Globalizations

ISSN: 1474-7731 (Print) 1474-774X (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rglo20

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To cite this article: Hein Marais (2019): The crisis of waged work and the option of a universal basic income grant for South Africa, Globalizations, DOI: 10.1080/14747731.2019.1652469

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2019.1652469

Published online: 29 Aug 2019.

GLOBALIZATIONS
https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2019.1652469

The crisis of waged work and the option of a universal basic income grant for South Africa

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ABSTRACT
Waged work is widely seen as a sufficient basis for meeting basic needs, achieving social inclusion and realizing essential social rights. Yet waged work that provides a livable income on reasonably secure terms is rare in 'developing' economies and increasingly scarce in 'developed' economies. This trend is likely to persist and worsen as the disruptive impacts of economic volatility and climate change intensify and labour market restructuring continues. Aggravating the impact is the diminishing access to livelihood options outside the wage economy. South Africa is an extreme example of this trend, with a very large proportion of the working age population superfluous to the formal economy, high levels of poverty and severe inequality. This paper describes this crisis at the global level and then specifically in South Africa, before considering the option of a universal basic income grant (UBIG). It examines the critiques and the potential merits and risks of such an intervention. To realize its transformative potential, a UBIG would have to be deployed as part of a broad transformation strategy that is led by an active state and driven by a mobilized civil society.

Introduction

Waged work continues to be presented as the guarantor of a secure livelihood, wellbeing, social inclusion and the realization of social rights. Yet paid work that provides a livable income on reasonably secure terms is rare in 'developing' economies and is becoming increasingly scarce in 'developed' economies. This is distressingly evident in a country such as South Africa (SA), which already is stricken with extraordinarily high levels of unemployment and inequality.

In addition to having a conservatively measured unemployment rate of more than 27%, close to one-third of employed individuals in South Africa do not earn enough to afford basic food and non-food items. This crisis is rooted both in the specific political economy of SA and in structural trends shaping the capitalist system globally.

The scope and intensity of this crisis is likely to increase as the short-term, dividend-boosting pressures of financialized capitalism persist, as digitalized and other job-replacing technologies are deployed more widely, and as pressure mounts to phase out economic activities associated with intensive greenhouse gas emissions. In such an outlook, the pursuit of more jobs – and *more decent* jobs – is important and necessary, but it cannot substitute for a more encompassing drive to realize social citizenship and assure basic entitlements.

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A retooling and drastic expansion of social protection is necessary, including the possible introduction of a universal basic income grant (UBIG). In addition to supporting basic means for material survival, such an intervention could reduce socioeconomic inequality, support greater gender equality, spur a rethink of the role and status of waged work in society, and ease transitions towards ecologically sustainable economic models.

The crisis of waged work

Chronic high un- and under-employment; new jobs that are mostly irregular and at the low-pay end of the scale and that lack benefits and security; stagnating or declining real incomes for the majority of workers; social protection systems that are either flimsy or humiliatingly policed and rationed; widening income inequality. Those descriptions used to apply almost exclusively to countries on the margins of the global economy. Today they are increasingly generic (Breman, 2013).

The intensity, pace and scale of these changes differ between regions and countries, but the overall trend is relatively homogenous. The world employment rate continues to fall, to a little over 58% in 2017 (ILO, 2018). Except for sub-Saharan African, the secular trend since 2000 in the populous regions is stagnant or downward (Figure 1).[1]

Conservative calculations put the global unemployment rate[2] at 5.6% in 2017 (about 190 million people), with youth unemployment (15–24-year-olds) more than double that, at 13%.[3] The absolute number of people deemed 'unemployed' is rising in East and South Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean and sub-Saharan Africa, a trend that is likely to continue as the demographic 'youth bulge' grows. In 'developed' countries, declining official unemployment rates hide large shares of discouraged workers, and a rising incidence of involuntary part-time employment in growing populations (ILO, 2018).

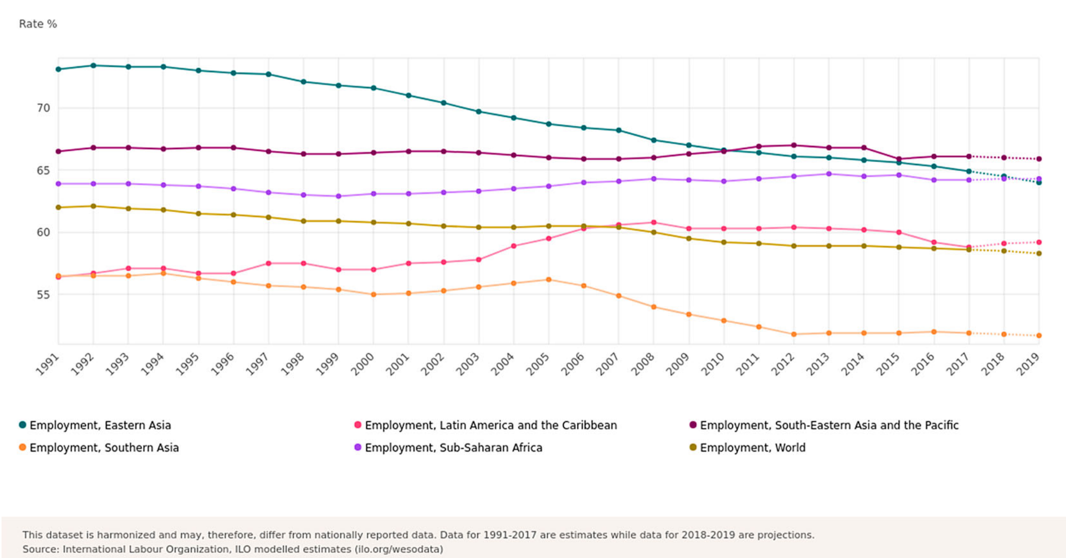

Figure 1. World and regional employment rate, 1991–2019. Source: International Labour Organization (2018).
Note: The 'employment rate' (also known as the employment-to-population ratio) is defined liberally to include all persons of working age (15+ years) who, during a short reference period, were engaged in any activity to produce goods or provide services for pay or profit.

The weight of workers' organizations in 'developed' economies varies considerably (contrast the United States with France, for example), but its strength and influence has weakened considerably over the past 30 years (Breman, 2013). Growth in the industrial and service sectors has seen workers' organizations proliferate in some 'developing' economies.[4] Their impact, though growing, remains limited. Job and income insecurity and poor working conditions, therefore, continue to typify employment in 'developing' economies. In most of them, self-employment and family-based work still eclipse formalized waged work as the chief material basis for survival.

In 2017 an estimated 300 million workers were living in extreme poverty in 'developing' countries, a figure that rises to 730 million when people classified as moderately poor (that is, living on less than US$3.10 per day in purchasing power parity terms) are included. Globally, about 1.4 billion workers were in vulnerable employment – either self-employed or contributing family workers – and they accounted for almost 42.5% of total employment (ILO, 2018).

In 'developed' countries, decently paid, secure work is increasingly atypical, with the jobs created since 2008/2009 disproportionately of the low-skills, low-pay, and low- or no-security variety. But it is in 'developing' countries that the association of work and precariousness remains strongest: only about 4% of people in 'vulnerable employment' reside in the 'developed' countries, according to the ILO (2018). As the disruptive impact of climate change intensifies, economic volatility persists and labour market restructuring continues (and possibly intensifies as AI and other automating technologies are incorporated), wage employment is predicted to be an insufficient basis for dignified life for a growing proportion of people across the world.

Shrinking shares

The predicament of workers is reflected in the declining share of income that reaches them. Globally, the percentage of gross domestic product paid out in wages (the 'global labour share') has been falling for at least three decades (Figure 2 shows the trend in four major economies). One may expect that the labour share in 'developing' countries will have risen as their economies became more integrated internationally in recent decades. Yet labour's relative income in those countries declined despite rises in overall productivity (Trapp, 2015).[5]

Of the 59 countries with at least 15 years of data between 1975 and 2012, 42 showed downward trends in their labour shares – including China, India and Mexico. This is a generic trend and it is visible in countries with very different policies and economic institutions, and across all industries. The fact that the labour share has been shrinking also in major locations of out-sourced production (in Asia especially) indicates that the trend cannot be attributed strictly to offshore production or international trade patterns (Karabarbounis & Neiman, 2013). In 'developing' countries, this downward trend has accelerated since the early 1990s, with the labour share dropping most sharply in low-income countries (Figure 3) (Trapp, 2015).[6]

Profound structural changes contribute to these trends. Among them is the incorporation from the 1970s onward of tens of millions of peasants around the world into the labour reserve, mostly in Asia. This coincided with the entry of vast numbers of women into labour markets. The resulting glut of labour supply dramatically depressed the 'reservation wage', the lowest wage that workers are willing to accept for any given job. It also removed the constraint of labour scarcity, which tends to boost the bargaining power of workers. Along with sustained attacks on workers' organizations over the past 40 years, those developments have helped push and hold workers on the defensive (Kunkel, 2014).

