

The Debate Over the Definition of Basic Income

Karl Widerquist
Professor of Philosophy, Georgetown University-Qatar
Karl@Widerquist.com

Abstract

This article doesn't take a position on the question what is the best way to define Basic Income. Instead, it argues that a family of related concepts are identified by two crucial questions: is the concept restricted to a non-means-tested grant delivered to high- and low-income people alike? And is it restricted to a grant that is large enough to live on? Although we can't get away from the question of exactly how do we define Basic Income, controversies about the family of related concepts identified by these two questions cannot be resolved by any organization clarifying its definition of Basic Income. This family of closely-related concepts have been and will continue to be used in the discussion of policy options along the lines of an unconditional cash payment. The best service a discussion over the definition of Basic Income can do is to try to suggest terms that can be used by people on all sides of the debate so that they can more easily discuss their differences clearly and respectfully. Therefore, the goal of this paper is to identify the various concepts that need to be clearly identified so that everyone in the discussion can understand each other.

The Basic Income movement is in the midst of a substantial internal debate about how exactly Basic Income should be defined. Within the community of activists and scholars who regularly work on this issue, many definitional issues have been settled. For example, as I understand the nature of the shared understanding within that community, Basic Income is a government program providing a permanent, universal, unconditional, cash income.¹ To elaborate:

- “Permanent” might not necessarily mean lifelong but it has to last for a substantial amount of time. This requirement rules out temporary or one-time grants. The term “stakeholder grant” is sometimes used for a large one-time grant and is widely considered to be distinct from Basic Income.
- I use “Universal” to mean that the grant is for all members of a political community: a targeted income grant (say for the elderly, the disabled, children, or any other demographic group) is not a Basic Income.
- I use “Unconditional” to mean that the grant is free from any behavioral conditions (such as working, affirming the willingness to accept employment if offered, attending classes, or accepting counseling,) with the possible exception of a requirement to reside within the community.
- The “cash” requirement rules out in-kind grants such as housing vouchers, food vouchers, or the direct provision of goods and services.

These (mostly) settled issues narrow the meaning of the term “Basic Income” substantially, but at least two definitional questions remain controversial:

- Should the definition be restricted to a “uniform” payment to all (a non-means-tested grant delivered to high- and low-income people alike)?
- Should the definition be restricted to a grant that is large enough to live on?

Throughout this article, I use the term “uniform” to mean “uniform with respect to income” which is to say “non-means-tested,” although of course, a grant could be uniform in this way but nonuniform with respect to many other characteristics.

These are not the only controversial questions in the debate over the definition of Basic Income, but they are, I believe, the two most important and controversial questions right now. In any case, I don’t want to complicate the question further. So, I limit the discussion in this article to the interaction between those two questions.

Definitions provided by Basic Income organizations around the world give different answers to these two questions, and these two issues are regularly debated at Basic Income conferences. The Basic Income Earth Network’s (BIEN’s) current definition (last revised in 2014) explicitly takes a side on one and tacitly takes a side on the other: “a periodic cash payment unconditionally delivered to all on an individual basis, without means test or work requirement.”² This definition specifically rules out a means test (which has been understood to include an income test). By not saying whether the definition needs to be large enough to live on, the definition includes any sized grants whether or not it is large enough to live on. Some national or regional Basic Income organizations use a more restrictive definition, requiring a yes answer to both questions.³ Some Basic Income organizations include means-tested payments as forms of Basic Income.

Some people have tried to draw a distinction between a “means test” and an “income test” so that an income-tested grant qualifies as a “non-means-tested” grant. Although an income-test is different from a wealth test or a test of a person’s capacity to earn income, it is undeniable that “income” is a form of “means.” Therefore, an income-test is a test of at least one form of means and is excluded by a definition that includes the clause, “without means test.” In fact, the intent of that clause was specifically to exclude income-tested grants.⁴

Despite the relative clarity of BIEN’s definition, the controversy around these two issues is substantial.

Some people in the movement (for some form of income guarantee) believe a uniform grant and a means-tested grant are very different policies that should be treated very differently. Others believe uniform and means-tested (income-tested) grants are basically the same thing. In some countries means-tested grants have come to dominate the discussion of “Basic Income.” Some supporters of means-tested grants promote the means-tested grant as a form of Basic Income. Other supporters of means-tested grant promote it as a distinct alternative to Basic Income. The lack of agreement to basic terminology is a major source of confusion in the debate.

