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On the 12th of May 2022, the UBI Network launched UBI Food, its 41st Lab, with a virtual event focused on “*What role could a Universal Basic Income play in ensuring nutritious and sustainable diets for all?*” Dan Crossley of the NGO Food Ethics Council, UK, hosted a panel of experts, including Professor Elaine Power, Dr Elizabeth Kimani-Murage and Dr Sara Closs-Davies. They led a rich discussion that contended with the relationship a basic income has with nutritious and sustainable diets. Three key questions were discussed: (a) how UBI can address food insecurity?; (b) how does a UBI fit into the right to food? and; (c) how can a UBI be financed? Below is a summary of the event!

Elaine, who has studied food insecurity for almost 30 years, opened the panel to discuss how a basic income can address food insecurity. She shared that Canada established its first food bank in 1981 but has since increasingly relied on them to address food insecurity—particularly in the last 12 years. Elaine reflected on her research with individuals from low-income households who “try to make their dollar stretch” between paying for food, rent, utilities, transportation, clothing and other family living expenses. Food banks are often relied on to supplement the cost of living as there is little money left after all other bills are paid (1). The use of food banks as a solution to address food insecurity, however, is problematic as it does not address individuals' and households' income and budget concerns. Elaine shared data from a 2017 basic income pilot (2), conducted in Ontario, Canada, which found that participants could afford higher quality and healthier food with the additional income (3).

Elizabeth then shared how a UBI fits into the right to food. She has worked on transforming food systems in Kenya and Africa to be more human-centred, resilient and sustainable. Elizabeth highlighted that nearly two-thirds of Kenyans are either moderately or severely food insecure (4). Reflecting on her work, she mentioned that while food is available in marketplaces in Nairobi, individuals in urban poor settings cannot afford it. These foods are then wasted. Elizabeth explained that despite “adequate food of acceptable quality” being a constitutional right in Kenya (5, [no page]), it has not yet been realised. Issues related to food affordability and the minimum wage are linked to the formal employment sector and threaten this right. However, Kenya has a large informal sector (6) where this minimum wage does not apply. According to Elizabeth, a UBI not linked to employment status could provide access to healthy and nutritious food in urban poor settings.

Lastly, Sara focused on the costs of implementing a UBI. She researches the real-life implications of tax and welfare policy on citizens, civil servants, society and social inequality. During the panel, she challenged the notion that people on benefits do not want to work or are lazy. She also disputed arguments that those who receive a universal basic income would waste it on gambling, alcohol and smoking. Reflecting on her work, Sara explored how this rationale is politically driven by an assumption that only those that pay income taxes should benefit from state resources. She shared that not all recipients of state benefits can work, even if they want to, and those not working still pay other taxes, such as VAT. Sara explained how even those who are working still require support. For example, 52% of the UK population receives some kind of state benefit (7), with a significant proportion being those who are already working. According to Sara, there are several options to finance a universal basic income, such as increasing income tax rates, reducing tax reliefs for the rich, making UBI taxable, windfall taxes on certain industries, and hypothecated taxes on plastic and sugar taxes. There could also be a restructuring of the tax and bureaucratic system. Sara concluded that there could be a targeted UBI for certain groups in the population. Still, there is a need to consider how it would be administered and implemented to ensure it is effective and efficient in taking people out of poverty.

The panel also fielded questions from attendees. The first question concerned whether the amount of UBI would continuously need to be adjusted as food prices rise. Elaine reflected that UBI could have an inflationary component and can be administered through the income tax system to meet this challenge. Sara also added that there should be a dynamic system in place to react to market fluctuations (e.g. as the price of food increases/decreases, the amount of UBI would also increase/decrease). Elizabeth spoke about the need to change the perception of food from being a commodity to a human right. This would require governments to take charge of food as a public good and not subject it to market forces, making food prices more affordable.

Another question concerned the required level of a UBI to address food poverty and food bank usage. Elaine shared that in Canada, advocates of UBI are currently focused on a targeted liveable income where people will not have to worry about putting food on the table. However, according to Elaine, this more targeted and smaller basic income has been critiqued for subsidising low-wage employers.

A third question was whether UBI could impact the price of food. According to Sara, there are several factors to consider (e.g. energy and oil prices) when it comes to the cost of food, and UBI itself, therefore, may not directly impact the price of food. Elizabeth added that social support systems would need to work together to address issues such as these.

Lastly, there was a question about how UBI can contribute to more sustainable farming. Elaine reflected on the challenges farmers face, including labour and land issues. She shared that Canada's National Farmers Union endorsed UBI as a stabilising force (8), especially as new and younger farmers enter the industry.

The panel concluded with perspectives on taking the UBI Food Lab further, with a robust agenda highlighting the critical role of UBI in ensuring nutritious, sustainable diets for all.

The event can be seen in its entirety here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sCQDmKLRP08>

The second event of the UBI Food Lab will be held on 21st November 2022 at 6:30 pm. You can register to attend here:

<https://actionnetwork.org/events/ubi-lab-food-online-event-universal-basic-income-and-the-cost-of-living-crisis>

UBI Lab Food is part of the [UBI Lab Network](#) and is facilitated by [Opus](#) social enterprise based in Sheffield.

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