

Universal Basic Income Policy as a Weapon to fight Hunger, Undernourishment and Poverty

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Abstract:- Universal Basic Income has caught a lot of attention in recent years, garnering an extensive exchange of views from a multitude of academicians and researchers. This paper focuses on the effectiveness of Universal Basic Income in effectively confronting and tackling hunger, undernourishment, poverty and their concomitant repercussions in India. A wide range of the Indian population has been and still is vulnerable to the maladies of hunger and undernourishment. This paper walks through the condition of India in perspective with these problems over the past years, and discusses the advent of Universal Basic Income as a feasible and effective solution to fight them.

Modern innovations have dispossessed more than half the inhabitants of every nation of their natural inheritance, without providing for them, as ought to have been done, an indemnification for that loss, and has thereby created a species of poverty and wretchedness that did not exist before¹. World is a shared place where the whole income has to be shared among all. Universal Basic Income is one such Policy. We live in a world with widespread undernutrition, meager healthcare, and dogged hunger, and to our chagrin, all of this is aggravated by natural dire straits such as famines and flood. We do hold a sustainable development goal to eradicate hunger in the next 8 years, but as perceptible from the dejected data, reports, and also a massive and long-standing pandemic, we are nowhere in the girth of the completion of the goal.

But whilst creating policies and strategies, there is an inherent pessimism in our approaches and our reactions to dealing with this massive problem. There are many problem specific Policies, but there is a universal Policy named as Universal Basic Income, which can act as a weapon to attack everything at the same time. Universal basic income (UBI) is a government program in which every adult citizen receives a set amount of money regularly. This paper focuses upon this economic Policy,

which can solve the Problem of Indian Poverty, Hunger, Under nourishment etc. These three² are major problems. This paper takes you through the predicaments of these problems, specifically in India, the interconnections with various economic facets, and the empirical comprehension of the way Universal Basic Income would be effective in letting us sail through.

Keywords: *Universal Basic Income, Poverty, Hunger, Undernutrition.*

I. UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME COULD BE A PLAUSIBLE SOURCE OF RELIEF IN THE WORST OF SCENARIOS, WHEN USED PRAGMATICALLY:

One of the crucial goals of development economics is to increase the incomes of the poor to eventually at least, put food on their plates, and a policy like Basic Income, by its very definition and design, complies with the criteria of achieving this goal. A lot of researchers argue in the favor of and against the advent of UBI. We often tend to use the overarching term of the so-called World food problem which makes us obliterate the fact that our world is sparsely and sporadically different geographically, physically, politically, and socially.

And on these grounds, we often tend to forget to analyze the nature of the problem specifically. This results in the absence of serious attempts that we can plausibly take to tackle the problem at hand, and in the policy-makers mind the problem stands immutable, but there are no cogent grounds for this assumption. The majority of measures pitched in this direction have been concentrated on the provision of food to the hungry population of the world, but since they're unplanned and not tailor-made for vulnerable and suffering regions, these pitches either fall flat on their faces or prove to be meagrely helpful, and thus it would not be unfair to say that the effect of hunger is often verbally and politically distorted by preconception and hollow attempts to analyze the problem in narrow terms.

¹ grundskyld. "Thomas Paine. Agrarian Justice. Digital Edition," Pages 9-10. Accessed Oct. 2, 2021

² https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-981-13-1930-3_12

Banerjee, Niehaus and Suri (2019), assert that, “Asking whether the effects are good or bad amounts to asking whether we should be trying to raise the incomes of the poor in the first place.”, but also put an alarm for the pragmatic use of the income apprising, “Even if basic income is the best solution for some people, it is not obvious that it is universally best. A targeted basic income could be a better use of scarce resources. This in turn depends on the effectiveness of targeting”. However, targeting within the domain of the same state, could be an invitation to exacerbate other problems. In one geographical state of action, Universal Basic Income should be administered uniformly. Situations for different countries are different at all points in time. They are bound to be different for countries with different geographical, geopolitical, and financial situations. For example, the case for a developed nation should be different from the case of a developing nation, Hoynes and Rothstein(2019) talk about the case for developed nations.

