

Basic Income and health in Ireland

Ar scath a cheile a mhaireann na daoine

People live in each other's shadow

Introduction

Seventy years ago, in 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights stated that “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and his family...” However, Eurostat, the statistical office of the European Union, reported in 2018 that 14.9% of Irish people in Ireland were living with a disposable income at a level below the risk of poverty¹. In that same year, the Council of Europe voted in favour of a resolution to adopt basic income². This surely then is an opportune time to examine the role of basic income in improving the health and well-being of Irish people. The role of income in determining health status is unequivocal. There is a ‘huge gap’ in mortality rates between the poorest and the richest people in Ireland³ and life expectancy in deprived areas in Ireland is five years less than that of people living in least deprived areas⁴.

The philosophy of basic income has been discussed previously in the Irish context⁵, including the exchequer implications⁶, and the impact on the economy and labour force⁷. This paper will discuss how a basic income would help to redress the balance and improve the health and wellbeing of all Irish people. This discussion will be in four parts: Firstly the role of basic income in improving the well-being of specific groups of people in Irish society will be discussed. Secondly, the paper will explore how basic income, in part by increasing social capital, would impact positively on Irish society and by doing so, improve the health and well-being of all Irish people. Thirdly, the experience of basic income as it has been tried in other countries will be discussed. Finally, we will look at the ways in which basic income challenges our current economic model and recommendations will be made. Initially however, it is necessary to look at the definitions of both basic income and health.

Definition of basic income

A basic income, as defined by Social Justice Ireland⁸, is an income unconditionally granted to all on an individual basis, without a means test or a work requirement. It is a form of minimum income guarantee that differs from those that now exist in various European

countries in three important ways: (i) it is paid to the individual rather than the household (in the case of children, a reduced amount is paid to the parents/carers), (ii) it is paid irrespective of any income from other sources, and (iii) it is paid without requiring the performance of any work or the demonstration of a willingness to accept a job if offered. Such a system would relieve absolute poverty, ensure that a person would live in dignity and most importantly a person would be able to work and to participate in society, as this income would not be withdrawn if other income is earned.

Definition of health

The World Health Organization defines health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”⁹. In contrast, the definition of health by Rene Dubos, namely “a modus vivendi enabling imperfect man to achieve a rewarding and not too painful existence in an imperfect world”¹⁰ reflects more precisely, perhaps, the situations most of us face in our lives. This definition of health acknowledges the fact that that we live in an imperfect and changing world, and events in our lives do not always turn out as planned. In Dubos’ definition, health is a coping mechanism that helps us in a changing world. Of interest, the concept of well-being is included in both definitions of health.

Basis income and health

The World Health Organization puts the social and economic environment as the first determinant of health¹¹, and income is widely considered to be the most important social determinant of health¹². The relationship between income and health has been extensively studied by Sir Michael Marmot¹³, Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett¹⁴ among others. They have analysed the health of people on low incomes and found that the adverse impacts of poverty were linked to material deprivation, a restriction on social participation and the ability to have control over one’s life. Above the level of material deprivation, income positively impacts on health largely through social conditions. People are in poverty not generally because they are unwilling or unable to work, but because they are poorly paid¹². All across Europe, the lower the status of work, the more likely it is to be work characterised by conditions such as low control over conditions, low organisational justice, social isolation,

shift work and job insecurity; each of these damages health and contributes to the social gradient in health – the lower the social position the poorer the health¹⁵.

In the light of this, while all of society would benefit from the introduction of basic income, there are particular groups in Irish society who would particularly benefit; (a) people who are unemployed, (b) people who are employed but on a low wage, (c) people who are in uncertain employment, (d), people who are unhappy in their present work, (e) people trapped in relationships because their partner earns the household income, (f) people who have come out of prison and finally (g) people who undertake voluntary work.

In relation to (a) people who are unemployed, under our current system, unemployment payments are means tested, and there are restrictions if a person who is currently receiving unemployment assistance undertakes paid work. Means tested benefits have been found to be deeply damaging to personal trust, self-confidence, and respect for others¹⁶, and such welfare systems have been described by Bregman as a “system of suspicion and shame”¹⁷. Furthermore, the World Health Organization has reported extensive international evidence to show that the conditional nature of benefits reinforces the adverse physical and mental health difficulties of income insecurity¹⁸. The Department of Social Protection’s campaign ‘Welfare cheats cheat us all’ gave the “impression that there is a huge amount of fraud when there is not”¹⁹. Of note, half of the approximately 20,000 appeals in relation to social welfare decisions made every year in Ireland have a successful outcome²⁰. The anticipation of status assessment of benefit eligibility also has adverse health effects¹⁸.

