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Thinking Bigger

Contribution to GTI Forum Universal Basic Income: Has the Time Come?

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Universal basic income is a redistributive way to deal with the extreme and increasing inequality we have in the world today, generated by the very extreme inequality in the distribution of means of production and appropriation of resources. However, despite the great redistribution implied, the Jeff Bezos of the world, the Mark Zuckerbergs, and the Sundar Pichais will still remain at the top of the world's distribution of wealth and power. As such, they will automatically benefit from whatever increases in the world's income get generated in their way. They will keep receiving billions, as they did this year, because "they have a right to it." Under the UBI schemes, they will pay taxes, and the income collected through taxation will be channeled and distributed to recipients at the bottom of society. This redistribution will deal with poverty in a rather efficient way. It will clearly contribute to build a more just society, but by far, it will not be an egalitarian solution since great differences in income and power will remain.

Could we not do better by thinking "outside the box" in this discussion? Can we not question, for example, the fact that the immense wealth generated by the increase in Amazon's sales this year is the result of private ownership and accumulation of resources? Could we not begin questioning again the maldistribution of the means of production and appropriation in this planet and search for ways to make sure that they belong to everybody?

In our old arguments for socialism, we used to talk about the "nationalization of means of production," and I don't want to return to old debates related to a different world. But, as we find ways of discussing and implementing UBI schemes, could we not start thinking about the fact that the world's resources should not continue to be controlled by a few while so many have nothing? We need to think about how they could be collectivized and accessed by all the world's

citizens so that we all have rights to them. To begin thinking about how this ambitious goal can be put in motion seems mind-boggling, if not impossible. But, if our ancestors developed ways of organizing their commons, perhaps we can do it too. Old commons can be a source of inspiration to begin with. They encompassed more local wealth and means of production whereas our globalized resources would be harder to identify and distribute, but that does not mean that it can't be done.

About the Author



Lourdes Benería is Professor Emerita at Cornell University, where she taught from 1987 to 2010 and was Director of the Gender and Global Change Program and of the Latin American Studies Program. An economist, her work has concentrated on development issues—especially in Latin America—and on labor markets, women’s work and globalization. She has worked with several international organizations, including the ILO, UNDP, and UNIFEM (now UNWomen), and she is a former president of the International Association for Feminist Economics. She is the author of such books as *Gender, Development, and Globalization* and *Changing Employment Patterns and the Informalization of Jobs: General Trends and Gender Dimensions*. She holds a PhD in economics from Columbia University.

About the Publication

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