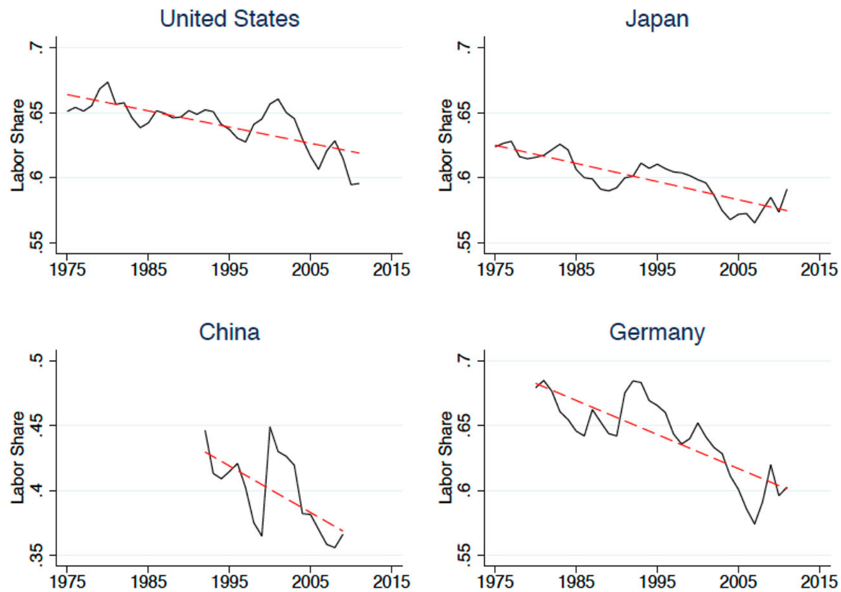

Figure 2. Labour share of national income in China, Germany, Japan and United States between 1975 and 2013. Source: Karabarbounis and Neiman (2013).

Shifting production to zones with attractively low labour costs allied with adequate transport and other infrastructure has been another key strategy used by capital to reduce aggregate labour costs and increase profitability. By the 2010s, however, the opportunities for cutting labour costs by reallocating production to new geographical zones were diminishing.[7] Africa may beckon with low wages, but volatile currencies, poor infrastructure and unreliable transport and communications systems dim its attractions.

Beware the robots?

There is growing alarm about an impending mass erasure of jobs as new robot and artificial intelligence technologies are developed and deployed more extensively. A 2013 study by Oxford

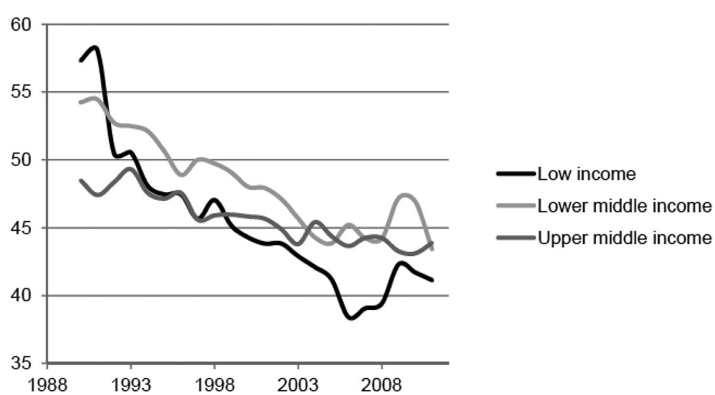

Figure 3. Labour share by country income classification, 1990–2011. Source: Trapp (2015).

University's Martin School, for example, caused consternation when it estimated that close to half of existing jobs in the USA were at 'high risk' of being replaced by artificial intelligence and robots within the next few decades (Frey & Osborne, 2013).[8] Skeptics remind that similar forecasts in the 1990s failed to materialize. Robert Solow's famous 1987 aphorism that 'you can see the computer age everywhere but in the productivity statistics' may still be appropriate despite the growing use of robots and artificial intelligence in 'developed' economies. In US manufacturing, for example, there has been a steep increase in the use of robots since 2010, yet labour productivity has stayed sluggish (as it has across 'developed' economies generally) (Figure 4) (Majmumdar, 2017).

It may be too early to detect the impact of automation on productivity, or statisticians may be looking in the wrong places, or measurements of output may be too imprecise in some industrial sectors to capture the impact. Or it may be that the anticipated impact is exaggerated. This is an interesting debate, but it is also somewhat misleading.

New productive technologies are not used simply because they exist. Their function is to increase profit by reducing input costs (that is, over time they become cheaper than the labour inputs they replace) and/or boosting output (that is, they produce more in less time). Whether a particular system of automation can do that is not only a matter of the technology itself; it depends on the context.

In a period and in settings marked by a surplus of suitable labour and depressed wages – and policy environments that promise to sustain those conditions – widespread and major capital expenditures on new workplace technologies become less attractive. These are the conditions that currently pertain across much of the world. Conversely, if workers successfully organize and campaign for higher wages and improved working conditions and terms of employment, labour input costs will increase – and so will the attraction of labour-substituting technologies.

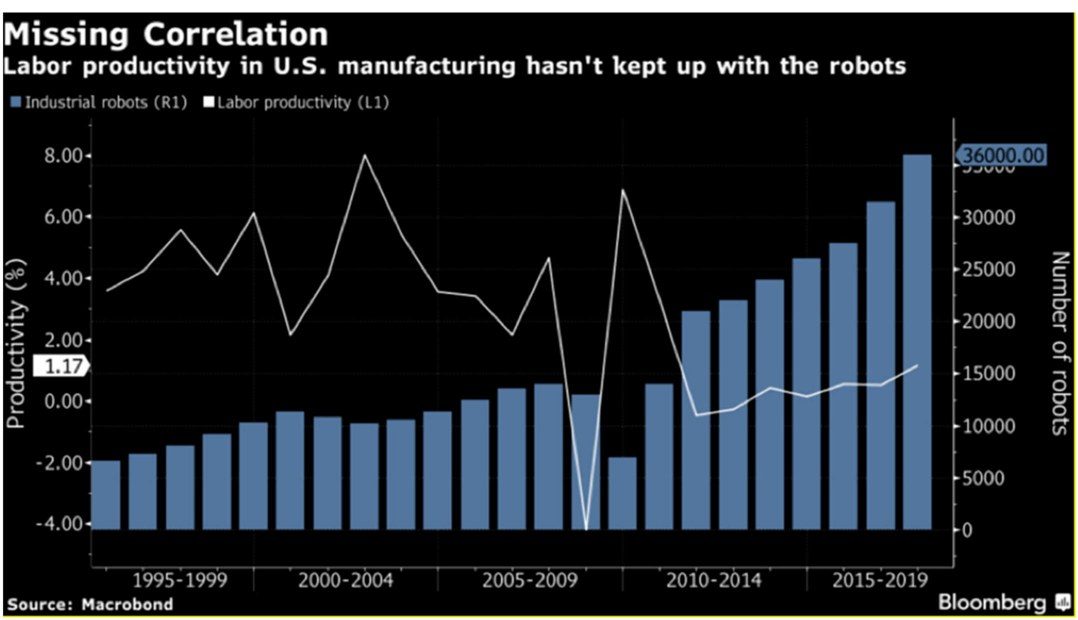

Figure 4. Industrial robots in use and labour productivity trends, USA 1995–2019. Source: Bloomberg (2018).

Vast numbers of workers are cornered between those scenarios. One involves further proliferation of precarious and draconian work regimes that rapidly cycle individuals in and out of work, thereby maintaining a constant surplus of labour supply that's big enough to keep wages depressed. Importantly, in such a scenario low unemployment rates need not reflect actual labour scarcity (which usually strengthens workers' bargaining power). If workers successfully press for higher wages and improved working conditions, more extensive use of labour-replacing technologies will become more attractive and viable for capital. We can then expect the stuttering succession of precarious employment and 'gigs' to blur steadily into lengthening periods of no work.

A crisis with deep roots

Thomas Piketty's analysis (2013) suggests that the global growth rates of the mid-twentieth century are unlikely to be repeated and that a remake of the 'golden age' that prevailed in 'developed' economies is unlikely. That period, which ended in the early 1970s, boasted accelerated growth in productivity, output and profitability, along with rising real wages and a rich array of work-related entitlements. Much of the impetus for those improvements came from workers' movements that were powerful enough to act as sturdy stakeholders in corporatist arrangements. This occurred against the geopolitical background of the Cold War, with capitalist governments anxious to prevent workers' and other social movements from radicalizing to the point where they might challenge the system on fundamental terms.

That grand compromise broke down in the 1970s. Intensified competition at the global level led to excess industrial capacity and overproduction, which depressed profitability. Surplus capital was increasingly routed away from investment in the 'real economy' in pursuit of strategies promising higher returns (Brenner, 2006). Whereas finance capital used to function largely in service of industrial growth, by promoting industrial development through the merger of industrial and financial capital (Hilferding, 1981), it was now being geared to extract maximum returns in a minimum of time, even by dismantling industrial capacity. This increased the pressure on enterprises to maximize short-term profits, with wages and working conditions typically in the firing line. Worker organizations came under sustained attack and production chains were extended into low-wage, union-free locations as globalization gained pace. 'Excessive' wages and 'inflexible' labour standards were targeted, work regimes were restructured and workers were driven increasingly into retreat.[9]

These 'fixes' prolonged and, in some respects, compounded underlying problems. Productivity and output recovered somewhat, but in several of the biggest economies, wage growth (except for top earners) was attacked, arresting median real income growth and depressing aggregate demand. Although real wages rose and the ranks of wage earners grew in many other economies, this was not enough to generate sufficient final demand to absorb excess supply of goods and services at the global level.