Although most Basic Income supporters want to have a grant that is large enough to live on, not everyone agrees that that characteristic needs to be part of the definition of Basic Income. Some people within the movement believe that the definition of Basic Income should incorporate stipulation that the grant is large enough to live on, making it more like the definition of “the Living Wage” than like the definition of “the Minimum Wage.” Others who strongly support a livable Basic Income nevertheless do not think it is necessary to incorporate livability into the definition of Basic Income, preferring instead to clarify as necessary.

The desire to incorporate livability into the grant into the definition of Basic Income is largely driven by the fear that neoliberal interests will try to divert enthusiasm for a livable Basic Income into one so small that it would make little difference in people’s lives.⁵ The resistance comes partly from a fear of the difficulty of defining “livability” and of the consequent controversy over whether a particular unconditional income qualifies as a (livable), as well as from the belief that the political process might ensure that the first Basic Income introduced anywhere will initially be set at a less-than-livable level with the hope of raising it later. Insisting on a restrictive terminology might be a barrier to that strategy of implementation.⁶

Although these two disagreements have dominated discussion of the definition of Basic Income in recent years, the interaction between them has received little discussion. The interaction is the focus of this paper.

Most of the attention in the definitional debate has been how to apply the popular name, “Basic Income.”⁷ Does that name denote a yes answer to one or both of those questions, or can a policy be called “Basic Income,” even if it has a no answer to one or both of them?

This article doesn’t take a position on the question what is the best way to define Basic Income. In fact, it argues instead that that question is not the most important definitional issue. Although we can’t get away from the question of exactly how do we define Basic Income, controversies about the family of related concepts identified by the two questions above cannot be resolved by any organization clarifying its definition of Basic Income. This family of closely-related concepts have been and will continue to be used in the discussion of policy options along the lines of an unconditional cash payment.

Disagreements about what form of unconditional payment is best will not be resolved by definitional fiat. The discussion needs language that will allow people on all sides of the controversies behind these two questions to clearly discuss the options. That means we need not

one but several terms. All of them should be neutral or positive so that people on both sides of the issue can use the same term.

Therefore, the goal of this paper is not to identify the one concept that most deserve the popular name, “Basic Income,” but to identify the various concepts that need to be clearly identified so that everyone in the discussion can understand each other. Most literature on the definition of Basic Income ignores the question of what to call the concepts that their definition rules out as a form of Basic Income.⁸ Ignoring that question ignores that problem that I’m focusing here, and fails to suggest language for respectful discussion among people who disagree on these issues.

As near as I can tell, the interaction between these two questions produces a need for about nine term, which we might be able to identify with as few as one noun and four modifiers. I don’t expect that anyone could assign names to all of these and expect their names to be remembered—much less used—by everyone in the debate. But I do think it’s important to point out that all these concepts are out there; they’re not going away because some organization says, “Basic Income is X and only X.” We need to start thinking about how to identify the members of this family of concepts in nonpejorative ways so that people on all sides of the relevant issues can share the terminology they need to have fruitful discussion.

Framing the issue with a two-by-two matrix

This section examines the interaction between these questions by plotting their yes-no answers on a series of 2x2 matrices. This allows the reader to identify and compare just how many concepts fall out of the interaction of these two simple questions. Throughout the discussion, assume that the other characteristics are settled: the grant is a permanent, universal, unconditional, cash income (all as defined above). The questions are whether its livable and whether it’s uniform in the sense being non-means tested.

Table 1 is a 2x2 matrix with four cells, but as we’ll see, it identifies far more than four concepts that tend to come up in discussion of Basic Income and related policies. The top row (cells 1 and 2) identifies a yes answer to the question of whether the grant in question is large enough to live on. The bottom row (cells 3 and 4) identifies a no answer, not large enough to live on. The left column (cells 1 and 3) identifies a yes answer to the uniform question: a non-means-tested grant. The right column (cells 2 and 4) identifies a no answer: a means-tested (i.e. income-tested) grant. Therefore, the four cells are

Cell 1. Yes, Yes: a uniform payment, large enough to live on

Cell 2. No, Yes: a means-tested payment, large enough to live on

Cell 3. Yes, No: a uniform payment, too small to live on

Cell 4. No, No: a means-tested payment, too small to live on

Table 1: Plotting the interaction of two important questions in the debate over the definition of Basic Income		Is it a uniform (with respect to income)?	
		Yes, uniform payment	No, not uniform (means-tested)
Is it large enough to live on?	Yes, large enough to live on	1. Yes, Yes	2. No, Yes

		A uniform payment, large enough to live on	A means-tested payment, large enough to live on
	No, not large enough to live on	3. Yes, No A uniform payment, too small to live on	4. No, No A means-tested payment, too small to live on

The first concept that needs identification is the entire set. What do we call the union of all four cells—the family of conceptions of income guarantee programs that may or may not be uniform and/or livable? If we use the term “Basic Income to identify the entire 2x2 matrix, we are using a “broad” or “expansive” definition: open to yes or no answers to both questions as shown in yellow Table 2 below or by the union of cells 1, 2, 3, and 4 in Table 1.

