

## **Faith Community support for a Basic Income Grant**

This gathering of BIEN is significant for a number of reasons. Most importantly, I believe it is the first time that you are getting together under the banner of the Basic Income EARTH Network. From a largely European structure in the past, you are joining hands with basic income activists in other parts of the world to form a network that encompasses the globe. And you are demonstrating this transition and this commitment by convening your Congress in the developing world, in Africa, and specifically in South Africa – a nation whose shockingly lopsided distribution of wealth and income makes it a prime candidate for the introduction of a basic income grant.

The shift to an “Earth” network implies not only a change of size, but also a change of perspective. The developing world has different sets of issues, different bases of experience, a different range of social actors than many of those who participated in past Congresses might be familiar with. For one thing, faith communities tend to be much stronger and more visible in the developing world than in Europe. Faith communities can bring a great deal to the campaign for basic income, such as:

- Deep and rich traditions of ethics and social justice that can lend a particular moral authority to interactions with public officials and decision makers;
- Networks of communication and organisation that reach into just about every community and engage regularly and intensely with ordinary people in all their diversity;
- Unique perspectives on and understanding of the needs, interests and aspirations of those who are likely to be the primary beneficiaries of income support schemes; and
- A wealth of practical experience regarding service delivery at the local level.

Although we know that, in the USA, Dr. Martin Luther King was an early proponent of basic income, in part on moral/theological grounds, basic income has not been a burning issue for North American churches in recent years. From what little I know about BIEN’s history, it has largely been a network of academics, without a lot of religious involvement. So as you spread your arms to embrace the entire world, we hope that you will also be embracing faith communities. And we hope that embrace will be returned.

Certainly in South Africa, people of faith have been centrally involved in the Basic Income Grant campaign from an early stage. In a nation where nearly 80% of the population identifies themselves as Christians, it will come as no surprise to learn that Churches have played a particularly key role. There have been several strands to this. Claudia and Dirk Harmann – who did the initial policy research on basic income in South Africa for COSATU and who will be giving a paper at the conference – came to the topic through the Lutheran Church in Namibia. South Africa’s Anglican Church adopted a resolution calling for something equivalent to a Basic Income Grant in 1998. Other churches, including the Methodist Church, have also endorsed the concept of basic income in one form or another. The South African Council of Churches joined the campaign in 2001, adopting a resolution of support at its triennial national conference and reiterating its position even more strongly in 2004, shortly after no less a person than President Thabo Mbeki tried to persuade delegates that a Basic Income Grant was both undesirable and unrealistic.

Why is it important for us, as people of faith, to back the call for a universal income support grant?

**1. All people are created in the image of God and are therefore equally deserving of respect, dignity, care and protection.**

- We believe that it is God's will that all should enjoy fully God's gift of life and the bounty of God's creation. But we must also be good stewards of God's creation. This means not only taking care of it and preventing its misuse and degradation, but also apportioning its fruits fairly – living in such a way that others also have access to the resources they require to meet their basic needs.
- Our faith tells us that the highly lopsided distribution of wealth and resources is not a function of God's will, but of human greed. This is particularly evident in South Africa, where apartheid policies amplified the class distinctions of capitalist society and aligned them with race to produce especially extreme and persistent islands of privilege in a sea of poverty.
- Thus, we are called to challenge the status quo and to work for systems and practices that protect the rights and dignity of all people and advance the vision of human equality and economic justice that lies at the heart of the Gospel.
- A basic income grant, financed through progressive taxation, is one of the ways that we can begin to address the legacies of apartheid, to achieve a fairer distribution of wealth and income, and to give tangible expression to the love and compassion that Christ admonished us to show for each of our neighbours.

**2. We seek to enable and empower, rather than to stifle or be paternalistic.**

- If we are true to our vision of equal human rights and dignity, then our goal should not be to make decisions *for* people about what they need, but rather to ensure that everyone has access to the resources and material to permit them to realise their full, God-given potential. In this context, we are particularly proud and supportive of the socio-economic rights recognised in our national Constitution, including the right to appropriate social security.
- A basic income grant is one of the most empowering and developmental approaches to meeting basic human needs. It is flexible, so people can decide how best to use it to achieve their goals. A regular income, even a small one, liberates people to take the kinds of risks that they might be unwilling to take in the absence of that security – to seek employment, to educate a child, to experiment with one's own entrepreneurial venture.
- Basic income enables people, especially desperately poor households, to take advantage of other public goods and services that might otherwise be beyond their reach: health care, education, skills training programmes, agricultural extension services. All of these are public programmes that can produce valuable returns, but only if people can afford the transport, time, or even the emotional energy to access them.
- Basic income can provide a cash injection to local communities, stimulating further demand-driven economic growth.

**3. We believe that families are and should continue to be the cornerstone of society.**

- Families are changing. The pressures of urbanisation, HIV/AIDS and other health crises, changing social and cultural norms and emerging economic trends have often led or compelled us to form new types of families – single parent families, “skip-generation” families, child-headed households, etc. Some configurations are more fragile than others, but all reflect a deep-seated human need for the security, the nurture, the love and the intimacy of family.

- In a society where it seems that families struggle to stay together in the face of centripetal forces, a BIG would be a form of glue that would help families, whether consanguineous or chosen, to stay together. It would mean that all individuals would come to a household capable of contributing something to the costs of maintaining that household.
- Basic income could help alleviate some of the pressures and tensions that can damage healthy family life and can express themselves in the form of domestic violence and abuse. At the same time, basic income could provide a certain measure of independence to vulnerable partners stuck in abusive relationships, allowing them to envision other options besides remaining in a hopeless and loveless situation.

#### **4. We are called to respond compassionately to the HIV/AIDS pandemic**

- HIV/AIDS presents a major challenge to our survival, both as individuals and as a society. The church feels a particular calling to respond to this challenge with compassion and practical ministry.
- Prevention education, testing schemes, ART advocacy, home-based care networks, anti-stigma campaigns are all important, but they are not enough. The problem is simply too vast.
- Poverty heightens people's vulnerability to all manner of social, economic and medical ills, including HIV infection.
- A basic income could offer some measure of protection, particularly to poorer households, by enabling people to maintain a better level of nutrition and general health, thus reducing their risk of infection if exposed to the virus or slowing the progress of the disease for those who are already infected. Basic income could also improve people living with AIDS' access to basic medications to treat secondary infections.