Even before the 2008 global financial crisis, it was becoming obvious that, for hundreds of millions of people, waged work is a scraggy and often unavailable basis for dignified life. The myriad of collapsed livelihoods left in the wake of that crisis drove home this realisation and revived a search for more appropriate, egalitarian and reliable sources of income support. The havoc of the COVID-19 pandemic has made that quest even more urgent.

Those kinds of upheavals are likely to recur. Scientists expect that, even when (or if) COVID-19 eventually recedes, similar zoonotic epidemics will follow in the near-future. In addition to public health crises, both developed and developing countries across the world are contending with overlapping turmoil: economic instability, environmental disasters, and social and political turbulence. Amid all this, steady and decent waged work is becoming increasingly rare, inequality is widening and precarity is deepening.

These are not mere cyclical adversities, to be subdued through adaptation and innovation. They arise from the driving dynamics of a capitalist system that degrades and depletes, at increasing pace, the natural resources, social assets and political capacities that enable it to flourish. The result is an entanglement of crises. Mid- to long-term social and
economic planning has to anticipate a ‘new normal’ that is characterised by intersecting instabilities and compounded insecurities. As John Harris noted in mid-2020, ‘We live … in an age of ongoing shocks, and it is time we began to prepare … unprecedented times demand drastic answers.’

Current systems for allotting the means for life are not only inadequate and unjust, they are doomed.

**AHEAD OF THE CURVE**

South Africa exemplifies this predicament. Economic policies have serviced the accumulation of great wealth, but at the cost of prolonging and deepening a social crisis. At least four in ten adults cannot find paid work of any kind, let alone decently paid work. Poverty remains widespread and is concentrated disproportionately among the black African majority. Massive income and wealth inequalities inherited from South Africa’s colonial and apartheid past persist. With economic policies designed for growing and partially deracialising the economy – but much less for redistributing the wealth generated in it – inequalities have widened. The environmental costs of these economic choices, stretching back more than a century, continue to be borne primarily by poor communities, who are also most vulnerable to the effects of climate change.

At the same time, South Africa battles three coinciding epidemics. The overlapping HIV and tuberculosis epidemics have taken an exceptionally heavy toll, especially in low-income households and communities. Together these epidemics have killed at least 3.7 million people since 2000, most of them in what should have been the prime of their lives. The COVID-19 pandemic – and the social and economic restrictions imposed to control it – has caused additional privation, ruining the livelihoods of millions of people.

Economic and social policy frameworks in South Africa continue to embody the idea that waged work is a viable and sufficiently available basis for avoiding poverty and pursuing fulfilling lives. When, during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, the South African government
introduced additional emergency grants, the initial relief package centred on expanding the Unemployment Insurance Fund, even though almost half of workers were not eligible for support from that fund. This left at least six million South Africans without any direct income support during the first COVID-19 lockdown in early 2020. Despite the evident scale of need, the policy reflex was still to link crisis relief to waged work. Eighteen months into the COVID-19 pandemic, with more than 40% of adults unable to find paid work, the South African finance minister’s response to calls for a basic income was to fret about creating ‘a cycle of dependency’ and propose skills training and a ‘job seeker’s grant’ as a way forward.

Many millions of South Africans are trapped between an economic and social order that insists they sell their labour to ‘earn’ a chance of a dignified life, and an economy that is structured in ways that render them superfluous to its needs. There is no prospect of mass unemployment disappearing in South Africa for the foreseeable future (Chapter 2). This is not a sudden revelation. The Taylor Committee, in considering a basic income proposal in South Africa almost two decades ago, noted that ‘in developing countries, where stable full-time waged formal sector labour was never the norm, it is increasingly unlikely that it will become the norm’. Two decades on, that statement seems indisputable.