Choosing the expansive definition of “Basic Income,” would not get us out of the need for more terms because the expansive definition identifies a family of closely related policies, and any discussion of a broad conception, naturally brings up the question of what “type” of Basic Income is under discussion.

Table 2: An expansive definition of UBI		Is it a uniform (with respect to income)?	
		Yes, uniform payment	No, not uniform (means-tested)
Is it large enough to live on?	Yes, large enough to live on	Call this “Basic Income?” (cells 1,2,3,&4)	
	No, not large enough to live on		

Another potential definition of Basic Income stipulates that the grant is uniform (with respect to income) but does not stipulate whether it is large enough to live on. This concept is the current BIEN definition of Basic Income. It is equivalent to the until of cells 1 and 3: the yellow area on the left side of the matrix in Table 3. The Basic Income Earth Network (BIEN) has used this concept of Basic Income since it first voted on a definition of the term in 1986. BIEN clarified several definitional issues in 2014, but the designation of a uniform grant regardless of size remained in place before and after the revision. This definition is used both by the Oxford English Dictionary and the Cambridge Dictionary (with slightly different wording in each case).⁹ For example, Cambridge defines “Universal Basic Income: as, “an amount of money that is given regularly to everyone or to every adult in a society by a government or other organization and that is the same for everyone: A basic income is unconditional and is independent of any other income.”¹⁰

If a uniform grant is under discussion (whether called Basic Income or any other name), the contrast between it and an otherwise similar means-tested grant is usually important. If so, we need a term for the green shaded area in Table 3, the union of cells 2 & 4 in Table 1: a means-tested grant whether or not it is large enough to live on.

Table 3: Uniformity as the definitive characteristic		Is it a uniform (with respect to income)?	
		Yes, uniform payment	No, not uniform (means-tested)
Is it large enough to live on?	Yes, large enough to live on	Call this “Basic Income?” (1&3)	What do we call this? (cells 2 & 4)
	No, not large enough to live on		

Another candidate to be *the* definition of Basic Income incorporates the livability requirement but remains neutral on the issue of means testing: the yellow-shaded area at the top of Table 4, the union of cells 1 and 2 in Table 1.

If a livable income guarantee is under discussion (whether called “Basic Income” or any other name), the contrast between it and an otherwise similar but less-than-livable grant is usually important. That concept is shown by the green-shaded area in Table 4 or by the union of cells 3 and 4 in Table 1.

Table 4: Livability as the definitive characteristic		Is it a uniform (with respect to income)?	
		Yes, uniform payment	No, not uniform (means-tested)
Is it large enough to live on?	Yes, large enough to live on	Call this “Basic Income?” (1&2)	
	No, not large enough to live on	What do we call this? (Cells 3 & 4)	

The most restrictive definition of Basic Income requires a yes answer to both questions: a non-means-tested, livable grant: an unconditional income that is both uniform (with respect to income) and large enough to live on. This concept is designated by the yellow-shaded area (cell 1) in Table 5. If this restrictive concept is under discussion (whether called “Basic Income” or any other name), it raises three other questions. First, what do you call a grant that is large enough to live on but means-tested (Cell 2, shaded green in Table 5)? Second, what do you call a grant that is uniform (with respect to income) but not large enough to live on (Cell 3, shaded green in Table 5)? Third, what do you call an unconditional grant that is neither livable nor uniform with respect to income (cell 4, shaded green in Table 5)?

Table 5: (Most) Restrictive definition		Is it a uniform (with respect to income)?	
		Yes, uniform payment	No, not uniform (means-tested)
Is it large enough to live on?	Yes, large enough to live on	Call this “Basic Income?” (cell 1)	What do we call this? (Cell 2)
	No, not large enough to live on	And this? (Cell 3)	And this? (Cell 4)

Adding up the number of concepts mentioned in the discussion of Tables 1-5 gives us nine things that might need names. These nine concepts are likely to come up in discussions about

whether to introduce “Basic Income” or something like it. Some of them come up a lot—others less often.

The debate over the definition of Basic Income tends to focus on the question of which candidate deserves the popular name “Basic Income.” Although we do have to have some answer to that question, it’s not the most important question. A more important question is what set of terms can facilitate a clear and respectful discussion of these ideas with language that people on all sides can use.