Easy credit became the stopgap of choice – allowing people to borrow against income they do not have (and may never have) or assets they do not fully own. Equity and housing bubbles keep these improvizations aloft for a while, but they tumble back to earth without fail.

Wolfgang Streeck (2014) has argued that capitalism's resilience – its ability to renew itself through crisis – is waning and that the system may be entering a phase of prolonged instability and gradual breakdown as it destroys the conditions for its continued growth. As climate shocks increase in frequency and scale, economic instability is likely to intensify, with the impact funnelled largely into the lives and communities of the poor.

Even if the vast majority of goods and services continue to be produced and provided by workers – as seems probable for the foreseeable future – the structural momentum of capitalism currently inclines towards depressed real wages for a majority of workers toiling in unstable and insecure work regimes. Sheer necessity will see workers evolve new forms of organizing to challenge those terms. But the prevailing conditions and dilemmas of capitalism do not favour generalized 'win-win' compromises of the kinds associated with the 'golden age'.

The encroachments of agribusiness on agrarian livelihoods, the impact of climate change on agrarian production, and the blurring of informal and formal economies make it much more difficult for families to diversify and juggle sources of income and subsistence and thereby avoid complete dependence on waged work (Davis, 2006). Their supplementary options for building livelihoods and achieving basic wellbeing are being erased rapidly. Their reliance on regular waged work is increasing, while access to such work narrows.

South Africa presents a grim, almost dystopian, expression of these trends.

South Africa – a sign of things to come?

The South African economy manages to grow, albeit feebly, without the paid labour of around 40% of the working age population and by paying a substantial proportion of employed workers wages so low that their survival requires subsidies from family members and the state. The labour share of income is shrinking and a tiny proportion of employed workers pocket much of it.

For perhaps a majority of low- and semi-skilled workers, working life comprises short periods of employment bracketed by unpredictable durations of unemployment (with rare access to unemployment insurance). A very large percentage of working age adults in South Africa is superfluous to the labour needs of capital. The trend stretches back decades and there is no current indication of significant change.

Patterns of poverty and inequality

Poverty and inequality trends reflect very high unemployment rates and rising earnings inequality (Leibbrandt, Finn, & Woolard, 2012). Small sections of society capture much of the reward of SA's halting economic growth, while punishing costs are imposed on the poor. Patterns of poverty in SA are glaringly skewed by race and gender (Figure 6). Women are more likely to be living in poverty than men, and black South Africans are much more likely to be living in poverty than other population groups (Statistics SA, 2016a).

Fully 56% the population lived at or below the upper-bound poverty line (UBPL) in 2015 (Figure 5). This meant that 30.4 million South Africans were living in poverty in 2015. Of them, almost 14 million were classified as 'extremely poor', that is, they could not regularly buy essential food items.

The South African government's 2012 National Development Plan called for reducing the percentage of South Africans living below the lower-bound poverty line (LBPL) from 39% in 2009 to zero in 2030. In 2015, 40% of South African were somehow living below that threshold (Statistics SA, 2016a). Low and weak economic growth, very high unemployment, stagnant incomes for a majority

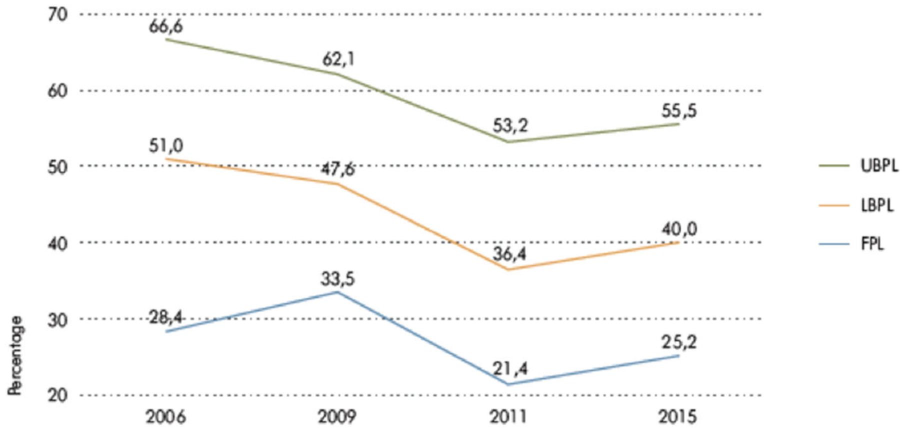

Figure 5. Poverty headcounts in South Africa based on food poverty line, lower-bound poverty line and upper-bound poverty line (2006, 2009, 2011, 2015). Source: Statistics SA (2016a).

of wage earners, rising energy and food prices, and great household dependency on unsustainable debts continue to pull households and individuals into poverty.

The poverty gap has widened: that is, people living in poverty in 2015 tended to be in deeper poverty than in 2006 or 2011 (Statistics SA, 2016a).[10] Yet it's remarkable how little it would take to close that poverty gap (that is, lift everyone below the poverty line above it): about 3% of GDP, excluding administrative costs and assuming perfect targeting (Tregenna, 2009).

Even when performing listlessly, the SA economy generates great wealth – the distribution of which is extraordinarily unequal. The GINI coefficient in 2014 was 0.65 based on expenditure data (excluding taxes), and 0.69 based on income data (including salaries, wages, and social grants) (World Bank, 2018). The top 10% of income earners in SA captured about 45% of

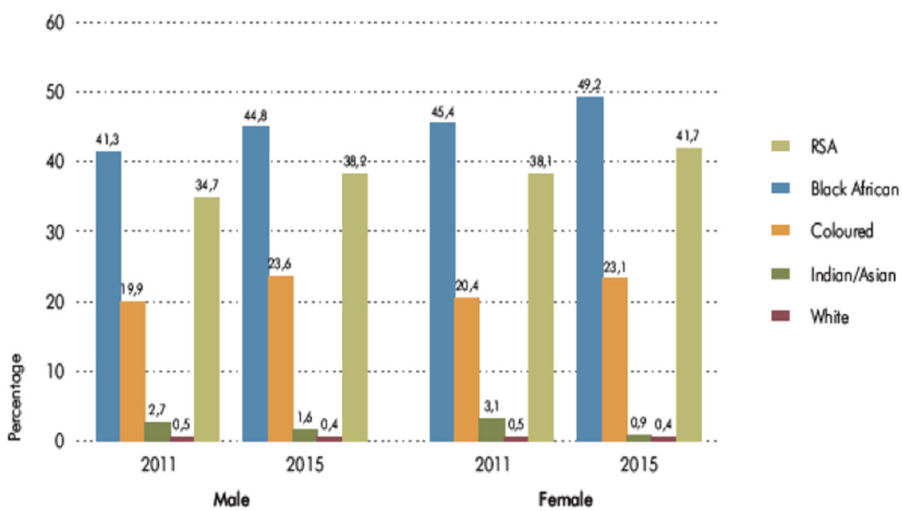

Figure 6. Proportion of South Africa's population living below the lower-bound poverty line by sex and population group (2011 and 2015). Source: Statistics SA (2016a).

national income in 2014. The poorest 40% received about 5% of national income, a share that's changed little for almost three decades and which is among the smallest in the world (Angola, Bolivia, Colombia, Haiti and Namibia are among the few other countries that rival SA's inequality).[11]

Wealth inequality is even more extreme. Tax and household survey data from 2011 show that the richest 10% of the population owned 90–95% of all assets, while the poorest 50% owned no measurable assets (Orthofer, 2016).

Jobless – and wageless – in South Africa

Finding employment is a Herculean undertaking. The official (narrow) unemployment rate was 27.7% in 2017. If you count unemployed adults who did not search for a job in the previous three months, the unemployment rate was 37% (Statistics SA, 2017a).

The employment-to-population ratio (the proportion of the population aged 15 years and older that is in employment) has been abnormally low for decades and has deteriorated, falling from 44% to 39.6% between 1995 and 2017. In other upper-middle-income economies it averaged around 60% during that period (World Bank, 2017). SA is one of the ten countries with the worst employment ratios in the world; many of the others are in Middle East and North Africa, where women are largely excluded from the labour market.

Waged work, poverty and inequality

Not having paid employment is an obvious and major cause of poverty. But having a job is not a sure bulwark against poverty. Unemployment is estimated to be the main cause of about half of poverty in SA; low earnings are a major cause for the other half.

From 2004 to 2012, the working poor became a significantly larger segment of SA's large population of working-age poor. In 2012, about one-third of workers earned wages that were too low to enable their households to meet basic food and non-food needs. Put differently, the majority of poor South Africans in 2012 (58%, using the upper-bound poverty line) lived in a household with at least one employed person (Rogan & Reynolds, 2015).[12]

Driving these trends are three key factors: a sustained shift towards the use of casual and subcontracted labour, the related decline in real wages for low-skilled workers, and job losses in sectors that used to have strong trade union representation (such as mining and manufacturing). These patterns reflect companies' attempts to compete in a global market by imposing new paradigms of work. They increasingly rely on a small core of skilled, full-time workers and a larger stock of less-skilled, casual and outsourced labour that is deprived of the wages, benefits and rights enjoyed (for now) by their better-off peers. This fits global trends.

