

# Role of civil society in realising a universal basic income guarantee

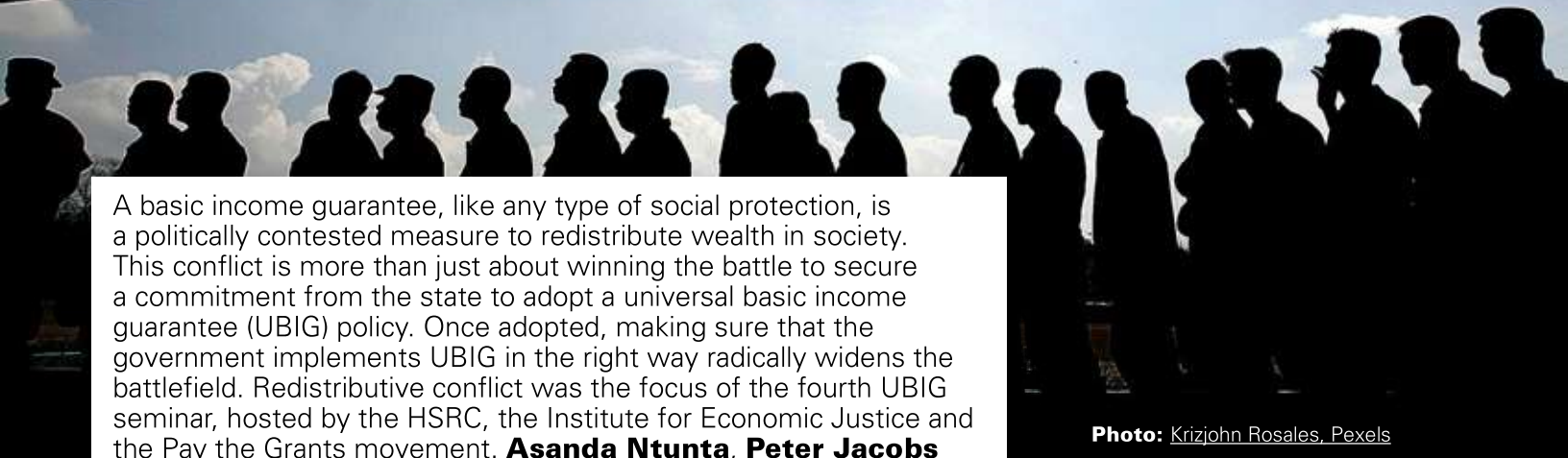


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A basic income guarantee, like any type of social protection, is a politically contested measure to redistribute wealth in society. This conflict is more than just about winning the battle to secure a commitment from the state to adopt a universal basic income guarantee (UBIG) policy. Once adopted, making sure that the government implements UBIG in the right way radically widens the battlefield. Redistributive conflict was the focus of the fourth UBIG seminar, hosted by the HSRC, the Institute for Economic Justice and the Pay the Grants movement. **Asanda Ntunta, Peter Jacobs** and **Palesa Sekhejane** share their thoughts on the significance of civil society activism for UBIG.

**S**outh Africa's deep and enduring socioeconomic crises have not yet resulted in a universal basic income guarantee (UBIG). However, with the promise of comprehensive social security reform high on the government's agenda, prospects for a UBIG look more hopeful than in the past. Even so, difficult questions about political tensions around pro-poor redistribution, the political will of the government, and whether civil society groups can meaningfully influence UBIG policy must be answered.

General Alfred Moyo, coordinator in the Fight Inequality Alliance and #PayTheGrants campaign, spoke on these issues at the recent fourth and final UBIG webinar hosted by the HSRC, the Institute for Economic Justice and the Pay the Grants movement. He tied the lack of political will of the government on UBIG to the defence of a socioeconomic system, which is based on growing wealth polarisation.

Civil society movements confront formidable macro-economic and political opposition in the battle for a UBIG, which includes anti-BIG narratives and the persistence of divisions and fragmentation among these movements. In Moyo's view, "the anti-BIG narratives that enjoy government backing do not only lack transparency and accountability but exclude would-be beneficiaries of UBIG from critical policy decisions." The Department of Social Development (DSD) papers on comprehensive social security reforms, for example, pay lip service to bottom-up

and participatory policy development. Moyo also lamented how the state is micromanaging UBIG public discourses and processes, which frustrates rather than facilitates civil society activism.

