

**Steven Janssens** is a Belgian filmmaker and engineer known for his diverse career as a director, editor, and trainer. He gained recognition for documenting *Crazy Money* (2020), a film capturing the Eight project in Busibi, Uganda, where residents receive unconditional basic income. His extensive filmography includes the documentary *Wardje* (2004), *Point Off U* (2007), and contributions to *Kongo* (2010). Steven has worked on award-winning projects like *Atoma* by Brepols (2012) and web documentaries like *Het Antwerpgevoel* (2010), and most recent film *Blind Spots* (instagram: [@blindspotsthefilm](#)). Combining technical expertise and creative vision, Steven continues to explore impactful storytelling through innovative and socially conscious filmmaking. Janssens talks about collaborating with sociologist Maarten Goethals to provide unconditional cash transfers in impoverished African communities, including Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Inspired by the transformative potential of basic income, Janssens produced *Crazy Money*, documenting their pilot project in Busibi, Uganda. By partnering with the University of Antwerp, Eight measured the program's impact on education, healthcare, and entrepreneurship. Janssens emphasizes trust and autonomy, noting significant improvements in life satisfaction and community development. Eight's efforts now expand to Côte d'Ivoire, addressing poverty, climate resilience, and gender equality through evidence-based, scalable interventions.

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** Today, we're here with Steven Janssens, a Belgian documentary filmmaker who co-founded the nonprofit Eight, established in 2015. You founded this organization with sociologist Maarten Goethals. What was the original inspiration behind Eight, and why did you focus specifically on underserved communities in Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo?

**Steven Janssens:** I've always had it as a filmmaker and artist. I've always believed that humans are fundamentally the same everywhere.

As I travelled extensively, I realized that poverty is not a character flaw but a financial problem. That insight led me to read extensively about basic income, both its conditional and unconditional models. I wanted to create a documentary about *basic income in action*. The result was *Crazy Money*, in which I spent 2–3 years filming in the village where we piloted our project.

From that project, I partnered with Maarten, my cofounder with a background in sociology. Together, we launched an unconditional cash transfer pilot program. While I focused on documenting the process through film, Maarten worked on developing and implementing the project. Thanks to the success of the documentary and our evidence-based approach—partnering with the University of Antwerp to measure outcomes using control villages—we expanded the initiative to multiple locations.

So far, we've worked in nine villages in Uganda and three in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Why focus on impoverished contexts in Africa? The answer is twofold. First, we didn't have significant funding, and implementing a pilot in African villages allowed us to stretch our resources further.

Second, there's a significant personal component. While basic income doesn't exist in Europe, other Western countries have extensive social security systems. In African villages, however, there is often nothing—no pensions, child benefits, or safety nets.

Uganda was a natural starting point for several reasons. My wife is Ugandan, and Uganda has become my second home. Maarten also had prior experience working in Uganda, which made it

easier to begin there. As for the Democratic Republic of the Congo, our work there began at the request of two technological companies who wanted to have an impact on mining communities since the minerals are vital resources for them.

This year, we're expanding to Côte d'Ivoire, focusing on cocoa-growing communities. At Eight, we aim to provide unconditional cash transfers over two years. While some may call this basic income, I prefer "unconditional cash transfers," as basic income traditionally implies a permanent program.

Looking ahead, we plan to test different durations—one year or three years—to determine the optimal length for maximum impact. For me, it's always about the outcomes. One thing I am sure of is that this approach has a profound and measurable impact. That's why I dedicate all my energy to it. It's incredible to witness the transformation in these communities.

**Jacobsen:** The basic income discussion is a broader one, of course. In the end, it's about trusting people. How do you respond to skeptics who doubt its viability?

**Janssens:** I always tell people who don't believe in it that if I gave you €5,000, would you spend it wisely? Everybody answers yes. But the funny thing is, they don't answer yes for someone else. That's because people tend to distrust others. In the end, it's about trust.

Every person is the best captain of their own life. In a capitalist world, which is what we live in, basic income is the best tool to honour our human rights. If we want to ensure basic human rights—education, food, and shelter—the simplest way is through basic income. Everything in our societies has become financial over the past centuries, so basic income is a logical step forward.

