From Utopia to Implementation: How Basic Income has progressed from radical idea to legitimate policy solution

Summary of key findings

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Introduction

Basic income (BI) promises a life free from poverty, where all citizens enjoy real freedom and an equal stake in society, where automation is no longer a cause of anxiety, and where no-one is forced into poor quality, low-paid work[1]. Previously an idea very much at the margins of politics and policy debates, BI has enjoyed a steep rise in popularity recently, attracting regular coverage in the mainstream media, and pilot projects are now underway or in planning in eight countries. BI is now a credible and much-debated alternative to existing welfare policies, and, many believe, a genuine opportunity to address poverty and inequality[2]. This rise from utopian idea to legitimate policy is, so far, little explored or understood.

The majority of BI research and theory is specific to either ethical or economic aspects, with little attention given to the political and policy context, the policy process by which BI might move from idea to implementation, or the barriers and enabling factors involved in making this happen[3]. Previous attempts to secure a place for BI on the policy agenda in Finland and Canada, small-scale experiments in India and Namibia, and examples of universal benefits in Iran and Alaska provide some insight into BI's growing popularity. However, given their limited and sometimes tangential nature, and despite their extensive coverage in the literature, it seems unlikely they can fully account for the rise in interest in BI.

This study therefore set out to understand the contexts, circumstances, and key actors involved in four of the pilot projects, Finland, the Netherlands, Ontario and Scotland, exploring how the seemingly utopian and marginal idea of basic income has found a place on the policy agenda. It examines how basic income is legitimised as a policy solution, and to what problems, how the idea and implementation of basic income varies across the cases, and identifies the key actors involved in the policy processes. Ten semi-structured interviews with civil servants, experts and advocates involved in BI and the pilots were used to develop comparative case studies. A summary of key findings from the research is presented below, with short descriptions of the key aspects and features of each case, followed by cross-case comparison, looking at the major themes and issues cutting across all cases.

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[1] Van Parijs, 1992; Van Parijs and Vanderborght, 2017
[2] De Wispelaere, 2016
[3] De Wispelaere and Morales, 2016

Key Findings

Finland: Pragmatism and Experimentation

A BI experiment launched in Finland in summer 2017, focusing on unemployed individuals and testing reduced conditionality. A strong pragmatic thread runs through the Finnish project, and an over-riding emphasis on the project as an experiment, reflecting a wider interest in evidence-based policy. Implementation has been driven by a focused and urgent need to get things done, necessitating compromise in experimental design and bureaucratic processes. There is seen to be a limited political window in which to deliver the project, so there is a focus on how to deliver the best possible experiment within the practical and temporal constraints.

Prime minister Juha Sipilä, a relative newcomer to politics, was the primary instigator of the experiment, committing to experimenting with BI in his governmental programme. The reasons for this commitment are unclear; it may have been influenced by an expert report about BI[4], as well as a response to the gathering pace and volume of public and media interest. It appears that his interest in BI is pragmatic rather than values-driven, and combined with the focus on experimentation, this seems to have shaped the overall nature of the pilot. Policy changes over many years have, often unintentionally, acted as test-beds for aspects of BI, for example bigger income disregards for those in low-paid work. These incremental changes have opened up policy space for BI to colonise, and allowed policy to deviate from well-worn paths[5].

The experiment is part of a broader policy focus on addressing the changing nature of work and problems with the social security system, but government is also running a parallel experiment testing the effects of increased conditionality. As such, the BI experiment does not appear to be a signal of deep cultural or political change. Political opinion is divided on whether BI is a suitable solution, however, interestingly this has led both sides to support experimentation, in order to resolve the debate.

Netherlands: Conflict and Compromise

Several municipalities in the Netherlands are in the process of launching experiments into the effects of reduced conditionality on recipients of social assistance. Under municipalities' original plans, they were identified as 'basic income' experiments, however, as is characteristic of much of the process, political disagreement between local and national government led to significant compromise of their

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[4] Forss and Kanninen, 2014
[5] Béland, 2010; De Wispelaere and Fitzpatrick, 2011

scope and purpose. Municipalities embraced the opportunity for change which BI represents, whilst national government strongly resisted anything resembling it.

The experiments are primarily driven by municipalities, often working in close partnership with local universities. Empowered and emboldened by devolution, municipalities were driven to make a difference for their citizens, and demonstrate innovation. This resulted in a power struggle, with the bottom-up desire to experiment pushing against top-down control and resistance to change.

In 2015 the Participation Act was introduced, a new legal framework for employment support and social assistance, delivery of which is devolved to municipalities. The Act intensifies conditionality and rules, and is unpopular with municipalities who do not believe this approach is effective. Contained in the Act is an Innovation Clause, which allows for experimentation within the legal framework. This clause proved to be instrumental: municipalities seized the chance to test less conditionality and improved work incentives. This appears to be an unintended consequence of the clause; the space in which municipalities have been able to act was created accidentally, and they embraced it.

