

Dr. Guy Standing is a Professorial Research Associate at [SOAS University of London](#) and a founding member and honorary co-president of the [Basic Income Earth Network \(BIEN\)](#). This non-governmental organization promotes a basic income for all. Standing discusses the concept of emergency-based basic income (EBI) as a tool for recovery in crises like natural disasters, wars, or economic collapses. Standing highlights its effectiveness in creating economic stability, reducing corruption, and fostering social solidarity. Using examples from Sri Lanka, Ukraine, and India, he explains how EBI directly empowers individuals and communities while stimulating local economies. They also explore issues like equitable distribution, the treatment of migrants, and potential corruption, emphasizing transparency and universal access. Standing notes growing global interest, including support from the Vatican, and underscores EBI's role in promoting justice and hope.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Today, we're here with Dr. Guy Standing. I wanted to focus on something relevant to your recent work, particularly emergency-based basic income. This is a very practical example.

I returned from Ukraine on September 14th after my second trip. I worked as a freelance journalist there, reporting independently. There are contexts where journalists are killed, such as in Gaza and the Palestinian territories. Additionally, there are other situations, like natural disasters in Sri Lanka and elsewhere.

How does emergency-based basic income work exactly? It sounds like a fund that is built up and then lasts for a certain amount of time. How do you fund it, determine the amount, and decide how long it will last?

Dr. Guy Standing: We need to consider what happens during a natural disaster, bombing, or the situations you mentioned—civil wars or genocidal crises, as in Gaza. We need to ask: What will help the population, economy, and society recover? Too often, international aid floods with food parcels, blankets, clothes, and other supplies.

Much of that aid is diverted, fueling corruption and potentially causing inflation. It often fails to help ordinary people. Imagine if, alongside providing goods and services to kickstart the economy, you also provided everyone with an emergency basic income.

You could offer a small but sufficient amount to help people afford food, medicine, and other necessities, creating demand for goods and services and stimulating supply. This is the general principle behind emergency basic income schemes: you need to kickstart the economy and directly reach ordinary people.

I witnessed this in Sri Lanka after the 2004 tsunami. I worked there immediately following the disaster. I saw a massive influx of well-intentioned aid. Still, it was oversupplied in some areas and undersupplied in others.

Local producers did not benefit because goods were provided for free, removing incentives for increased production. However, with an emergency basic income, people are incentivized to produce and invest in food, seeds, or whatever is needed to meet the demand created by people having money in their hands. This approach is essential and often pays for itself.

Experiments and case studies in various countries show that for every dollar spent on basic income, there is a multiplier effect on incomes within the community. It generates production, creates jobs, stimulates income flows, and establishes a new market system. It also reduces corruption, which often follows natural disasters, as powerful individuals exploit the vulnerable.

Emergency basic income is an essential tool. It shouldn't be seen as a panacea but as part of a broader recovery package. Without basic income, recovery is often distorted and limited. Many people die unnecessarily after crises because they lack the resources to sustain themselves or rebuild.

We've advocated this to the United Nations, UNDP, and various governments. After the end of apartheid in South Africa, I worked there and strongly advocated for basic income. It could have reduced inequality and corruption.

We continue to advocate for it there, and now many ministers support it. Still, it's too late to implement it effectively. There is growing interest in using emergency basic income as part of rescue packages.

The question remains whether wars in Gaza or Ukraine will end and if they do, whether there will be opportunities to rebuild civil society.

Jacobsen: Regarding the United Nations, how much can they support such an initiative through passing a resolution or similar actions? Is it within their structure and resources to implement something like this or create a ratification process supporting a resolution?

Standing: In BIEN, we advocate that the UNDP and the various specialized agencies develop methodologies for implementing a basic income in emergency situations and acquire the skills to ensure these initiatives work effectively.

We've conducted basic income pilots in various developing countries. As a result, we know much more about how to execute these programs, with whom to collaborate, avoid wasteful spending, and evaluate the outcomes properly.

We suggest that the UN adopt this as part of its toolkit to bring to developing countries and coordinate such efforts. Often, the funds required to provide a basic income will need to come from the country's diaspora.

For example, Ukraine, where you and I have worked, in a typical oblast, some very wealthy Ukrainians, many of whom live outside Ukraine, are genuinely interested in contributing to the rebuilding process.

Providing a modest basic income, which we've already estimated the cost, would not be financially burdensome for these businesspeople. Moreover, they would know they are contributing to something practical that directly reaches ordinary people. It would be transparent and free from the corruption that often infiltrates aid programs, ensuring that funds do not end up in the hands of bureaucrats or criminals.

Being universal, in the sense that everyone in the oblast would receive the same amount, the program would foster a sense of fairness. People naturally wish to defend their right to this income, as it would also support others' rights to receive it.

This approach could help rebuild a sense of social solidarity, establish a sense of rights, and contribute to the reconstruction of communities. For instance, in our large-scale pilot in Madhya Pradesh, India, collaboration increased dramatically when every man, woman, and child in the community received a modest basic income.

People worked together on initiatives like improving sanitation, rebuilding marketplaces, and supporting small-scale shops. They understood they were all in it, a fundamental aspect of any

emergency basic income scheme. This approach would work just as well, if not better, in places like Gaza and the West Bank.

Of course, other forms of support will also be necessary in countries where infrastructure and accommodations have been destroyed. However, an emergency basic income can encourage people to feel invested in staying rather than fleeing when conflicts end.

