

Interview with Leire Rincon, President of Unconditional Basic Income Europe (UBIE)

1. Why has UBIE joined the observatory 'ToShare' on the fair distribution of wealth?

At UBIE we understand that the fair distribution of wealth should be a priority at the global level. Eradicating economic inequalities and the accumulation of wealth is not only a question of social justice, but it is also a more effective way of organizing ourselves in society. A basic income, properly implemented, is one of several tools that can be used to achieve a fair distribution of wealth. We joined the observatory not only because of the common ground substantively, but we believe in the ways of this initiative. At UBIE we believe in activism based on knowledge and research, and on the other hand, on the strengthening of a global justice movement through the creating and strengthening of networks with organizations that share with us core values and similar purposes. Thus, we see our participation in the observatory to share is ideal not only on the substantive level as well as in form.

2. Why does the accumulation of wealth and the resulting inequality represent a problem?

The accumulation of wealth and the consequent inequality pose a problem on two levels: one is about how just or ethical this is, and the second one is about how desirable this system is in terms of the outcomes generated. Related to the former, injustice is not merely an individual issue revolving around the unfair distribution of opportunities in terms of economic prosperity, self-fulfillment or health in different social strata, but this is also a societal issue. This unjust and unethical system puts at risk the legitimacy of political and economic institutions.

On another line, we should think about how desirable the outcomes produced by wealth accumulation and inequality are. Evidently, the accumulation of wealth is beneficial for some, especially for those who maintain the economic and political system which favours these dynamics. As a number of studies indicate how wealth inequality, and those who have accumulated wealth are able to exert more influence in politics and how we organise society than the majority of the population, which already seems an undesirable outcome of wealth accumulation for those who believe in democracy as a political system.

The consequences of wealth accumulation and inequality go well beyond the political system and are deep rooted into many social realities, from mental health issues, to physical health, and diverging death rates amongst those who enjoy different economic opportunities. Inequality also favours lack of social mobility, violence and crime, amongst other detrimental phenomena. In essence however, inequality is not only bad at the individual level of those who are worst-off, but it is detrimental to the whole of society, at various levels.

3. What are the proposed solutions?

The solution that we propose at UBIE is a universal and unconditional basic income, which is a periodic cash transfer provided to each person individually, of a sufficient amount to be able to sustain him/herself in that particular society. This is the ideal solution, although from UBIE we recognize that the impact and benefits of a basic income depends on how this measure is implemented and concretized, financing mechanisms and what happens with the rest of the state's policies (e.g. free public services of high quality) being of fundamental importance.

We understand that a basic income that supplants the welfare state and that is not financed progressively will be detrimental to the most common offering.

However, in addition to a basic income, UBIE considers or takes into account other measures as part of the debate, such as a Euro-dividend. Precisely, given the European focus of the organization, we believe that the ideal solution involves a policy implemented and supported at least at the European level.

4. Last week UBIE launched a petition addressed to the Eurogroup, in which a basic income is urgently requested. With the current health emergency, why do you think basic income is such a necessary policy given the current circumstances?

UBIE this week launched a request to the Eurogroup to urgently consider introducing a basic income to alleviate some of the socio-economic consequences of the coronavirus crisis.

The purpose of this petition is to promote an *urgency* basic income. From UBIE we interpret that some of the problems that have been manifested and emerged with the coronavirus crisis, actually reflect the gaps in the current capitalist system, its unsustainability and undesirability as a system.

Despite being the largest health crisis of the time, coronavirus is already prooking an unprecedented economic crisis of great impact in society in general. In Spain, ERTes, the closure of thousands of shops, the problem of the self-employed, are just some of the economic problems facing society. Given the impact that the coronavirus crisis will have on an individual and collective level, basic income is a tool to prevent the rising numbers of individuals falling into poverty or at risk of poverty. In essence, it guarantees living standards in a time of unemployment. In addition, in the long term it is an ideal tool to promote entrepreneurship, care work and the adaptation to crisis and new labour market demands, since it guarantees the survival of people and frees up their time to be able to dedicate it to unpaid activities in currently offered jobs.

The current crisis shows that in the presence of priorities and political will, important changes can be made fastly, and that the necessary resources can be deployed. We have seen how in the face of this health emergency, many governments, have not relegated their confidence in the free market, but have made use of all public and private resources through expropriation of diverse venues, deployment of public resources and funding of all forms. We have seen how entering a

crisis shows that putting life at the center is not only viable but desirable: self-care and wellbeing is constantly being promoted, like physical, creative and artistic activities.

From UBIE we think that crises can be windows of opportunity to change, that is why we wanted to promote basic income now: we think it is the moment where its usefulness and advantages become visible and clear, and we think that current political debates reflect this too.

We think that the global political discussion on basic income is also reflective of the fact that many actors, political representatives and policy-makers are coming to terms with the idea of a basic income as being more effective for society. For one, the patchwork of programs of social benefits cannot tackle and cover the circumstances of the pandemic. On another level, representatives are aware of the detrimental effects of placing the millions of affected individuals on stigmatising, residual benefits. This is a moment to invest in proper economic safety nets for the population. A pandemic with the magnitude of this one is certainly the ideal exogenous shock to implement such a policy: it cannot be attributed to individual actions, and individuals cannot be asked to work when there is no employment.