Getting BIEN or any other Basic Income group to define Basic Income in one way or another won’t do what the people debating the definition want: it won’t settle the issue. It won’t bring more support to whatever concept gets the name. It won’t make people who support competing concepts come over to your side, nor will it make them disappear. And it won’t make them stop using the term “Basic Income” the way they want to. None of the organizations in the Basic Income movement is large or powerful enough to control the use of language throughout the world or very likely even in one country. At best, they can suggest.

The debate between these concepts will go on no matter how the term Basic Income is defined by whatever group. The best service a discussion over the definition of Basic Income can do is to try to suggest terms that can be used by people on all sides of the debate so that they can more easily discuss their differences clearly and respectfully.

We might not need names for all nine of the concepts identified above, but we cannot resolve the disagreement about which member of this family of ideas is the next best step in public policy by insisting that only the version I think is best deserves the popular name, “Basic Income.”

With this in mind, the rest of the paper suggest the many options that might help facilitate that discussion.

Using the 2x2 Matrix to understand the current state of the definitional debate

People arguing about the definition of Basic Income give off the impression that they think the controversy ends as soon as BIEN or some other well-respected group chooses *the* definition. This concept *is* Basic Income. The others are not. Basic Income is what people in the Basic Income movement talk about. Who cares what the other concepts are called?

It’s not that simple for two reasons. First, you can’t solve a political disagreement by definitional fiat. Movements for political change are inherently diverse. They’re made up of free-thinking people who challenge authorities. They’re not going to stop talking about their preferred concept just because someone told them it’s not what they call Basic Income. The debate between these concepts will go on, and all sides will need clear terminology to distinguish their preferred idea from similar concepts. This fact implies that we need to decide not only which of these concepts most deserves the name Basic Income, but also what to call the closely related concepts.

Second, it’s helpful to talk about a concept in opposition to similar concepts. If you favor a uniform grant that’s large enough to live on, how does it differ from one that lacks one or both of those characteristics? What arguments do people give for those alternatives? How do you refute them? When discussing issues like this, it’s helpful to have names for both sides of the divide. That means we need as many as nine nonpejorative terms.

What terms might work?

Terms do exist, but they're controversial. The next few tables show what I believe are the most common terms in use now. As you will see from looking over Tables 6-9, the problem with the existing terms is that there is little consistency in how they are used.

Table 6: Common existing terms for the whole set		Is it a uniform (with respect to income)?	
		Yes, uniform payment	No, not uniform (means-tested)
Is it large enough to live on?	Yes, large enough to live on	Guaranteed Income, Income Guarantee, Basic Income Guarantee, Guaranteed Basic Income, Minimum Income	
	No, not large enough to live on		

Table 7: Common existing terms to distinguish uniform and means-tested versions of unconditional grants		Is it a uniform (with respect to income)?	
		Yes, uniform payment	No, not uniform (means-tested)
Is it large enough to live on?	Yes, large enough to live on	Basic Income, Citizens Income, Demogrant	Negative Income Tax, Guaranteed Income
	No, not large enough to live on		

Table 8: Common existing terms to distinguish a livable from		Is it a uniform (with respect to income)?	
		Yes, uniform payment	No, not uniform (means-tested)
Is it large enough to live on?	Yes, large enough to live on	Guaranteed Adequate Income, Guaranteed Livable Income	
	No, not large enough to live on	Partial Guaranteed Income	

Table 9: Common terms for each of the four cells		Is it a uniform (with respect to income)?	
		Yes, uniform payment	No, not uniform (means-tested)
Is it large enough to live on?	Yes, large enough to live on	Basic Income; full, livable, or sufficient Basic Income; full, livable, or sufficient Citizens Income; full, livable, or sufficient Demogrant	Guaranteed Adequate Income, full or livable Guaranteed Income, full or livable Negative Income Tax
	No, not large enough to live on	Partial Basic Income, less-than-livable Basic Income	Partial or less-than-livable Guaranteed Income, partial or less-than-livable Negative Income Tax

“Basic Income” is used in at least four different and largely conflicting ways, and as mentioned above each the four is a candidate to be “the” definition. The use of most of the other terms is similarly inconsistent.

The most recognizable name for an unconditional but means-tested grant is “the Negative Income Tax” (NIT). That name was popular in the United States in the 1960s and ’70s. There was a substantial wave of support for income guarantee programs at that time, and NIT was the dominant model of income guarantee. Uniform (non-means-tested) income guarantees were occasionally discussed under the names “demogrant” and “social dividend.” Although the term “Basic Income” had been defined decades earlier, it was not widely used at the time.

These terms were still common when BIEN was founded in 1986. NIT was the more widely known concept and term. To people attending the first BIEN conference in 1986 It must have seemed obvious that Basic Income could be the name of a non-means-tested grant while the means-tested grant would continue to be known by the familiar term, NIT.

