

“Exploring Parallels Between Unconditional Basic Income and the Auroville Context”

Report of Auroville – “Basic Income Earth Network” August Events

September 2019

Preamble: What is UBI and how does it relate to Auroville?

Universal Basic income (UBI) is a radical economic policy, being explored and incubated in various countries – Canada, Finland, Kenya, India and more – which envisions that all members of society would receive an unconditional stipend with which to meet their basic needs. Pilot projects have shown that UBI recipients participated more meaningfully in society as a result, having dissociated such participation from economic survival. The security of having basic needs met has also had profoundly positive effects on psychological and emotional well-being, improving not only individual lives, but the very social fabric of society.

In the past 50 years, following The Mother’s directives, we’ve done a lot towards establishing a socio-economic basis to realize such individual and societal outcomes, with the deeper objective of facilitating a spiritualized approach to work and living – primarily through a “Universal Basic Services” model. Yet many Aurovilians have not been completely freed from the individual burden of meeting their economic needs, interfering with a focus on a spiritual dimension of development. ‘Work’ has not been completely dissociated from ‘economic survival’ in Auroville, and Universal Basic Income may offer us a framework to achieve this.

“The organisation should be such, should be so arranged, that the material needs of everyone are assured, not according to ideas of rights and equality, but on the basis of the minimum needs. And once that is established, each one should be free to organise his life according to—not according to his financial means, but his inner capacities.” The Mother, 30 Dec, 1967 (Mother on Auroville, pg. 16)

Background to the Auroville-BIEN collaboration: The Bridge, Auroville's 50th anniversary conference.

A research partnership between the Basic Income Earth Network and Auroville was first initiated at The Bridge, a collaborative research encounter organized by a team of Aurovilians for Auroville's 50th anniversary. The intention of The Bridge was to share Auroville's experimentation in various fields with an international roster of progressive and applied researchers whose work resonates with Auroville's ideals and practices, in order to inspire and be inspired by innovative research being undertaken worldwide, and foster opportunities for collaboration.

On the suggestion of Aurovilians who had been struck by the parallels between Auroville's economic ideals and practice, and those that animate Unconditional Basic Income (UBI) policies and experiments, The Bridge team decided to include a Unconditional Basic Income researcher among the invitees, to explore these. We invited Dr. Sarath Davala, Vice-Chair of the global Basic Income Earth Network (BIEN), founder and President of its India chapter, the India Network for Basic Income (INBI), and co-author of "Basic Income: A Transformative Policy for India." Unbeknownst to The Bridge team at the time, Sarath had already visited Auroville, and recognised such parallels as well: "For me who is researching and advocating the idea of unconditional basic income to all citizens, Auroville stands as a symbolic community that is idealistic and at the same time pragmatic in its world view... There are major intersections in Auroville's worldview and that of what our network believes in – a vision of a more evolved man, and a more evolved human society," he responded, eagerly accepting to join us.

During the in-depth immersion into Auroville's socio-economy that The Bridge offered its participants, Sarath expressed his admiration for how much of what UBI activists are trying to achieve is already established in our community. Shortly after the event, we began discussing a research partnership, to include focussed socio-economic research, and participatory workshops exploring UBI and Auroville's socio-economy. "The advantage Auroville members have is that you already have the experience with the utopia that we are grappling with... That is

what makes us such exciting research partners,” he shared with us. We too recognized that further collaborations could have mutually beneficial potential: offering Auroville fresh perspectives to inform our advancement towards our socio-economic ideals, and inspiring UBI from our basis of experience. In August 2019, a series of opportunities to concretize these arose.

Find a recording of Sarath’s talk on Unconditional Basic Income at The Bridge [here](#).

AUGUST 2019 AUROVILLE-BIEN EVENTS

1. Aurovilians at the Annual Congress of the Basic Income Earth Network



From left to right: Aurovilians Stephanie, Suryamayi, Inge and Lakshay

On August 22 – 25th, 2019, the annual congress of the Basic Income Earth Network (BIEN) was held in India (Hyderabad) for the first time, hosted by the India Network for Basic Income under Sarath’s presidency. In order to continue to explore bridges between Unconditional Basic Income and Auroville, Suryamayi from Auroville (who co-organised The Bridge and is undertaking social science doctoral research on Auroville), was invited to present at the congress.

