

Basic Income & Climate Change – Written Responses to Live Audience Webinar Questions

Responses by: Dr. Jim Mulvale and Scott Santens | November 12, 2021

Q. Does the solution *need* to be basic income? Could other means (ex. Living wages, child care, etc.) not achieve the same goal?

Jim: The basic income movement in Canada has always stressed that a basic income guarantee is not a silver bullet and will not on its own to solve all our problems in regard to social injustice or sustainability. But it is an essential component in a broader response. See for instance, OBIN Statement of Principles:

https://www.obin.ca/obin_basic_income_statement_of_principles

Specifically on the living wage campaign, it can be noted that several years of campaigning have yielded very limited results. Perhaps it is time to change the conversation about income security and to not see the labour market as its primary guarantor.

Scott: Nothing else achieves the same goal as basic income because cash can be anything, and people's basic needs need to be met first and in a dependable way.

Consider the provision of food instead of cash. What kind of food? What variety? What quantity of each? There are people who love meat and there are vegans. There are people who love bread and people who are gluten intolerant. There are people who love peanut butter and those who it would kill. Cash enables people to choose the food that's best for them, anywhere where food is available, because cash is accepted by everyone. And the lack of conditions means that people don't need to do something first in order to obtain food. Purchasing food enables people to have a healthy foundation of food security. Food banks which are now seen as a way to fill gaps should be seen as an utter failure of policy to avoid people needing food banks.

Consider next the provision of health care instead of cash. 80% to 90% of health outcomes are determined by the social determinants of health, not medical care, so hospitals are to a huge degree treating the impacts of poverty, chronic insecurity, and excessive inequality. By providing people with money, financial security, and reduced inequality, basic income creates a healthier society that needs less healthcare.

Consider next the provision of education instead of cash. Like health, educational outcomes are greatly determined by socioeconomic standing. Increasing a family's income and economic stability can mean the difference between a kid failing school, and a kid getting straight As. The investments put into education will go further, once every kid lives in a house with basic economic security.

What's missing is a strong foundation for all programs to be built upon. Right now, they are built on sand. Nothing else but basic income can function as a strong foundation always underneath everyone's feet.

Q. Are Indigenous people, black people, disabled people and feminists framing basic income to shift it from predominantly male perspectives?

Jim: There is lively debate among disability advocates about the pros and cons of a BI guarantee for all. One way to address (debatable) concerns that a BI might result in a downgrade of existing disability benefits is to think about a “basic income plus” model. Everyone gets a basic income guarantee, but persons with a disability who encounter expenses related to their condition have access to additional cash and in-kind supports to ensure their full inclusion and participation.

There have been strong feminist proponents of BI, including Carole Pateman, Ailsa McKay, Almaz Zelleke, and Kathi Weeks. Web searches of their names will yield relevant material.

There has been some Indigenous support expressed for a BI approach. The Southern Chiefs Organization in Manitoba has been in this camp. There are also interesting arguments about how Treaty annuity payments could evolve into a form of basic income. In the US, the Cherokee Nation in North Carolina has been distributing casino revenues to all tribal citizens for almost 25 years as a form of (partial) ‘basic income’. There are other similar examples of Indigenous nations directing collective income to individual members.

I don’t know if contemporary groups like Black Lives Matter have taken a position on BI. But almost sixty years ago, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. strongly advocated for a “guaranteed annual income” (in the nomenclature of the day).

Scott: There are certainly all of those perspectives and more. From the beginning, the unpaid care work of women has been a big part of the basic income conversation, as has domestic violence and pay inequity. The potential for basic income to help with racial justice has also been a part of the conversation for decades, with the Black Panthers being for basic income back in 1966, whose support was cited by the Movement for Black Lives when they included basic income in their platform in 2016.

More recently, organizations like Color of Change have begun pushing for basic income, and many of the city-led basic income pilots are focused on Black Americans, especially Black mothers.

As for indigenous support for basic income, I have not seen it be as much of the conversation as the aforementioned groups, but it's still out there, and some even are already effectively living with basic income via casino dividends like in North Carolina. One anecdote that I particularly like from an indigenous participant in a basic income pilot is the ability it provides to enable her to sustain the traditions of her people. It takes time and resources to do that. Traditions don't just perpetuate themselves. They need to be nurtured and basic income better enables that by freeing people from daily survival concerns.

Q. In the Maritime provinces, we are currently seeing a significant political will to develop clean energy projects at a rapid pace. At the same time, we are seeing growing political will (particularly in PEI) to develop a basic income. Do you feel this solidifies the links between climate action and a basic income? Can the Maritimes be a perfect testing ground for the two acting in tandem?

Scott: Typically, this kind of conversation involves discussion of a carbon fee and dividend as a means of connecting these two, but another interesting avenue is green dividends.

Consider wind turbines. Who does the wind belong to? If taxes pay for wind turbines, shouldn't citizens be seen as investors? Why not connect wind turbines to dividends? The more wind turbines, the higher the dividend. The same thinking can be applied to solar panels. Who owns the sun? These energy sources are using energy that belongs to all of us, and so we should all benefit from it as collective owners.

I'd like to see someone somewhere pursue this green dividend model, and the Maritime provinces seem like a great place to do it.