



Commentary

An unconditional basic income is necessary but insufficient to transition towards just food futures

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Abstract

In food systems scholarship, the case for basic income to reduce food insecurity is well-established. Less well-appreciated is the potential for basic income to support young farmers, improve rural vitality, promote gender equality and racial justice in agriculture, and assist farmers in building resilience in the face of climate chaos and other overlapping crises. In and of itself, basic income cannot transform the food system. However, by guaranteeing an income floor and thus freedom from necessity, it could be a potent tool in radical, democratic struggles against systems of oppression and towards justice—in the food system and beyond.

Keywords: Basic income; just food futures; rural vitality; food system justice; family farmers

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Introduction

COVID-19 has shone a harsh light on injustices in the food system, from increased rates of food insecurity to the rapid spread of the virus in unhealthy spaces where food system workers live and toil. COVID has reminded us that essential workers in the food system tend disproportionately to be women, to come from racialized communities, or to be poorly paid, often in precarious employment without crucial benefits, like paid sick time. Similarly, COVID has made visible women's normally hidden and unequal burden of unpaid work in the home, including food work.

We argue that an unconditional basic income (BI), set at a level to cover basic costs of living, is necessary—but insufficient—to move towards justice in the food system. It would provide an income floor beneath which food producers, workers, and eaters would not fall, allowing us to meet basic needs and make better, freer choices about how we live, what we eat, and how our food is produced, processed, and distributed. Aric has come to this position from his experiences as a National Farmers Union organizer, a farmer on an organic family farm, an author on social movement strategy, and a direct-action campaign organizer. Elaine became a BI advocate after years of research on food insecurity and poverty; her new co-authored book details the transformative effects of the Ontario Basic Income Pilot for participants (Swift & Power, 2021).

Following Marxist feminist Kathi Weeks (2020), we propose that BI be understood as a tool in the struggle for just food futures, not as an end in itself, but as a mechanism to support “survival pending revolution” and an expression of solidarity with those most marginalized in the food system (see Poppendieck, 2022, this issue). Having a stable income adequate to meet basic needs promotes the freedom required for those most marginalized in the food system to participate in food production (see Kerr et al., 2022, this issue) and in the grassroots struggle for the right to food envisioned by Tung, Rose-Redwood, and Cloutier (2022, this issue).

What is basic income?

There is no single model of basic income. There are many varieties—liberal, libertarian, neoliberal, techno-futurist, and socialist—and two main genealogies (Weeks, 2020). One genealogy is progressive, rooted in the 1970s Wages for Housework movement, the Black Panther Party, and the civil rights movement, among others (Weeks, 2020). Another lineage is right wing, libertarian, neoliberal, and pro-austerity; supported by Milton Friedman and Charles Murray, this tradition would use BI to shrink government and dismantle what remains of the welfare state. In Canada, there is a third model, a “mixed welfare” BI that closely resembles existing programs, with partial and conditional benefits (Young & Muvale, 2009). The Canadian Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), quickly rolled out in spring 2020 to support millions of

suddenly unemployed Canadians, conforms to Young & Mulvale’s (2009) “mixed welfare” model.

Left-wing critics of BI often set up the austerity version as a straw figure, without acknowledging that other versions exist (Weeks, 2020) or that the mainstream advocacy efforts for BI in Canada are progressive. The two main Canadian advocacy groups, the Basic Income Canada Network (BICN) and Coalition Canada Basic Income–Revenu du Base, have called for a BI that is unconditional, accessible to all who need it. They propose an unconditional BI that is adequate to meet basic needs for health and a life of dignity, reliable, respectful of individual autonomy, integral to a reinvigorated social safety net, supportive of labour rights (or laws, such as minimum-wage laws), and careful to leave no one worse off than before BI (see, for example, Coalition Canada, 2022).

We advocate an unconditional BI that is delivered through the tax system and provides the highest benefit levels to those with the lowest incomes, gradually tapering off as income rises, similar to the Canada Child Benefit (Pasma, Reghr, & Basic Income Canada Network, 2020). We understand BI to be reformist in the sense that it “loosens the grip” of capitalism rather than ending it (Weeks, 2020). However, we also see its revolutionary potential because it would force capitalism “to restructure social relations in terms more favourable to us” (Federici, 1995, p. 191) and could empower collective, democratic struggles for justice.

Achieving a strong, progressive BI will require a powerful coalition of activists to engage an extended political struggle (Weeks, 2020). A progressive BI provides a positive vision of something to fight *for* while fighting against injustice (Klein, 2017) and can be a unifying force among disparate social movement participants, including environmentalists, feminists, anti-racism activists, migrant labour rights activists, anti-poverty activists, family farmers, and others (Weeks, 2020). In contemporary struggles for racial justice, both the Movement for Black Lives (McFarland, 2016) and the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (Core Working Group, 2021) have called for BI to begin to address the profound social and economic marginalization of Black and Indigenous peoples.