But in the decades since, the term NIT has fallen out of favor. The meaning of a “negative tax” was never as easily understandable to people unfamiliar with the topic as the economists who

coined the term thought it would be. It connotes negativity. And it is associated with ungenerously sized proposals put forward by neoliberal economists, such as Milton Friedman.¹¹ Most of the progressive supporters of unconditional-but-means-tested grants today want to avoid all these associations, and NIT is less-and-less used. But a recognizable standard term to replace NIT has not yet emerged.

Further complicating the issue of naming this concept is that there is no agreement about the relationship between means-tested and uniform unconditional grants. Some supporters of a means-tested grant like to think of it as practically the same as Basic Income (under BIEN's existing definition of the term), and have even used the name "Basic Income" for it, implicitly or explicitly using the expansive definition of Basic Income.

Many supporters of unconditional uniform grants view this use of the term by supporters of unconditional-but-means-tested grants to benefit from the positive associations with the term that the Basic Income movement has built up over the last several decades, even though the movement was made up mostly of people pressing for unconditional-and-uniform grants. This use of terms also tends to push uniform grants out of the discussion because there is no word to distinguish it from the means-tested version of the grant.

Other supporters of unconditional-but-means-tested grants think that the differences between it and Basic Income are substantial. Therefore, they believe it is important to distinguish their proposal from Basic Income. Some of these supporters have started to call this policy the "Guaranteed Income," but it is sometimes unclear whether "Guaranteed Income" is being used specifically for means-tested grants designated by cells 2 and 4 or whether it is being used for the expansive family of ideas designated by the whole 2x2 matrix.

Supporters of uniform grants also disagree about how they view means-tested grants. Some see them as a close sibling of unconditional grants or even as practically the same thing. They're happy to see supporters of means-tested-but-unconditional grants as their political allies as long as they're willing to use a term that clearly distinguishes between the uniform and means-tested versions of the grant.

Others supporters of uniform grants view means-tested grants as a very different policy that could derail enthusiasm for a uniform grant and possibly tarnish Basic Income's reputation if some nation introduced the (flawed) means-tested alternative under the name "Basic Income."

This illustrates why we need more terms. Even if there were agreement that the two ideas are close siblings, we need words to distinguish them whenever we discuss the pros and cons of going with one model or the other. Even if there were agreement that the two policies are very different, we need names for both uniform and means-tested grants that both sides can use so that we can have a respectful debate.

The question of livability sparks a somewhat different controversy. Most people within the "Basic Income" movement (the many activists and academics who go to the many actions and events organized under the name "Basic Income" each year) support a grant that is large enough to live on. However, not all of them agree that livability needs to be incorporated into the definition of the term. Proposals for a less-than-livable unconditional grant to come out from time-to-time, but they usually fall into one of three categories: 1. They're proposed as transitional programs—the best we can do under current conditions with the hope that perhaps sooner or later we can get closer or all the way to livability. 2. They are proposed as issue-specific policies, such as a pollution-tax dividend universally distributed as a Basic Income. 3. They are proposed as stand-alone permanent solutions and a distinct alternative to a more generous unconditional grant.

The desire to incorporate livability into the definition is usually driven by the fear that people will use this third type of proposal to promote regressive policies in the name of Basic Income. Such proposals do come out from time to time. The replacement of existing policies targeted at the poor with a universal and uniform Basic Income at a very low level constitutes, in most cases, a regressive—perhaps highly regressive—change. Proposals like this usually come from outside the Basic Income movement and they only rarely use the term “Basic Income.” But they could be seen as a way to derail the movement and to give the impression of guilt by association.

Although few people in the Basic Income movement support a less-than-livable Basic Income, there is a substantial argument against incorporating livability into the definition. First, if the goal is a livable Basic Income, almost any Basic Income, no matter how small, is a step in the right direction as long as it doesn’t come at the sacrifice of other programs. Second, the narrow definition might seem to create unity in the movement by separating out people who want a regressive change, but it actually creates a new prompt for disunity by introducing the argument of how large is “livable.” People will disagree about livability and that will carry over disagreement about whether one proposal is a Basic Income or not.

We will not resolve a disagreement about how large Basic Income should be—or any of the other issues I’ve discussed—by definitional fiat.

People will continue to support what they support, and we will need words to talk about them. We should choose a set of words that allow respectful and clear discussion.

A note on linguistics

Language develops by use. No official ruling, no official body can make something the “right” or “wrong” definition of a word. There are common and uncommon definitions, standard and nonstandard definitions. Any person or group can choose the terms they use, but they can’t be sure those terms will catch on. Official definitions can stipulate a term for internal use, but beyond that they are no more than an effort to use their influence to nudge language in a particular direction. Language might or might not follow.