Inequality in earnings among employees has increased in the post-apartheid period. Higher-income earners pocket a bigger share of the total wage bill in SA than they did in 1994, while the bottom 50% of wage earners have lost ground (Figure 7) (Wittenberg, 2017). In other words, the average real wage in SA is propped up by the improved fortunes of small numbers of high-skilled, high-salary workers.

Working poverty has persisted over periods that saw both high and low levels of economic growth, persistently high levels of unemployment, partial recovery from a major financial crisis and the introduction of protective labour market legislation (Rogan & Reynolds, 2015).

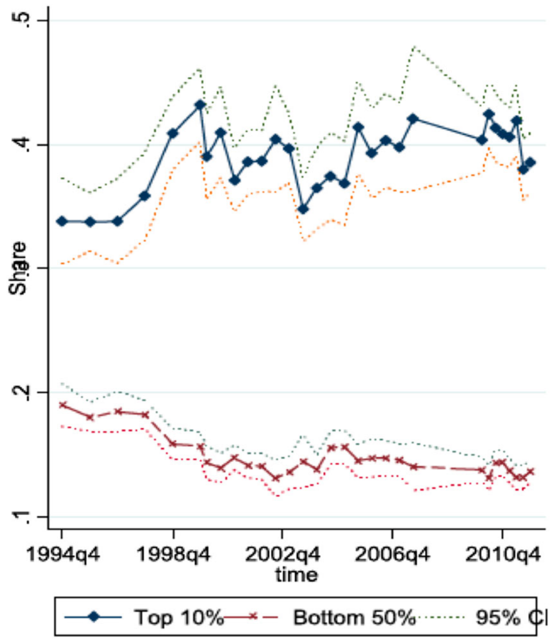

Figure 7. Share of the total wage bill in SA going to the top 10% and bottom 50% of wage earners, 1994–2011. Source: Wittenberg (2017).

Reducing poverty with social grants

One of the most effective interventions against poverty in the past two decades has been the expansion of SA's social grant system (Leibbrandt, Woolard, McEwen, & Koep, 2010; Woolard & Leibbrandt, 2010). In 2017, approximately 17.4 million South Africans were receiving a social grant, up from about 4 million in 1994 (Statistics SA, 2017b). The main social grants in SA are the old-age pension and the child support grant (Statistics SA, 2016b). Although unconditional, both are means-tested and targeted.[13]

Social grants have become a vital and, in many cases, primary source of livelihood for close to half of households in South Africa: almost 45% of households were receiving a social grant of some sort in 2015 (Statistics SA, 2016a). Between 2004 and 2012, the percentage of the working poor living in a grant-receiving household increased from 51% to 63% (Rogan & Reynolds, 2015). It is estimated that levels of persistent poverty would have been 8% higher in 2014/2015 in the absence of social grants (Posel, 2016).

Income is also shared 'privately' amongst households, usually those with family links. In 2014/2015, 21% of households received income from another household, compared with 43% of households that received at least one social grant. Transfers of income between households account for as much as 41% of total household income. The share of individuals living in poor households in 2014/2015 would have been 3% larger had these private transfers not occurred (Posel, 2016).

Economic growth in SA has been comparatively sluggish for decades. It averaged at 3.3% per annum in the two decades after 1994, compared with an average growth rate for 'developing' economies of 5.4% in that period. It is not uncommon for income inequality to increase during periods of robust economic growth. In SA's case, however, already-high income inequality has increased even in periods marked by sub-par economic growth or stagnation. This points to an ongoing process of dispossession at the expense of the working poor and unemployed.

SA's comparatively low rate of economic growth is due largely to the structure of the economy and the terms of its insertion into the global economy. The SA economy remains centred around minerals, energy and related capital-intensive ventures, but is increasingly in tow to a voracious financial sector that accounts for about one-quarter of SA's GDP (compared with 6.5% in 1994) (Ashman, Fine, & Newman, 2011). This results in massive misallocation of capital while also blocking structural economic change (Mohammed, 2016).

What's going on?

Employment trends, the kinds of jobs that are being created, and the terms and wages attached to them in SA generally follow global trends. They also have distinctly local features. The ruling ANC (African National Congress, 2007) squandered a great deal of its leverage with corporate capital during the 1990s. Economic policy adjustments ensured that corporations' chief requirements were met: they were allowed to diversify abroad, and relaxed capital controls and various investment 'incentives' enabled them to circumvent SA taxes and spirit profits into offshore havens. Their domestic operations are often subsidiary to global corporate strategies and do not enjoy privileged status. Unlike the Asian 'tigers' of yesteryear, the SA government's sway over the banks and financial sector is slight. In addition, its capacity to coordinate planning across sectors is weak, as is its capacity to assemble and steward economic and social compacts (Marais, 2011).

Operating alongside the impersonal, structural drivers in SA is an acute self-awareness among corporate managers, who reacted to the shifting balance of power between employers and workers since the mid-1970s in two ways.

South Africa's post-apartheid labour regime was designed to promote and protect decent work. But liberalized economic policies increased both the perceived need and opportunities for companies to sidestep the provisions of the new labour regime. Labour-saving technologies were introduced where feasible, though a volatile currency made this option unpredictably expensive. Another option was to resort to casualization and subcontracting, and to squeeze workers' wages and terms of conditions. Companies adapted 'by restructuring production, establishing new patterns of work organization and/or relocating production units' (Webster & Omar, 2003, p. 195). Those shifts had begun in the 1980s already and gathered momentum subsequently (Bezuidenhout & Tshoaedi, 2017; Pons-Vignon & Anseeuw, 2009).

Trade unions have struggled hard to put 'decent work' on the map, but they are fighting mostly rearguard battles and memberships are shrinking in important sectors. The labour movement remains committed to centralized bargaining, and some of its affiliates have mounted successful campaigns in defence of sector-wide bargaining (Bezuidenhout & Tshoaedi, 2017). But powerful pressures are pushing in the opposite direction. Research reveals considerable *de facto* flexibility in a labour market that is highly segmented and increasingly characterized by 'shell' wage agreements where labour wins high standards on paper that apply to fewer and fewer workers in reality (Kenny & Webster, 1998; Pons-Vignon & Anseeuw, 2009). The sectors with the strongest labour market protections (manufacturing and mining) have also been the targets of deep and sustained job cuts.

Compounding matters is the labour movement's failure to organize the 'new working poor' in meaningful numbers. Organizing these workers is notoriously difficult; so, too, is convincing them that the potential benefits of formalized solidarity outweigh the immediate risks of harassment and lay-offs. In addition, their status is unstable. They migrate between employment, self-employment and unemployment (Di Paola & Pons-Vignon, 2013; Webster & Buhlungu, 2004).

SA has a severe and long-lasting crisis of unemployment, poverty (including working poverty) and inequality. In such a context, social, economic and labour policies should be as radical as reality

– which is one of many reasons why a universal basic income grant (UBIG) deserves serious consideration, especially in a setting such as SA.

Thinking ahead: a universal basic income

A UBIG is an increasingly in-vogue, yet highly contested concept. Supporters can be found across the ideological spectrum and they invest it with different content, meanings and functions. In its most expansive form, a UBIG would entail an income that is unconditionally paid to every member of a society on an individual basis without means testing and without work requirement (Van Parijs, 2013). It would be a livable income that supplements social wage entitlements, as well as industrial and labour policies.

The final feature is vital. The UBIG would be a monthly payment that exists alongside other forms of institutionalized social protection (exactly which forms would depend on the setting and context).[14] The grant is 'universal' not because it replaces other entitlements, but because it is available to everyone. By removing means testing and conditionalities, a UBIG would be less costly to administer. By releasing people from the coercive discipline of welfare capitalism, it would be less stigmatizing and less invasive (Srnicek & Williams, 2016).

Many of those effects could conceivably be achieved with a UBIG that significantly contributes to, but does not itself entirely constitute a livable income. The amount of an efficacious UBIG would be context-specific, as would the political and fiscal factors that shape the size of a UBIG. This is a controversial aspect which is best examined in specific, concrete settings.

A UBIG that provides a livable income would reduce extreme poverty and income inequality, as well as fuel stronger consumer demand which can stimulate economic growth. Studies of current targeted cash grants suggest that a UBIG would improve public health (especially maternal and child health), lessen the number of school dropouts, reduce petty crime, strengthen women's financial independence and more (Bastagli et al., 2016; Pega et al., 2017).

Crucially, a UBIG that provides a livable income would liberate people from a race-to-the-bottom labour market where desperation strips them of bargaining power and choice. It could constrain employers' ability to subject low-wage, low-skill workers to super-exploitation. This could elevate wages at the low end of the wage spectrum. Instead of having to accept dangerous, low-paying and insecure forms of employment, people would be able to put their labour and time to other uses – including performing socially useful or personally fulfilling work, studying or acquiring new skills, contributing to fairer divisions of labour in household and family life, and more.