A small number of key individuals at national level contributed to a surge in interest in basic income, building on a long history of interest in BI in the country. Strong local coalitions of actors involving advocates, activists and citizens have been key to building broad-based support and legitimising the experiments. There is considerable evidence of collaboration and proactive networking between municipalities and universities across the country, in contrast to the tensions between local and national government.

Ontario: Poverty and Holism

The BI experiment in Ontario, Canada, focuses on low-income individuals, and guarantees a minimum income to those on the programme. Its over-riding focus and motivation is the relief of poverty, which is defined broadly and includes a wide range of associated problems including food security, health, mental health and homelessness. Delivered by the Ontario provincial government, the pilot seeks to mitigate personal hardship as well as the financial costs of poverty. The experiment is not a stand-alone trial, but part of a move for systemic change in the social security system. Awareness of the scale and severity of poverty and its impacts is seen to have grown amongst politicians and the general public, and this has been key to a parallel growth in awareness and support for the principles of BI.

Two political actors have been critical in the instigation of the experiment, Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne and former Conservative senator and academic Hugh Segal. Segal, a long-standing advocate

of BI, was commissioned (pro-bono) by the provincial government to write a report and series of recommendations for the experiment[6]. His position as a powerful political actor lent significant legitimacy to the project, and appears to have assisted in gaining cross-party support for the experiment. It built on a long history not only of advocacy but also political support for BI in Canada.

As well as the importance of these individuals, significant levels of well-organised lobbying, from professional groups such as doctors as well as advocates and activists, have fed into the broader context of public and political opinion. This lobbying is seen as directly influencing the decision to proceed with the experiment. The broad range of advocates reflects the broad range of positive outcomes that BI is deemed to offer.

Scotland: Collaboration and Resonance

Four local authorities in Scotland, Glasgow, Fife, Edinburgh and North Ayrshire, are working towards implementing BI pilots. The BI activity in Scotland has a strong emphasis on networks, collaboration, sharing and facilitation, with experts and advocates amongst the key actors. Think tanks and academics have been instrumental in raising the profile of BI amongst the public and politicians, lending it legitimacy, and leading on policy and project development. In addition, a wide range of voices, many from the grassroots, have increased public and political engagement with BI. Together, these actors have contributed to an upsurge of interest in the last 12 months. There is broad agreement that current systems and policies for dealing with long-entrenched problems in Scotland such as unemployment, poverty, inequality and poor social mobility are ineffective, and that the scale and impact of these problems is growing.

Whilst local politicians are driving the experiments, there is also a supportive national political environment, with Scottish national government encouraging and now proposing to fund experimentation. Aspects of BI such as innovation resonate with the Scottish cultural identity. The wider policy environment provides a fertile and complementary context, with a good level of cross-party consensus on key issues: the Independence Referendum in 2014 galvanised political engagement and a common desire for a better country, albeit with different perspectives on the best way to achieve it. Scotland was found to be the country with the furthest-reaching ambitions relating to BI, which is seen as having the potential to unlock wider debate. Although the current priority is to test the effects of BI, it is framed as the basis for fundamental, perhaps paradigmatic, social change.

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[6] Segal, 2016

Scotland is the most engaged of the cases in international activity, taking more cues from other pilots, and proactively seeking to contribute to the global debate. The global interest in BI is shining a spotlight on Scotland as an innovator, and the attention provides political currency to BI's supporters, thereby strengthening the position of BI as a viable policy option.

