

How can a basic income be defended?

By [Guillaume Allègre](#)

Following the submission of 125,000 signatures collected by organizations supporting the introduction of a basic income, Swiss citizens will vote in a referendum on a popular initiative on the inclusion of the principle of an unconditional basic income in the Swiss Federal Constitution.

An [OFCE Note \(no. 39 of 19 December 2013\)](#) analyses the grounds for supporting the institution of a basic income.

While a basic income can take many forms, its principle is that it is paid (1) on a universal basis, in an equal amount to all, without testing for means or needs, (2) on an individual basis and not to households, and (3) unconditionally, without requirement of any counterpart. A progressive version would add a fourth characteristic: it must be (4) in an amount sufficient to cover basic needs and enable participation in social life.

While this looks attractive, it is not easy to find grounds in terms of distributive justice that are consistent with these four characteristics of a guaranteed basic income. So long as there exist economies of scale and a political trade-off between conditionality and the level of minimum income, then in a Rawlsian perspective a system of guaranteed minimum income like the French RMI / RSA programme (family-based with weak conditionality) seems preferable to a pure basic income. In addition, the generalized reduction of working time seems more sustainable than a guaranteed basic income for achieving the ecological and emancipatory goals that are often attributed to a guaranteed basic income.

It seems that the main advantage of a guaranteed basic income

is that its universality means that it does not cause any undue use or non-use and so does not stigmatize the net beneficiaries of the system. From this perspective, minimum income support could be turned into a universal benefit, which would be less stigmatizing. This allocation needs to take into account family composition and set conditions on social participation. It would involve checks on black market work and include incentives to work. It would be supplemented by specific policies to provide support for children, the elderly and disabled people, *i.e.* people who do not respond to incentives, and it would complement the insurance system (unemployment, retirement, illness). The social protection system would thus not really be simplified but transformed in such a way as to avoid stigmatization and the lack of take-up.

While a guaranteed basic income is not a stupid idea, nor is it the miracle reform pictured by its advocates, *i.e.* a veritable Swiss Army knife for reforming social welfare, a social and environmental emancipator.

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