This is very different from the kind of basic income advocated in libertarian and neoliberal quarters. They see a limited basic income *replacing* most other forms of social protection, thereby turning social entitlements into private markets and boosting the compulsive power of the labour market. Instead of claiming entitlements (such as free primary health care and school education, transport and housing subsidies, food programmes or free water and sanitation services), the neoliberal vision of a UBIG would see individuals using their basic income (and any other income they have) to purchase those services as commodities from private providers. This would constitute a triumph of neoliberal ideology, tethering wellbeing to 'individual responsibility' and positioning the market as the arbiter of even the most elementary means of life. This dystopian version of a basic income would involve a payment that is too small to make ends meet, thereby forcing people to accept whatever work and wages are on offer while simultaneously subsidizing employers. The coercive power of the market and employers would be greatly enhanced.

Even if a UBIG is conceived on more expansive and potentially emancipatory terms than the libertarian version, there is a considerable risk of 'capture' if the intervention is approached as a discrete, technocratic policy tool. Realizing a UBIG's ameliorating and transformative potentials requires that it form part of a broader suite of social transformation programmes that are led by an active state and propelled (and defended) by a mobilized civil society. In such a configuration, a UBIG could help reduce poverty and inequality, strengthen social inclusion and provide vital protection against escalating disruptions associated with economic instability and climate change.

The slipperiness of the concept partially explains its prominence even in mainstream debates on how best to adapt social policies for a future where work becomes increasingly scarce. The ambiguity is an advantage insofar as it makes a potentially transformative intervention a legitimate subject of debate.

Mainstreaming the idea

Discussion of the merits of a UBIG is no longer confined to the fringes of national debates. In Switzerland's 2016 referendum on a universal basic income, 23% of voters (and up to 35% in some cantons) supported the proposal to pay every Swiss national CHF2500 a month as a guaranteed universal income ('Switzerland's voters', 2016; European CEO, 2014). The Basic Income Initiative, a Europe-wide organization, has campaigned for a similar plebiscite across Europe. The city of Utrecht in the Netherlands is implementing a controlled trial to determine whether a universal unconditional income is feasible at scale (McFarland, 2017).

Mainstream debates tend to focus on the UBIG as a way to restructure welfare systems, alleviate poverty and jump-start bedraggled economies by boosting aggregate demand for basic goods and services. Those goals may be more prosaic, but they are nonetheless important – as highlighted in Mark Blyth and Eric Lonergan's (2014, p. 98) reminder that occasional infusions of cash via such transfers,

> … could reduce dependence on the banking system for growth and reverse the trend of rising inequality. The transfers won't cause damaging inflation, and few doubt that they would work. The only real question is why no government has tried them.

But a progressive vision of a UBIG sees it as much more than a social policy intervention designed to alleviate poverty and reduce inequality. It holds major transformative potential, particularly if pursued as part of a broader push for social and economic change.

A UBIG would be an important part of strategies to manage and mitigate climate shocks, and of strategies to achieve a just transition to sustainable economic models. It would support shifts away from fossil-fuel dependent economic models toward renewables – by providing a universal safety net that helps displaced workers and vulnerable communities manage that transition, rather than become mere casualties of it.

In the decades ahead, this transition is inevitable, as the shift away from dependence on fossil fuels gains momentum. Also inevitable are intensifying climate shocks (including droughts and flooding), unstable food security, volatile pricing trends and labour market disruptions. The repercussions will hit hardest in funnelled into the lives and communities of the poor. But the upheavals will arrive in unpredictable ways, reducing the impact or reactive policies, especially targeted ones. More blanketing interventions will be needed.

An idea for our times?

The concept of a guaranteed basic income dates at least to the mid-nineteenth century. Drawing on the thinking of the French socialist Charles Fourier, the philosopher John Stuart Mill argued for such an instrument in the 1849 edition of his *Principles of Political Economy*. It would require, he wrote, that 'a certain minimum is first assigned for the subsistence of every member of the community, whether capable or not of labour'.

A century passed before a type of guaranteed minimum income was institutionalized in several Western European countries, but these were highly conditional and typically means-tested forms of state support. Other, conditional variants have included fixed payments to families for each child (irrespective of income levels). A similar though not entirely analogous existing payment would be the old-age pension which, although targeted at a specific age group, is usually available to all citizens (though additional criteria often decide the amount of the payment).

The idea was revived in the run-up to the 1972 United States presidential election. Both the Democratic and the Republican contenders touted versions of a basic income, while more than 1000 economists called on the federal government to adopt some kind of income guarantee (Neyfakh, 2014). Fashioned into a proposal called the Family Assistance Plan, the concept gained considerable support, partly because it included a work incentive.[15] The Plan did not pass the US Congress. The biggest criticism was less the affordability of the scheme, than concerns that it would sabotage the agricultural economies of southern states by introducing a 'disincentive' to work. That objection would become routine in later debates. At face value pragmatic, that concern is rooted in a deeper moralizing disquiet, as we discuss below.

The basic income grant in the real world

A UBIG has been introduced in a few places. Canada's so-called 'Mincome Programme' entered the annals of social policy folklore in the mid-1970s with a scheme that ran from 1974 to 1979. It entailed paying a monthly supplemental income to about 1000 poor families in Dauphin, a small town in Manitoba province. The results? Poverty virtually disappeared, high school completion rates rose, hospitalization rates fell and mental health improved. Productivity increased and the work rate fell only among new mothers (who were able to spend more time with their children) and teenagers (who were able to give up part-time jobs and focus on schoolwork) (Forget, 2011).

In the US, the Alaska Permanent Fund Dividend annually pays each resident an equal share of the returns from investments in the specially created Alaska Permanent Fund, which is financed from a small portion of the state's annual oil revenue (Cummine, 2015; Widerquist, 2013). Studies have shown that income distribution and poverty alleviation improved significantly after the dividend was introduced, though it is difficult to determine to what extent the scheme has been responsible for those outcomes (Goldsmith, 2012).

On a much smaller scale, a basic income grant was introduced as a pilot project in 2008 and 2009 in the Namibian town of Otjivero-Omitara. The grant payment of one hundred Namibian dollars per month was unconditional and went to everyone younger than 60 years. Data were skewed by an influx of family members from elsewhere, which is why per capita income seemed to fall during the project. But the social benefits were substantial. The percentage of residents living in poverty fell from 76% to 37%, and among those who did not take in migrating family members, it fell to 17%. School drop out rates fell sharply and child malnutrition declined by more than half (from 42% to 17%). Recipients also became more active in income-generating activities (Haarmann, Haarmann, & Jauch, 2009).

With such encouraging results, why have UBIGs been introduced so rarely? The bid to introduce a UBIG in South Africa is instructive.

In the late 1990s, South African trade unions, religious organizations and NGOs campaigned for a universal grant as a tool that could help alleviate poverty, support livelihood security and lay ‘the foundation for more productive and skilled communities’ (COSATU, 2000, para 3.2).

The intervention proposed in 1998 was modest, with the envisaged grant pegged at ZAR100 per month (a little over US$12 at the time), an amount trade unionists believed was politically ‘winnable’. Although the grant would be spread thinner than existing social transfers, its benefits would extend far wider, they claimed – and without the restrictive, rationing terms of existing grants. Financial simulations indicated that a grant of R100 per month for all South Africans could close the poverty gap by 74% (Liebenberg, 2002),[16] and lift about six million people above a poverty line of R400 (US $50) per month (Gumede, 2005).

The South African campaign failed, largely due to the unwavering opposition of the Treasury, with the finance minister at the time, Trevor Manuel, claiming that the grant would ‘bankrupt the country’.[17] Yet, after rejecting a UBIG as ‘unaffordable’, the South African government proceeded to massively grow its welfare system over the next decade. Fiscal objections yielded to social and, especially, political imperatives. In the context of rising inequality, stubbornly high unemployment rates and poverty levels, and a groundswell of localized protests, the prospective costs of not relieving some of the hardship outweighed the fiscal concerns. As David Everatt (2008, p. 303) later noted,

> the dominant voice within the ANC after Mandela was one that chided the poor for remaining poor, rejected [a basic income grant] but was unable to resist pressure for major cash transfers to the poor in the form of social grants.

Fiscal arguments alone therefore are not a satisfactory explanation for the defeat of the UBIG campaign in South Africa. The reasons extended deeper, into the domains of ideology, discipline and control. It was, as former trade and industry minister Alec Erwin is said to have remarked, ‘not the money but the idea’ that offended (Hart, 2006, p. 26).

Beyond welfare as control

Prevailing around the world is the insistence that waged work and entrepreneurial zest shall provide a secure basis for wellbeing for the great majority of society. Ideally, welfare is available only to those who, due to age or infirmity, cannot work (children, the elderly or disabled persons) and those who have (temporarily) fallen on hard times. A safety net may be suspended beneath the hapless and the luckless – ‘those’, as Margaret Thatcher put it, ‘who had genuinely fallen into difficulties and needed some support till they could get out of them’ (cited in Meth, 2004). As for ‘those who had simply lost the will or the habit for work and self-improvement’, they should not look to the state for relief (Meth, 2004). Their only route to survival is by performing waged work.

