

**REPORT ON THE  
BASIC INCOME EARTH NETWORK (BIEN) CONGRESS  
held in Seoul, South Korea, 23 - 26 August 2023**

**by  
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When I was invited to give the Opening Address, I wondered ‘What could I talk about?’. However, I realised that, even after more than three decades in the business, I am still learning new things that I could share.

I had also had the privilege of attending the first of the current wave of Basic Income (BI) conferences, in September 1986, in Louvain-La-Neuve, Belgium, organised by the *Collectif Charles Fourier*. I reflected on how things have changed over the last 37 years.

**First of all, ‘Who were we then? Who are we now?’** Twenty-five papers were presented in 1986, of which four were by women. All the presenters hailed from 10 mainly northern European countries. The theme this year was ‘Basic Income in Reality’ and some 140 papers were presented (including those in the Plenaries), and at least 30 were given by women, which represents a slight increase in the proportion of presentations by women. Presentations came from 26 different countries and every continent was represented (excluding the Antarctic).

As in 1986, the majority of presenters this year appeared to be university academics and other researchers from independent institutes from around the world. This is probably because other people find it even more difficult than academics to obtain funding to attend. About 50 people attended the

1986 Basic Income conference and the General Assembly that followed, several of whom went on to organise and host subsequent BIEN Congresses. However, this year, we are privileged to welcome some elected representatives and others representing political parties, in addition to literary critics, poets, a novelist and other activists. So, Basic Income is both worldwide and mainstream now. We are no longer merely a set of independent researchers, other academics and advocates. We are definitely a 'Basic Income Movement'.

So, who contributes to this movement? Researchers and other academics have developed an academic structure, comprising a broad base of theoretical research, overlain conceptually by a layer of empirical research mapping the subject matter of the theoretical base. Our enthusiastic activists have provided a very welcome third layer to the Basic Income movement, with the extremely important role of engaging with and persuading the general public and opinion-formers, policy makers and politicians, as to the desirability and feasibility of a basic income programme – informing and educating the grass roots, and even entertaining them with one or two of our rare Basic Income jokes?

The Congress was extremely well organised, (as we have come to expect from our Korean friends), and the program was comprehensive. The lynch pin events started with a formal Welcome followed by the Opening Address; there were seven Plenary sessions followed by the Closing Reflections by Sarath Davala for BIEN and by AHN Hyosang, chair of the Basic Income Korean Network and of the Local Organising Committee. Each of the key events had simultaneous translation into English or Korean, was recorded and is available to watch on the BIEN website

([www.basicincome.org](http://www.basicincome.org)). They covered a variety of topics and are well worth watching.

Between these lynch pins events, there were eleven one-and-a-half-hour-long slots for the concurrent sessions, during which 112 papers were presented in 36 different sessions, averaging three papers in each session. Seven papers were in the Korean language without translation. Another nine were online, sometimes at early or late times of the day to provide access to presenters from other parts of the world. Again, these papers covered a wide variety of topics reflecting the theme of the Congress 'Basic Income in Reality'. The most popular themes were: outcomes such as poverty and inequality, BI and gender, BI and the creative arts, literature and poetry; the effect of BI on particular groups, including youths and farmers. There were several papers exploring empirical aspects of BI, pilots and case studies. Some were on financing issues, and others were on the potential effect of BI on climate justice and carbon neutrality. There is always frustration with respect to these parallel sessions, having to decide which of these very interesting sessions to attend, and which sadly will have to be missed.

In the parallel sessions, much of my attention was preoccupied with getting to grips with the draft chapters of a book in English proposing a comprehensive BI scheme for S Korea, with the title 'An Integrated Model of Basic Income, Negative Income Tax, and Universal EITC: Enhancing Freedom, Equality, Efficiency, and Fertility in the Korean Context' by YOU Jong-sung, KANG Nam Hoon and LEE Seungju. Half a dozen of us were invited to comment on the plan, but there was little that we could add, the plan having been thoroughly thought-out to take account of conditions and

restrictions relevant in Korea at this time. They hoped that a BI could help: to reduce, or even reverse, rural to urban migration; to increase S Korea's exceptionally low fertility rate (0.78); and otherwise promote women's rights. Korea has the dubious distinction of having the widest gender wage gap of the thirty-eight OECD countries, (with the UK in 11th place). (<https://data.oecd.org/earnwage/gender-wage-gap.htm>).