Cross-case Comparison

A number of themes cut across all or most of the cases, and appear to be the most influential and important in generating the conditions for the experiments to take place, shaping their contexts and also their content. These themes interact and influence each other, strengthening in some cases, modifying and translating in others:
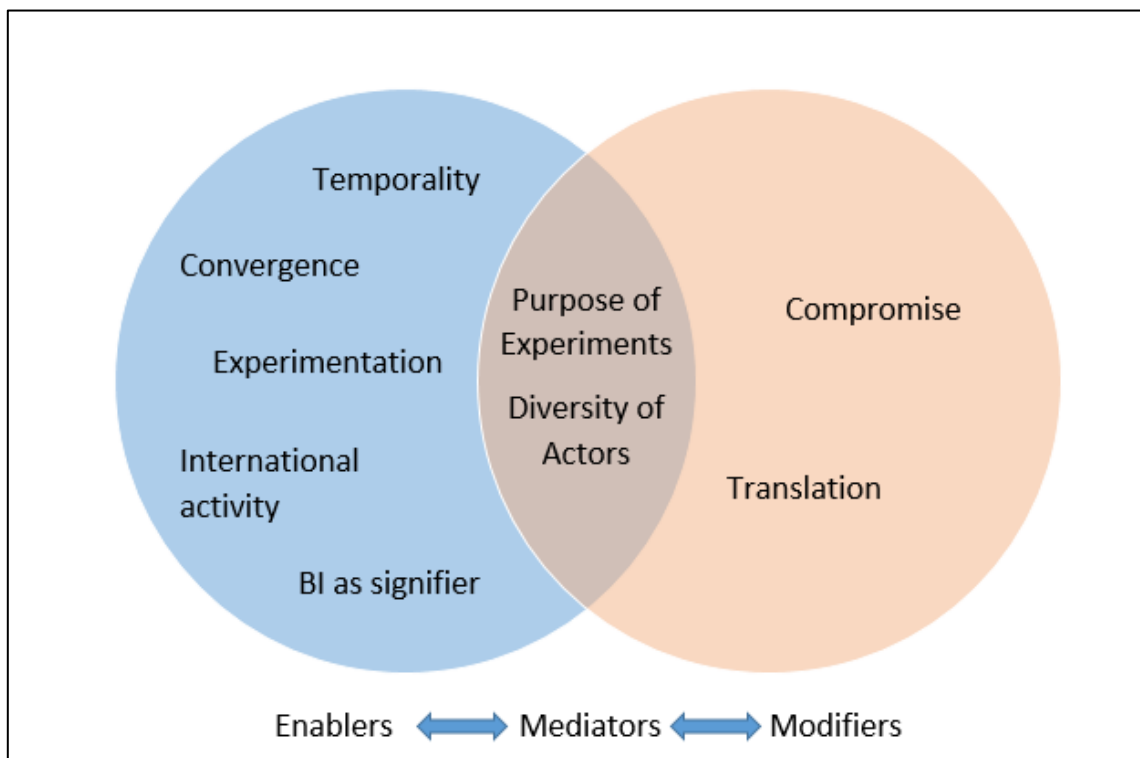
Figure 1: Key Themes

In each case multiple factors have *converged* to become a whole: an enabling policy space in which localities have been able to act. Some have occurred by accident and some by design, some are a consequence of the passing of time. Some, such as the income disregards in Finland and innovation clause in the Netherlands, appear small and relatively inconsequential, but in combination contribute to much wider impacts. All have in some way contributed to BI being legitimised as a policy option and to key actors being open to explore it, and crucially have all occurred together within a *temporal* window.

Anxiety about the future is coupled with long-standing interest in BI and advocacy in all cases, although the historical roots appear less strong in Scotland. This has allowed public and political opinion, and norms and values, to develop over time. This appears to have led to increased familiarity and comfort with the concept of BI, eventually reaching a threshold and triggering change. Ontario and Finland in particular demonstrate a combination of slow, incremental change, such as in public opinion, and rapid decision-making and implementation. The problems that BI is hoped to address have not diminished over time, despite societal and economic change and concerted policy attention, whilst awareness and understanding of these problems has grown. Policy has not kept up with change or found new ways to tackle problems, leading to a re-examination, and sometimes an active positioning, of BI as a possible solution.

The emphasis in each case on *experimentation* is an important enabler. Each case is framed as an investigation into whether BI might really deliver what it promises, in a wider context of growing interest and legitimacy in evidence-based policy. Support for experimentation does not necessarily equate to generalised support for BI however, nor does interest in BI necessarily signal deep political or societal change. In Scotland and Ontario the potential for BI to precipitate deeper change appears strongest; less so in the Netherlands and Finland given the wider policy contexts.

BI is a policy laden with meaning, and a strong *signifier*, framed in all cases as radical, innovative and different. It is seen as multidimensional, speaking to a broad range of different actors, and intersectional, providing solutions to many problems. It taps into many different motivations, and critically, is different to existing policy options which are failing to deliver. There appears to be a kudos attached to testing BI, which is embraced by those involved. Particularly in Scotland and the Netherlands, BI takes on a symbolic role and is a signifier of particular positive qualities which actors wish to project: innovation, influence, leadership, progressiveness.

This signifying plays out through *international activity*, where piloting BI positions a locality as a global innovator. In all cases the international context lends legitimacy and importance to the local experiments, however the extent to which international activity directly influences local policy and implementation varies. Finland, the Netherlands and Ontario are all well aware of the international activity, and see their work as part of a global conversation, but their own local circumstances are the primary influencers of the shape and scope of their experiments; there is no strong evidence of policy transfer between the current experiments. The dissemination of historical BI activity appears to be more influential, in particular the Mincome experiment of the 1970s[7]. In all cases there is an

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[7] Forget, 2011

exchange of ideas and experiences between countries at a global level, creating a space in which policy can move and translate[8], which may prove to be more influential in future.