Sarath also generously extended an invitation for other Aurovilians interested in the topic to attend free of charge, to support this budding partnership. Suryamayi shared the invitation on AuroNet, with Auroville's economic Working Groups and the Auroville Council. A group of 6 Aurovilians in total attended the congress: Dan Be Kin, Inge Riecke, Lakshay Dharan, Minhaj Ameen, Stephanie Bussman, and Suryamayi Clarence-Smith.

The congress drew a global cohort of Unconditional Basic Income activists, researchers, politicians and policy-makers to India, exploring multiple dimensions of UBI – such as what forms of community life UBI engenders, UBI and employment, UBI and women's empowerment, UBI and mental health etc. Suryamayi presented in the plenary, on the panel "The Emancipatory Potential: What forms of Freedom and what kind of Community life does Basic Income promote?"

All the plenary sessions were filmed by the conference, and will eventually be made publically available. Suryamayi's plenary session was also filmed by a fellow Aurovillian (Lakshay), and is available [here](#). For more details of the conference, see <https://indiabasicincome.in/congress/>.

2. BIEN Delegates in Auroville

A few of the BIEN delegates had friends in, or had previously been to Auroville, and planned to visit before or after the conference. After meeting the cohort of Aurovilians at the cohort, and hearing Suryamayi's presentation, more were inspired to come as well (12 in total). To make the most of this visit, Aurovilians Suryamayi and Maya (friends with one of the visiting BIEN delegates), organised for them to offer talks, and a participatory workshop "Exploring Universal Basic Income in the Auroville Context."



Talks on Unconditional Basic Income:



- **“Universal Basic Income and the Sustainable Development Goals”**

A first talk was given by Hilde Latour, a UBI activist from the Netherlands, at Unity Pavilion on August 13th, 2019. While this talk was not recorded, her recent TEDx talk on UBI can be watched [here](#).



- **“Le travail bénévole et le revenu de base : découplages entre revenus et activités” | “Volunteer work and basic income: uncoupling income and activity”**

A second talk was given in French (in collaboration with the Pavillon de France), by Loïc Damey, co-director of the “Mouvement Français pour un Revenu de Base” (French Movement for a Basic Income) and director of the non-profit “Réunion Bénévolat,” connecting volunteers with non-profits. The talk was held at the

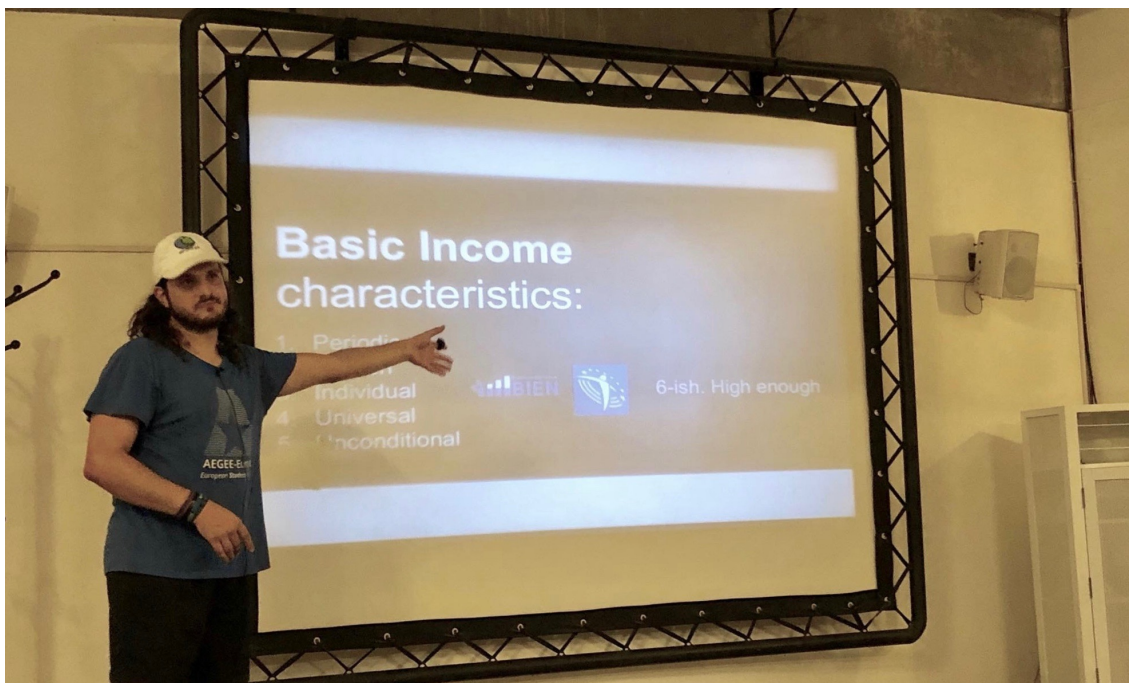
Visitor's Centre Video Room on August 29th, 2019, and was based on Loïc's research project, accessible to read here: <https://prixdesmemoires.cjdes.org/le-travail-benevole-des-sans-emploi-une-logique-de-contribution-a-re-evaluer/>



