From Utopia to Implementation: How Basic Income has progressed from radical idea to legitimate policy solution

Summary of key findings

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Introduction

Basic income (BI) promises a life free from poverty, where all citizens enjoy real freedom and an equal stake in society, where automation is no longer a cause of anxiety, and where no-one is forced into poor quality, low-paid work[1]. Previously an idea very much at the margins of politics and policy debates, BI has enjoyed a steep rise in popularity recently, attracting regular coverage in the mainstream media, and pilot projects are now underway or in planning in eight countries. BI is now a credible and much-debated alternative to existing welfare policies, and, many believe, a genuine opportunity to address poverty and inequality[2]. This rise from utopian idea to legitimate policy is, so far, little explored or understood.

This study therefore set out to understand the contexts, circumstances, and key actors involved in four of the pilot projects, Finland, the Netherlands, Ontario and Scotland, exploring how the seemingly utopian and marginal idea of basic income has found a place on the policy agenda. It examines how basic income is legitimised as a policy solution, and to what problems, how the idea and implementation of basic income varies across the cases, and identifies the key actors involved in the policy processes. Ten semi-structured interviews with civil servants, experts and advocates involved in BI and the pilots were used to develop comparative case studies. A summary of key findings from the research is presented below, with short descriptions of the key aspects and features of each case, followed by cross-case comparison, looking at the major themes and issues cutting across all cases.

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[1] Van Parijs, 1992; Van Parijs and Vanderborght, 2017
[2] De Wispelaere, 2016

Key Findings

Finland: Pragmatism and Experimentation

A BI experiment launched in Finland in summer 2017, focusing on unemployed individuals and testing reduced conditionality. A strong pragmatic thread runs through the Finnish project, and an over-riding emphasis on the project as an experiment, reflecting a wider interest in evidence-based policy. Prime minister Juha Sipilä was the primary instigator of the experiment, committing to experimenting with BI in his governmental programme. It appears that his interest in BI is pragmatic rather than values-driven, and combined with the focus on experimentation, this seems to have shaped the overall nature of the pilot. Policy changes over many years have, often unintentionally, acted as test-beds for aspects of BI, for example bigger income disregards for those in low-paid work. These incremental changes have opened up policy space for BI to colonise, and allowed policy to deviate from well-worn paths[3].

The experiment is part of a broader policy focus on addressing the changing nature of work and problems with the social security system, but government is also running a parallel experiment testing the effects of increased conditionality. As such, the BI experiment does not appear to be a signal of deep cultural or political change. Political opinion is divided on whether BI is a suitable solution, however, interestingly this has led both sides to support experimentation, in order to resolve the debate.

Netherlands: Conflict and Compromise

Several municipalities in the Netherlands are in the process of launching experiments into the effects of reduced conditionality on recipients of social assistance. Under municipalities' original plans, they were identified as 'basic income' experiments, however, as is characteristic of much of the process, political disagreement between local and national government led to significant compromise of their scope and purpose. Empowered and emboldened by devolution, municipalities were driven to make a difference for their citizens, and embraced the opportunity for change which BI represents, whilst national government strongly resisted anything resembling it. This resulted in a power struggle, with the bottom-up desire to experiment pushing against top-down control and resistance to change.

Contained in the 2015 Participation Act, a new legal framework for employment support and social assistance, is an Innovation Clause, which allows for experimentation within the legal framework. Municipalities seized the chance to test less conditionality and improved work incentives, although

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[3] Béland, 2010; De Wispelaere and Fitzpatrick, 2011

this appears to be an unintended consequence of the clause; the space in which municipalities have been able to act was created accidentally, and they embraced it.

Strong local coalitions of actors involving advocates, activists and citizens have been key to building broad-based support and legitimising the experiments, as well as a small number of key individuals at national level. There is considerable evidence of collaboration and proactive networking between municipalities and universities across the country, in contrast to the tensions between local and national government.

