

**12<sup>th</sup> BIEN Congress, Dublin 20-21 June 2008:**  
**Inequality and Development in a Globalized Economy - The Basic Income Option**

Democracy, Human Rights and a Basic Income in a Global Era

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The promotion of democracy by international agencies, and especially by the Bush administration, is a prominent feature of globalization, and a great deal is heard too about human rights. At the grassroots also both democracy and human rights are the focus of many women's groups and other political movements around the world. This year is the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but, at least in academic arguments, basic income is seldom advocated in terms of democracy and human rights.<sup>1</sup>

By a basic income I mean a life-long, regular and unconditional payment to individuals that is sufficient for (what I have called) a modest but decent standard of life.

Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights reads in part “everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services”. Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which came into force in 1976, states that “the States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself

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<sup>1</sup> (Presentations and discussions during the conference indicate that, at least for human rights, this may be changing). And see Michael Goodhart, “‘None So Poor that He is Compelled to Sell Himself’; Democracy, Subsistence, and Basic Income,” in *Economic Rights*, ed. Lanse Minkler and Shareen Hertel Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions". On the face of it, a basic income – a universal program - would thus fit neatly within a human rights framework and, if democracy is government for the people, would seem easily accommodated as part of the rights of citizenship in a democracy.

However, there are two theoretical problems, that have important practical consequences, in making the connection between globalization, democracy, human rights and a basic income. First, there is the question of democracy. For centuries, democracy was regarded with hostility and only very recently has it been seen as uncontroversial, as the only legitimate way of producing a government. But what does "democracy" mean?

This is the crucial question and has more than one answer. What we might call the "official" view of democracy, the view that is currently being exported, is very narrow. It consists of two parts: free and fair elections, with the civil and political liberties required for electoral democracy and, second, the establishment of markets, organised on neoliberal lines so that there is as much privatization and deregulation as possible. I shall come back to the question of "democracy".

The second problem is about the interpretation of human rights and the widely accepted division between civil and political and economic rights (represented by the existence of two UN Covenants, one on civil and political rights and the other on economic, social and cultural rights).

Economic rights have always had a precarious and controversial place within the body of human rights. They have long been criticised - for example, a political philosopher mounted a well-known early attack while the UN Convention on Social and

Economic Rights was still under discussion <sup>2</sup> - and it is often claimed that economic rights are not real or genuine human rights. Thus, a prominent line of argument treats civil and political rights as negative rights which require only that individuals do not interfere with each others' rights. In contrast, economic rights are presented as positive; that is, someone is required to do something to implement them. In addition, the argument continues, economic rights require resources, and scarcity of resources prevents them from being universalized in the same way as proper human rights.

This is a curious argument. One obvious reply is that, if civil and political rights are to be effective, they must be institutionalised in a context of the rule of law, an efficient and impartial judicial and police system and a flourishing democratic electoral system. That is to say, these rights require public resources. Critics then sometimes respond that in the case of civil and political rights resources are a contingent not a necessary element of the rights whereas, in contrast, economic rights necessarily require material resources. But this is hardly a convincing reply. Without resources being expended, none of these human rights are meaningful; they are mere words and remain worthless to citizens. To separate human rights into two categories is not only misleading but a major obstacle to the implementation of global basic income.

The assumption that, unlike civil and political rights, economic rights are unnecessary can also be found in recent controversies over welfare in rich countries, and in debates between supporters of basic income. These arguments are not necessarily couched in terms of rights, but implicitly economic rights are contested. Supporters of the transformation of welfare into workfare (part of neo-liberal policies) advocate targeted

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<sup>2</sup> Maurice Cranston, 'Human Rights, Real and Supposed', in D.D. Raphael, Political Theory and the Rights of Man, London, Macmillan, 1967.

not universal programmes and maintain that the poor must only be supplied with cash benefits from the public purse if they provide something in return, usually wage labor. Similarly, among some supporters of a basic income, apprehension about idleness and free riding by male workers has led to rejection of an unconditional basic income, of what is seen as “something for nothing”.

The assumption that there is no human right to an adequate standard of living, and thus no right to an unconditional basic income, fits very well with the neo-liberal part of the official view of democracy. I have been critical of such a conception of democracy for very many years, but there are now two new elements. First, privatization has closed off many potential avenues of public accountability and citizen participation; second, neoliberal economic doctrines have led to a rapid increase in social inequality and economic insecurity, both within and between countries.

However, an alternative view of democracy is available; this emphasizes citizen participation and self-government, including individual freedom, in all areas of social and political life. It is a conception of democracy as democratization; that is, the creation of a more democratic society in which all citizens enjoy equal standing as members of the polity and enjoy citizenship of equal worth. A necessary condition of democratization is that all citizens must have the material resources that make their rights meaningful.

