

Chairs' report BIEN 2019/2020, Louise Haagh and Sarath Davala

2019/20 saw a series of new initiatives and many challenges to BIEN.

EC membership changes – and a thank you to André Coelho

In November 2019 André Coelho resigned as News Editor in response to personal commitments. André has been a cornerstone of BI News for many years. The chairs in particular wish to express their gratitude to André for all he has done for the News service, his talent for news, his tireless commitment and time invested, his dedication to ensure the service was always up to date and live with new items and his overseeing the work of volunteers in a long period of expansion and steady influence of BI News. He will be sorely missed

News and Web-site

With the departure of Andre Coelho in November a major challenge was presented to the new service. Losing André's input was a major loss to BIEN and a challenge to manage in the short term. At the same time the old web-site was encountering problems of functionality due to its complexity. After recommendations from André Coelho about interim replacement till a new News Editor could be elected in September 2020, the Chair initially approached Jason Murphy who has been doing an excellent job on BIEN's Facebook page with some suggestions for a new direction of the news service and social media platforms.

At the same time the Chair approached in January the Chair asked the General Manager if he would lead a task force to look at coming forth with suggestions for web-site improvements and to keep the news service going during the transition. Since Jason Murphy became too busy to take up the interim position of News Editor it was agreed to continue to manage the news under the General Manager's oversight till a new News Editor would be elected. Thank you to Malcolm Torry for doing this so diligently and efficiently, and to the task force that worked on web-site renewal, including Leah Hamilton and Aoife Hegarty.

Covid and BIEN responses

(i) Congresses

The Covid 19 pandemic presented mayor challenges to BIEN, including managing the forthcoming congresses in Australia and Scotland in 2019 and 2020. The Chair led a joint group of the local organising committees and BIEN to manage the response. The form and sequencing of the two congresses was discussed. In the end it was decided to postpone the Australia congress scheduled for 2020, and run the Scotland congress first in 2021, in whatever blended form (online and face-to-face) would be possible.

(ii) BIEN Conversations

The Chair proposed to set up and led a series of considered and informative debates about the impact of the Covid Pandemic on the UBI debate and movement worldwide, with a stable set of anchors, including for the first year Sarath Davala and Jamie Cooke, in addition to Louise Haagh, and with the aim to include experts and activists from around the world in conversation about local impacts and lessons. The remit of the Conversations was ‘opportunities and risks’ of Covid, in recognition of the uncertain and varied impact that the pandemic presents in the direction of the BI debate. BIEN Conversations will be a forum for putting together live content with up-to-date information and research material relevant to local contexts and global debate.

Consultation exercise

The BIEN EC led a consultation exercise to inform a vote on the frequency of congresses. This exercise involved a survey to take opinions from members that could be collated into reasoning for different options to inform the vote. This mode of consultation with members constituted a further development of the democratisations process that began under the Chair’s leadership with the introduction of secret ballot elections, and was intended to move beyond binary-choice decisions without reasoning input from the membership.

Contemporary challenges

The present moment in the UBI debate worldwide, with the influx of new voices and actors in the debate, taking up UBI as an idea, not always in ways that conform with BIEN’s definition, presents a major challenge to BIEN. This is a time for BIEN to act in its educational role as a facilitator of informed debate engaging as many actors as possible. In the new environment it becomes increasingly difficult and arguably unrealistic for BIEN to situate itself as a leading actor fronting a variety of initiatives, given the increasingly plural and sometimes conflicting aims and content of different projects at grassroots or policy level. However, BIEN’s unique history and experience, given the composition of its membership, gives BIEN an unrivalled credibility as a forum for critical thinking about UBI, and as a meeting space among interested groups. BIEN’s global reach in terms of its membership and affiliate organisations adds to the power of networking in a way no other actor in this space can claim to offer. BIEN’s tradition of bringing together academics, community organisers, and policy-makers continues to make for a very different, genuinely multi-level form of public reasoning. Therefore, in the present context, BIEN can offer a unique meeting space for global civic education and organisation, and a foundation for informed debate, research material, and forward-thinking initiatives at the level of policy and society.