In the worst of situations if people were handed over a cash transfer, at a time where they can not bank upon any other source such as a famine. To further explain, let’s look at the two contrasts which paint a vivid picture.

India has been widely praised and reasonably so for being able to prevent any famine since its independence. The last famine to occur was the Bengal Famine that occurred in 1943, and India has been acclaimed for bouncing back from it rapidly. However, let’s put this picture alongside the situation of China, which went through a massive famine from 1958 to 1961. The famine resulted in the death of around 25 to 30 million people. But still, the nutritional achievement in China was much higher than that in India and has been a perpetuated trend since then. While more people died in China during famine than the recorded toll of any famine in India, the mortality rate in India is much higher than that of China. And this mortality cannot be attributed to the nutritional quality of healthcare. This is normal mortality, unaffected by the aforesaid factors. The increase in the number of normal deaths was so enormous, it surpassed the number of people who died during the great famine in China in a matter of a few years. This India-China contrast limits the fact that at different points in time, there are different problems that different regions need to tackle, which in turn largely depends on the region’s geographical, political, fiscal, and social position. This contrast also shows us the impact of hunger and the facets associated with it in two forms - mortality and nutrition.

Let us go through another side of the world now. Back in 1991, the median age of death in India was around 37 years. While that in China was around 67 years. But in some countries of Sub-Saharan Africa, it was well below and equivalent to 3 years of age. These statistics limn a story that

demonstrates a very strong record of India vis-a-vis Africa. The plausible reasons might have been the frequent famines and calamities in Africa, while India did not have any, and the premature mortality situation ultimately boils down to the facets of hunger, illness, lack of healthcare, and undernutrition. But the prevalence of undernourishment in these two regions tells us a different story altogether. At that time, in Africa, 20 to 40 percent of children were chronically undernourished, while in India, as much as 40 to 60 percent of the children were chronically undernourished. That is, more than half of the population of Indian children was undernourished, but it was Africa that was war-torn and famine struck at that time, not India. And of course, in population figures and not absolute terms, this picture seems to be a little worse. The correlation and paradox has been vastly explored by Klasen (2008)³.

Hence, there is no “world food problem”, the problems vary regionally in their forms, antecedents, and repercussions and need solutions targeted at solving them per their characteristics.⁴ But all things said, if in both these scenarios, if the government had used a policy such as Universal Basic Income, the mortality in China, the premature deaths in Africa and the undernutrition in India, could have all been solved, as all of them would have been enabled to buy food and ingredients in order to avert the long-standing maladies, and living conditions could have been improved. This is how UBI can prove to be a single measure to solve a wide range of problems associated with poverty and hunger.

II. UBI Feed the Hungry (A look into Global Hunger Index (GHI))

There are various interconnections we have to look at before reaching the terminal of hunger. A wide range of gaps are extant which ultimately lead to hunger and desolation. For instance, there is an inherent interconnection between income and consumption. This is the most rudimentary link we can establish in order to understand poverty and hunger, and more so, in order to propagate an effective solution to handle the problem at hand. Hunger is predominantly a problem of the poor population, who resultantly, do not have access to adequate nutrition and are in turn deprived of proper healthcare facilities. In this scenario, a modicum of cash at hand in the form of UBI for this population can prove to be life saving. However, in order to completely understand the problem and the solution, it is imperative to not only look at the problem of hunger, poverty, and their repercussions but also the long-existing gaps in the extant and functional policy framework that lead to causal processes and serious losses in effective income, which are eliminated by the very design of universal basic income and the many ways of funding which have been pondered upon by researchers and academicians around the world. See, e.g., Banerjee & Duflo 2005⁵, Jeong

³ Klasen, S. Poverty, undernutrition, and child mortality: Some inter-regional puzzles and their implications for research and policy. *J Econ Inequal* 6, 89–115 (2008). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10888-007-9056-x>

⁴ Source of Case Studies : Sen, Amartya, *Hunger in the Contemporary World*, 2009