Civil and political rights are conventionally presented as crucial for the preservation of individual freedom. Their importance can hardly be underestimated at a time of the so-called war on terror when even the right not to be tortured has to be defended. But what of the life and liberty of the 2.5 billion people who live on less than \$2 a day and receive only 5% of global income? What is the worth of civil and political

rights and all the talk of democracy and freedom if you spend your life in extreme poverty or destitution, toil endlessly and are continually malnourished and in poor health? The poorest people are pushed to the margins of their societies, they lack access to basic amenities and services, and their civil and political rights are frequently disregarded and violated.

In other words, when the right to the means for a decent life is lacking, other rights are more easily infringed. As Henry Shue has argued, fundamental human rights are interdependent and when one is insecure the others are too.<sup>3</sup> Without a certain level of economic resources, an individual's freedom, civil and political rights and ability to be a participating citizen are never guaranteed. This is why it is misleading to classify the right to a basic income as an economic right; it is just as much a democratic or political right.

The vote is the political right that is now taken for granted; universal suffrage is central to the official view of democracy. Universal suffrage is democratic because the vote is a right of all adults, a right that everyone can exercise when they reached the required age (or have become naturalised). That is to say, a vote is no longer a privilege. But a dignified standard of life is not a right; it remains a privilege. Yet basic income can be compared to the suffrage as a fundamental democratic right. Like the suffrage, a basic income provides the security that is necessary to maintain the equal political standing of citizens and, just as the suffrage enhances collective self-government, so a basic income – set at the appropriate level - enhances individual self-government or freedom.

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<sup>3</sup> Henry Shue, Basic Rights: Subsistence, Affluence, and US Foreign Policy, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1996

It provides individuals with a modicum of control over their lives, enlarges their opportunities and gives the economic security that allows them to participate in all areas of social and political life to the extent that they wish. In addition to its material value, a basic income provides a symbolic affirmation of the equal worth of all citizens; it proclaims that everyone is owed the respect signified by a decent living standard.

This is a global argument, an argument about a universal human right. The wealth of rich countries is such that, as supporters of basic income from across the political spectrum have made clear, the introduction of the policy is a real possibility. A basic income is simple, relatively cheap to administer and would replace many programmes that currently involve poverty, employment and other traps, intrusion into individual's lives and very complex bureaucracies. But surely, most people would object, it is impossible for poor countries to provide such a benefit to their citizens.

Of course, the level of a basic income would have to vary to be compatible with each country's conditions, but the introduction of a global basic income could be aided by use of measures such as a Tobin tax to underwrite a global fund for the purpose, the development of public capital holdings and social funds.<sup>4</sup>

And it must not be forgotten that poor countries are not necessarily poor in themselves. Often they have many natural resources -- they have sustained the rich countries since the early modern period and the beginning of colonialism -- but their riches are frequently monopolised and plundered by corrupt and predatory rulers, elites and militaries. In addition, neoliberalism and globalization have increased the ease with

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<sup>4</sup> E.g., the Alaska Permanent Fund, sovereign wealth funds could be used for the purpose or measures like the Swedish Rehn-Meidner plan - in which a certain percentage of company shares are put into a social fund - could be revived.

which the global North continues to engage in its own forms of plunder. They also have a multitude of human resources; the citizens of poor countries are energetic, inventive and entrepreneurial – but they lack the freedom, security and opportunities provided by a basic income.

Democratization in both the global North and South is likely to be a long and hard process but the introduction of a universal basic income is a necessary first step in bringing government and economies into the service of citizens. It is not a panacea and nor would it necessarily replace all existing welfare programs. Public provision would still be required, not least of educational and medical facilities and affordable housing. But a basic income would be a major advance in another fundamental element of democratization; the enhancement of women's freedom and citizenship.

The Universal Declaration and the International Covenant that I quoted at the beginning of my address both referred to an individual's standard of living in terms of "himself and his family". Women have disappeared as individual citizens in their own right. This wording reflects the fact that (still today), whether or not men enjoy the privilege of a decent standard of life, they all participate in the privilege and power that follows from the mere fact of being a man. Women's lesser citizenship is still ubiquitous. Democracy and human rights are still, to a large extent, a masculine preserve. Women's citizenship is not worth the same as men's; they earn and own less - women form the majority of the global poor - men monopolize the authoritative positions in society and women's human rights, especially their right to bodily integrity, continue to be violated with impunity around the world.

In 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft argued that women's rights and citizenship could not be secured unless every woman, whether married or single, enjoyed economic independence.<sup>5</sup> An unconditional basic income, set at a modest but decent subsistence level, would provide women with that independence for the first time in history, and thus be a major step forward to their full social and political participation and full citizenship. If globalization is not to continue to entrench the privilege of the rich at the expense of the poor and the privilege of men at the expense of women, if all the talk of democracy is to be more than empty words, then the material and symbolic support offered by a basic income for everyone around the world is a necessary first step.

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<sup>5</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 1792 (various modern editions).