Basic Income is still a nonmainstream political idea in most countries. Probably a large majority of people don’t know what it is. Although *the Oxford English Dictionary* and *the Cambridge Dictionary* have entries for Universal Basic Income, *Dictionary.com* and *Merriam-Webster.com* do not.¹²The Basic Income movement, therefore, has very little influence over the language at this point. Media and social discussions of Basic Income reveal widely conflicting understandings of what it is.

Any organization hoping to affect how the language is used should recognize the limits of its influence. With the limited nature of this effort in mind, I’ll consider some options for sets of terms for this family of related concepts.

Using the matrix to consider possible sets of terms

The expansive definition of Basic Income with modifiers

If we were to use the expansive definition of Basic Income, only four modifiers would be necessary to identify all 9 terms, but some of the resulting combinations would face resistance or would create other difficulties.

Consider the possibilities displayed in Tables 10-13. These tables use “universal” and/or “unconditional” to be the moderator designating uniformity with respect to income and “guaranteed,” “means tested,” or “income targeted” as the modifier designating variability with respect to income.

These tables suggest three possible pairs of modifiers to distinguish between livable and non-livable grants: “full” or “partial,” “livable” or “less-than-livable,” or “sufficient” and “insufficient.” The modifiers, “full” and “partial,” are simpler and more intuitive than the two other pairs of modifiers I’ve suggested to designate livability, but they also have baggage. “Full” has been used not only to designate a Basic Income that’s large enough to live on, but also for one large enough to replace the rest of the welfare system. Many Basic Income supporters oppose replac the rest of the welfare state and don’t want to associate with such proposals. Any use of “full” and “partial” as modifiers would have to overcome that association. But for lack of better terms, I’ll use them throughout this essay.

Table 10: Just the matrix with the expansive definition: Basic Income covers all four cells

Basic Income

Table 11: The expansive definition with modifies for the means-testing question (cells 1 & 3 on the left and 2 & 4 on the right)

Universal Basic Income Unconditional Basic Income	Guaranteed Basic Income, Means-Tested Basic Income, Income-Targeted Basic Income
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Table 12: The expansive definition with modifiers for the answer to the livability question (cells 1 & 2 on the top and 3 & 4 on the bottom)

Full Basic Income, Livable Basic Income, or Sufficient Basic Income
Partial Basic Income

Less-than-livable Basic Income
Insufficient Basic Income

Table 13: The expansive definition with combined modifies from above used to designate each of the four cells

Full Universal Basic Income, Livable Universal Basic Income, Sufficient Universal Basic Income	Full Guaranteed Basic Income, Full Means-Tested Basic Income, Full Income-Targeted Basic Income Livable Guaranteed Basic Income, Livable Means-Tested Basic Income, Livable Income-Targeted Basic Income
Partial Universal Basic Income, Less-than-livable Universal Basic Income	Partial or Less-than-Livable Guaranteed Basic Income, Partial or Less-than-Livable Means-Tested Basic Income, Partial or Less-than-Livable Income-Targeted Basic Income

These sets of terms are relatively elegant, understandable, and simple. This strategy of using the expansive definition is the only way both to preserve the popular term “Basic Income” and to identify all 9 terms with as few as four modifies.

But this strategy faces two problems. First, “Basic Income,” “Universal Basic Income,” and “Unconditional Basic Income” have been used synonymously for decades. Any attempt to pry them apart would sew confusion for years to come.

Second, a large number of people in the Basic Income movement consider uniformity with respect to income as an essential characteristic of Basic Income. They want to minimize the association with a means tested grant. The Basic Income movement was built largely by people who felt this way about uniformity with respect to income. Most of them do not want to share the term with a rival policy. I expect that this set would be the preferred solution only of the supporters of a means-tested grant who see it as a close cousin of (the uniform) Basic Income and who want to capitalize on the positive attention the Basic Income movement has built up over recent decades. It will be less popular with means-tested-grant supporters who see it as a rival to Basic Income, and less popular still with (uniform) Basic Income supporters.

I consider these two reasons conclusive. This solution will not work despite its elegance.

Separation of uniform and means-tested grants without using a modifier

If we can’t use the expansive definition of Basic Income, we can’t designate all nine terms with four modifiers without dropping the popular term “Basic Income” altogether. In this case, we could use “Basic Income” (and its best-known synonyms “Universal Basic Income” and “Unconditional Basic Income”) in the sense used by BIEN to identify a non-means-tested grant without regard to livability. Doing this, we would have the same three options available for answering the livability question: full or partial, livable or less-than-livable, and sufficient or insufficient.