There was friendly rivalry between the Koreans and the Brazilians as to which country would be the first to introduce a national BI program. Brazil has the ascendancy just now, since President Lula, (who introduced the *Bolsa Familia* to 60 million people in 2004), has already been in power since 2022, but he still must persuade the rest of his party. In the same year, LEE Jae-myung, (who, when Governor of Gyeonggi Province, the largest province in S Korea, implemented a BI experiment in 2019-20), was the losing candidate by a small margin in the Presidential elections in South Korea, but it is very likely that he will stand again in 2027. However, he too, will need to persuade more people in his party to support his proposals.

Delegates from the Republic of Korea have only been involved in BIEN and its Congresses since about the year 2009. In the short time since then, S Korea has become a leader in many aspects of Basic Income. It has already hosted the BIEN Congress in 2016 and has carried out an extensive experiment with 175,000 24-year-olds in Gyeonggi-do Province in 2019-20. In 2021, the publication of the English edition of *Basic Income: for Everyone's Economic Freedom*, edited by Professor YOO Young Seong, with contributions from seventeen of Korea's most eminent specialists on Basic Income, shared the state-of-the-art of BI research in Korea with the rest of the world.

Not only that, an incredible range of institutions dedicated to Basic Income has also sprung up in Korea. This Congress has been organised by the Basic Income Korean Network, and co-hosted with four other institutions, together with members of the Local Organising Committee which comprises another thirteen organisations, of which at least eight had the term 'Basic Income' in their title.

South Korea is an amazing country, having pulled itself up by its bootstraps after the devastation of the Korean War (1950-53), to become a modern economy now, being in 23<sup>rd</sup> place out of 38 OECD countries, (placed only three countries behind the UK), in the GDP per capita stakes (<https://data.oecd.org/gdp/gross-domestic-product.gdp.htm#indicator-chart>). Koreans are hard-working, very well organised, determined, creative and friendly. Their diet is very tasty and healthy, with lots of vegetables and rice and kimchi (Korea's national dish). (Sadly, commercial interests seem intent on introducing sugar into this otherwise healthy diet). Korea's geographical size is about the same as that of Scotland, and it also has a mountainous region. Whereas Scotland has a population of 5.5 million, S Korea has 52 million; (N Korea has 26 million people). Thus, land is at a premium. The weather was interesting – very warm, overcast and humid with frequent showers. The locals wore light summer clothes, but most carried umbrellas ready for the rain. Visitors could borrow one from their hotels.

The Congress was held in the relatively new teaching facilities of the private Ewha Women's University in Seoul. This architectural feature is an excellent example of the creative ingenuity of the Koreans. The University has

beautifully maintained, slightly hilly grounds and was reluctant to spoil this amenity. So, the architects have built an extensive, four-storey underground teaching facility, with lecture halls, smaller teaching rooms, a library, shops and cafes, built into the side of a hill, but which one would not immediately realise is there. It is accessed by a wide, sloping, open-air walkway with windows on either side to help to light up the interior. Once inside, one is hardly conscious of being underground.

After the Congress, I took a guided bus tour to the De-Militarised Zone. One can view North Korea to the right and South Korea to the left with the DMZ between, through a telescope, from behind a shoulder-high wall. Korea was divided at the end of WWII, when both the Soviet Union and the Allies claimed it. It was made clear to me that the 'peace' after the 1950-53 Korean war is just an interlude. Technically, the war has not ended, and North Korea continues to claim that the South belongs to them while increasing their nuclear capability. North Koreans have built an unknown number of tunnels under the border as part of a future invasion plan. Some tunnels have been revealed by defectors from the North, but the total number is not known to S Korea. The possibility of entering 'Tunnel no. 3' via an access tunnel built from the south was part of the tour, an opportunity that I eschewed when a colleague warned that it involved a steep descent and was very uneven underfoot.

I had not attended the non-European Congresses before, because it has taken me a long time to realise two things.

1. Advocates from non-European countries have made the effort, paying the enormous costs, to attend previous BIEN Congresses in Europe and Canada, but few people from Europe make the corresponding effort in return, yet it

behoves us to do so, to support the six out of a total of 22 so far, BIEN Congresses in these other countries (South Africa 2006, Brazil 2010, S Korea 2016, India 2019, Australia 2022, S Korea 2023).

2. What a delight these non-European Congresses are – well-worth attending, partly because they are smaller, with a more intimate atmosphere, increasing the chances of making enduring friendships. There now, I have let the cat out of the bag. Everyone will rush to them now and that intimacy may be lost. Nevertheless, I shall do my best to attend all future BIEN Congresses, God willing.

In the meantime, the University of Bath has a hard act to follow in the organisation of the next BIEN Congress on 29-31 August 2024.