

POLICY DETAILS AS A PLEA FOR BASIC INCOME EXPERIMENTS

Bru Loín

Amy Castro and Stacia West (2022), with whom I have had the opportunity to exchange ideas on these pages, defend the need to continue experimenting with cash transfer policies through new experiments or pilot projects such as the Stockton Economic Empowerment Demonstration (SEED) that they personally helped to design and evaluate. I agree with them. As I argued in my first contribution to this debate, I sincerely believe that experiments on unconditional income schemes can provide very useful and valuable information in moving towards the full establishment of an unconditional basic income (UBI). In this regard, we should welcome the recent creation of the Center for Guaranteed Income Research at the University of Pennsylvania, which will surely contribute to the systematization of study and the accumulation of a scientific corpus on income policies in general, and on UBI in particular.

Castro and West defend the appropriateness of continuing to experiment with unconditional cash transfer policies, i.e., UBI, for two reasons. On the one hand, and despite the large number of experiments carried out so far, they argue that we still need to gather more empirical evidence on the possible effects of UBI on individuals, especially on those who are more vulnerable and more likely to be marginalized. The scientific literature, they argue, has not provided conclusive answers as to what measurable effects UBI could have on people, what amount would be most appropriate, or what the frequency of payments should be, for example. On the other hand, they defend the need to continue experimenting to determine the best strategy for implementing a UBI at the national level, given the particularities of each political and institutional system. Their laudable aim is to ensure that an eventual UBI does not repeat or perpetuate the mistakes associated with the design and implementation of traditional policies that, although well-intentioned in most cases, have relied on narratives and conceptual frameworks that feed and legitimize stereotypes, the singling out and the stigmatization of the most vulnerable and historically excluded people and groups.

To illustrate this characteristic (and even constitutive) feature of our welfare states, they give as an example of the way in which the housing policies implemented during the New Deal era, or the stimulus package implemented in the U.S. to mitigate the economic consequences of COVID-19, have carried over these same errors and biases both in their design and in their implementation, and have therefore ended up exacerbating certain racial and economic inequalities. Paradoxically, they point out, even the SEED program itself has been marred to some extent by these same gaps and pitfalls, both in its design and its implementation. Despite its good intentions, this program could not prevent some of its potential beneficiaries from refusing to participate for fear of losing other benefits or public aid to which they were already entitled, or to avoid having to interact with a public administration

with which they have never had a good relationship and that they have always distrusted. Indeed, as they note paraphrasing Bidadanure (2019), “the devil is in the details of the UBI implementation.”

I agree with this analysis, although their doubts regarding the possible effects or individual impacts of the UBI should be qualified in light of the empirical evidence accumulated by the numerous experiments carried out so far in very different economic, social, cultural, and historical contexts. I believe that we have already collected enough data and information to infer that the unconditionality and individuality associated with UBI generally lead to positive individual results, for example, regarding subjective well-being, health, happiness, food, reduced stress and debt, increased interpersonal and institutional trust, and community participation, to name just a few indicators (Laín, 2021). On the other hand, if they are concerned about questions as to the amount of UBI or the frequency of payments, it should be noted that the scientific literature offers strong arguments to answer these questions. For example, regarding the amount, several authors have argued that it should be set, as a general rule, near the poverty threshold established in each country (Arcarons, Raventós, & Torrens, 2014) or, more generally, that it should be “high enough” to secure a decent life (Torry, 2019, pp. 23–24).¹ As for the frequency of payments, there are powerful reasons put forward by Philippe Van Parijs or Carole Pateman, for example, that recommend a regular monthly payment as opposed to a one-off payment or the idea of the “basic grant” defended by Bruce Ackerman or Anne Alstott, among others (Olin Wright, 2006). Thus, although there may always be questions worth discussing along these lines, I believe that, by themselves, they do not justify the need to continue carrying out UBI experiments.

While continuing to conduct UBI experiments would not be justified by the need to obtain more empirical evidence in relation to these first questions, I do believe, as Castro and West defend in their second argument, that it is justified by the need to find the best strategy for implementing UBI on a large scale. There is no shortcut or panacea, nor a single magical policy able to solve all the social, economic, or gender problems plaguing our societies by itself at a single stroke. This includes UBI, however universal and unconditional it may be. The key, again, lies in the details. On the theoretical and analytical level of debate, for example, Simon Birnbaum and Jurgen De Wispelaere (2021) have argued that the “power to say no” (Casassas, 2018; Widerquist, 2013) that we usually associate with UBI, and that should allow recipients to take a stand against contractual relationships that they consider degrading or unacceptable, must be upheld with caution and always with careful consideration paid to the starting or the background position from which each of these recipients declare this “no.” Also, some authors and commentators from various feminist perspectives have also suggested that the unconditionality of UBI could discourage some women from entering the labor market. This would perpetuate their subordinate position in the public sphere in favor of the greater visibility and power of their partners and of men in general (Baker, 2008; Federici, 2012; Miller, Yamamori, & Zelleke, 2019).