Ontario: Poverty and Holism

The BI experiment in Ontario, Canada, focuses on low-income individuals, and guarantees a minimum income to those on the programme. Its over-riding focus and motivation is the relief of poverty, which is defined broadly and includes a wide range of associated problems including food security, health, mental health and homelessness. Delivered by the Ontario provincial government, the experiment is not a stand-alone trial, but part of a move for systemic change in the social security system. Awareness of the scale and severity of poverty and its impacts is seen to have grown amongst politicians and the general public, and this has been key to a parallel growth in awareness and support for the principles of BI.

Two political actors have been critical in the instigation of the experiment, Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne and former Conservative senator and academic Hugh Segal. Segal's position as a powerful political actor and long-standing advocate of BI lent significant legitimacy to the project, and appears to have assisted in gaining cross-party support for the experiment. The experiment builds on a long history not only of advocacy but also political support for BI in Canada. As well as the importance of these individuals, significant levels of well-organised lobbying, from professional groups such as doctors as well as advocates and activists, have fed into the broader context of public and political opinion. This lobbying is seen as directly influencing the decision to proceed with the experiment.

Scotland: Collaboration and Resonance

Four local authorities in Scotland, Glasgow, Fife, Edinburgh and North Ayrshire, are working towards implementing BI pilots. The BI activity in Scotland has a strong emphasis on networks, collaboration, sharing and facilitation, with experts and advocates amongst the key actors. think tanks and academics have lent BI legitimacy, and grassroots advocates have encouraged public and political engagement with BI, contributing to an upsurge of interest in the last 12 months. There is broad agreement that current systems and policies for dealing with long-entrenched problems in Scotland

such as unemployment, poverty, inequality and poor social mobility are ineffective, and that the scale and impact of these problems is growing.

Whilst local politicians are driving the experiments, there is also a supportive national political environment, with Scottish national government encouraging and now proposing to fund experimentation. The wider policy environment provides a fertile and complementary context, with a good level of cross-party consensus on key issues. Scotland was found to be the country with the furthest-reaching ambitions relating to BI, which is seen as having the potential to unlock wider debate and perhaps trigger fundamental social change. It is also the most engaged of the cases in international activity, taking more cues from other pilots, and proactively seeking to contribute to the global debate. The global interest in BI is shining a spotlight on Scotland as an innovator, and the attention provides political currency to BI's supporters, thereby strengthening the position of BI as a viable policy option.

Cross-case Comparison

A number of themes cut across all or most of the cases, and appear to be the most influential and important in generating the conditions for the experiments to take place, shaping their contexts and also their content. These themes interact and influence each other, strengthening in some cases, modifying in others.

In each case multiple factors have ***converged*** to become a whole: an enabling policy space in which localities have been able to act. Some have occurred by accident and some by design, some are a consequence of the passing of time. Some appear small and relatively inconsequential, but in combination contribute to much wider impacts. All have in some way contributed to BI being legitimised as a policy option, and crucially have all occurred together within a ***temporal*** window. Long-standing interest in BI has allowed public and political opinion, norms and values, to develop over time. This appears to have led to increased familiarity and comfort with the concept of BI, eventually reaching a threshold and triggering change. The problems that BI is hoped to address have not diminished over time, despite societal and economic change and concerted policy attention, leading to a re-examination, and sometimes an active positioning, of BI as a possible solution.

The emphasis in each case on ***experimentation*** is an important enabler. Each case is framed as an investigation into whether BI might really deliver what it promises, in a wider context of growing interest and legitimacy in evidence-based policy. Support for experimentation does not necessarily

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equate to generalised support for BI however, nor does interest in BI necessarily signal deep political or societal change.