- **“Talks on Universal Basic Income”**

A series of three talks on Universal Basic Income were held in succession, on August 30th, 2019 at the Visitors Centre Video Room, followed by lively discussion.

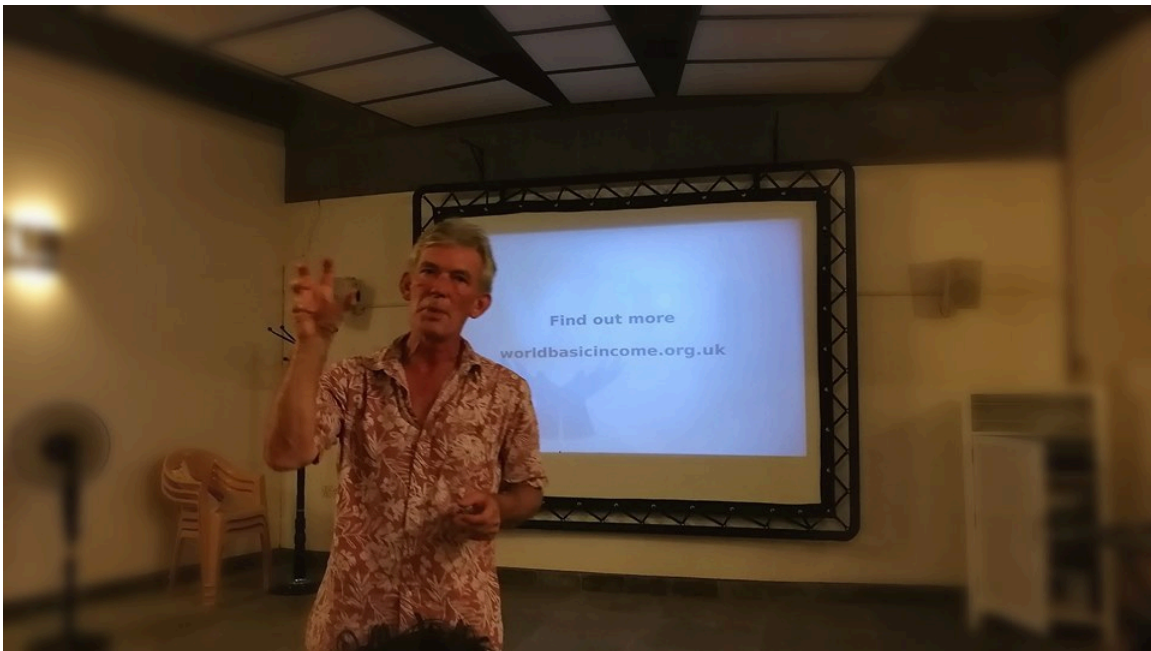
The first was an introductory talk on Unconditional Basic Income given by Antonis Triantafyllakis of Universal Basic Income Europe:



The second, a comparison between UBI versus Job Guarantee policies, was presented by Roberto Merrill of the University of Minho (Portugal):



Third, economist Paul Harnett then presented on the project of World Basic Income:



These talks were recorded and are available to listen to [here](#).

Participatory Workshop: “Exploring Universal Basic Income in the Auroville Context”

A public, participatory workshop “Exploring Universal Basic Income in the Auroville Context” followed the talks in which Aurovilians could acquaint themselves with the idea of UBI. Prior to the workshop, the BIEN delegates met with representatives of Auroville’s socio-economic administration: the Auroville Board of Services, Auroville Housing Service, Human Resources Team, Budget Coordination Committee, Funds and Assets Management Committee, Government of India Grant Group, etc. to get acquainted with the Auroville context.