This unforgiving sensibility exists across the spectrum of political beliefs. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (1988) listed the ‘equal liability of all to work’ among the ten distinguishing features of a communist society. Or as former US President Richard Nixon put it: ‘The work ethic holds that labour is good in itself; that a man or woman becomes a better person by virtue of the act of working.’[18] It is an outlook which, as Franco Barchiesi (2006, p. 3) has written, assigns to

> wage labour a powerful disciplinary and pedagogical meanings, educating the poorest sections of the population to the idea that full citizenship revolves around individual responsibility, labour market activation, and the avoidance of ‘dependency’ on public spending.

Some critics object that a UBIG would act as a disincentive to work and declare displeasure at dispensing money to people without the assurance that they will contribute to society by working. Yet the prevailing conditions and the most likely outlook highlight a double fiction: the idea that employment is available to those who seek it and that waged work ensures wellbeing. Many millions of people are unable to achieve secure, viable livelihoods through waged work. They also have less and less access to traditional sources of subsistence and income outside the labour market, such as family farming, artisanal production and bartering systems. They are trapped between a crisis of waged work and the steady erasure of traditional livelihoods, a predicament that generates hardship and insecurity on a massive scale and that carries great risk of chronic social and political instability. The increasing popularity of cash grants and other forms of social protection, especially in 'developing' countries, should be viewed in that context.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that about 45% of the world's population had access to some form of social protection payment in 2016. Although coverage is expanding, it varies widely by region, and the programmes remain highly uneven in scope and accessibility. Overall, four billion people lacked any such protection in 2016, and only 35% of children worldwide enjoyed effective access to some form of social protection (ILO, 2017). Globally in 2014, 130 countries (forty of them in Africa) provided unconditional cash transfers of some type, and sixty-four provided conditional cash transfers, typically on a limited scale (World Bank, 2015). Among the best-known examples are South Africa's child support grant, Brazil's *bolsa familia* and Mexico's *opportunidades* schemes.

Attracting policymakers to such schemes is their pacifying potential and the leverage they offer for 'engineering' certain desirable behaviours or practices in poor households (such as enrolling and keeping children in school, improving health-seeking behaviours, reducing malnutrition and stunting, and so on.) (Baird, Ferreira, Ozler, & Woolcock, 2014; Lagarde, Haines, & Palmer, 2009), along with the perception that they are relatively inexpensive and easy to administer, and politically rewarding (Lavinas, 2013).

There continues to be debate about the comparative merits of conditional and unconditional grants and the usefulness of means testing and targeting. In most social protection schemes, the targeted beneficiaries are predominantly children and the elderly. The grants therefore reinforce a patriarchal and work-centric social order. They subsidize the social reproduction of labour and domestic care (considered 'women's work') while requiring men to work for a wage.

The selectivity of targeted programmes also limits their impact on inequality, with research suggesting that redistribution tends to be weak in welfare systems that rely on targeted assistance to the poor. Evidence from Scandinavian countries indicates that large-scale, universal provision of decommodified services tends to be more successful in reducing inequality and poverty (Huber & Stephens, 2012; Korpi & Palme, 1998).

Conditionality seems less a catalyst for specific desired behaviours than a lever for control. Often the desired outcomes (such as school attendance or having health check-ups) are linked to the receipt of money, rather than the condition set for eligibility. Families are more likely to keep their children in school or travel to a health clinic when they can afford to do so.

As for means testing, it requires thresholds (usually determined by income) that are often fictive and unjust. Limiting assistance to individuals earning less than, say, US$2 a day while denying it to others earning, say, US$2.20 a day is capricious, no matter the 'clarity' of that 'poverty line'. Means testing is arbitrary, involves humiliating processes of 'proving one's poverty' and leaves people with fluctuating incomes, such as seasonal or self-employed workers, floundering when especially hard times strike.

In Thandika Mkandawire's (2005) assessment, targeted and means-tested cash transfers defy commonsense in settings where large proportions of the population are poor, especially if universal grants to the 'non-poor' can be taxed back (which they can).

Due to its universality, a UBIG would avoid the drawbacks of targeted, means-tested or conditional cash grants – including their stigmatizing effects, their burdensome administrative features, their arbitrariness and their limited ability to redistribute income on a sufficiently large scale. The grant transcends notions of a 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor.

Rethinking the meaning of work

Many people find a UBIG's lack of targeting and conditionality to be disturbing. It distorts a familiar social-moral topography and unbalances the ways in which social obligations and entitlements are organized. The payment becomes more than a discreet form of assistance. It destabilizes deeply held ideas about the role of work as a basis for social citizenship and about the claims we legitimately have on one another and on the state. And it challenges key assumptions and criteria that are used to assign worth and value to people.

In the popular imagination, work is seen not merely as a means for achieving livelihood security and wellbeing; it functions as a source of dignity, status and entitlement – of meaning. There is a deep-felt sense that it is chiefly through waged work that we contribute to society and 'earn' our claims to social citizenship. When a claim to entitlement is not in some way attached to waged work, it is commonly treated as a moral offense – for it is felt that a basic principle, that of social reciprocity, has been 'violated'.

This feeds a deeply and widely felt affront, even when the reaction seems 'irrational' – for example in societies where there is no waged work for large proportions of working age people. The problem with the sentiment lies not so much with the principle of reciprocity, but with the way in which that principle is anchored in a very narrow, distorting and patriarchal understanding of work.

Work contains many meanings. It can refer to an activity that is necessary for sustaining civilization by producing and reproducing the immediate essentials of life. Or it can mean the activities we perform in exchange for money, in order to purchase the means for existence. Or it can refer to exertions that involve discipline and deferred gratification in pursuit of future goals (Frase, 2016).

For example, teaching is clearly vital for human civilization, but so is raising children; yet the one is remunerated and called 'work' and the other not. Some (very well-paid) work is of dubious or no social utility; Frase (2016) suggests the design of high-speed financial trading algorithms as an example. Voluntary work in the community is by definition not paid, but much of it has great social utility. Other activities require substantial time, discipline and self-denial, but are not paid. Some of them are relatively 'frivolous', such as train spotting or gym training, others are of much greater social use, such as the emotional and other support we provide to friends and colleagues. Work, in other words, fills our lives; yet a great deal of it is typically not regarded at 'work'.

Consider also the unrewarded work people perform in search of work – the drudgery of 'skills development' and 'job retraining' courses, job counseling, scanning the classifieds, preparing job applications, adjusting CVs and resumes for different occasions, travelling and queuing to drop off resumes, attending interviews, furnishing additional information. Most states demand these humiliating 'performances' as a prerequisite for receiving welfare entitlements, even when they hold faint prospects of leading to paid work and are of dubious value to the individual performing them or to society. These morally freighted pantomimes of work-seeking are deemed to 'earn' a claim to entitlement, even when the social or economic utility of the job seeker's exertions are minimal.

These demands form part of a larger disciplinary system that is organized around work as the central pivot not only for physical survival and social esteem, but also for laying claim to entitlements and rights. This ideological primacy of waged work destabilizes and limits demands for social and economic justice. Demands for a fairer distribution of the means for life then become channelled and filtered through demands for 'job creation' or 'decent jobs' or a 'minimum wage'. These are important struggles, but they do not encompass or encode *all* social demands.

Meanwhile, 'job creation' operates as a radiant metaphor for a romanticized and elusive past where having a job not only fulfils our needs but delivers our desires, as Franco Barchiesi (2012) has noted. This notion historically was realized only partially, temporarily and in specific parts of the world – for a few decades in the mid-twentieth century and almost exclusively in North America and Europe. Yet its gravitational pull is strong enough to trap a great deal of progressive and leftist thought in what Barchiesi calls a 'melancholia' for a past which is in large part imagined. It locks the imagination inside the boundaries of contemporary capitalism, funnelling it towards 'solutions' that ignore the underlying dynamics that shape the availability and nature of waged work.

Thus waged work continues to be idealized, even as its availability and capacity to sustain a decent life diminishes.[19] The less attainable work becomes, the more centrally it is positioned in our imaginary. In Gorz's (1999, p. 1) view, it is less the abolition of work that should alarm us, than the insistence that demeaning, boring and often 'worthless' work should serve 'as a norm, and as the irreplaceable foundation of the rights and dignity of all'.

The stigma of not having a job

It is common wisdom that not being able to work is demoralizing, isolating and unhealthy. Lacking access to the social intercourse that many jobs facilitate deprives people of social solidarity, affirmation and other support. Research shows high levels of stress, unhappiness and loss of self-esteem among unemployed people (Clark & Oswald, 1994). Any combination of those effects can encourage behaviours and other habits that are likely to undermine both physical and mental health (such as isolation, lack of exercise, poor diet, excessive smoking and/or alcohol use, and so on).

Analysis of data from 63 countries from 2000 to 2011 also found that unemployment and job insecurity was linked to a higher risk of suicide (Carlos, Warnke, Seifritz, & Kawohl, 2015), although the association between unemployment and suicide appears to be strongest in high-income countries (Noh, 2009).[20] Suicide is an extreme reaction to the dissatisfaction associated with unemployment, but it seems clear that the general life satisfaction of unemployed individuals diminishes significantly and is not fully restored even after having been unemployed for a long time.

But none of these effects are necessarily *inherent* in the fact of joblessness (Frase, 2012). They stem largely from social discourses that equate people's worth with their work status (especially men who have been conditioned to see themselves as primary breadwinners), and from the fact that being jobless can render one indigent.