It's also sad that it hasn't been implemented nationally yet. While I'm very proud of our projects, I'm still waiting for a country to roll out a scale-based basic income program. Take Finland, for example. They called their program basic income, but to me, it wasn't. They took 2,000 individuals—single mothers with children who were already unemployed and receiving Social Security—and made their benefits unconditional. Then, they labelled it basic income.

To me, basic income is different. What we implement in our villages comes closer to the essence of basic income because we focus on closed communities. This ensures that no one is left behind, a key principle. On an individual level, people make the best choices for themselves. Contrary to popular belief, they don't waste the money. In the first year, most people invest in it. By the second year, they begin saving because they know the program lasts two years.

The results have shown many lasting effects, as evidenced by our partnership with the University of Antwerp. I'm excited about the tier of change we're creating. At one point, Maarten and I asked ourselves: it's great to help individual villages, but how do we create systemic change?

Within the poverty context, most of the people who generate resources—farmers and miners—are often the most exploited and live in extreme poverty. We aim to convince stakeholders in various value chains to contribute directly to these communities. It's not just about helping individual farmers; it's about supporting entire communities, including children, women, and older people.

We are beginning to succeed. In Côte d'Ivoire, for example, we're working with the largest supermarket in Belgium and another major company. Soon, the chocolate sold in that supermarket will come from farmers in our cash transfer program. This is just the start, and I find

it incredibly exciting. It's not a silver bullet but about dignity—a bottom-up approach that gives people autonomy and freedom of choice.

This model bypasses many issues, such as bureaucracy and interference from local elites. I know I've been talking a lot, but I hope this answers your question.

**Jacobsen:** It's excellent. The documentary *Crazy Money* was mentioned earlier. It documented the start of your work in Busibi, Uganda, correct?

**Janssens:** Yes, that's right. *Crazy money* captured the beginning of our project in Busibi, Uganda. It's where the idea of linking a documentary to a social project took off.

**Jacobsen:** The cash transfer program involved a monthly unconditional transfer of USD 18.25 to adults and USD 9.13 to children to assess the impact of basic income on education, healthcare access, entrepreneurship, and community engagement. When measuring these factors, why specifically USD 18.25 for adults and USD 9.13 for children?

**Janssens:** In that case, we used the calculation method applied in the Indian basic income experiment. The idea is to base the amounts on the country's average income. It's a rule of thumb because income levels are complex and subject to debate. We can discuss this for hours. We take one-third of the average income on a family level.

Is it truly a basic income? That's an interesting discussion. A basic income inherently raises questions about the amount and its adequacy. It has a massive impact on the villages where we operate. However, you can't directly compare this to Western societies. Rural communities in the African context are not as cash-oriented because they operate within a different economic framework. Many people survive through subsistence farming.

From the moment they receive cash, they can invest it in housing, for example. One of the most amazing things we see is people building permanent housing. Their children attend school more regularly. They invest in land. We observe transformative outcomes—not for everyone, of course. Still, the vast majority use the money for something sustainable and lasting. Individual choices vary, and luck plays a role, especially with startups.

Not every entrepreneurial venture succeeds, but an important aspect of entrepreneurship is having the capacity to fail and try again. These cash transfers create mental bandwidth. People leave survival mode for at least two years, fostering happiness and satisfaction. This applies universally—you can't thrive without positivity and satisfaction.

But let me return to the question of the amount. Our calculations are also available on our website. The goal is for the amount to cover basic needs. We must adjust the amounts if they are insufficient to meet those needs.

That said, it's a delicate balance. The lower we keep the amounts, the more communities we can reach. The higher the amounts, the fewer people we can help. For me, it's always about maximizing the impact.

To state it with a bit of humour: I hope our work becomes unnecessary at the end of the day. I hope countries eventually take up this responsibility by implementing social security systems and basic income programs. That would represent true decolonization. But, of course, we're far from that reality.

**Jacobsen:** When examining the impact of the monthly stipends, which factor—education, healthcare access, entrepreneurship, or community engagement—showed the most significant effect, even from a qualitative perspective?

**Janssens:** That's a difficult question because we see strong effects across all areas: entrepreneurship, collective action, investments, health—everything. The strongest impact, however, depends on the specific community. For instance, in some communities, the number of entrepreneurs has multiplied by 10; in others, it's a factor of 6. So, entrepreneurship stands out, but collective action is equally remarkable.