The second group of people (b) who would benefit from the introduction of basic income comprise people who are working but earning a low wage. Social Justice Ireland (SJI) state that “work is not an automatic poverty reliever”, and report that over 5% of people employed in Ireland earn a figure which puts them below the poverty line²¹. Of note, the percentage of lone parents in employment earning an income below the poverty line, increased from 9% in 2012 to 20% by 2017²². Furthermore, inequality of income is marked in Ireland by the fact that jobs at the lower end of the pay scale are more poorly paid than elsewhere in the EU²³. Much valuable work undertaken in Ireland is either unpaid or paid very poorly. The hourly rate of a person working as a cleaner in Ireland is 10.21 Euros with an annual salary ranging from 19 to 24,500 Euros²⁴. Basic income would allow a re-assessment of the importance of valuable work. A basic income would mean that people

would feel less compelled to endure poor working conditions, and it would also make it easier to leave such employment or to explore the option of further education, without fear of losing any allowance.

Thirdly, in relation to people who are in uncertain employment (c), SJI reported that in 2016, 7% of the workforce was in temporary employment. It is being increasingly recognized that people in such employment are at risk of mental stress²⁵. In the future, job losses may also be expected as a result of increasing automation, and there is growing concern that the “traditional standard of secure, certain, regular employment is being replaced by employment that is insecure, uncertain, and unpredictable”²⁵. A report from the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation in 2019 states that by 2025 “Certain job roles will disappear or be redefined and emerging jobs will require new and different skill sets”²⁶. Recent research in 2019 from University College Cork also found that the impact of automation in Ireland will be felt “far and wide” and that two out of every five jobs are at high risk of automation²⁷. Job insecurity impacts on health²⁸ and this uncertainty is recognized by the World Health Organization as a social determinant of health²⁹.

The fourth category (d) comprises the many people who are unhappy in their present work. In a study of 12,000 professionals by the Harvard Business Review³⁰, half of those asked said that their job had no “meaning or significance” and an equal number were unable to relate to their company’s mission. A further study, also quoted by Bregman, found that 37% of British workers think that they have “a bullshit job”. Basic income would make it easier to change work positions or to pursue further educational opportunities. It would also support the development of varied types of cooperatives, which would benefit the mental health of worker/owners.

People trapped in relationships because their partner earns the household income (e) and people who have come out of prison (f) would also benefit from a secure income³¹ and finally people who undertake voluntary work (g) would also benefit from recognition of their work. Over a quarter of adults (28.4%), aged 15 years and over undertake volunteer work in Ireland and over 40% of volunteers worked more than 100 hours a year³². Applying the relevant national minimum wage, the value of this unpaid work is over 2 billion Euros.

In addition to the specific groups listed above, who would benefit from the introduction of a basic income, many other individuals and households would benefit also.

People currently employed would be free to continue to work if they wished to do so, or to devote their time to other pursuits. Basic income would recognize the valuable work that parents and carers undertake and would provide an option for partners to stay at home and care for their young children. It would also provide scope for cooperative shared childcare, which is between care in the home and the more institutional crèche settings³³. It would also provide a flexible form of job sharing, and would make it easier for people who work too much to reduce their working time or to take a career break³⁴. The benefits of flexible working have been outlined³⁵, and include increased well-being and health, enhanced creativity and personal productivity.

Basic income “liberates people from the struggle for survival” so that they can participate in and contribute to society³⁶. People could follow their interests, pursue further education, write poetry, and become involved in community activities. There would be no ‘welfare fraud’ or poverty trap’. As Philippe Van Parijs says:

basic income provides a floor on which people can stand, because it can be combined with earnings, rather than a net in which people can get stuck because it is withdrawn if people who are on low incomes start earning³⁷.

And Professor Erik Olin Wright says, of a basic income, “Poverty is eliminated, the labour contract becomes more nearly voluntary, and the power relations between workers and employers become less unequal since workers have the option of exit”³⁸ A further benefit of basic income would include savings in the cost of the administration of our social welfare system. Many of the current allowances could be abolished, with resultant savings in administration.

