

Prof. Karl Widerquist's website biographical sketch states: "I'm a Professor of Philosophy at [Georgetown University-Qatar](#) with a background as an economist. I specialize in distributive justice—the ethics of who has what. I write on many topics including social contract theory, freedom, equality, property rights, and sufficientarianism, but I'm best known for my work on Basic Income. I've published dozens of articles in fields as diverse as economics, philosophy, politics, and anthropology. I've published nine books, including *Freedom as the Power to Say No*, *Prehistoric Myths in Modern Political Philosophy*, *A Critical Discussion of Basic Income Experiments*, and *The Prehistory of Private Property*, and [Universal Basic Income: Essential Knowledge](#) ([preview](#)). I cofounded [the U.S. Basic Income Guarantee Network](#) 1999 and the academic journal [Basic Income Studies](#) in 2006. I've appeared on or been quoted by [many media outlets](#) including [the New York Times](#), [NBC News](#), [538](#), [Vice](#), [NPR's On Point](#), [NPR's Marketplace](#), [PRI's the World](#), [CNBC](#), [Al-Jazeera](#), [Dissent](#), [Forbes](#), [the Financial Times](#), [Salon](#), and [The Atlantic Monthly](#), which actually called me "a leader of the worldwide basic income movement." My current project is a book entitled *Universal Basic Income: the Janus Debates* with Lucas Stanczyk." Widerquist explained his theory of "justice as the pursuit of accord," emphasizing respect for independence and the need for basic income to empower individuals. Widerquist highlighted the potential for poorer nations to lead in UBI implementation due to high inequality and low living costs. He also discussed criticisms, stressing the importance of setting UBI levels that meet basic needs while integrating with existing social programs.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Today, we are joined by Karl Widerquist, a political philosophy professor at Georgetown University-Qatar. He has an extensive research and publication record on universal basic income. He uses an interdisciplinary approach, incorporating economics, politics, philosophy, and anthropology into his work. He has also developed independent political theory, specifically within his framework of *justice as the pursuit of accord* (JPA). What do independentism and *justice as the pursuit of accord* mean?

Prof. Karl Widerquist: The idea of *justice as the pursuit of accord* stems from criticisms I've made of natural rights theory and social contract theory. We need a new framework to justify social arrangements. A well-intentioned individual seeking to organize social arrangements and interact with others should aim to cooperate rather than impose their will.

In doing so, you should strive to treat others well, discuss the rules of cooperation openly, and avoid forcing your will on them—just as you should avoid letting them impose their will on you. The goal should always be to seek mutual agreement with others. However, it is impossible to secure a unanimous agreement. Therefore, the aim is to achieve the broadest possible consensus, ideally with at least a majority.

As the majority, you become the ruling coalition, and you get to make the rules. However, you must realize that you're not special—you don't have a unique handle on what natural rights everyone has, especially when there is widespread disagreement about those rights.

You might imagine a social contract where, if everyone were rational and reasonable, they'd agree with you—the ruling majority. And if they don't agree, you dismiss them as unreasonable.

That is not a reasonable way for those in power to behave. Because you make the rules, you take on more responsibility. Natural rights and social contract theories give more power to the majority. Still, you must take on more responsibility and act modestly in how you treat others.

You don't gain extra authority to behave however you like. Instead, you should create rules with minimal negative interference with those who might object to them. You should do everything possible to avoid forcing others to participate.

When it's feasible, you can separate or split up. But since splitting up isn't always possible (in fact it's seldom possible in a world of 8 billion people), you must respect their independence and ask as little of them as possible. For example, if we impose a project on someone against their will, we shouldn't force them to work for it.

This is what I mean respecting independence—respecting people's freedom as independent individuals. I call this *independentarianism* because it places independence at the center of what it means to be free and how people should treat each other.

I also have a theory called *effective control self-ownership*, which describes what it means to be free. By respecting *effective control of self-ownership*, we must ensure that everyone unconditionally has access to the resources they need to survive and thrive. This is a key motivation for basic income.