Research shows that generous unemployment benefits *offset* the impact of unemployment on suicide rates, for example (Cylus, Glymour, & Avendano, 2014). Other research from Germany indicates that life satisfaction among the long-term unemployed increases significantly when they officially retire from the labour market and the social expectation of wage labour is lifted. This suggests that the psychological damage associated with unemployment is not fully intrinsic to not having a job; much of it stems from the social stigma of being jobless. In the German study (Hetschko, Knabe, & Schöb, 2011), 'long-term unemployed people benefit[ted] from the change of their social category while retiring and the associated relief from not having to meet the social norm of being employed anymore'.

The stigma attached to unemployment is also laden with patriarchal notions of what constitutes work. Relieving women of some of the burdens of child- and home-care (for example, through the introduction of washing machines or piped water or hired care) is not typically regarded as cause for disquiet and a basis for depression and low self-esteem.

A UBIG that delinks subsistence from the wage invites us to think beyond the standard notions of what constitutes work and the hierarchies of entitlement and worth that are embedded in those assumptions.

The conventional narrative invests all wage work with magical properties and insists that it assigns value, meaning and worth to people's lives. Not all jobs leech life from human beings. But only a lucky few workers would fail to relate to the observation that opens Studs Terkel's magisterial book, *Working*, where he informs readers that the book,

> being about work, is by its very nature about violence – to the spirit as well as to the body. It is about ulcers as well as accidents, about shouting matches as well as fistfights, about nervous breakdowns as well as kicking the dog around. It is, above all (or beneath all), about daily humiliations. To survive the day is triumph enough for the walking wounded among the great many of us. (Terkel, 1972, p. xiii)

The transformative potential of the UBIG

A UBIG that provides a livable income could help shift the balance of power between low-skilled workers and employers, by affording them the freedom *not* to sell their labour and to withdraw, at least temporarily, from the labour market's 'race to the bottom'. It is a possible springboard towards a social order that is no longer hostage to the rule that 'No matter how it dulls the senses and breaks the spirit, one must work,' as Studs Terkel (1972, p. i) put it.

If the bare necessities of life can be secured elsewhere, demeaning and hyper-exploitative wage labour – when available – is no longer the 'only option'. By tightening the labour supply, a universal income (if large enough) would increase the reservation wage (or the lowest wage at which a worker is likely to perform a given task), thereby boosting wages. This altered power relation would boost the collective strength of workers: 'Where workers individually have easier exit options, employers may have greater incentives to agree to new forms of collective cooperation with organizations of workers' (Wright, 2003, p. 80).

If employers respond by resorting to automation and shedding more jobs (thereby loosening the labour supply), the economic and social argument for a UBIG increases. 'We ought to be less obsessed,' says Peter Frase (2012), 'with maximizing job creation and more concerned with making it easier and better to not be employed'.

In addition to being a safety net in the context of increasingly unstable and inhospitable labour markets, a UBIG would provide protection for workers who are displaced as economies shift and industries adapt to low-carbon strategies. The climate change transition will unavoidably affect employment patterns and will cause significant disruption in some industries (oil, petroleum and gas most obviously as well as coal mining and other fossil fuel-based energy generation). A protective mechanism such as the UBIG could be vital for helping achieve a 'just transition' that does not unload such costs onto workers and their communities. In addition, a UBIG could counteract potential resistance to such a transition among workers in heavily affected sectors by providing tangible, sustained support that goes beyond 'retraining' and 'reskilling' programmes (Goodstein, 1999).[21]

The UBIG would also challenge the tethering of social citizenship to waged work. It would open opportunities for imagining 'alternative forms of social citizenship [that are] capable of liberating individuals from waged work, labour market dependence and their associated forms of social discipline', in Barchiesi's (2006, p. 5) words. It can be a profoundly emancipating intervention.

For that to be possible, the UBIG must be sufficient to enable workers to rebuff low-wage, super-exploitative jobs, should they wish to. Otherwise, it may end up *subsidizing employers*, much as food vouchers and other welfare support in the USA and UK currently do, enabling companies to depress wages. This is a crucial variable and it is context-specific.

The basic income grant proposed in a national referendum in Switzerland in 2016, for example, envisaged a monthly payment of CHF2500 (approximately US$2550) for each adult and CHF625 (US$635) for each child. (The country's poverty line was CHF2200 in 2012.) The proposal was to finance the programme by replacing current welfare programmes and using the 'living wage' component that is built into most salaries (UBI Initiative, 2016).[22]

In South Africa, a maximal UBIG could be a monthly amount equivalent to the lower-bound (R647 in 2015) or upper-bound poverty line (R992 in 2015) or in between. The total population in 2015 was 55 million, of whom about 35.2 million were 18 years or older (Statistics SA, 2015).[23] If paid to each adult, a UBIG equivalent to the lower-bound poverty line would cost approximately R23 billion per month or R275 billion per year (using 2015 data). By way of comparison, total expenditure on existing social welfare grants (including old age pensions and children support grants) totalled approximately R150 billion per year in 2017, when 17.2 million grants were paid to 10.6 million beneficiaries (AfricaCheck, 2017). The fiscal viability and financing options for a UBIG are the subject of ongoing research by the author.

A utopian glimmer

To the extent that the UBIG releases people from the compulsion to sell their labour at the going rate and on proffered terms, it destabilizes a cornerstone of capitalist ideology and breaches the limits of 'reformism'. What may seem at first like 'tinkering' with social policy contains radical potential, which Robert van der Veen and Philippe van Parijs (1987) teased into a tantalizing 'thought experiment' in their essay, 'A Capitalist Road to Communism'. When linked with other interventions to expand the content of citizenship it can also contribute towards a potentially significant redistribution of power, time and liberty (Van Parijs, 2003).

A longstanding reality in 'developing' economies, and particularly in the 'informal' sector, the dividing line between 'private' life and 'work' life is being erased steadily also in 'developed' economies as 24/7, on-call labour becomes more pervasive. Employers are stripping waged work of security while commanding control over ever-growing parts of people's lives. Alongside this is an even more 'pervasive process of enclosure' (Barchiesi, 2012, p. 236), in which we not only sell our time, skills and labour, but our civility, emotions and dignity. Increasingly, it is life itself that is put to work. The challenge is not simply to find work that can finance the means to life, but to reclaim life from the voracious demands of that work. The UBIG supports that quest.

By introducing scenarios that release people (at least temporarily) from demeaning labour without losing access to the means for a decent, fulfilling life, a UBIG supports building a society in which wellbeing is not tethered to wage labour and production.

Such a 'post-work' vision has a rich pedigree on the Left, encompassing thinkers from Paul Lafargue to Bertrand Russell to André Gorz. At risk of over-simplification, they have pictured scenarios in which wage relations gradually lose their pre-eminence in securing the means for life, organizing social and economic life, and achieving what we may call 'fulfillment' or 'meaning'.

'Post-work', in other words, refers not to a world without work, but to one where the (im)balance between waged work and what used to be called 'life' can be recalibrated. Waged work itself does not disappear, but the terms and manner in which labour is exchanged steadily change, and the moral, social and economic 'authority' of waged work weakens.

But material security is not the sum of life. A UBIG will have to boost our ability to live a socially rooted and socially meaningful life.[24] Andre Gorz worried that a guaranteed minimum income for people who are temporarily out of work or who choose not to work at all would compensate them for their economic exclusion while leaving untouched the reality of a divided and unequal society. He saw risks, specifically in the ways in which a UBIG could be used to service diametrically opposed agendas:

> The guarantee of an income independent of a job will be emancipatory or repressive, from the Left or the Right, according to whether it opens up new spaces for individual and social activity or whether, on the contrary, it is only the social wage for compulsory passivity. (Gorz, 1985, p. 40)

A UBIG would need to do more than release people from the compulsion of waged work or even separate work from income entirely; it must also have a social goal:

> [E]xcusing people from working by securing them an income anyway is not a way of giving them full membership of their society. You cannot become a member of any community if you have no obligation whatsoever to it […] There can be no inclusion without reciprocal obligations (Gorz, 1992, p. 184).

We return, in other words, to the vexing matter of *reciprocity* – except that it now has a different character, freed from the fiction that it can only be expressed through the mechanism of waged work. A UBIG and the reduction of obligatory waged work has to also open opportunities for activities that allow one 'to feel useful to society in a general sense … thus to exist as a fully social individual' (Gorz, 1985, p. 54). It has to promote and facilitate reciprocal arrangements that allow for full participation in society. It can do so by expanding

> … those activities which create nothing that can be bought, sold, exchanged – and hence nothing that has value (in the economic sense) – but only non-marketable wealth with an intrinsic value of its own. (Gorz, 2010, p. 28).

The uses and functions of a UBIG are therefore fundamentally tied to the social and political agendas and processes that accompany it. If treated strictly as a technocratic intervention, detached from broader social and political programmes of transformative, it is exposed to capture and ruin.

Coursing through the debate about the UBIG are profoundly different visions about its function and thrust. The Left sees a universal income that is incorporated into an extensive safety net, and that functions as part of systemic reforms that can support a just transition. The Right sees it as an opportunity to further expand the authority of the market by replacing – and commodifying – other forms of social provisioning and protection with a single payment.