Impacts of basic income on Irish society

While many specific groups would benefit from the introduction of basic income, Irish society would benefit also. Over the last sixty years, at least in European countries, it seems that individualistic values have become more important in contrast to values that are associated with being engaged as members of a community³⁹. When this happens, social capital may decline. Social capital relates to quality of life and social inclusion, and the most

recent study of this in Ireland was undertaken by the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) in 2003⁴⁰. Their report defined social capital as follows:

“The concept of social capital sounds abstract, but it couldn’t be simpler, do you trust people? How many clubs, societies or social groups are you a member of? If your child gets sick do you have support to call on? Basically how much social contact do you have in your life? These social ties, according to research will help you live longer and are probably worth money to the economy”

People living in neighbourhoods with low social capital have been found to have lower mental health scores than people living in areas with high social capital, after individual socio-economic factors and life events were adjusted for⁴¹. Higher levels of social capital also improve physical health, and been found to be inversely related to mortality⁴², and to better self reported health⁴³. Some recent findings from disparate sources in Ireland reveal some worrying findings in relation to social capital. For example, a recent study by the Irish Longitudinal Study on Aging in 2019 (TILDA) reported that while loneliness was associated with a poorer quality of life, almost one third of adults over 50 experienced emotional loneliness at least some of the time, and that it is now a “critical issue” for public health⁴⁴.

There has also been a steady decline in trade union membership in Ireland, every year from 2005 when the data originated, to 2019⁴⁵. Similarly, there has been a drop in attendance at Mass from 1991, when over 90% of people who identified themselves as Catholic attended Mass weekly, to 35% in 2016.⁴⁶ In contrast to Ireland, where social capital is not regularly assessed, the Office for National Statistics in the UK assesses social capital⁴⁷. In a report issued in 2020, it found that social capital had declined; *“we are engaging less with our neighbours but more with social media”* A sense of belonging to neighbourhoods also fell. On an individual level, reported membership of political, voluntary, professional or recreational organisations declined while social networking via the internet increased. It found that *“While we feel safer walking alone after dark in our neighbourhoods....more recently fewer of us feel like we belong to them.”* Communities with high levels of social capital have lower crime rates⁴⁸.

With the security of basic income, it would be possible for people to spend more time in their communities, freed from the necessity to rush to and from work, and social capital would increase. There would be more time for friends, time to get to know our neighbours, and to become involved and to volunteer in community activities. People who volunteer report better health and happiness than people who do not, irrespective of their socio-economic circumstances⁴⁹. The NESF report in 2003 found that while social capital in Ireland in general was above the European average, interestingly, it identified four distinct groups in which social capital was low, namely (i) people living in rural or large urban centres, (ii) people who have a disability or are ill, (iii) people in lower socio-economic groups, and (iv) people over 65 or between 18-29 years. While basic income is received by people irrespective of their abode, it would substantially improve the living conditions of people in the three latter groups and free them from the restrictions of means-tested social welfare payments.

Basic income could also be expected to contribute to a reduction in relative poverty; As the Green paper on basic income states⁵⁰:

"...the Basic Income system studied would have a substantial impact on the distribution of income in Ireland in that, compared with conventional options, it would on average improve the incomes of 70% of households in the bottom four income deciles ...and raise more than half of those who would be below the 40% poverty line under conventional options above this line."

Basic income experiments

Although income is a determinant of health, and many studies of varying types of income supplementation, including basic income have been undertaken⁵¹, many have not examined their impact on health⁵². Nevertheless there have been some small studies which are of particular interest because of their design. It is beyond the scope of this article to examine the impacts of health of all the studies which have been undertaken but four of note are referred to here, Finland, Ontario, Canada, and Alaska.

Finland was the first country in Europe to examine the impacts of an unconditional basic income⁵³. It was organized by the Finnish Ministry of Social Affairs and health and

involved 2,000 people randomly selected from the employment benefit register, and who received basic income for a two year period. The results were then compared to a group of people matched on socio-demographic variables who received unemployment benefit^{54 55}. Participation was mandatory in order to avoid participation bias. Perceived health and well-being, among other variables were assessed. The scoring system for life satisfaction ranged from 0 to 10, where 0 was a negative result and 10 was the highest possible result. In terms of life satisfaction, the group who received basic income scored 7.32, in contrast to the control group who scored 6.76. In addition, the group who received the basic income had the highest values for levels of confidence in the future, had less mental stress, and better self reported health. All of these differences were statistically significant.

