

European Green Perspectives on Basic Income

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The Unconditional Autonomy Allowance: a tool for democratic and convivial degrowth

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In France, 2002, the provocative slogan ‘*Décroissance*’ – meaning ‘degrowth’ – was launched. Later translated into other languages, degrowth became a set of thoughts and a mindset related to questioning not only the physical limits to growth but also the cultural limits³⁴. Degrowth became a movement and a platform for fruitful open debates, activism, and experimentations. Since its beginning, Unconditional Basic Income (UBI) has been debated within degrowth networks³⁵. However, the question of UBI in the degrowth movement has not been discussed in the simple ‘in favour of’ or ‘against’ fashion. Such binary approaches often lead to sterile and narrow-minded debates. Instead, the question has rather been whether UBI would be meaningful and useful from a degrowth perspective. Like any other tool, the key question is under which conditions and within what kind of framework would UBI make sense? UBI was soon adopted by a large part of the degrowth networks, with criticism and caution, and associated with other economic and social tools and framework, such as *gratuités* (free access for basic goods)³⁶, Universal Basic Services (UBS)³⁷, local/complementary currency, and reciprocity or maximum income. Thus, in France emerged the idea of Unconditional Autonomy Allowance (UAA) as a central democratic and transition tool for a degrowth project³⁸. This proposal reflects the key principles on which degrowth has been constructed:

radical criticisms to development and capitalism³⁹ or how to re-embed the economy⁴⁰, eco-feminism, frugal abundance, conviviality and autonomy⁴¹, and open re-localisation⁴².

Democracy requires serenity and trust

The degrowth movement opened the debate on basic income, first as a tool for re-politicization and for autonomy. “Without minimum resources, the new citizen cannot completely assume the republican principles of freedom, equality and fraternity,” said Thomas Payne in 1792 at the French National Assembly. Thus, the primary aim of basic income relates to the individual empowerment to freely decide whether to participate in the imposed productivist and consumerist society. In addition, UBI would recreate a feeling of serenity and trust in a society dominated by economic fears; in particular, the fear of unemployment.

In parallel, driven by the same principle about autonomy and democracy, other economic tools enable the recreation of solidarity and trust in society, such as local and complementary non-speculative currencies and non-monetary local exchange systems. Such local systems aim to create and sustain social interactions, acts of solidarity, and mutual assistance. These interactions

“In short, from a degrowth perspective, UBI should be implemented as a tool to reinforce democracy by reconnecting people by creating solidarities and by questioning basic needs and how to fulfil them in a sustainable way.”

34 Vincent Liegey and Anitra Nelson, *Exploring Degrowth: A Critical Guide*, Pluto Press, September 2020.

35 Hugo Carton, *Le revenu d'existence, Pour des sociétés libres et égalitaires*, Institut Momentum, October 2013 (find here the translation into English: <http://www.projet-decroissance.net/?p=1640>).

36 Paul Ariés, *Gratuité versus capitalisme*, Editions Larousse, September 2018.

37 <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/oureconomy/why-universal-basic-services-is-no-alternative-to-basic-income/>

38 Vincent Liegey et al., *Un projet de Décroissance, Manifeste Pour Une Dotation Inconditionnelle d'Autonomie*, Editions Utopia, Janvier 2013.

39 Vincent Liegey, *Convivial Degrowth or Barbarity?*, in *Degrowth and Progress*, L'Internationale Online, February 2021, https://www.internationaleonline.org/research/politics_of_life_and_death/156_convivial_degrowth_or_barbarity/

40 Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, Farrar & Rinehart, 1944.

41 Anitra Nelson and Vincent Liegey, *Four Principles of Degrowth And why they matter*, September 2020, <https://www.pluto-books.com/blog/the-four-principles-of-degrowth/>

42 Vincent Liegey et al., *Neither protectionism nor neoliberalism but “open relocalisation”, the basis for a new International*, Bastamag, November 2015, <https://www.bastamag.net/Neither-protectionism-nor-neoliberalism-but-open-relocalization-the-basis-for-a>



might further create altruism and trust, essential for a fruitful and good democratic life. Sustainable and thus meaningful production of food and services are beneficial for creating more resilience and solidarity.