At the most empirical level, the rationale of some unconditional policies similar to UBI, as in the case of the subsidies launched in Iran in 2010, for example, shows that the design of any economic benefit is always highly sensitive to issues that have

¹ The general assembly of the Basic Income Earth Network (BIEN) held in Seoul in 2016 discussed this reference to a “high enough” amount. Although there is no specific criterion shared by all the organizations affiliated to the BIEN, it is understood that this minimum amount, along with regularity, individuality, universality, and unconditionality, is one of the key features of the definition of universal basic income. The resolution of this debate is available at <https://basicincome.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Basic-Income-definition-longer-explanation-1.pdf>.

to do with structural relations of power and domination. In the Iranian case, the beneficiary of the allowance was by de facto the head of the household, which in that country, as in most, continues to mean the man. Thus, as Castro and West criticize, the design of a well-intentioned social policy can lead to questionable or even negative results from the perspective of gender equality. Obviously, none of these three examples, nor the low take-up rates recorded for the SEED project, call into question the potential factual virtues of a UBI or challenge its normative desirability. Rather, they call attention to how the eventual design and implementation of such a policy must always consider the details, so its emancipatory potential does not become a perpetuation or reinforcement of the ideological biases and the administrative errors carried over from more conservative traditional conditional policies.

Other UBI experiments, such as the B-MINCOME project in Barcelona, Spain, which I had the opportunity to take part in, considered some of these “details” and tried to deal with them from the outset. Thus, for example, we were aware that, although the conditions of participation were quite lax (basically, the requirements were to live in one of the participating neighborhoods for at least one year prior to the experiment, to have a low income, and to be or have been a user of the municipal social services), there would be a contingent of potential beneficiaries who, for some reason, would not apply to participate. To mitigate these foreseeable low take-up rates, letters were sent to the 4,824 people who made up the target population. These letters included the detailed information about the project in three different languages, along with the application form that they could fill out and send back to the city council for free. In addition, 2,383 of these candidates were successfully contacted by telephone to briefly explain the project again.

Anticipating that this would not be enough, the letters and phone calls also included an invitation to attend one of the 400 information sessions held in the candidates’ neighborhoods. These sessions were attended by 2,203 people, 92.5 percent of those who had been contacted by phone, or 45.7 percent of the total number of candidates. Finally, a total of 2,525 applications were received: 2,039 (92.4 percent) were delivered in person during the briefings, and only 486 (19.2 percent) were sent by post. Thus, as we demonstrated (Lain & Julià, 2018), the fact of attending the information sessions had a determining effect on the take-up rate: 92.3 percent of the attending candidates completed and handed in their application forms for participation. Likewise, it should also be noted that from the beginning of the project, about 250 candidates were identified as having a postal address that was unknown, who were nomadic people, or who were suffering in situations of such vulnerability that they had been rendered “invisible” to the system. Despite meeting all the eligibility requirements, these people would never have been aware of the pilot—and therefore would never have signed up—were it not for the intense effort made by the team of social workers assigned to the project who exhaustively localized and informed most of these “invisible” potential participants. Thus, a population that is usually “non-existent” to public administration was able to participate in a project that undoubtedly would be beneficial to them economically and relationally for 24 months.

In most similar projects or experiments, the existence of the project is simply advertised, and potential participants are informed that they can sign up to participate. What the experience of Barcelona showed is that such an information strategy is highly inadequate, especially when the program or policy in question has the most excluded and vulnerable groups as its target population. This supports the criticism made by Castro and West when they emphasize that many social policies are designed under conceptual frameworks based on negative stereotypes and the stigmatization of the most vulnerable population—which, in the Spanish case, mostly applies to the gypsy, Roman, and nomadic population. This ultimately causes the details of the design and implementation of these policies to reinforce

the dynamics of exclusion and stigmatization, and thus perpetuating many forms of discrimination and inequality. The phenomenon of low take-up rates is an example of this since, as a general rule, those who apply the least often for benefits or social policies are paradoxically the groups that are most vulnerable and excluded from these very circuits and programs of social protection. Again, the case of non-take-up or the compatibility with other public benefits should not seem to affect UBI due to its unconditional and universal nature. Although this may initially appear to be the case, the problem is that we do not have the empirical evidence to show that UBI would circumvent all these (or other similar) problems. In fact, we must be very cautious, because the examples of Stockton, Barcelona or Iran warn that there are always fundamental “details” that can raise questions not only about the viability of social policies but, above all, about their ethical and moral implications.

These “details” should concern us because we know that being excluded from a benefit that one is entitled to is not so much a result of rational, individual decisions as it is the obstacles that are created by the very functioning of public administrations and the communications strategies they employ. It is morally uncontroversial for a person in a vulnerable situation to decide not to apply for a benefit. But that they do ultimately not apply for it because they have been inadequately informed, because they do not understand the application form, because this form can only be obtained from an office at a certain time, or because they lack the language or digital skills needed to fill out the paperwork online, is an unacceptable fact that challenges us and should make us reflect on what kind of society we live and desire to live in. We can focus our attention on the profile of some particular groups and continue to ask ourselves why they do not apply for a benefit that “we have so carefully designed for them,” but I believe it is more efficient, more effective, and above all more honest, to devote this attention to analyzing how our welfare states, our social policies, and our public institutions work. UBI experiments provide us with an incomparable opportunity to carry out this exercise of collective reflection. Let us not squander it.

BRU LAÍN is an Affiliate Professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Barcelona, Faculty of Economics and Business, Av. Diagonal 690, 08034, Barcelona, Spain and Adviser to the Office of the Catalan Basic Income Pilot Schema (e-mail: bru.lain@ub.edu).

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