Parameter	Control group	Basic income group
Level of confidence in the future	46.2%	58.2%
Mental stress	16.6%	25%
Self-perceived health	46.2%	54.8%

Some results of Finnish basic income study

A basic income project was also initiated by the Government of Ontario in 2017, however due to a change in the government, the project was stopped after a little over a year. Nevertheless, researchers from Mc Master University in association with two local groups undertook an online survey and qualitative interviews, to ascertain how basic income had affected people’s lives up to that date. The results were published in 2020⁵⁶. It is clear that the lives of the people in the area were improved in meaningful ways. Almost 80% said that they had increased overall well-being, reduced anxiety, greater self-confidence, a better diet and had a more positive outlook on life. Over three quarters said that they were more physically active, and a half reported less use of alcohol and tobacco. There was a fall of a third in visits to general practitioners and casualty. A quarter of respondents had started an educational course during the scheme.

In order to determine the impact of a basic income on population health in Manitoba, Canada, a comparative analysis was undertaken to determine whether contacts with the health care system declined among subjects who lived in a town receiving basic income relative to a comparison group, again matched by socio-economic variables⁵⁷. Health administration data

was used for the analysis. There was an 8.5% decrease in hospitalizations and mental health diagnoses, relative to the comparison group. Interestingly, two groups of participants in the group receiving basic income were noted to have decreased their working hours. The first group was young mothers, and the other group comprised single young men who pursued further education. The author concluded that the results would suggest that a basic income, widely implemented in society, may improve health and social outcomes at the community level.

Alaska has had a form of basic income, arising from the Alaska Permanent Fund. There, it was found that there was a substantial decrease in cases of low birth weight babies (14% of the sample mean), and that the effect was higher for less well educated mothers⁵⁸. This is significant as there is a higher risk of earlier mortality in later life in babies who have had a low birth weight⁵⁹.

It is clear that basic income, with the security of a stable income and the freedom to work without any restrictions, has the potential to improve health and well-being.

Our current economic model in the wider context

Basic income would be good for our environment as well as our society. The aim of our current economic policy is continued economic growth. But we cannot have infinite growth on a finite planet. An increasing GDP depends on an over-riding impetus to ‘consume’, and this has directly resulted in the two over-riding issues of our time: namely climate change and the reduction in our biodiversity. The concept of ‘enough’ has been comprehensively discussed by Anne Ryan⁶⁰;

“‘Enough’ puts us back in touch with the part of us that understands beauty and scale and that empathizes us with the rest of creation.”

Increasing consumption leads to an increased GDP, which consumes our ever depleting resources and results in the production of greenhouse gasses. In this regard, the role of local communities will be vital in our efforts to bring our carbon emissions under control. It no longer makes sense to transport frequently used foodstuffs and other commonly used items around the world; we will need to produce more of what we use every day locally. A basic

income, by giving people more time, will enable people to grow their own vegetables and generally provide more of what they need locally, reduce the emission of greenhouse gasses and bring the associated health benefits of fresh produce. In addition, our increased demands result in changing land use and resultant decrease in habitat areas. Habitat loss is the greatest cause of the devastating reductions in our biodiversity⁶¹. A society with basic income would be one where economic growth was not always increasing, and had reached a steady-state. In the words of Social Justice Ireland⁶²:

“social policy and economic policy can no longer be conceived separately, and basic income is increasingly viewed as the only viable way of reconciling two of their respective central objectives: poverty relief and full employment.”

In conclusion, the NESF report on social capital referred to earlier, concluded with the following

“Perhaps the greatest contribution the Government and the social partners can make to investment in social capital is through actions that encourage social inclusion, fairness, transparency and equality of opportunity”.

It is clear that basic income has benefits for all of Irish society and our environment. In relation to Dubos’ definition of health, basic income can be seen as an enabler, enabling people to be free to explore their capacities and to more readily address their life circumstances. There have been calls to introduce basic income in the light of increasing levels of unemployment due to robotic technology, to provide a sense of social security and well-being and to ensure that health inequalities are progressively reduced⁶³. In Oct 2019, the Dept. Of Social Welfare’s budget for 2020 was 21.2 billion⁶⁴, larger than the budget of the Department of Health of 17.4 billion⁶⁵. Failure to test this promising initiative has been described as a “failure of government and a missed opportunity to invest in the health and well-being of an increasingly insecure and unequal society”⁶⁶. The time has surely come to consider introducing basic income to Ireland.

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