As well as acting strongly as an enabler, the ***purpose of the experiments*** has also acted to modify and shape their design and implementation. Common to all four cases is the belief in the failure of existing social assistance systems. Although each country's system is delivered differently, the basic problems are common to all: performance in addressing long-term unemployment falls short; systems are too complex and bureaucratic; they contain structural flaws that disincentivise the outcomes they seek to deliver; and they stigmatise those in poverty. This represents a significant reframing of the problems of unemployment and poverty, shifting the narrative away from 'benefit dependency' and the undeserving poor, to acknowledging the importance of structural and systemic issues[9]. Changes to the labour market, particularly precarious work and growing automation, are the cause of significant anxiety about the future: BI is seen to have the potential to allow this new future to be negotiated.

Every case is hoping for a range of different positive outcomes, both economic and social, pragmatic and ethical, and all are motivated by concern for citizens' welfare. Each case, but particularly Ontario, acknowledges the interconnectedness of problems, and views BI as a holistic and intersectional policy solution. These problems and desired outcomes modified the experiments' design and implementation, for example incentivising work by setting deduction rates at a level to make work pay, or working across bureaucratic boundaries to ensure a holistic approach.

The ***diversity of actors*** has both enabled the experiments and shaped their implementation. Informal and collaborative groupings of advocates, experts and political actors appear to be an important enabling factor. The motivations, interests and power of the interlinked mix of actors have had significant effects on how the idea of BI has been translated into implementation in all cases[10]. Particularly in the Netherlands and Scotland there is a strategy of proactive network development, which serves to shore up support, and consolidate BI as a legitimate policy: a coalescence of actors, if not organised coalitions, appears key to making progress[11].

There is a distinction between those actors making up the broader context of debate, support and awareness, and those directly involved in decision-making, although their multiple interpretations of BI all contribute to its translation into a locally-specific form[12]. In general, politicians and experts

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[8] Stone, 2012
[9] Bacchi, 2009; Patrick, 2014
[10] Lendvai and Stubbs, 2007
[11] Martinelli, 2016
[12] Yanow, 1996; Lendvai and Stubbs, 2007; Freeman, 2009

wield most power, with expert power being particularly important in Finland and Scotland. In all cases political actors are driving experiments, and all are at sub-national level, except in Finland. There is broadly a left-right political split in terms of support and opposition across the cases. However, this obscures more nuanced positions, including opposition from trade unions in Finland, and conservative support in Ontario for a smaller, simpler welfare state. This appeal to different political orientations is partly a quality of BI itself, and partly a conscious tactic to position it in a multi-dimensional space.

Although all cases demonstrate significant similarities, it is at the level of detailed design and implementation that divergences emerge. **Translation** of the paradigmatic idea[13] of BI has occurred through local circumstances; political, cultural and structural[14]. These circumstances have shaped the focus, scope and delivery of each experiment. One of the key drivers of translation is the need for **compromise**: each case has been forced to make compromises in order to make the experiments politically and experimentally acceptable. Implementation processes have been complex and atypical, adapting and morphing according to a variety of local forces and their complex interactions, including public opinion, political disagreement, bureaucracy, and experimentation. None of the experiments is testing anything like a paradigmatic BI; there is a strong sense of ambitions being scaled down, particularly in the Netherlands.

Conclusion

In their specificities, all of the contexts and circumstances in this study are different, and each case has its own character, however there are common themes that occur in all. No one single factor has brought about the implementation of BI, but it has required a cluster of enabling factors occurring within a temporal window, which interact and strengthen each other. Some factors have been gestating for many years, others have entered the frame recently and trigged rapid progress. Problems, policy and politics have converged, opening up a window of change[15]. Broad agreement amongst diverse actors on policy problems has occurred at the same time as BI has risen in prominence and credibility, and powerful actors have found the idea politically acceptable.

The explicit framing of the pilots as experiments, and the status of BI as different and innovative, combined with the kudos lent by the international attention on the pilots, lend BI an important legitimacy. A critical mass of public awareness and debate has helped to push BI up the policy

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[13] Adhering to all core principles of BI: unconditional, universal, non means-tested, individual, De Wispelaere and Stirton, 2011
[14] Johnson and Hagström, 2005; Lendvai and Stubbs, 2007; Stone, 2012
[15] Kingdon, 2011

agenda, and a resonance with cultural and political values has given it an unusually strong following and momentum. A complementary policy context helps, but even in its absence actors have carved out space to act. The failure of existing social assistance policies is a key driver in these cases, and the central problem that experiments are attempting to tackle. BI is viewed as a multi-dimensional and intersectional policy, capable of addressing multiple policy problems.

Whilst the study can't be considered as a 'how-to' guide for other localities, with findings applicable to any setting, the similarities across all the studied cases give a useful indication to policy-makers and advocates of the circumstances and factors which may be necessary to advancing BI from radical idea to implementation.

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