What do we call the means-tested version? The most recognized term for this concept is “Negative Income Tax” (NIT), which is in the Cambridge Dictionary online (“a system in which people with incomes below a particular amount receive money from the government instead of paying tax”).¹³ It was widely used in policy circles in the late Twentieth Century. Unfortunately,

as mentioned above, it has fallen out of favor with supporters of unconditional-but-means-tested grants.

Many supporters of the income-tested version of the grant have begun using the term “Guaranteed Income.” It has been used as an expansive term, and it’s often unclear whether it’s being used specifically for means-tested grants or in the expansive sense. This problem notwithstanding, it does make a good contrast with “Basic Income.”

If these two terms are used to answer the uniformity question, what term do we use for the expansive definition? One option is not to have any one term for the expansive concept. When one needs to talk about the whole set, one could say, “Basic or Guaranteed Income.” This solution also provides no single term for the union of cells 1 & 2 in Table 1 or for the union of cells 3 & 4 in Table 1. One has to hope that there is little need for these term. Another option would be “Basic Income Guarantee,” which the U.S. Basic Income Guarantee Network has been using since 1999 to identify the expansive concept. They did so because the network was founded by both Basic Income and NIT supporters.

Tables 14-17 display the options discussed above.

Table 14: Options for the expansive concept (the union of cells 1, 2, 3, and 4)
Basic or Guaranteed Income or Basic Income Guarantee

Table 15: Terms for the uniform and means-tested versions (cells 1 & 3 on the left and 2 & 4 on the right)		
<table border="1" style="width: 100%;"> <tr> <td style="width: 50%; text-align: center;">Basic Income</td> <td style="width: 50%; text-align: center;">Guaranteed Income</td> </tr> </table>	Basic Income	Guaranteed Income
Basic Income	Guaranteed Income	

Table 16: Terms for livable and non-livable versions of a unconditional grant without regard to uniformity (cells 1 & on top and 3 & 4 on the bottom)
Full Basic Income Guarantee, Livable Basic Income Guarantee, or Sufficient Basic Income Guarantee
Partial Basic Income Guarantee, Less-than-Livable Basic Income Guarantee, or Insufficient Basic Income Guarantee

Table 17: Terms to designate each of the four cells using this system	
Full Basic Income, Livable Basic Income, or Sufficient Basic Income	Full Guaranteed Income, Livable Guaranteed Income, or Sufficient Guaranteed Income
Partial Basic Income, Less-than-Livable Basic Income,	Partial Guaranteed Income, Less-than-Livable Guaranteed Income,

or Insufficient Basic Income	or Insufficient Guaranteed Income
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Possible terms when “Basic Income” is used in the most restricted sense.

Now consider possible terms when “Basic Income” is used in its most restrictive sense. Table 18 shows four fairly straight-forward terms for the four individual cells. “Basic Income” in the restrictive sense is large enough to live on and uniform with respect to income. A “Guaranteed Income” in a similarly restrictive sense is large enough to live on and variable with respect to income. The less-than-livable versions of these two policies are distinguished with the addition of the word “partial” in front of them.

However, I’ve put the word “full” in square brackets in front of the terms Basic Income and Guaranteed Income in cells 1 and 2. I do this because we need to ask ourselves what to do when we need to distinguish between a “Basic Income” and a “partial Basic Income.” In the same way we distinguish between a “professor” and an “associate professor” by putting the word “full” in front of professor (although full is not part of a professor’s official title), we will need to put something in front of the official name “Basic Income” to distinguish it from a Partial Basic Income in at least some contexts. As any “professor” can tell you, those contexts have a tendency to multiply, and we might find ourselves adding the word “full” more often than not, even if we try to keep “full” out of the official term. As much as we might want to get away from the need to use a modifier to communicate that a “Basic Income” is large enough to live on, we might never do so.

Table 18: Terms to designate each of the four cells when using the restrictive definition of Basic Income	
[Full] Basic Income or [Livable] Basic Income	[Full] Guaranteed Income or [Livable] Basic Income
Partial Basic Income	Partial Guaranteed Income

This solution seems less elegant when considering Tables 19, 20, and 21. What do we call the whole set? Table 19 suggests “Income Guarantee,” “Unconditional Grant, or “Basic Income Guarantee” as terms for the whole set. There are many other possibilities, none of them particularly attractive.

Table 19: The expansive concept (the union of cells 1, 2, 3, and 4)
“Income Guarantee”? “Unconditional Grant”? “Basic Income Guarantee”

Tables 20 and 21 indicate that names for the other concepts we’ve been discussing are also unattractive.