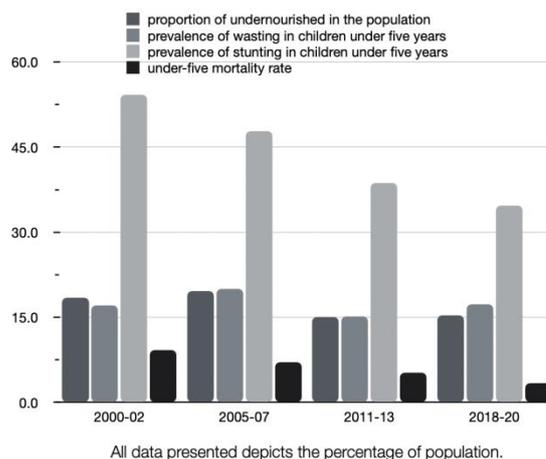
⁵Banerjee A, Breza E, Duflo E, Kinnan C. 2017a. *Do credit constraints limit entrepreneurship? Heterogeneity in the returns to microfinance*. Unpublished manuscript, Harvard Univ., Cambridge, MA

& Townsend 2007⁶, Alfaro et al. 2008⁷, Bartelsman et al. 2008⁸, Buera et al. 2011⁹, Restuccia & Rogerson 2008¹⁰, Hsieh & Klenow 2009¹¹.

To further study hunger and its purview, the WHO and International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) devised the Global Hunger Index (GHI) to measure malnutrition across countries. The GHI combines three equally weighted indicators:

- the proportion of the undernourished as a percentage of the population as compiled by the FAO. Undernourishment indicates the calorie consumption of fewer than 1,800 a day, which is thought to represent the minimum calorie requirement that most people need to live a healthy and productive life (FAO, 2011);
- the prevalence of underweight children under the age of five as estimated by the WHO;
- the mortality rate of children under the age of five as collected by UNICEF. Since GHI's calculation involves three equally-weighted indicators, it is a more comprehensive measure of undernutrition (Weismann, 2006). Besides, the GHI reflects the nutritional status of children under the age of five.

Let's have a closer look at the condition of India, from the lens of Hunger and The Global Hunger Index.



All data presented depicts the percentage of population.

Source: Global Hunger Index 2021

As is visible from the data, India has seen a steady decline in the prevalence of stunting in children under 5 years. Although this data helps us fetch insights in absolute terms, we can still consider it to be a good sign as there has been a decline in this repercussion as a ratio of the population. At the same time, we see a plateau result when considering wasting in children under 5 years.¹² Furthermore, the data also depicts a scanty decrease in the percentage of the population which is undernourished. But given that this percentage has to be applied on a rapidly increasing population, we see a huge increase in the number of people who suffer undernutrition.

⁶ Jeong H, Townsend R. 2007. Sources of TFP growth: occupational choice and financial deepening. *Econ. Theory* 32:179–221

⁷ Alfaro L, Charlton A, Kanczuk F. 2008. *Plant-size distribution and cross-country income differences*. NBER Work. Pap. 14060

⁸ Bartelsman E, Haltiwanger J, Scarpetta S. 2008. Cross country differences in productivity: the role of allocative efficiency. *Am. Econ. Rev.* 103(1):305–31

⁹ Buera F, Kaboski JP, Shin Y. 2011. Finance and development: a tale of two sectors. *Am. Econ. Rev.* 101(5):1964–2002

¹⁰ Restuccia D, Rogerson R. 2008. Policy distortions and aggregate productivity with heterogeneous establishments. *Rev. Econ. Dyn.* 11:707–20

¹¹ Hsieh CT, Klenow PJ. 2009. Misallocation and manufacturing TFP in China and India. *Q. J. Econ.* 124:1403–48
Hsieh CT, Klenow PJ. 2014. The life cycle of plants in India and Mexico. *Q. J. Econ.* 129:1035–84

¹² **Stunting** - Stunting refers to a child who is too short for his or her age. These children can suffer severe irreversible physical and cognitive damage that accompanies stunted growth. The devastating effects of stunting can last a lifetime and even affect the next generation.

Wasting - Wasting refers to a child who is too thin for his or her height. Wasting is the result of recent rapid weight loss or the failure to gain weight. A child who is moderately or severely wasted has an increased risk of death, but treatment is possible.

