

“Artists have a head start in dealing with uncertainty”

There is an increasingly urgent need for a triad of basic income/basic livelihood, deceleration, and sustainability during the coronavirus pandemic: Adrienne Goehler on the need to seize the coronavirus crisis as an opportunity for creating a fairer society.

Justin Gentzer: In your book you describe a triangular relationship between the discourses on the Universal Basic Income (UBI), environmental sustainability, and deceleration. In this context you also speak of a basic livelihood. What are the distinctive features of this triad, and why do you believe that a basic livelihood results directly in greater sustainability?

Adrienne Goehler: Breaking out of compartmentalised/departmentalised/expertised thinking has been my guiding principle since the 1980s. This is because I firmly believe that only permeability between disciplines and other (assurance) sectors can give rise to a social relevance that could enable the arts and sciences to become more effective agents against the destruction of the foundations of our existence. Today especially, we have to learn anew from Alexander von Humboldt that everything is interrelated.

From my perspective on this interrelation, first of all, it strikes me that sustainability sciences and movements make no reference to the idea of a UBI, even though hunger and chronic existential fears clearly rule out sustainable living; second, the UBI movements make no reference to the necessary transformation towards sustainability; and finally, just like conventional development policy, migration activists are slow to recognise the direct link between forced migration and the consequences of climate change. And so, all knowledge and action exists more or less in isolation, within the boundaries of disciplines and knowledge practices.

In addition, for years I have been astonished by the fact that most artists in all disciplines live precarious lives but are afraid to talk about it and to proactively demand a basic income – a state of affairs that also applies to unemployed scientists. So, in my book on a basic income in Germany, I interviewed around fifty people in science, activism, economics, development work, psychology, and art about the above-mentioned triadic relationship – and also about whether and how basic *income* could be further developed into a basic livelihood and thus into a human right. This triad of perspectives opens our eyes to the possibilities and contradictions of the way we currently do things.

JG: With public life grinding to a halt and the economy stagnating, we are facing massive uncertainties and fears. On top of that, there are also those who are observing the emergence of a new form of social solidarity. In this context, the understanding of solidarity as the protection of the weakest is changing to solidarity for the benefit of society as a whole. What do you think a UBI can contribute to this new form of post-crisis social solidarity?

AG: Solidarity is the new normal, said an Israeli friend. All the evidence suggests that we should now use this asset to try out the UBI. We gain time, strengthen everyone's purchasing power, and enable people to be part of the solution rather than part of the problem. If we use the crisis to change our perception, it does not have a stranglehold over us.

A UBI can provide the foundation for thinking radically beyond the status quo and transforming profound individual and collective experiences at almost all levels into social knowledge and action. We really are facing a situation worldwide that is literally unimaginable. Do we really want to continue living like this?

[Zitatkasten, bitte abheben]

We buy things we don't need with money
we don't have to impress people we don't like.

Volker Pispers, satirist

Adapted from Alexander von Humboldt

With this consumer pressure? With this form of agricultural production and factory farming? With this acceptance of blatant social inequality? With closed prosperity boundaries? Without acting on the knowledge that monocultures and the loss of biodiversity favour pandemics?

Suddenly, there are loud and clear demands for different circumstances and priorities in terms of health, education, solidarity, livelihood, and the common good. I have become aware for the first time of the public dismay at how miserably paid systemically relevant tasks are, and this now finally includes the arts, small businesses, and local and decentralised producers, all the solo self-employed who do not appear in any unemployment statistics and who worry every month about whether they can afford to pay the rent. Instead of continuing to accept inhumane and environmentally destructive paid work, it is now becoming ever clearer that people need an income, freedom from fear, and time to make the reshaping and transformation of society their business – which is so necessary now at almost every level.

JG: We are currently living in an age of constant acceleration. With the help of a UBI, you advocate a radical reversal of this maxim. But isn't there a danger of even more acceleration through such a UBI, due to less material insecurity, more holidays, and even more time-wasting consumerism?

AG: On the contrary, a basic livelihood would create a window of opportunity to transform the current forced slowdown into a self-determined mode of deceleration in one's own life. Because this question is being asked out loud as well: Do we still want this frenzied, unbridled, self-optimised lifestyle, with the destructive exploitation of nature and ourselves?

For those with their eyes open, this fact has been clearly visible and blatantly obvious for some time now. We cannot continue with this level of consumption, destruction, and acceleration; we can no longer ignore the victims of globalised capitalist structures. We simply have to test a variety of avenues out of this system.

For this, we need time to take up the challenge of reinventing society after coronavirus, so that the economy serves the people and creates a different way of doing things and a different distribution of paid and unpaid work. And with a basic income/basic livelihood, women and men would – for the first time in history – have the same financial starting point.

The arts could also slow down if a basic livelihood made them more independent of the market, trade fairs, festivals, bi- and triennials, premiere marathons, visitor records, and project-funding sources, for which they all have to prove that they are able to present “Something! Totally!! New!!!” in order to survive.

Artists have an important part to play in the post-coronavirus process. They have a head start in dealing with uncertainty. What distinguishes them is their ability to improvise, try out and reject, recontextualise, and deal with errors creatively. From this, they derive the innovation skills that we so urgently need in these times, when there is a distinct unease about any notion of back-to-normal.

Isn't it obvious that the arts are involved in strengthening the societal notion that we need a guaranteed allowance to make a living in order to transform outdated, superfluous, harmful production methods into a sensible system for the production of everyday goods that does not destroy resources? Perhaps, in completely new constellations, we could try to find out how to use machines, currently only suitable for car production, for the socially relevant and ecologically compatible production of goods.

Despite the coronavirus crisis, we should not forget that we are in the middle of a dramatic change in the world of work due to artificial intelligence (AI), which could be tackled even more fearlessly with a UBI, since AI will put very many people out of gainful employment. Let us also use this crisis to anticipate this reality and see it as an opportunity for other forms of living and working, as well as an opportunity for the sciences to free themselves from their self-chosen, pre-coronavirus action quarantine.

JG: If one follows current affairs, one cannot help but notice that, despite all international solidarity, nation-states regularly reassert themselves. The question then arises as to what this means for the organisation of a UBI. Is it a nationally limited project, or can there be a community-wide UBI, and if so, how?

AG: In many countries there is quite a commotion in this regard – with petitions, webinars, and interviews on social media everywhere meeting with a huge response. Whether in Brexit-Britain or South Africa, in Spain or in the Pope's embassies, wherever you look, the issue is on the agenda – in more than eighty countries around the world, a South African activist recently mentioned in a lecture I attended.

In Kenya, the impressive pilot project – currently the largest in the world, initiated by the US NGO Give Directly – has been running since the end of 2017; with funds from an

unprecedented crowdfunding campaign, a UBI will be tested in about 200 villages for twelve years, with the aim of achieving a completely different and far more cost-effective development policy. And even the editor of the *Berliner Tagesspiegel* is arguing that the question of a UBI could dominate the next coalition negotiations. Avanti!

ADRIENNE GOEHLER, graduate psychologist, curator, and writer is an affiliate scholar at the Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies (IASS), Potsdam. From 1989 to 2001, she was president of the University of Fine Arts in Hamburg; from 2001 to 2002, senator for science, research, and culture in Berlin; and from 2002 to 2006, curator of the Capital Cultural Fund, Berlin. In March 2020, Parthas Verlag Berlin published her book, *Nachhaltigkeit braucht Entschleunigung braucht Grundein/auskommen ermöglicht Entschleunigung ermöglicht Nachhaltigkeit* (“Sustainability needs deceleration needs a basic income/basic livelihood enables deceleration enables sustainability”).

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