In almost every community we work in, people participate in saving groups. These groups persist over time because people save money for the future. They even petition local governments for roads, electricity, and other infrastructure, creating a ripple effect of empowerment and advocacy.

This ties into what I didn't finish explaining earlier. What makes basic income so unique is its inclusivity—leaving no one behind. Even those better off in the village take better care of their community members. There's a stronger connection, and people feel empowered to step up.

This may be one reason why some political leaders oppose the idea. Basic income can be destabilizing for those who prefer centralized power because it provides people with more freedom, mental bandwidth, and time to think critically.

**Jacobsen:** That's fascinating. Were there formal assessments done to measure the psychological impact of the program?

**Janssens:** Yes. Based on self-reporting, we observed significant improvements in mental health. Life satisfaction scores, for example, typically start below 5 out of 10 in these communities. After the cash transfers, the average increases to around Eight out of 10. That's a huge jump.

For me, this is one of the most gratifying effects. It's not about achieving some "American dream" version of happiness but about people feeling good and comfortable. That's the foundation for growth and development.

**Jacobsen:** Now that you have the data, how would you reimplement the program differently? Are there any tweaks you'd make to improve its efficacy?

**Janssens:** Absolutely, and that's what we constantly do—we learn daily. We've continuously fine-tuned our approach from our start in Busibi to to the new community in North Uganda we launched this summer.

For example, in the beginning, we registered everyone based on land ownership. That wasn't always the best approach. We've since shifted to registering people who live in the village, regardless of whether they own land, rent, or work there. This adjustment better reflects the village dynamics.

Another area we've improved is the service point activities. While the cash transfers are unconditional, we've added service points that visit the villages monthly to address technical issues. This is particularly important for older people, who sometimes forget their PIN codes or have trouble using the mobile money system.

Speaking of mobile Money, our system works through mobile phones, which essentially act as bank accounts. Money is transferred to a phone; people can send it to others or withdraw cash through mobile money agents. It's simple and effective.

While the program's core principles—unconditional cash transfers, the two-year timeframe, and leaving no one behind—have remained unchanged, we continuously refine the details to make the project even more effective. By not interfering with people's choices and respecting their autonomy, we've created a system that empowers communities while adapting to their needs.

**Jacobsen:** It's fascinating how the optimization process makes communities uniform and functional. But, of course, there must also be unique stories that arise. For instance, have you encountered resistance to the cash transfer program?

**Janssens:** Yes. There are many stories. For example, some people refuse money because they don't trust it. They think we're trying to trick them, take their land, or even harm them and sacrifice them to gods. These superstitions still exist and can create challenges. This is because some people found it so unbelievable that there must be something behind it. A bit like the cognitive dissonance in Western countries.

Additionally, some men get very angry because we give the money for the children directly to the mothers. But I always say that change hurts. People don't like change—it's uncomfortable. However, functioning families pool their resources and manage the family budget collaboratively.

The program acts as a catalyst in families with strained dynamics. It highlights and sometimes exacerbates existing issues, particularly around gender roles. However, this discomfort can lead to growth and adaptation.

**Jacobsen:** From a sociological perspective, what insights does Maarten bring when observing the developments of these programs over time?

**Janssens:** That's a great question, but you'd have to ask Maarten himself. I can share general observations since we're closely aligned in approaching these programs, and I'm familiar with many sociological aspects. However, his perspective would provide a deeper understanding of specific developments.

**Jacobsen:** I'd love to interview him about that sometime. It's fascinating how these two-year pilot projects might compare to longer-term programs. For example, how might a 10-year program impact crime rates or shift public opinion and policies on law and order?

**Janssens:** It's an intriguing idea. We don't measure criminality levels directly, but we observe that people feel better and report higher life satisfaction. That said, the impact on crime rates or broader societal structures requires analysis on a larger scale, such as at a regional or national level.

**Jacobsen:** On a village level, you'll always encounter outliers—"It takes a village to raise a child, but it also takes a village to produce the occasional idiot," as the saying goes. But there's also the issue of superstitions, such as witchcraft allegations. These are real challenges, and while they may appear backward to some critics, they profoundly impact lives. It's important to contextualize these issues and recognize the internationally accepted metrics you use when conducting your studies.

Superstitions, like witchcraft allegations, often get dismissed as primitive thinking. However, they reflect deeper cultural and societal dynamics. What's often overlooked is that we use internationally recognized metrics to evaluate the program's impact. These metrics provide robust, objective data to guide the approach and address misconceptions.