Last but not least, I would also like to comment on some common Left-wing criticism against UBI approaches, adding Universal Basic Services (UBS) and the notion of *gratuités* (free access for basic goods) to the picture. UBS in the form of a free health system, health insurance, education, public transport, and funeral services should be preserved. But it is also an opportunity to rethink them from a degrowth perspective: to question their meaning and organisation and to reform them in a way that only some parts would be incorporated into a new and better system; whereas others would be discarded. For example, a free health system should first be based on healthy life and acts of prevention, without for instance, junk food or stress, but with more care and lower overall health care expenses. A similar approach aiming at public deliberation is a core concept of *gratuités*: why should the same price be applied for one litre of water used for drinking, washing ourselves, or cooking; and one litre of water used for constructing an electronic chip, cleaning a car, or filling a private swimming pool? *Gratuités* is an invitation to question our habits, our basic needs and what should be protected and provided to all for free or for a very low price. On the other hand, it democratically questions misuse and proposes to exponentially increase the price above a certain level of consumption. Within the framework of *gratuités*, the space to rethink the production and distribution of basic goods and services is opened up, for example, with regards to water, food, energy, and square meters for decent accommodation or for meaningful activities. Like UBS, local currencies or exchange systems, through the *gratuités* framework, we question our basic needs and how to fulfil them in sustainable, fair and convivial ways. In this way, *gratuités* offers the opportunity to experiment with democratic governance of the commons.

In short, from a degrowth perspective, UBI should be implemented as a tool to reinforce democracy by reconnecting people by creating solidarities and by questioning basic needs and how to fulfil them in a sustainable way.

Degrowth in inequalities

One of the main goals of the degrowth movement is to address inequality⁴³. UBI has become one of our main techniques to not let anybody slip under a decent level of a good livelihood. But the agenda of the degrowth movement does not only focus on minimal and decent subsistence level (through UBI) but is equally proposing a maximum acceptable income to set an upper limit to the income distribution. However, for a fruitful discussion on basic income and maximum acceptable income to happen, a lot of work might be needed to re-establish a sense of upper and lower income limits on a societal level. But as wealth inequalities do not mainly depend on varying income levels – but are strongly associated with inheritance and especially ownership of land and real estate⁴⁴ – such a debate immediately touches on the questions of fair distribution of land and real estate and of tax evasion and optimization. To question maximum income and limits also means to re-evaluate subjective well-being and inclusive democracy. As those at the upper end of income distribution also consume the most natural resources (and thus have the largest CO2 footprint), the way of life of the wealthiest cannot be sustainable and is thus not desirable; it also creates ostentatious rivalry and frustration, exploited and intensified by mainstream media and advertisements. Serene democracy can hardly rest on large inequalities as the gap between the interests of the wealthiest and the poorest are so large that they are mostly incompatible.

To question inequalities from a degrowth perspective means to question the imaginary institution of society⁴⁵ and how narratives can create domination⁴⁶. Accordingly, the degrowth movement investigates and questions the role of the media in general and of commercial marketing strategies in particular as these industries tend to be not only influenced but governed more and more by very few oligarchs⁴⁷. Along the same lines, political debates are most strongly influenced by technological innovation and growth. As large infrastructure projects, such as new military and industrial complexes, airports, or roads, have a large impact on society, the underlying decision-making process needs to allow more democratic participation. Similarly, main investment decisions regarding research and development need to allow interference of those who are not already in (financial) power. The future of, for example, genetically

modified organisms, trans-humanism, autonomous cars or 5G telecommunications networks cannot be shaped almost exclusively by a lobbying industry of big pharma and big tech, but rather needs to reflect the interest of those most concerned: the general public. Instead of purely focussing on technological innovation and growth, the societal discourse should be guided by non-violent communication, care, conviviality, the commons, permaculture, and low-tech. The degrowth movement is not only about embracing and enforcing limits (i.e., in the form of basic income on one end of the income distribution and maximum acceptable income at the other end) and redistribution, but also about democratic participation questioning technology-focused progress, and about our basic needs and desires as human beings. A UBI with a strong degrowth flavour could only be implemented in a society that enables and performs a lively discussion on limits on income and more generally on wealth distributions, thus taking up a radical stance on re-evaluating nothing less than what is important to create good living conditions for all. Or, to make it short: what does really matter?

Re-embed the economy into society

Degrowth is an invitation to free ourselves from an almost exclusively economic mindset. As Mark Twain once said, “If your only tool is a hammer then every problem looks like a nail”. Our hammer is an economic one and when discussing UBI, one understandably – and, in some cases, even rightfully – faces economic questions, such as how much it costs, where this money comes from, and how to deal with risk of inflation. As much as these issues have to be addressed, the degrowth movement offers a perspective on UBI that first puts the economic view back on its feet, such that the economy is a sustainable system in the interest of the people, not vice versa. The degrowth movement invites one to question debts⁴⁸, the creation of money, and the role of central banks, and finally the financialization of the economy. In this light, UBI should be an opportunity to de-commodify what really matters: well-being, sustainability and a meaningful life. Pursuing these goals must not be left to some “invisible hand” seemingly optimally” guiding world markets of goods and services. Democracy at its core means to recall the supremacy of politics over business interests as a guiding principle for all major societal decisions. That is why public and transparent audits of public and private debts are nec-

essary. In parallel, the governance structure of central banks and the associated creation of money need to be overhauled to reflect democratic values again. In addition, democratic re-appropriation and control of banking systems should be implemented to eradicate a potential financialisation which could become out of control and again may expose our economies to another financial and banking crisis.