What the government needs to do, Moyo contended, is to break with its fiscal model based on austerity budgeting. The government must place the protection of the interests of the working class or the marginalised first while also transforming the underlying capitalist system and making the policy spaces inclusive to civil society demands, he said.

Lebogang Mulaisi, a labour market policy coordinator at the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), endorsed these views, underscoring the urgency for unity among civil society movements around UBIG. Bringing trade unions together with civil society movements should help amplify the collective voice for UBIG; however, the risk of it being shoved off the policy agenda remains huge. She stressed that solid empirical evidence is also essential to back social movement calls for the implementation of UBIG. Trade unions want the social relief of distress (SRD) grant to be extended but at a decent living standard well above R350 per month, she said. In addition to this demand, the activities of COSATU affiliates "include mass power mobilisation, educating and training workers on the benefits of UBIG and leading and supporting advocacy groups for UBIG," Mulaisi reported.

Trade unions are figuring out ways to persuade their members and non-unionised workers to join the battles for a UBIG, because it is sensible from both livelihoods and solidarity perspectives, she said. Stretching meagre incomes to assist needy relatives or neighbours is a common practice in worker communities. Moreover, solidarity struggles have deep roots in the labour movement. Mulaisi also compared the popularity of the fight for UBIG in COSATU with that of civil society organisations. In her opinion, trade union activism lags civil society activism with this demand. The envisaged social movement for UBIG ought to prioritise closing the gaps between these two types of organisations.

Another trade unionist, Ferron Pedro, a working-class campaigns coordinator and educator for the South African Federation of Trade Unions (SAFTU), agreed with proposals for united civil society action for UBIG. She reminded webinar participants that advocacy, mobilisation and struggles for UBIG have a history spanning decades. The impact of COVID-19, coupled with numerous gaps and shortcomings in current social safety nets, make the urgency for UBIG more compelling, said Pedro. Public pressure on policymakers through mass action for UBIG is crucial, but insufficient rallying of communities behind these actions also requires civil society movements to step up campaigns to educate communities about the benefits of this social policy, she said.

“The struggle for increasing wages is not separate from the struggle for UBIG.” The SAFTU leadership is working towards a Working-Class Summit in 2022, with UBIG mobilisations as the core focus. Maximum unity of trade unions and other grassroots movements needs to be built from the bottom, she said. “What is at stake in this debate is who decides how society is organised and how wealth is distributed. To make UBIG a reality it is urgent to raise the consciousness and confidence of the working class to take back socioeconomic control from the ruling elite.”

Both trade unionists emphasised that consciously building a clear understanding of UBIG within communities must go hand-in-hand with greater awareness of how to organise protests in the face of an infectious pandemic. Physical distancing restrictions that come with COVID-19 regulations might hamper the “going to streets”, classic mode of trade union struggles, but do not impose an outright ban on mass protests. Pressuring the state through mass action calls for more creativity in how civil society movements execute such actions.

How the country gets to a UBIG policy is impossible to envisage without inspecting the logic of policy change. This means that the prospects for a UBIG policy must be grounded in the country’s policy development realities. In his speech, Professor Alex van den Heever from the University of the Witwatersrand and a member of the Expert Panel on Basic Income Support included a cautionary note on how policy processes work. South Africa has “a shallow and vulnerable institutional framework that makes it difficult to achieve incremental advances in areas of social assistance and the current social grants framework,” he said.

On such a fundamental policy shift, the constitution envisages change through deliberative societal conversations and decisions. Instead of developing policy through consensus, decision making among a minority in an undemocratic way has become normalised, said Van den Heever. He added that policymaking pathways are fraught with bottlenecks, blockages and pitfalls, which indicates that UBIG will be won through difficult incremental struggles over time.

## Conclusion

A need exists for a giant social movement for UBIG and critical conversations about how to bring such a movement into being. The delinked conceptualisation of a basic grant and cost of living are contradictory, and thus evade equitable social security reform, redistributive justice and social solidarity. Lessons from history suggest that it will be a battle on multiple fronts, and the negative UBIG messaging that overshadows the public discourse needs to be defeated. With the false dichotomies and prejudice of social grants debunked, the participatory assertion of the realisation of rights should empower marginalised communities to join UBIG campaigns.

*Towards the end of 2021, the HSRC, the Institute for Economic Justice and the Pay the Grants movement hosted webinars on the UBIG debate. This overview is based on the [fourth webinar](#) under the title **#BigQuestionsForUBIG: How Do We Get There?***

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