Economics, education, human rights application, and gender parity are widely recognized and measurable metrics being worked on worldwide. I want readers to understand that concrete, evidence-based methodologies are applied in your research, and rigorous social scientific methods are respected throughout the process.

This isn't something that can be dismissed as "backward people." That critique often carries racist undertones. Moreover, any critique should focus on the methodology or data gathering if proper methodologies are being applied—and you are using internationally recognized metrics. Criticism is healthy, sharpening the evidence, making it more robust and valid, and strengthening the case for basic income.

**Janssens:** I completely agree. Constructive criticism is crucial because it improves the validity and credibility of the evidence we produce. This, in turn, strengthens the case for basic income, especially as we face increasing challenges like job displacement and other socioeconomic shifts.

From my perspective, the more I do this work with Eight, the more I am convinced that poverty is the first problem we must solve. Until we address poverty, we can't effectively tackle other issues. It might sound simplistic, but it's fundamental.

If people are stuck in survival mode, you can't train them, let alone help them create business plans. They lack the money and the mental bandwidth to think beyond their immediate needs. Cash transfers give them the foundation to step out of survival mode. Basic income is a starting point, and that's the direction we're focusing on moving forward.

We call this the "1 + 1 = 3" approach. For example, in our fifth village in Uganda, we partnered with the University of Antwerp to design and research a program focused on climate resilience. We saw incredibly strong effects. With climate change being such an urgent issue, we're now exploring how cash transfers, combined with specific interventions for climate adaptation, can further strengthen communities.

The same applies to gender. Cash transfers or basic income serve as a foundation, a starting point for freedom. It's not a cure-all, but it provides the freedom of choice vital for personal and community growth.

**Jacobsen:** It's an empowering perspective, and it's fascinating to see how cash transfers can intersect with broader goals like climate adaptation and gender equality. But what are your thoughts on how societal advancements, like artificial intelligence, cross-sect with these issues?

**Janssens:** It's an interesting connection. Historically, societal advancements haven't always benefited communities equally. For example, the emancipation of women was a significant achievement, but it didn't necessarily lead to less work for families.

When I was a child, my father was the breadwinner, and my mother stayed home. I'm not saying whether that's good or bad, but now, in many families, both parents must work to sustain their household. Similarly, with artificial intelligence, the benefits often don't trickle down to the community. Instead, these advancements can force people to work even harder or adapt to new pressures, often without reaping the rewards.

That's why I see basic income as vital—it provides the starting point for addressing these structural imbalances and ensuring that technological and societal advancements benefit everyone, not just a select few.

And what will AI do? No one can say, but it doesn't look good for communities. The benefits will likely not reach them, as we already see where this is headed. That's where basic income becomes incredibly relevant. It's super relevant.

**Jacobsen:** I agree. I interviewed some AI experts, but I haven't interviewed him. But even Sam Altman of OpenAI recently mentioned that they're on a clear path to achieving AGI (Artificial General Intelligence) within this year or next, as they've already hit some key benchmarks. Now, they're starting to shift their focus to ASI (Artificial Superintelligence). It's becoming a rapidly evolving and transformative landscape. Do you have any final thoughts?

**Janssens:** I have so many thoughts! But I'll say this: giving people freedom of choice and autonomy is a crucial starting point. Basic income isn't a silver bullet—it's not the only solution. However, it is a way to honour human rights, especially in poverty-stricken contexts, by lifting people out of extreme poverty so they can meet their basic needs.

Why do I call it a starting point? Hans Rosling, the renowned demographic expert, illustrated this in his work. People living in poverty tend to have an average of six children. In contrast, those not in poverty have an average of two children. Those two children essentially replace their parents. While population growth continues due to advances in healthcare, there will eventually be a natural stabilization. Society risks becoming robotic without such measures, but that's another discussion.

Basic income is not a panacea. It's about dignity, honouring human rights, and giving people the foundation to build their lives.

**Jacobsen:** One last question: if you could describe the impact of basic income on individual lives in Uganda, Côte d'Ivoire, and other regions in just three words, what would they be?

**Janssens:** Investment, saving, and life satisfaction.

**Jacobsen:** Steven, thank you so much for your time.

**Janssens:** Thank you.