In 2018 and 2019, French President Emanuel Macron demonstrated how difficult it is to introduce taxes on natural resources without appropriate social compensation. Those most affected by his increase of a carbon tax formed the ‘Gilet Jaunes’ – or ‘Yellow Vests’ – movement and protested over multiple months. To give the people a direct say in how to achieve a reduction of greenhouse gas emissions “in the spirit of social justice”, President Macron accepted the proposal to initiate a citizen’s convention on climate.⁴⁹ To explore all the aforementioned issues regarding the dominance of economic thought in basic democratic and societal questions, a citizen’s convention, such as the one for the climate in France⁵⁰, would be very promising. Such a fundamental debate about UBI might prevent this topic from falling prey to purely economically motivated speculations about the effects of inflation or to a neoliberal agenda capitalising on the option of increased consumption through an overall increase in cash-flow from UBI.

Towards an Unconditional Autonomy Allowance (UAA)

All of these questions, principles, ideas, and proposals, including UBI, have been articulated together and created the notion of Unconditional Autonomy Allowance (UAA). The principle is the same as for UBI: to provide, individually, unconditionally, for all, from birth to death, what is democratically considered as enough to have a decent quality of life. UAA is necessarily associated with a maximum income and a partially demonetised or de-commodified economy: some basic goods and services could be given through *gratuités* and local and/or complementary currencies or exchange systems. A part could also be given in national/supranational currencies.

UAA is an economic and social tool-box enabled to re-embed the economy in a sustainable and people-centric way in society. UAA intends to re-define

43 Anitra Nelson and Vincent Liegey, Coronavirus and Degrowth, *The Ecologist*, April 2020, <https://theecologist.org/2020/apr/03/coronavirus-and-degrowth>

44 Piketty T., *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, Harvard University Press, 2014.

45 Cornelius Castoriadis, *The imaginary institution of society*, MIT Press, January 1998.

46 Liegey et al., A Maximum Acceptable Income: beyond the symbolic limits, *Moins!*, September 2012, <http://www.projet-decroissance.net/?p=1154>

47 See, for example, the French media ownership: <https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/cartes/PPA>

48 David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*, Melville House, 2011.

49 The results of the discussion among 150 randomly selected people representing the population of France are unfortunately not legally binding to the president’s decisions, but he promised they would be carefully considered and would influence his later ruling.

50 <https://www.conventioncitoyennepourleclimat.fr/en/>

local, national and international production processes and limits to consumption in a democratic way in order to evaluate our basic needs and how to meet them. So, UAA is an invitation to free ourselves from a predominantly economic mindset preventing serene and democratic transitions but enabling sustainable and desirable models of society based on degrowth principles.

Concrete steps towards UAA

Based on cultural changes – which are already underway – a grass-roots transformation of society, always with more creation and extensions of local citizen initiatives, UAA could be gradually implemented. This could, for example, reform local food production systems which could be created based on a local currency. However, this approach faces two main challenges. First: it might not be able to keep up with the pace at which our society is headed towards a climate disaster and associated social challenges. Second: if the movement was only loosely connected with other political and activist movements questioning the current economic system, it runs the risk of attacks from market regulations favouring a neoliberal agenda.

For as many people as possible to get involved in initiatives in the spirit of the UAA, a first step of voluntarily sharing work hours could be implemented. This approach would follow the messaging of, ‘Work less to have work for all! Work less to consume less but better! And use your free time for useful activities like care.’

Still based on cultural transformations and developments of such local initiatives, facilitated by the share of the work hours, a sufficient UBI could be implemented. It could be associated with the implementation of a maximum income and the re-embedding of the economy through debt audits and debates for another type of governance structure of central banks, money creation and the banking sector. Step by step, in a decentralized and re-localized way, UBI could eventually be de-monetarised. For example, where a local currency has been implemented for sustainable organic local

food production, the part of UBI dedicated for food would be substituted by the local currency. Where free access for basic goods based on gratuités principles has been implemented, the part of UBI dedicated for those goods would be substituted by that free access. And, in this way, through public deliberation, basic needs and the fulfilment for all in sustainable and fair way would be implemented.