That sense of hope is essential. Without it, people can succumb to despair, dying not just from physical hardships but from the psychological trauma of such situations.

Jacobsen: You're alluding to phenomena like deaths of despair that arise in such contexts.

Standing: Absolutely.

Jacobsen: What do we know about municipal or national policy changes that occur during emergencies, which may not necessarily be basic income schemes but mimic many of the general principles of basic income? How can we use those policies as a foundation to extrapolate the efficacy of basic income beyond the experiments conducted in select instances across different cultures?

Standing: That's a good question, and it reminds me of my time as Director of the International Labour Organization's operations after the collapse of the Soviet Union. I worked extensively in Russia and Ukraine during the 1990s.

Western donors made a classic mistake during the rebuilding of the shattered economies. They implemented what is known as "shock therapy," which involved liberalizing prices, privatizing production, and squeezing state budgets, including bureaucracies, to combat inflation.

I saw the effects of this in Ukraine. Civil servants' salaries collapsed to the point where they were worth only about \$5 a month. Under those circumstances, corruption became inevitable. It fosters behavior where criminal gangs and kleptocrats quickly rise to power, becoming plutocrats and oligarchs—exactly what happened.

This dynamic is common in many post-conflict situations. A few strongmen, backed by gangs, exploit a weakened state unable to function effectively. In such contexts, rebuilding the capacity to combat corruption is vital. If you or I were being paid \$5 a month with a family to support, we wouldn't be able to resist someone offering \$10 for unethical actions.

Basic income could play a crucial role in these situations by recreating the capacity for moral action. It provides freedom to make ethical decisions without being driven by chronic insecurity or dependence on others.

One of the broader arguments for basic income, not just in emergencies, is that it strengthens people's freedom to act morally. It enables individuals to make decisions based on what they believe is right rather than being coerced by desperation or dependency.

This type of freedom is often denied to people who live in chronic insecurity and dependence. With a basic income, people gain the autonomy to be moral, which is central to our argument for adopting basic income more widely.

Jacobsen: Are there cases where basic income distribution can be corrupted? For instance, could individuals position themselves as intermediaries between the distribution system and recipients, obscuring tracking and accountability?

Standing: Any scheme, anywhere in the world, is potentially corruptible—let's be honest about that. Basic income should never be treated as a panacea or a standalone policy. It must be part of a broader effort to rebuild and strengthen community structures.

That's why I emphasize linking basic income to the commons—society's shared resources and institutions. We need systems in place to protect people who receive a basic income, ensuring they are not exploited by landlords, abusive spouses, or others seeking to appropriate it unfairly.

These protections are essential. If a basic income system were implemented, safeguards against exploitation would need to be built. However, the potential for corruption does not invalidate the idea of basic income—it applies to any policy or program.

To dismiss basic income entirely because of potential corruption would be to give up on civilization. A key strength of basic income is its transparency. It is equal in that everyone receives the same basic amount, providing a foundation of equal basic security for all.

This transparency and universality make basic income uniquely valuable. While challenges exist, they are manageable and do not undermine the policy's fundamental benefits.

It means providing a supplement to people with disabilities, for example, so the amount given may not be the same for everyone. A basic income system intends to give everyone equal basic security. People with higher costs, such as those with disabilities, need supplements to ensure they receive equal basic security compared to those without disabilities.

That is an important feature. The same principle applies to the treatment of migrants. One objection sometimes raised by critics is that providing everyone in a community with a basic income might encourage people from outside the area to move in, becoming what some call "welfare tourists."

That concern can be addressed easily. For instance, you could stipulate that eligibility for a basic income requires legal residency in the country for a minimum of two years or another reasonable timeframe. However, that does not mean migrants should be neglected. Of course, they should receive help, but their needs should be addressed separately from the basic income system.

Jacobsen: When distributing funds to populations, which groups provide the best "bang for the buck" regarding the distribution's impact? For example, if people receive \$10,000 a year in U.S. dollars, which populations benefit most? Is it dependent on specific variables within particular contexts? If so, what contexts and variables?

Standing: First, a basic income should not be a differentiated scheme. Everyone should receive a basic income, regardless of gender, age, income level, or other factors. Basic income should be universal.

In pilots where every individual in a community—every man, woman, and child—received a basic income, with smaller amounts for children paid to their mothers or surrogate mothers, we asked participants about the value they found in having the basic income and who they thought benefited most from it.

In all the schemes I have been involved in or observed, women benefit even more than men. People with disabilities also benefit significantly for obvious reasons. This is encouraging because it aligns with the principle of equity—equalizing disadvantages and advantages.

Interestingly, this connects to a religious argument for basic income. While I am not religious, many supporters of basic income are. From a religious perspective, one could argue that God has given people unequal talents, skills, and competencies. A basic income helps compensate those who lack the talent or capacity to earn money due to circumstances beyond their control.

This argument resonates with the idea of common justice. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Vatican contacted me to discuss basic income. The Pope subsequently wrote a public letter endorsing basic income, framing it as a matter of religious and common justice.

I wouldn't point to a specific group when you ask who benefits most. However, women—particularly women with children or disabilities—do tend to benefit significantly. This is fitting because these groups have historically been treated less favourably than others. In this sense, basic income serves as a form of reparations and an expression of common justice.

Jacobsen: That's outstanding. Thank you very much for your time today. I appreciate it.

Standing: There you go. Okay, right. Well, nice talking to you.

Jacobsen: Cheers. Have a good day.

Standing: Cheers.