

# Unconditional Basic Income

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An unconditional basic income (henceforth, UBI) is a “regular income paid in cash to every individual member of a society, irrespective of income from other sources and with no strings attached” (Van Parijs and Vanderborght 2017: 4). This brief definition highlights three major differences from existing cash aid schemes. First, a UBI would be paid to individuals rather than households. Its amount would therefore be the same for everyone, regardless of the family situation. Second, a UBI would be paid without a means test. Everyone, rich or poor, would be entitled to the benefit. Third and finally, no work requirement or obligation to actively seek employment would be attached to the payment. These key features reveal the radical nature of this proposal, which no doubt helps explain the skepticism with which it continues to be received in policy-making circles, even though it has attracted increased attention since the early 2000s. To date, worldwide, only one genuine UBI has been implemented: since 1982, all residents of the state of Alaska in the United States receive a modest UBI under the form of an annual oil dividend, with no strings attached (Widerquist and Howard 2012).

## Equality

The first proposal for a UBI established at the level of a national community was formulated by the Belgian socialist Joseph Charlier in 1848 (Cunliffe and Erreygers 2001). In his eyes, it was intended to compensate for the injustice generated by private land ownership. In theory, he claimed, land is a collective good that should enable everyone to meet their own needs, but due to the legal protection of private property a considerable portion of the population is denied access to it. A “territorial dividend” financed by a property tax is therefore an elegant way of solving the problem of the unequal distribution of this precious resource, pending its pooling in the longer term. Since Charlier, some form of egalitarianism has remained central to the justification of UBI. For example, as early as the 1930s, future Nobel Prize-winning economist James Meade advocated the implementation of a “social dividend” as one of the components of a fair society in which the unequal distribution of productive assets – not only land, but capital and technology as well – is corrected by public authorities (Meade 1989; O'Neill and White 2019).

The core egalitarian justification for a UBI thus comes down to considering that we are co-owners of a considerable quantity of inherited resources (*see* EGALITARIANISM; EQUALITY). These resources include not only land, as in Charlier, or capital and technical progress, as in Meade. Among other possibilities, they also cover

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