The workshop was chaired by Lena Stark, the Vice-Chair of Unconditional Basic Income Europe, and attended by approximately 40 people, including the 12 BIEN delegates. The workshop had no specific agenda, Lena inviting Aurovilians to propose any topics they felt they wished to explore. 8 topics were proposed:

- 1) To explore whether the ‘in-kind’ portion of our Maintenances is really necessary to ensure that Aurovilians consume within the community, or creates unnecessary hardship for Aurovilians with no external sources of cash.
- 2) To explore whether we could set up ownerless start-ups¹ in Auroville, to fund a universal basic income in our community
- 3) To explore whether we could introduce ‘unconditional Maintenances’ for

¹ On ownerless start-ups, see: <https://www.fanaticalfuturist.com/2019/05/ownerless-companies-on-the-rise-as-startups-experiment-with-new-business-models/>

- those with limited financial means
- 4) To explore circulation of under-utilised resources
 - 5) To explore setting up a communal savings account to cover external high costs
 - 6) To explore land value and allocations
 - 7) To explore what are the Auroville 'commons' and how to access and manage these communally
 - 8) To explore current challenges people face in Auroville.



Of these 8 topics, 6 were explored in subgroups, who then shared the outcomes of their discussions:

- (1)** The subgroup that was exploring the “cash vs. kind” topic discussed whether it could be possible to widen the choices of products available within Auroville to achieve freedom of choice, through a) extended bulk purchasing, b) allowing individuals to choose their own proportion of ‘cash’ and ‘kind’ in their Maintenances, and c) to pilot test whether people would actually consume more outside of Auroville if they could withdraw their current ‘kind’ as cash.
- (2)** The subgroup that was exploring “ownerless start-ups” suggested the rental of ownerless transport as a way to fund basic income.
- (3)** The subgroup that was exploring “unconditional Maintenances” discussed carrying out a basic income pilot in Auroville, as a first step towards delinking Maintenances from specific work. They felt this was linked to having an on-going conversation about what is considered ‘work’ in the Auroville context.
- (4)** The subgroup discussing the circulation of underutilised resources felt these could be redistributed in the form of a complementary currency.
- (5)** A subgroup discussing land use planning emphasised the need to base the allocation of Auroville land (i.e. to an Auroville Unit) with attention to the natural features of the land (i.e. not allocate arable land to a non-arable enterprise); they also discussed reducing our carbon footprint by charging for the use of motorised vehicles, including the land allocation required for cars in particular.
- (6)** A subgroup discussed the challenges and obstacles faced in Auroville at present, and shared the following points:
 - The capacity to be receptive to a spiritualised future
 - Perceptions of lack
 - Lasting sense of entitlement to Auroville land/assets
 - Fear of not being provided for (esp. in old age)
 - Fear of not being able to provide financially for higher education of one’s

children

- Lack of financial resources among young people
- Sense of disappointment with Auroville's current realities, and questioning whether we have 'downgraded our goals' from what The Mother intended
- Issue of access to external fields of work to supplement income, and the issue of wealth required for this (i.e. plane tickets).
- Proposal to rephrase the 'Income' of 'Universal Basic Income' to 'Abundance'
- Need for a centralised and open-hearted administration.

Auroville Radio TV produced a short video of the workshop, available [here](#).

Follow-Up

There was no follow-up 'strategy' devised at the workshop itself; the facilitators trusted that those who felt inspired within a given subgroup would take it forward. The group of BIEN delegates to Auroville, and Auroville delegates to BIEN did however meet after the workshop to debrief and share thoughts about next steps. The idea of a basic income pilot in Auroville stood out as something to pursue, which the Aurovilians and BIEN members alike felt inspired to contribute further consideration, energy and expertise towards and have taken up as a project.

The topic of under-utilised resources and alternative currency was brought forward by a group of Aurovilians (Dan Be Kin, Minhaj Ameen, B Sullivan) working in conjunction with a Korean Institute on an on-going project on this.

There may be others who are taking forward the conversations they had...

You can follow the progress of this initiative on: The Bridge [website](#) or [FB](#) page.

***THANKS:** To the Unity Pavilion and Auroville Visitor's Centre for hosting the talks and workshop, Outreach Media and Auroville Radio for recording the events, to Aurovilians for engaging with the BIEN delegates during their stay.*