Strategies that tether livelihoods and the realisation of social rights to job-creating economic growth are glaringly insufficient in such conditions. South Africa offers no reasonable basis for expecting that job creation can provide a viable foundation for wide-ranging livelihood security and social inclusion. Treating waged work as the fount of security and well-being also undermines the broader pursuit of social and economic justice – by filtering those demands through a quixotic quest for ‘full employment’. More, better-paid and socially useful jobs are necessary, but that aspiration does not encompass and should not substitute for building a just society. Much more realistic is a framework which recognises that waged work is one of several components of social citizenship and inclusion.
CONFLICTING VIEWS ABOUT A UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME

In the global context of ongoing economic instability and increasing inequality and insecurity, the option of a UBI is attracting widening interest and support, including in South Africa (Chapter 1). Much of this support, particularly on the Left, reflects an awareness that epochal changes are under way and that they demand new economic and social arrangements. In modest, but potentially important ways, a UBI is relevant to each of the main dimensions of crisis (economic, ecological, social and political). But the mainstreaming of the UBI idea is not an entirely ‘innocent’ and straightforward phenomenon: it speaks also to other underlying trends, including the reshaping of social policy in the shadow of financialised capitalism during the past thirty years and the fading authority of neoliberal capitalism (Chapter 6). Profoundly different ideas therefore circulate about the definition, design and functions of a UBI, and how it would relate to other elements of social and economic restructuring.

Left and progressive proponents support a basic income that is universal, forms part of an extensive and redistributive social provisioning system, and functions in support of systemic changes that are aimed at creating a more viable, just and egalitarian society. Those on the Right, especially the libertarian Right, see it as an opportunity to further limit the remit of the state and to expand the authority of the market by replacing – and commodifying – other forms of social provisioning and protection with a single cash payment. Other variants of a basic income find support elsewhere on the ideological spectrum. They range from forms of emergency income support that are targeted at those ‘most in need’, to cash grants that support people’s (re)integration into the labour market. This conceptual slipperiness has enabled a potentially radical intervention to become a staple of mainstream debate.

The UBI considered in this text is defined as a regular (monthly) income that is paid unconditionally to all individuals without means-testing or work requirement. It supplements existing forms of income
support (such as the child support grant, old-age pension and disability grants in South Africa) and other forms of social provisioning for low-income earners (such as free healthcare and school education; subsidised energy, transport and housing, and so on) (Chapter 1). And it functions as part of overhauled social and economic policies that are geared to reduce poverty and inequality, thus improving people’s capabilities and well-being. The payment is universal: everyone benefits. It therefore satisfies the criterion of fairness. Anyone who chooses to work is rewarded in addition to the payment. Those who earn higher incomes contribute comparatively more to the financing of the UBI, but a large share of the funding is drawn not from individuals but from the circuitries in which profit is generated and appropriated in capitalist economies.

A great deal of evidence supports the expectation that a UBI can contribute substantively to improving people’s livelihoods and life prospects (Chapter 3). Data from basic income pilot projects and from analogous cash transfer schemes indicate that, even if set at a low amount, a UBI would improve the financial, health and education status of low-income households, and reduce poverty.11

If linked to other transformative efforts, a UBI can promote and support forward-looking, adaptive change. It can function as a safety net for communities hard-hit by the effects of global warming and can provide multifaceted support as countries embark on a just transition to a low-carbon economic model. The extent of those effects would be shaped by the size of the payment and the availability of other forms of social wage provisioning. Increased income for the poorest deciles can also boost aggregate demand for basic goods and services, since low-income recipients are likely to spend rather than save income.12

Since it is neither conditional (in the manner of a job guarantee, for instance), targeted (like South Africa’s social grants), nor means-tested, a UBI as defined here would be less complicated and less costly to administer, and it would achieve more complete coverage than standard income support schemes. Core logistical requirements are a centralised database (updated with birth and death registration, and immigration
and emigration data) and a disbursement facility (electronic transfers to individual savings accounts). By drastically reducing administrative mediation, a UBI also offers fewer opportunities for patronage and corruption – pitfalls which blight the state in South Africa and elsewhere. The entanglement of the ruling ANC (and state officials) with profit-seeking ventures invites corruption, wastage and governance failure, as is evident at local\(^1\) and national government levels in South Africa,\(^4\) including in ‘spending irregularities’ during the COVID-19 pandemic.\(^5\) A UBI could sidestep such hazards.