BI is a policy laden with meaning, and a strong *signifier*, framed in all cases as radical, innovative and different. It is seen as multidimensional, speaking to a broad range of different actors, and intersectional, providing solutions to many problems. There appears to be a kudos attached to testing BI, which is embraced by those involved. Particularly in Scotland and the Netherlands, BI takes on a symbolic role and is a signifier of innovation, influence, leadership and progressiveness. This signifying plays out through *international activity*, where piloting BI positions a locality as a global innovator, however the extent to which international activity directly influences local policy and implementation appears limited. Finland, the Netherlands and Ontario in particular are all well aware of the international activity, but their own local circumstances are the primary influencers of the shape and scope of their experiments.

As well as acting strongly as an enabler, the *purpose of the experiments* has also acted to modify and shape their design and implementation. Every case is hoping for a range of different positive outcomes, both economic and social, pragmatic and ethical. Common to all four cases is the belief in the failure of existing social assistance systems: performance in addressing long-term unemployment falls short; systems are too complex and bureaucratic; they contain structural flaws that disincentivise the outcomes they seek to deliver; and they stigmatise those in poverty. This represents a significant reframing of the problems of unemployment and poverty[4]. Changes to the labour market, particularly precarious work and growing automation, are the cause of significant anxiety about the future: BI is seen to have the potential to allow this new future to be negotiated.

The *diversity of actors* has both enabled the experiments and shaped their implementation. Informal and collaborative groupings of advocates, experts and political actors appear to be an important enabling factor. Particularly in the Netherlands and Scotland there is a strategy of proactive network development, which serves to shore up support, and consolidate BI as a legitimate policy: a coalescence of actors, if not organised coalitions, appears key to making progress[5]. In general, politicians and experts wield most power, with expert power being particularly important in Finland and Scotland. There is broadly a left-right political split in terms of support and opposition across the cases. However, this obscures more nuanced positions, including opposition from trade unions in Finland, and conservative support in Ontario for a smaller, simpler welfare state.

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[4] Bacchi, 2009; Patrick, 2014
[5] Martinelli, 2016

Although all cases demonstrate significant similarities, it is at the level of detailed design and implementation that divergences emerge. **_Translation_** of the paradigmatic idea[6] of BI has occurred through local circumstances; political, cultural and structural[7]. These circumstances have shaped the focus, scope and delivery of each experiment. One of the key drivers of translation is the need for **_compromise_**: each case has been forced to make compromises in order to make the experiments politically and experimentally acceptable. None of the experiments is testing anything like a paradigmatic BI; there is a strong sense of ambitions being scaled down, particularly in the Netherlands.

Conclusion

In their specificities, all of the contexts and circumstances in this study are different, and each case has its own character, however there are common themes that occur in all. No one single factor has brought about the implementation of BI, but it has required a cluster of enabling factors occurring within a temporal window, which interact and strengthen each other. Some factors have been gestating for many years, others have entered the frame recently and trigged rapid progress. Problems, policy and politics have converged, opening up a window of change[8]. Broad agreement amongst diverse actors on policy problems has occurred at the same time as BI has risen in prominence and credibility, and powerful actors have found the idea politically acceptable.

The explicit framing of the pilots as experiments, and the status of BI as different and innovative, combined with the kudos lent by the international attention on the pilots, lend BI an important legitimacy. A critical mass of public awareness and debate has helped to push BI up the policy agenda, and a resonance with cultural and political values has given it an unusually strong following and momentum. A complementary policy context helps, but even in its absence actors have carved out space to act. The failure of existing social assistance policies is a key driver in these cases, and the central problem that experiments are attempting to tackle. BI is viewed as a multi-dimensional and intersectional policy, capable of addressing multiple policy problems.

Whilst the study can't be considered as a 'how-to' guide for other localities, with findings applicable to any setting, the similarities across all the studied cases give a useful indication to policy-makers and advocates of the circumstances and factors which may be necessary to advancing BI from radical idea to implementation.

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[6] Adhering to all core principles of BI: unconditional, universal, non means-tested, individual, De Wispelaere and Stirton, 2011
[7] Johnson and Hagström, 2005; Lendvai and Stubbs, 2007; Stone, 2012
[8] Kingdon, 2011

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