Basic income exists, in part, to protect independence. It also compensates people because others have taken all the Earth's resources without giving them a fair share.

Jacobsen: Is there a notion of a minimum basic income threshold, where the level depends on the country, and this minimum allows people to lead sufficiently independent lives, in line with these theoretical concepts?

Widerquist: Yes. I have a theory of need, referencing some of the best-known theories of need in political philosophy. The basic income must be large enough to meet people's basic needs. That is the minimum requirement.

In some cases, the amount should be higher to compensate for the fact that powerful people with whom you may not agree have created rules that favor hierarchical power structures that are not completely fair. To minimize interference with individual freedom, we must ensure that basic needs are met and provide additional compensation whenever possible.

So, the amount should always meet basic needs at a minimum but aim for the highest sustainable level above that.

Jacobsen: How would you calculate this? Do you look at a country's purchasing power parity and provide a percentage of that as the minimum threshold for each country?

Widerquist: No, it's not relative—it's needs-based. You need to consider the actual costs of essentials. For example:

- What is the cost of housing?
- What is the cost of clothing?
- What is the cost of food?
- What is a reasonable form of transportation in that community?
- What are the other necessities?

You need to evaluate these things when determining the appropriate level of basic income.

Jacobsen: Now, when people look at this from other ethical and political theory frameworks, such as contract theory, what critiques do they offer? How do you respond?

Widerquist: Well, usually, there haven't been many critiques of the whole idea, but people often critique specific parts of it. For example, even some basic income supporters, like Juergen De Wispelaere and Simon Birnbaum, have argued that they don't believe a basic income can deliver everything I claim it can. My response is that the issue isn't with basic income itself—it's with basic income being set too low. A basic income at the proposed level and other social services could achieve the desired outcomes.

It's not about putting all the eggs in one basket. Just because people need a basic income doesn't mean we don't also need other social services. That's one type of exchange I've had.

Others argue that basic income lacks reciprocity, characterizing it as "something for nothing." However, since my first public piece in 1999, I've argued that basic income is the opposite of "something for nothing." The current system, where wealthy people essentially claim ownership of the Earth—where they say, "We, the rich, collectively own the Earth, and everyone else has to rent it from us or borrow money from a bank to control a tiny piece of it for a while"—*that is* "something for nothing."

In response, I argue that if someone claims part of the Earth as theirs, they must make a reciprocal payment to those who don't get to own a share of it. Basic income is entirely consistent with reciprocity and fixes the lack of reciprocity in today's system.

I envision a system where you pay for the resources you control, use, or deplete and receive payments for those others control, use, or deplete. Everyone pays for what they take from the commons and gets paid for what others take. If you pay more than you receive, that's the fee for being an above-average user of the Earth's resources or for depleting the environment. If you receive more than you pay, that's your reward for being a low-impact user of the Earth we share.

Jacobsen: When it comes to pressing issues, such as war or natural disasters, how does your framework address these contexts? For example, consider situations like Russia and Ukraine, Sudan, Ethiopia, Israel and Palestine or natural disasters like the Los Angeles fires. You mentioned variability in need. How does your framework respond to these conditions?

Widerquist: I haven't explored how the framework deals with war. However, it can work effectively when it comes to natural disasters. Amartya Sen has estimated that every major famine in the last 200 years—at least as far back as reliable information is available—has been caused not by a lack of food but by a collapse of entitlement.

For example, during the Irish Potato Famine, the problem wasn't when the potatoes died, people couldn't eat potatoes. The problem was that the potato farmers, with no potatoes to sell, had no income, and no one wanted their labor for anything else. As a result, the market sent the rest of Ireland's food out of the country because there was no money within Ireland to demand it. That's what markets do—they send goods to where money demands them.

People died in Ireland not because the market failed but because the market worked as it was markets do. A basic income could prevent such a natural disaster from becoming a full-blown catastrophe, like the Irish Potato Famine, by ensuring people retain entitlement to resources so that food comes in during crises.