**LIBERATING POTENTIALS**

A UBI holds deeper, transformative promise as well (Chapter 3). By strengthening workers’ abilities to quit a job without falling into distress or to turn down work that is exploitative or dangerous, a UBI could empower (especially low-wage) workers individually and collectively. The ability to decline waged work can help reset the balance of power between workers and employers, which would benefit workplace organising and other efforts to improve labour practices at the low-income end of the labour market. Those sorts of effects speak to the distinctiveness of a UBI. Not merely an adjustment or expansion of the existing social welfare order, it can be a qualitatively different intervention that breaks with the waged work-centric model of the old order, its paternalist frame and its patriarchal slant. It would present people with the opportunity to sidestep, at least temporarily, a fate where, as André Gorz put it, we are forever ‘prepared to make any and every concession, to suffer humiliation or subjugation, to face competition and betrayal to get or keep a job, since “those who lose their jobs lose everything”’.\(^6\)

This liberating effect can extend wider. If large enough, the payment would provide people with income security that enables them to devote their energies and time to purposes other than waged work – for example care and other socially productive work; community projects such as food gardens and repair and recycling work; cultural production; volunteer
work; and studying or acquiring new skills. Those kinds of activities are especially relevant for building sustainable and viable local communities and economies. Gorz referred to them as ‘socially determined’ work: activities that allow one ‘to feel useful to society in a general sense, rather than in a particular way subject to particular relationships, and thus to exist as a fully social individual’.

A UBI also challenges the reflex to equate well-being and progress with metrics of economic output. If large enough, a UBI undercuts the power of capital by enabling people to sidestep, at least temporarily and partially, the need to ‘earn’ basic security by selling their labour on unfair terms. That undermines capital’s power to decree the terms and conditions on which it uses low-skill labour. The demand for such a payment flows from the insistence that

everyone has a right to a decent life whether or not they have a job, that human dignity does not depend on paid employment, that perpetual growth is not the way to prosperity, and that everyone should benefit from shared wealth and our shared planet.

In such ways, a UBI that challenges the status of paid work as the decisive basis for social citizenship and entitlement serves as more than a means for individual ‘enablement’: it could, in Erik Olin Wright’s view, ‘underwrite social and institutional changes’ and help shift power relations and hierarchies. For Lindsey Macdonald, it also ‘holds the promise of establishing the material basis needed to make freedom a lived reality.’

A UBI on its own would not achieve those objectives, but it could support a broad suite of efforts to achieve them. Introducing and defending a UBI require political and economic conditions that are potentially transformative. Those conditions create space to shift relations of power in ways that open the possibility for further advances towards egalitarian goals. This perspective breaks with the ‘reform-versus-revolution’ binary of the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and resembles what Gorz referred to as ‘non-reformist reforms.’
A common criticism is that a UBI would encourage people to withdraw from the labour market on a scale that disrupts economies (Chapter 4). In the context of extremely high unemployment, concerns about a disincentive effect among low-skilled workers are misdirected. Even in general, basic income projects and cash transfer schemes offer scant basis for such unease.\textsuperscript{22} Might a basic income, if too small, end up subsidising low-wage employers, thereby undermining minimum wage demands and weakening worker organisations?\textsuperscript{23} Again, the worry seems less pertinent to a highly distressed setting such as South Africa, where hyper-unemployment already pushes the reservation wage far below a survival-level income.

Another concern on the Left is that a basic income, by fusing social welfare principles with neoliberal logic, would lubricate individuals’ deeper integration into the market as consumers. It is an odd objection, which tends not to surface in the context of waged work (which, of course, is remunerated with cash). It also ignores the reality that certain essential goods and services are currently not accessible outside the market (for example, food, toiletries, clothing, telecommunications), even though some, conceivably, could be converted into public goods in the future.