Basic income and the food system

On the consumption side of the food system, the case for BI to address food insecurity is well-established. Food insecurity is highly correlated with low income, meaning that the same groups who are most likely to be poor are also most likely to be food insecure, including single mothers, Black Canadians, and Indigenous people. The weight of the research evidence suggests that an adequate BI that covers basic needs could have a substantial impact on rates of food insecurity and its harmful effects, including poor mental and physical health (Ontario Dietitians in Public Health, 2020; Tarasuk, 2017).

There is less contemporary appreciation of the potential for BI to compensate unpaid domestic labour, including food work, and essential, highly gendered, public-care volunteer

work, such as that carried out by the Pomona Community Farmer Alliance (Lloro & González, 2022, this issue). BI was the key demand of the feminist, anti-capitalist Wages for Housework campaign that, in the 1970s, brought together Marxist feminists, welfare-rights activists, and others (Toupin, 2018). Never supported by liberal white feminists, the Wages for Housework campaign was all but forgotten until recently (Toupin, 2018). In much the same way as Wages for Housework imagined that BI could open up a wider variety of household forms (Federici, 2020; Weeks, 2020), food activists might imagine how BI could support more small-scale, household food production and community-level food initiatives like those described by Habib (2022, this issue), by freeing people from the necessity of full-time paid employment.

On the production side of the food system, BI would provide immediate, significant, stabilizing assistance to address some of the urgent problems facing rural communities and small and medium-sized farm operations, including the shortage of young farmers. To date, the BI movement has primarily focussed on urban dwellers and low-income eaters, but the inclusion of food producers highlights multiple issues facing family farmers and rural communities. Since the middle of the twentieth century, large-scale mechanization, corporate agriculture, and a focus on export-based production have created record levels of farm debt (Statistics Canada, 2021a) and contributed to the hollowing out of vibrant rural community life and to the deterioration of rural resilience and self-reliance (Desmarais, 2019). The combination of low net farm income and high land prices (Statistics Canada, 2021b) prevents new and young farmers, especially women and Black people, Indigenous people, and people of colour (BIPOC), from entering the field (Qualman, Akram-Lodhi, Desmarais, & Srinivasan, 2018; Statistics Canada, 2018). This has created a loss of skills, health problems in rural communities, and a risk to Canada's food security.

BI, by itself, cannot fix the high cost of farmland, which is the biggest single cost and barrier for new farmers. However, it can provide income stability, the lack of which can be catastrophic for new farmers. BI could make it easier for young and new farmers to get started as farmers, including women (Kerr et al., 2022, this issue) and BIPOC farmers, and to take on the risk of farmland ownership, to develop viable businesses, and to support non-extractivist, ecological agricultural practices that nurture the land and communities (Kerr et al., 2022 this issue; Vibert et al., 2022, this issue).

The effects of BI on agricultural-labour availability need careful consideration. BI pilot research suggests that BI doesn't affect labour-market participation but can cause shifts in overall employment patterns (Calnitsky & Latner, 2017; Calnitsky, Latner, & Forget, 2019; Forget, 2011; Kangas, Jauhiainen, Simanainen, & Ylikännö, 2019). Anecdotally, farmers in the 2020 growing season reported that the structure of the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) discouraged some farm workers from working full-time jobs or caused them to turn down farm employment altogether. Therefore, it is important to consider how BI could be "tuned" and integrated with other policies to have a beneficial impact on food production.

Considerations of BI and agricultural labour must also take account of the current exploitation of migrant workers. If extended on the basis of residency rather than of citizenship,

BI, along with other measures (see Klassen, Fuerza Migrante, & Wittman, 2022, this issue), could support fair and just labour practices for migrant workers. If food-system workers, including migrant agricultural workers, could walk away from unsafe and unhealthy conditions, such as those described by Weiler & Enclada Grez (2022, this issue), without fear of destitution or deportation, food producers and processors would be forced to provide safe working conditions and higher wages. If a BI program did not include migrant workers, it could actually worsen working conditions and labour shortages.

There are many other issues in the food system that BI could impact, and many that BI alone cannot address, including, for example, reparations for stolen Indigenous lands or the need for agricultural trade protections to ensure that the price of domestically produced food better reflects its true cost. For those in the growing movement for BI, attention to the food system will help inform robust design and thoughtful implementation, especially in rural parts of the country. For those in the movement for food justice, BI can help connect to other progressive and radical movements and facilitate the participation of those currently marginalized. Basic Income is not a silver bullet, but it could provide the freedom from want, scarcity, and desperation that is essential to imagine and struggle for more just ways of living together on the planet. That is Basic Income's most radical, revolutionary, and exciting possibility.

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