UAA has been inspired by UBI and its principles of autonomy and direct demand and decent conditions of life for all. UAA also questions the central role paid work – as opposed to unpaid – plays in this debate. In combination with other tools like gratuités, unconditional basic services, local currencies and exchange systems or maximum accepted income, UAA offers a public discourse platform for a more direct democracy, re-defining basic needs and how to implement a serene transition toward a sustainable, fair and convivial future. The experience of the Citizen’s Convention for Climate in France is a large-scale example of how deliberation could be implemented. Initially, the violently repressed Yellow Vests Movement emerged to fight against the introduction of a carbon tax, rendering the lives of millions of people in France very difficult. The citizen’s convention enabled long controversies and a respectful dialogue that resulted in a much deeper understanding of the global environmental challenges by 150 individuals representing the French population in all its diversity. Additionally, the convention took a large step towards fighting against climate change while also considering social and environmental justice. UAA proposes to follow such logic, with creativity and audacity, to collectively decide to reach sustainable and convivial societies of frugal abundance. Facing the collapse of the thermo-industrial civilisation, addicted to growth, the choice is between democratically chosen degrowth through UAA or a violent recession caused by the growth paradigm. UBI, within the UAA framework, could offer important emancipating dynamics for such democratic pathways, bringing forward questioning in a decentralised and re-localised capacity, but also in solidarity.⁵¹

51 Find more about UAA and its implementation steps on Exploring Degrowth: A Critical Guide (Pluto Press, 2020): <http://www.projet-decroissance.net/?p=2745>

The Ecological Euro-dividend: a step towards basic income in Europe

Ulrich Schachtschneider

In the public debate of the last three decades, a basic income has mainly been justified as a means to fight poverty, as an anti-bureaucracy measure for a liberal welfare state, as an incentive for economic creativity, as an enabling and empowering environment for political participation, an instrument to free labour, and as an answer to digitalisation. Only in the last few years have new arguments stressing the relationship between basic income and the large socio-ecological transition we are facing been brought forward. Similarly, the discussion about financing a basic income only recently started to revolve around ecological aspects. Many models rely on a value added tax, income tax, capital or inheritance tax, but it is not often heard that a basic income should be financed by eco-taxes.

In this article, I will argue that a basic income – if financed, to a large degree, by eco-taxes – is a very important tool for successfully performing the socio-ecological transition. I will conclude by outlining two initial steps in this direction: the Ecological Euro-dividend and the European Transition Income.

Some ecologists and degrowth proponents are afraid of an anti-ecological effect of basic income: with enlarged mass purchasing power, especially of the less wealthy, additional environmentally damaging goods could be bought and produced. Of course, this is, admittedly, not an implausible scenario. The overall effect of a basic income on the perceptions of what constitutes a “good life” cannot be predicted. If, however, with the introduction of a basic income, we would strongly increase eco-taxes –thus, creating revenues from activities polluting the environment –we would avoid such harmful effects and support an ecological transition. I suggest to call a basic income, financed in this ecological way, an “Ecological Basic Income”^{52, 53}.

But isn’t financing a basic income through an increase of eco-taxes unjust for the poor? Those with low income, don’t they suffer most under higher costs for energy, transport and other basic living expenditures? Well, the exact opposite is the case: those with a higher income consume more resources.⁵⁴ This is why someone with a high income – on average – pays higher taxes, while they receive the same basic income as anybody else and is considered a “net-contributor”. Those with lower income and those with many children are the beneficiaries as they – on average – pay lower (eco-) taxes and obtain basic income for each child separately. It is the same as with other types of taxes on income, heritage, wealth, or capital paid back as basic income: the wealthiest third or fourth will be the net-contributors. Basic income would not be financed by the middle class, as some critics say.

The redistribution of all revenues obtained through an eco-tax paid (in other words, an “Ecological Basic Income”) may lead us out of the dilemma of economic instruments used for environmental policies without social compensation: if the CO2 price is too small, it will not impact the consumer choices; if it’s too high, the sharp rise in basic goods and services becomes socially unacceptable. The Yellow Vests movement as a reaction towards the increase of CO2 taxes in France demonstrated this relationship very dramatically. In the case of Ecological Basic Income, the opposite holds true: the higher the eco-tax rate, the larger the redistribution impact also reaching those with a low- or middle- income.

But some critics might argue that if an increased eco-tax effectively reduces usage of natural resources, it will undermine the funds available for Basic Income. That is true, but for this “problem”, there is a simple solution. If the desired behavioural change is achieved (overall consumption of natural resources decreases), the overall amount of revenue provided by eco-taxes could be

52 First published in: Ecological Basic Income: An Entry is Possible. A Contribution to the BIEN Congress Munich 2012 http://www.bien2012.de/sites/default/files/paper_212_en.pdf

53 More details in: Schachtschneider, U. 2014: Freiheit, Gleichheit, Gelassenheit. Mit dem ökologischen Grundeinkommen aus der Wachstumsfalle. München.

54 Compare e.g.: Ivanova et al. 2017: Mapping the carbon footprint of EU regions, Environmental Research Letters 12 <https://iopscience.iop.org/article/10.1088/1748-9326/aa6da9>, (13.09.2020)
Ivanova, D. / Wood, R. 2020: The unequal distribution of household carbon foot-prints in Europe and its link to sustainability. In: Global sustainability 3, e18, 1-12