A more troubling possibility is that a UBI could be used as a lever for removing existing entitlements. In the Indian context, for example, Jean Drèze has warned of ‘a real danger of a UBI becoming a Trojan horse for dismantling hard-won entitlements of the underprivileged’:\textsuperscript{24} That concern dwindles when directed at a UBI that supplements other forms of social provisioning. However, there remains a danger that a basic income could be traded off against other entitlements if fiscal conditions deteriorate. Which brings us to the most common objection to the UBI demand: that it is unaffordable.

**WIDER IMPLICATIONS**

A basic income scheme would be expensive; how expensive would depend on the amount of the payment, how eligibility is defined, whether and how the payment is phased in and ramped up, and how it links
with existing forms of income and other social support. Blanket claims about (un)affordability are unjustified and erroneous. Detailed costing estimates for different scenarios are being developed in South Africa and elsewhere. Their fiscal feasibility depends on the financing options, a host of which are available (Chapter 5) and many of which are desirable irrespective of whether a UBI is introduced.

The fiscal choices draw into focus the linked need for supportive macroeconomic policy changes (Chapter 6). Macroeconomic policy has to facilitate industrial, labour and social policies that create more and better jobs, equitably build capabilities, are ecologically sustainable, redistribute incomes, and foster both social and productive capacities (especially in low-income communities). Fiscal and monetary policies have to simultaneously privilege societal needs and enable a shift towards a low-carbon economic model. The latitude for such innovation is considerably greater than is acknowledged in orthodox economic circles.

This underscores the need to approach a UBI not as a stand-alone, technocratic intervention or tool, but as an element of a broader, long-term project of transformation and emancipation. Its impact and fate will depend on how it synchronises with other economic, social and political strategies, which forces drive those strategies, and whether those forces are capable of defending the desired changes. Even when achieved, a UBI will remain a contested and politically unstable intervention. Jurgen de Wispelaere and Leticia Morales are correct to warn of a danger that the interaction between basic income and residual layers of traditional welfare programmes implies continuous competition over tight budgets and scarce organisational resources ... gradually converting the existing scheme from the ground up into something that only formally resembles what the enacting coalition set out to achieve.27

Yet this social and political context tends to be overlooked in much of the current debate about a basic income. There is growing mainstream
recognition of the need for some form of emergency income support as a cushion against destitution. But the size, design and financing of such a payment will be a matter of intense dispute and struggle. A generous UBI, financed along the lines discussed in Chapter 5 for example, requires fiscal and other changes that encroach on capital’s ability to commandeer the bulk of the surplus it appropriates from human labour (paid and unpaid) and nature. There is more at stake than the technical design of a social policy tool.

If detached from mobilised social support and without strong institutional backing, a UBI will be vulnerable to distortion or ruin (Chapter 6). Policy interventions do not automatically or indefinitely do the bidding of their creators. Separated from a strong political and social movement of change, a UBI runs the risk of backfiring, of being captured and repurposed in ways that sustain exploitation, precarity and inequality. The process of achieving a UBI therefore is at least as important as the achievement itself. That awareness is frequently absent from the UBI debate, which tends to orbit around justifications for and critiques of a UBI. Kathi Weeks makes the crucial point that

we would judge the success or failure of a movement for basic income not only in terms of whether the policy is implemented, but also in terms of the collective power, organizational forms, critical consciousness, and new demands that the process of demanding it manages to generate.28

A key variable is the state: whether and how it can be transformed from functioning as facilitator of private accumulation to creating the conditions, fostering the capabilities and furnishing the means for a just and sustainable society. Achieving and defending a UBI will require an active state that is accountable to progressive social forces and that privileges the needs and entitlements of ordinary people. Turning the state in that direction presents a massive challenge in a country like South Africa, where powerful sections of the state (notably the National
Treasury and the Reserve Bank) remain steeped in neoliberal ideology and tend to equate the fortunes of financialised capitalism with societal well-being. Nevertheless, South Africa’s Constitution mandates a shift towards a state that resets the relationship between the economy and society.