Many of the mainstream arguments favouring a UBIG seem to fuse social welfare principles with neoliberal reasoning, as James Ferguson (2007, 2015) has noted. The grant could nominally improve people's welfare, reduce poverty, function as a productive boost and serve as means to lubricate individuals' deeper integration into the market system.[25] Any bid for a transformative UBIG has to contend with these conflicting meanings and agendas that are being attached to the intervention.

Conclusion

More, better-paid and socially useful jobs are vital and feasible. But the current outlook offers no basis for an expectation that job creation will provide a sufficient basis for livelihood security and social inclusion in South Africa and a great many other countries. This outlook provides an opportunity for developing a framework in which waged work is understood to be one among several components of social citizenship and inclusion.

At a minimum, a UBIG is a means to improve people's material, health and educational status, and to reduce poverty and avert precariousness. It would function as a safety net for communities hard-hit by the accumulating effects of climate shocks. It would help cushion against the effects of automation and digitization on waged work, and it would help protect workers who are displaced as economies transition to low-carbon models. It can promote and support forward-looking, adaptive change.

A UBIG has a powerfully emancipating and transformative potential, as well. It potentially links the immediate, short-term need to secure the basic means for a dignifying life with the liberating potential of escaping the compulsion to sell one's labour at the going rate. By partially delinking income and basic needs provision from waged work, a UBIG would open new opportunities for social inclusion, for socially productive activities and for repairing the circuits of social reciprocity in ways that bypass the embattled and demeaning domains of waged work. It is an opportunity to transport ourselves beyond a fate where, as Gorz (1999, p. 56) put it in one of his last books, we are forever

> … prepared to make any and every concession, to suffer humiliation or subjugation, to face competition and betrayal to get or keep a job, since 'those who lose their jobs lose everything'.

Notes

1. Only in Latin America and Caribbean did a significantly contrary trend occur, starting in the early 2000s and continuing until the global financial crisis at the end of that decade. That uptick in the employment rate was associated with the pro-poor interventionist policies of the so-called pink tide of left-wing governments in Latin America during that period. Levels of both poverty and inequality decreased during that period, notably in Brazil and Argentina. See Berg (2010) for an analysis of the contribution of formal employment to poverty reduction in Brazil during the first decade of the 2000s.
2. Persons in unemployment are defined as all those of working age who were not in employment, carried out activities to seek employment during a specified recent period and were currently available to take up employment given a job opportunity.
3. Official definitions of employment generally present cosmetic pictures of reality. The definitions tend to be elastic, allowing for people in tenuous and fleeting forms of work to be counted as 'employed'. In South Africa, for example, people who report earning an income from 'hunting', 'begging', washing cars on the street or growing their own food are tallied as 'employed'.
4. ILO nomenclature now separates 'developing' and 'emerging' economies; this paper combines the two categories and refers to them collectively as 'developing' economies or countries.
5. Trapp's analysis (2015) shows a decrease in the labour share of income in all regions between 1990 and 2011, except for South Asia (based on data for only Bhutan, India and Sri Lanka), where it increased slightly.
6. Using a data set from 1960 to 1997, Anne Harrison (2002) split her sample of over 100 countries into two groups. Her data showed that, in the group of poorer countries, labour's share in national income fell on average by 0.1% per year from 1960 to 1993, with the drop accelerating after 1993, to an average decline of 0.3% per year. In the richer sub-group, the labour share grew by 0.2% per year prior to 1993, after which it fell by 0.4% per year.
7. Cambodia, Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam have tried to capitalize on those trends, but weak supply chains and transport networks, a lack of economies of scale and shortages of skilled workers have held back wholesale shifts of production in their direction.
8. Their model predicts that most workers in the transportation and logistics sectors, along with most office and administrative support workers, and workers active in production, are at risk. Jobs in construction, journalism, hospitals and pharmacies are also on the 'endangered' list.
9. There are some localized exceptions to this trend, notably in parts of South America and East Asia (particularly China). But in almost all of the industrialized world, the former Soviet Union and its satellites, Africa, south Asia, the Caribbean and Central America, workers at best have been fighting rearguard actions.
10. The percentage of the population living at or below the lower-bound poverty line (LBPL) decreased from 51% (2006) to 48% (2009) to 36% (2011) and then rose to 40% (2015). In absolute numbers, there were about 22 million South Africans living at or below the LBPL in 2015, compared with 24 million in 2006.

See Statistics SA (2016a). The upper-bound poverty line (UBPL) is the income threshold at which individuals have just enough income to purchase basic food and non-food needs. For 2015, the UBPL was set at ZAR 992. Calibrated against the consumer price index, it was projected to increase to ZAR 1138 in 2017. The lower-bound poverty line (LBPL) used by Statistics SA is a marker for distress. Individuals at or below the LBPL do not have enough resources to purchase food and essential non-food items; they have to sacrifice food if they need to obtain basic non-food items. For 2015, the LBPL was set at ZAR 647. Calibrated against the consumer price index, it was projected to increase to ZAR 758 in 2017 (Statistics SA, 2016a).

11. Generally, income redistribution tends to be drawn from the bottom 40% of income earners, since the middle classes usually have the political capacity to defend their income shares. SA is an exception. The poorest 40% of South Africans have been so radically expropriated that they're a very minor source of redistribution for the richest 10%; there's virtually nothing left to squeeze. This is the outcome of 300 years of colonialism, 40 years of apartheid policies and persistent unequal conditions since the formal end of the apartheid system in 1994. Worsening inequality since 1990 has been due largely to redistribution from the middle- and upper-middle-classes. See Palma (2012).
12. Does this trend apply to both formal and informal sector workers? The inclusion of a question on the formality of employment from 2010 onward in the General Household Surveys provides a limited data set that points in a surprising direction. The informal sector accounts for about one-fifth of the total workforce. Informal sector workers were much more likely to be poor (their headcount poverty rate was 46% in 2010 and it decreased to 41% in 2012; for formal workers it stayed steady 17%). So the risk of poverty decreased significantly between 2010 and 2012 for informal workers but there was no change for formal sector workers. See Rogan and Reynolds (2015).
13. Recipients must be a South African citizen, permanent resident or refugee, and must live in South Africa.
14. It may be advisable to absorb some entitlements into the UBIG (such as the old-age pension), but it is vital that the free provision of public goods such as basic health-care services, school education, and access to free sanitation, water and electricity entitlements for the poor continues and are not dissolved into the UBIG.
15. A basic federal minimum wage would be provided to any family, with new workers able to keep the first US$60 a month of outside earnings with no reduction in benefits, beyond which the family assistance supplement would be reduced by 50 cents for each US$1 earned.
16. The poverty gap refers to the total income shortfall of households living below the poverty line. A narrower poverty gap means more households would edge closer to, or above the poverty line.
17. The claim was moot. In the 2005/2006 financial year, for example, revenue collection exceeded budget estimates by ZAR41.2 billion (US$5.2 billion at the time), which prompted R19.1 billion (US$2.4 billion) in tax cuts in the following financial year. A R100 monthly income grant paid to each of the 47 million South Africans would have cost R56.4 billion in that year. See Marais (2011).
18. Cited in Terkel (1972).
19. In both the United Kingdom and USA, growing proportions of people receiving welfare benefits have some form of employment.
20. 'Linked' or 'associated' because the causality is not clearly established. Studies in New Zealand, for example, have found that being unemployed was associated with a twofold to threefold increased relative risk of death by suicide, compared with being employed. However, at least half of this association might have been attributable to confounding factors such as mental illness.
21. Eban Goodstein has shown, for example, that the relative generosity and lack of conditionality of welfare regimes in western Europe tended to result in less political opposition to environmental restructuring in those countries, compared with the United States.
22. The Swiss UBI Initiative estimated the total annual cost at CHF208 billion per annum, of which CHF190 billion would be recovered in that manner. This would leave a shortfall of CHF18 billion (equivalent to 3% of GDP), which could be covered through a small increase in value-added tax or environment- and automation-related taxes.
23. The age disaggregation used by Statistics SA divides into 5-year intervals and therefore does not segment at the 18-year mark. The 35.2 million figure is based on the mid-2015 official estimate of 33.2 million people 20 years and older and 5.1 million people aged 15–19 years (which suggests about 2 million people aged 18–19 years).

24. This is one of the reasons why Andre Gorz resisted regarding reproductive and domestic labour as merely unremunerated forms (of what should be) waged work. He argued that reproductive labour is invested with qualities that make it profoundly different from most waged labour, not least because it is among the only examples of 'work-for-oneself' that survived industrial capitalism. The oppressive aspects of domestic labour, he argued, could not be entirely removed, but could be relieved if more time were available to do the work, and if the work were divided more equitably within households. See Gorz (1994) and Little (1996).
25. Ferguson suggests that such an amalgam of arguments that do not fit the conventional oppositions of 'progressive' social democracy and 'reactionary' neoliberalism might be creating 'new and potentially promising forms of political struggle' (2007, p. 84). For an edifying elaboration on these and related themes, see Ferguson (2015).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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Hein Marais is the author of *South Africa: Pushed to the limit* (2011) and *South Africa: Limits to change – the political economy of transition* (1998 & 2001).

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