Table 20: Terms for the uniform and means-tested versions (cells 1 & 3 on the left and 2 & 4 on the right)

Basic Income or partial Basic Income Full or Partial Basic Income Livable or Partial Basic Income	Guaranteed Income or partial Guaranteed Income Full or partial Guaranteed Income Livable or Partial Guaranteed Income
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Table 21: Terms for livable and non-livable versions of an unconditional grant without regard to uniformity (cells 1 & on top and 3 & 4 on the bottom)
Full Basic or Guaranteed Income Livable Basic or Guaranteed Income
Partial Basic or Guaranteed Income

Many people who prefer the restricted definition of Basic Income are likely to react by discounting the need for any term for the whole set and the concern for what to call the other terms in the set. They view the other three policies in the 2x2 matrix as very different from and as rivals of a [full] Basic Income. They don't want to see them as part of a set.

Be that as it may, these policies do have some important features in common, and some people who participate in the debate want to talk about this set as a whole. To have that discussion, we need terms that people will actually use.

Conclusion

The point of this paper is neither to suggest a particular definition of "basic income" nor to suggest particular words for the 9 concepts it discusses. But to show the need for multiple terms.

The debate will not end just because some group says the official definition is such-and-such. People will continue to support means-tested and/or less-than-livable grants, and unless we can find respectful terms that clearly distinguish the relevant concepts and that people on all sides of these debates will feel comfortable using, people are liking to keep using the term "basic income" in very different ways.

Much of the literature on the definition of Basic Income seems to have to goal of defining it in such a way that no one can come up with a bad idea that fits under the definition of Basic Income. This is a hopeless quest. The devil is and will always be in the details. There are good pensions and bad pensions. There are good social security systems and bad social security systems, good and bad defamation laws, good and bad labor regulations, good and bad healthy eating plans, good and bad this, that, and the other thing.

An effort to definitionally rule out all plans one might disagree with from the definition of Basic Income will lead to an ever lengthening and ever more controversial definition. It does not end the debate it merely renames the debate over what is a good Basic Income plan, into the debate over what is the "true" definition Basic Income.

Am I suggesting that a penny a month is or can be a Basic Income? Possibly, but because it cannot significantly help maintain real freedom for all,¹⁴ because it cannot help protect freedom as the power to say no;¹⁵ because it cannot make a substantial difference in the lives the people who need it most,¹⁶ it is also a bad Basic Income plan. A very bad Basic Income plan. One can effectively oppose this and many other bad plans just as well (and perhaps better) by saying it is a bad Basic Income plan, than one can be trying to define Basic Income in such a way that no bad plan will ever fall under the definition of Basic Income.

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¹ My impressions of the discussion over the definition of Basic Income comes from participating at oral debates at multiple Basic Income conferences per year around the world for more than 20 years. For a survey of definitions provided by Basic Income groups, see Yamamori, "Is a Penny a Month a Basic Income? A Historiography of the Concept of a Threshold in Basic Income." 4-14.

² <https://basicincome.org/about-basic-income/>

³ Yamamori, "Is a Penny a Month a Basic Income? A Historiography of the Concept of a Threshold in Basic Income." 4-14.

⁴ I make this claim based on my participation in BIEN's 2014 definitional decision and my talks with people who participated in BIEN's original definition decision in 1986.

⁵ Yamamori, "Is a Penny a Month a Basic Income? A Historiography of the Concept of a Threshold in Basic Income." 4-14.

⁶ Torry, "The Definition and Characteristics of Basic Income."

⁷ Yamamori, "Is a Penny a Month a Basic Income? A Historiography of the Concept of a Threshold in Basic Income." 4-14; Torry, "The Definition and Characteristics of Basic Income."; Miller, "The Case for a Revision of BIEN's Definition of Basic Income."

⁸ Yamamori, "Is a Penny a Month a Basic Income? A Historiography of the Concept of a Threshold in Basic Income." 4-14; Torry, "The Definition and Characteristics of Basic Income."; Miller, "The Case for a Revision of BIEN's Definition of Basic Income."

⁹ https://www.oed.com/dictionary/universal-basic-income_n?tab=meaning_and_use#991341497700; <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/basic-income>; <https://basicincome.org/about-basic-income/>

¹⁰ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/basic-income>

¹¹ Friedman, "The Case for the Negative Income Tax: A View from the Right."

¹² <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/basic-income>

¹³ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/negative-income-tax>

¹⁴ Van Parijs, *Real Freedom for All: What (If Anything) Can Justify Capitalism?*

¹⁵ Widerquist, *Independence, Propertylessness, and Basic Income: A Theory of Freedom as the Power to Say No*.

¹⁶ Torry, "The Definition and Characteristics of Basic Income."