a basic income research protocol. Following are extracts from Hasdell's conclusions that can easily fit in all basic income research protocol designs.

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<sup>14</sup> Hasdell, Op. Cit., p.20

<sup>15</sup> Basic income pilot "WorkFREE", led by the team of the Madhya Pradesh's pilot, does not use RCT.

If you have to build a protocol, please consult the original version of her work for complete details and accuracy of sources.

## **a. Poverty and expenditures**

The English-speaking research *"demonstrates that unconditional cash in low-and-middle-income countries leads to a measurable decrease in poverty. [...] For persons living with disabilities, transfers are generally insufficient to move out of poverty or beyond sustenance living, but evidence for this population was limited to social assistance programs. Family earnings and profit generally remain constant after families receive cash transfers. No review reports on changes to poverty or household earnings for advanced economies. There is good evidence to demonstrate that an injection of cash increases household expenditures. Results are positive for food expenditure in all country contexts and the purchase and ownership of assets such as livestock in low-and middle-income countries. Less of an impact is observed for the purchase of productive assets/ capital such as agricultural tools."*<sup>16</sup>

## **b. Labor and employment**

*"The evidence from diverse interventions in low-, middle-, and high-income contexts indicates minimal impact on aggregate measures of labor market participation, with some studies reporting an increase in work participation. When reductions do occur, time is channeled into other valued activities such as care-giving*

*Greater differences in employment measures are observed depending on the type of intervention and between subpopulations. Decreases in work hours, for example, are observed for single mothers in means-tested programs in the United States, and for single and married women in households that received non-means-tested transfers, but other reports indicate increases in labor market participation for those that receive tax credits. [...] In low- and middle-income contexts, reductions in labor market participation are observed among the elderly, those caring for dependents, women with care responsibilities, married women with children and those in casual and occasional work. In the case of the latter group, there are positive but mixed results that individuals shift from wage labor to work that carries more financial risks, such as own agricultural work or non-agricultural household businesses."*<sup>17</sup>

## **c. Education**

*"There is considerable evidence of an impact on educational attainment across country contexts. Clear and significant impacts are well-documented for educational outcomes that would be expected in the short term, such as school enrolment and attendance, but impacts diminish over time. Fewer improvements are reported for outcomes that may require longer periods over which to observe effects, including student achievement on learning outcomes and cognitive development in low-and middle-income contexts. Some effects on test scores are observed in high-income countries, but gender-based analysis somewhat complicates this picture. Women's eligibility for cash transfer*

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16 Hasdell, Op. Cit., p.15

17 Hasdell, Op. Cit., p.16



results in increased expenditures on children's schooling, but no significant effect is observed for the children of eligible men."<sup>18</sup>

## **d. Health and healthcare access**

*"There is consistent evidence across contexts for improvements to health status and to the myriad behavioral and social factors that are linked to leading causes of premature ill-health, disability, and death. A small number of studies report on disease outcomes, with some evidence for clinically meaningful reductions in the likelihood of having any disease with sustained effects two years into the interventions and reductions in sexually transmitted infections. Positive impacts were generally observed for mental health, but some negative impacts were also observed due to social stigma and fear of benefits for persons with disabilities receiving targeted supports.*

*[...] There are mixed results for clinical measures in children, with limited impact on anthropometric measures, and some positive effects on birthweight, preterm birth, and Apgar scores. When program characteristics are taken into account, the most significant effects on birth weight in advanced economies are observed among low-income and white populations in targeted and unconditional programs, while programs that are accompanied by work conditions yielded no or mixed effects, or even negative effects when work reforms were introduced to existing social welfare programs. [...]*

*Some studies investigate impacts on social determinants of health. While the evidence for social determinants of health, such as education, income and employment, are more robust, less evidence is available for other social determinants, such as housing conditions and quality, civic participation, community resilience, and women's empowerment. The health impact on food security is generally well-reported, with positive effects on food security, food expenditure, and dietary diversity. The gender of the recipient impacts nutritional effects, with greater impacts observed for girls over boys."<sup>19</sup>*

Data invite us to suppose that people take better care of themselves as they better project themselves in the future. Being able to project oneself in the future seems to make people avoid risky behaviors.

## **Conclusion**

Available data concludes that basic income has a strong effect on reducing poverty. It drastically increases spending on food and housing, thus impacting the health of citizens who use it to improve their living conditions. It does not reduce labor, but some individuals decide to spend more time taking care of other people, relatives or not. So beyond the question of the work incentive, there is the question of how people appropriate the meaning of their work to engage in differently-valued activities. This question can be answered by creating data through qualitative research, like interviews. We have seen an increase in local businesses, but this information must be confirmed

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18 Hasdell, Op. Cit., p.16

19 Hasdell, Op. Cit., p.17

with further research on economic development. The growth of local businesses is relative to different contexts and can be measured by the number of new businesses, the evolution of their finances, the growth of their customer base, and partnerships. Investigating economic development can lead to new perspectives on community-level outcomes and can be done via balanced qualitative and quantitative research, asking questions about trust in the local economy.

Education and health are themes with a lot of positive data available to support political conclusions on basic income. Basic income increases scholar performances and attendance. This conclusion should always be included in research protocol designs as a hypothesis, to learn more about the dynamics of how basic income creates those outcomes. Basic income improves the health of the population in various ways. It improves of nutrition, especially among young girls; it allows better access to medical consultations, thus increasing prevention; it reduces risky behaviors as people can better project themselves in the future. Those conclusions should also be part of every research protocol on basic income.

Women empowerment is also an important theme on which we need more data. Differences between masculine and feminine behaviors, and relations between them, affect basic income outcomes in various ways, depending on contexts. Effects can vary from alimentation to school results and attendance, employed labor, care labor, civic activity and organization of the community, and economic development investment.

Rebecca Hasdell highlights the lack of comparison between basic income programs and non-basic income programs, to evaluate the impact level in comparison to other solutions. Right now, it seems that leading a basic income program already takes a lot of investment. Comparing it with other solutions is a great idea, especially to support political decisions. But which other solutions should we compare it to? And on which basis, which criteria? There is a high probability that the outcomes will not be comparable because of the inherent dynamics of each solution, leading to highly divergent outcomes that could not be comparable. Those are questions of high importance.

Today, Random Control Trials are considered the "golden standard" to build scientific data but it raises a lot of ethical questions. Because these experiments run on low-income countries, where programs' budgets can cover more population with less money, there is a risk that these countries become a playground for higher-income programs. Thus, every research program should be designed in agreement with local populations, their needs and visions<sup>20</sup>.

Basic income research has a long road to continue on, with surprises, and shifts of paradigms. If we consider basic income to be a natural evolution of societies, we still need to build this evolution the best way we can. Investigating on effects of basic income in various contexts should be a priority to make the most out of it. The question should not be "Does basic income work?", but "How basic income works best?" Finally, we will be able to overcome sterile representations of human nature and wrap up scientific knowledge to unfold the best humanity has to offer.

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20 Kline S. (2022), Basic Income and Local Government; A Guide to Municipal Pilots. Stanford, CA: Basic Income Lab.  
[https://basicincome.stanford.edu/uploads/basic-income-and-cities-toolkit\\_digital.pdf](https://basicincome.stanford.edu/uploads/basic-income-and-cities-toolkit_digital.pdf) (16th August 2023)



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