HEARTS AND MINDS

There is both a manifest need and potential for a model of income distribution that does not hinge on exchanging labour for wages or on qualifying for conditional ‘charity’. James Ferguson has suggested that the South African social grant system will gradually evolve into a de facto form of universal, citizenship-based entitlement, a kind of UBI ‘through the back door’.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a growing alliance of grassroots and non-governmental organisations, trade unions and research bodies in South Africa demanded that the state steadily graduate the newly introduced emergency grants into a full-fledged universal basic income scheme. The urgency of those demands was highlighted when rioting and looting erupted in July 2021.

While the need for an intervention like a UBI may seem increasingly self-evident, a generalised desire for a UBI cannot be assumed. The BIG campaign in the early 2000s did not ignite popular enthusiasm, nor did it defuse conservative reticence. In Jeremy Seekings’ view, ‘basic income activism in South Africa has remained a largely intellectual project sustained by a small network of individuals without strong organisational or popular bases.’ This may be changing. Recent surveys and opinion polls suggest a majority of South Africans now support a basic income.

That stance could solidify as the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects drag on.

Yet, even as opportunities for waged work diminish, its intrinsic value continues to be glorified. In addition to being portrayed as the core legitimate source of income for able-bodied adults, waged work is seen to bestow virtue, earn respect, nourish pride and assign legitimacy. Invested
with moral, psychological, social and political currency, its allure endures.\textsuperscript{33} Merit, social status and entitlement continue to be tied to waged work, and politicians persist in framing reality and policies in those terms. Thus, ‘job creation’ still operates as a radiant substitute for the task of creating a just society.\textsuperscript{34} In reality, pervasive and relatively secure access to decent work was realised only partially in a few industrialised countries, and those conditions survived for about two generations in the mid-twentieth century. In South Africa’s case, that idyllic arrangement was available only to white workers. And yet a kind of ‘melancholia’ lingers, a hankering after illusory pasts that traps inventiveness inside the boundaries of contemporary capitalism. This yearning also legitimises policies that are oblivious to the dynamics shaping the nature and availability of waged work today.

A UBI destabilises cherished beliefs about the role and status of waged work in human life. How a UBI is framed and promoted is therefore vitally important – not only to build durable social and political support, but because the eventual form and function of such an intervention will be constantly contested.\textsuperscript{35} A \textit{universal} basic income will attract fulsome resistance from both capital and the state. Achieving and defending it will require social and political forces that are strong enough to prevail against that opposition. And \textit{that} will require reshaping the ‘common sense’ people use when defining and weighing the claims they have on the common wealth, on one another and on the state.

The stigma attached to unemployment – and to non-waged income – has to be challenged, along with notions that paid work is the only authentic form of productive activity, the only legitimate way to contribute to society, and the only rightful basis for entitlement and reciprocity. As Kathi Weeks has emphasised, the arguments and tactics used to marshal support for a UBI will be important in their own right:

A demand is not just a thing, but something that must be explained, justified, argued for and debated. The practice of demanding is itself productive of critical awareness and new political desires.\textsuperscript{36}
It will be important to pursue social and economic policy reforms ‘that change people’s relationship with work: including the value we attach to work, the time we devote to it, and how work frames our judgements of other people’.\textsuperscript{37} That means valuing and validating other forms of work (volunteering, care and other forms of social reproductive labour) and other forms of contributing to the public good – both rhetorically and practically. The gendered constructions of ‘work’ (which devalue care work and other social reproductive labour) are obvious candidates for change. So, too, the impulse among many men to extol waged work not only as a source of recognition and status, but as an opportunity to recuperate domineering forms of masculinity. If the social and administrative category of ‘the unemployed’ is made more porous and less damming, the association of waged work with authority, the stigma attached to unemployment and the disparagement of non-waged work will weaken.

* * *

The push for a fully fledged UBI recognises that tectonic shifts are underway and that they demand actions that go far beyond attempts at recuperation and repair, or short-sighted notions of ‘building back better’. There are risks, unanswered questions and major challenges attached to a UBI. But as a formative intervention, the likely benefits of a UBI are, on balance, so urgent, numerous and potentially far-reaching that it should form part of a drive to create a viable and just society.