Jacobsen: In various spectra of political and economic commentary, critiques of basic income, Medicare, Medicaid, the healthcare system, and similar programs often acquire epithets to describe them. For instance, terms like "entitlement programs" or "welfare queens" are sometimes used.

Setting aside the biased language of such critiques, how does basic income integrate with preexisting programs like welfare, healthcare, and other social safety nets—programs often labelled with terms like "entitlement programs" or dismissed with stereotypes such as "welfare queens"? How do you pitch basic income amidst a biased media landscape that frames these programs negatively?

Widerquist: Oh, I'm not sure. I'm primarily a theorist and, to some extent, an empirical researcher. My role is to conceptualize these programs and argue for them philosophically. That's the area in which people recognize me as a leader.

I'm more of a follower than a leader regarding strategies for implementing basic income regionally or nationally. For practical strategies, I defer to the activists. I'd recommend asking people like Scott Santens, Stacey Rutland, or Conrad Shaw—activists who are deeply involved in the mechanics of promoting basic income.

That said, I do have some thoughts. For example, this is an area where I differ from Scott Santens, probably the most prominent UBI activist in the United States. He often tries to placate critics by highlighting studies showing that basic income experiments don't reduce work hours.

Those studies show that the basic income in those experiments was too low. Basic income isn't high enough if people don't work less. The working class is working far too hard. We need a basic income that empowers people to say no to bad jobs. There are far too many bad jobs out there. Pay is too long, working conditions too poor, disrespect for laborers is far too high.

We need to go on the offensive, not the defensive, and attack the underlying ideas behind the criticisms. Criticisms like "basic income is something for nothing" or "the poor should be working harder" must be challenged head-on. We should argue that people experiencing poverty should work less, as should the middle class.

A proper basic income would allow people to demand higher wages, better working conditions, shorter hours, and more respect on the job. It gives employers the incentive to improve all aspects of the job—an incentive they obviously lack now for most jobs in this economy. That's why we need basic income. We should be making these kinds of arguments—we need to push the conversation forward, not just defend it against criticisms.

Jacobsen: Many countries, especially those with less infrastructure, could see a massive difference in quality of life, with even a small amount of income delivered to individuals. In richer societies, the impact might be more marginal.

At the same time, there is a larger issue of increasing income inequality globally. How could basic income address both the growing inequality and the needs of individuals in societies that, by dint of birth, are less fortunate than those who have been born into highly developed systems?

Widerquist: Poorer societies have an enormous advantage when it comes to introducing basic income. The first full implementation of basic income might happen in a low-income country.

There are two reasons for this. First, these societies tend to be some of the most unequal in the world. They also tend to have much wealth concentrated in very few hands. This means that a

basic income could be financed by taxing only a small number of the wealthiest people without necessarily burdening the middle class. In some countries, the middle class could be net beneficiaries—well into the 50th, 60th, or even 80th percentiles.

Second, because prices and living standards are so low in many countries, even a small amount of money can dramatically change people's lives. For example, in a country where people earn \$1.50 daily, \$1,000 could be equivalent to two or two-and-a-half years' pay. Simply giving people this money could transform their lives.

GiveDirectly, which is the best charity I know of, is already demonstrating this. They are conducting several projects, including a large-scale one in Kenya, where for more than a dozen years, they have provided people in very poor, rural villages with \$0.50, \$0.75, or \$1.00 a day. This small amount is making a huge difference in people's lives.

They've been studying the outcomes and documenting the program's effectiveness through a long-term study. This example shows the significant advantages of implementing a basic income in low-income countries—it's a different kind of basic income but an incredibly impactful one, especially where a little money can go a long way.

Jacobsen: How can people get involved? What organizations would you recommend?

Widerquist: On an international level, I recommend the Basic Income Earth Network (BIEN) at basicincome.org. Check out USBIG (usbig.net) and the Income Movement in the United States. Look for Scott Santens and Conrad Shaw online. They're both doing great work. If you don't know what's happening in your country, contact BIEN—they'll likely have information about initiatives in your area.

Jacobsen: Karl, thank you for your time. It was wonderful to meet you.

Widerquist: Thank you. It was great to meet you, too.