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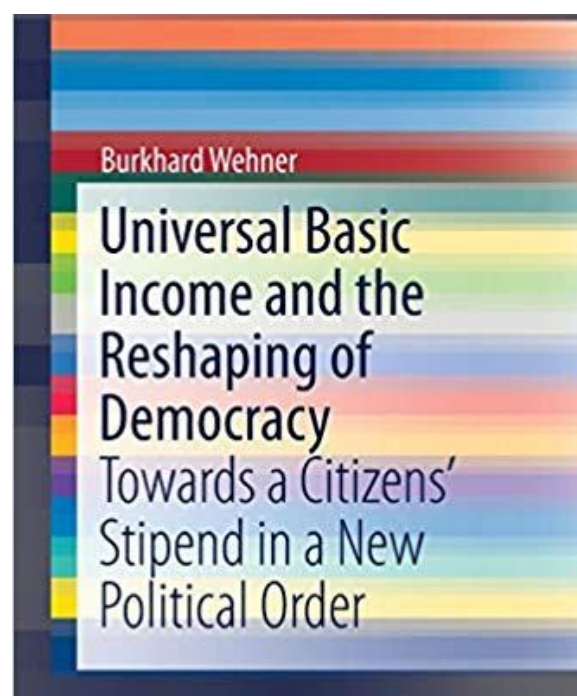
## BOOK REVIEW: Universal Basic Income and the Reshaping of Democracy

- Harshitha Dammu

### What's it about?

In his latest book, Burkhard Wehner attempts to make the highly-debated idea of unconditional or universal basic income (UBI) more politically acceptable in a democracy. His main contention is that UBI can only be implemented decades from now, but the process must be set in motion by the current generation.

At the outset, Wehner states that despite being crucial to understanding the political logic of UBI, the questions *whether*, *when* and *how* it could be implemented play just a minor role in the current debate. In his book, Wehner seeks to address these questions along with some common concerns regarding UBI such as funding, transition process,



and wavering commitments with changing governments.

### How can it be achieved?

It is stated that the 3 conditions essential for the implementation of UBI - exceptional foresight of policy makers, impartial political leaders, and support of voters, are missing in conventional

democracy. This can only be remedied by cementing UBI as a constitutional norm to be enjoyed by our future generations, irrespective of party ideologies and majoritarian views.

Unlike most UBI advocates who don't go beyond merely asking for it to be implemented, Wehner presents a new, alternative model to reshape democracy and make UBI both politically and financially viable:

*First*, use of a solidarity tax to fund social security programmes. For this, Wehner suggests using income tax as the primary source. But since an increase in taxation beyond a certain level could be counter-productive to revenue collection in countries with low tax-GDP ratio, a different tax such as inheritance tax could be used.

*Second*, entitlement to this basic income. Here, following the main argument that policy-makers should not also be beneficiaries because of conflict of interest, all living persons at the time of taking the decision to implement UBI

ought to be excluded, and instead made to continue under the old social security schemes. This way, for a certain period in the future, beneficiaries of both the UBI system and the old system would co-exist, making the transition a smooth process.

*Third*, complementing the UBI scheme with other income components. The political logic for this is that a UBI level that is sufficient to secure a decent livelihood is unlikely to gain the acceptance of the stable majority of citizens. Further, to offset the inevitable fluctuations in the UBI level, social security schemes (health insurance, pensions, disability insurance, etc) and statutory employment (like the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme in India) must always be available to the citizens.

### **What's in it for us?**

Wehner argues that since UBI ensures income continuity, it has a positive impact on employment and quality of life by encouraging

people to be more risk-taking and innovative. Apart from this, UBI by its very nature is simple and universal i.e. every citizen irrespective of age, sex, and employment status, is eligible under the scheme. In turn, this leaves the State with less discretion and promotes fairness and transparency in the system meant to protect the most disadvantaged in society. But in the absence of supporting evidence, Wehner's claims in this regard simply remain as hypotheses.

One particular section that discusses the potential to use UBI in population control, and as economic stabilisation allowance during slump years, is thought-provoking as it draws attention to the morally ambiguous role that the State plays in reproductive choice and wealth redistribution. The most glaring issue is that the book starts off with

the assumption that we require UBI, and the *why* part of UBI is left unanswered. This is, to an extent, addressed by the argument that UBI is based on the concept of "domestic solidarity amongst citizens" which is undoubtedly a positive feature in a democracy. However, in calling UBI a "lifelong compensation for the impositions of the capitalist economy", the author ends up revealing his ideological bias.

These shortcomings, however, do not take away from the otherwise practical and efficient basic income system presented in the book. In a political climate of movements demanding UBI and some countries, including India, already initiating their own largely unsuccessful UBI pilot projects, Wehner's model could be a good reference point for future, full-fledged, and hopefully better ones. \*