UNICEF/WHO/World Bank Group – Joint Child Malnutrition Estimates 2018 edition attested that In 2017, more than half of all stunted children under 5 lived in Asia and more than one third lived in Africa. Furthermore, more than two thirds of all wasted children under 5 lived in Asia and more than one quarter lived in Africa.



The Global Hunger Index report for the year 2021, was out in October 2021, and it ranked India 101st out of the 116 countries which had sufficient data to be considered for the ranking list. Although the infographic shows that there has been a slight decrease in the score, and India still has serious levels of poverty, it is important to discern that the previous year India was ranked 94. All it indicates is that the other nations were able to perform better in the direction of eradicating poverty. And India’s condition can be plausibly attributed to the massive negative impact of the pandemic and India’s huge population. But all things said, we need to focus on finding a measure to further alleviate the problem efficiently.

III. UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME NOURISHES THE UNDERNOURISHED INDIANS

Gustavo Anríquez, Silvio Daidone, Erdgin Mane¹³ in their paper on ‘Rising food prices and undernourishment: A cross-country inquiry’ speaks about the rising prices which makes it costly for poorer people to consider basic food as a luxury.

A myriad of past famines and natural calamities have culminated in high inflation in the economic panorama. The groups which were the most vulnerable in terms of financial stability throughout the regions of impact are the ones that have had to suffer the most. For instance, the most recent famine of India - the Bengal Famine of India in 1943 is considered as a boom famine, in which nearly 2 to 3 million people were coerced to lose out on their lives due to lack of food entitlement and it was highly inflation driven. Therefore, prevention of severe, uneven inflation is another vital factor while cogent formulation of a policy that innately confronts hunger, food insecurity, and poverty, and UBI can be

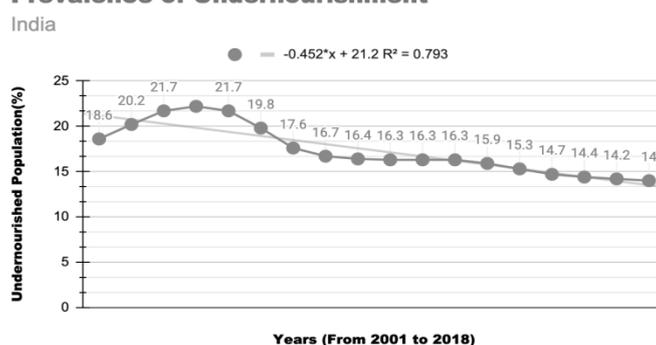
¹³ Gustavo Anríquez, Silvio Daidone, Erdgin Mane, Rising food prices and undernourishment: A cross-country inquiry, Science Direct, Volume 38, February 2013, Pages 190-202, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0306919212000140>

¹⁴ Ray R., Sinha K. (2019) Food Consumption, Calorie Intake and Undernourishment in India: The Recent Evidence on

functional and impactful enough to tackle the problem. The advent of a modicum of cash at disposal of an undernourished part of the population would mean access to convalescent, immunity boosting food and hygiene, due to a cash-transfer that can be prerogatively used for sustaining and having access to basic food acquisition and healthcare opportunities.

Over the years, there has been a spatial difference in the trends of food consumption in India, which are further extensively studied by Ray and Sinha (2019)¹⁴, where they explore the interconnection between various economic facets complicit in an exacerbated situation. Here we look at the condition of prevalence of undernourishment in India over the course of the last 20 years with the help of the data retrieved from the data centre of the World Bank.

Prevalence of Undernourishment



In an attempt to analyze the data of India about the prevalence of undernourishment in the country from 2001 to 2018, we came across the fact that prevalence is on the decline by nearly 0.452% annually. For the trend analysis, the equation we found for the data was $-0.452 * x + 21.2$. Although all of this might sound relieving, when extrapolated to reality and the multiple other challenges faced by the nation, it is also true that India ranked 101st among 116 nations in the Global Hunger Index 2021 and is in the "serious" hunger category with experts blaming poor implementation processes, lack of effective monitoring, siloed approach in tackling malnutrition and poor performance by large states behind the low ranking.¹⁵ According to reports related to the global hunger index, it’s estimated that 14% of the population of India is undernourished.

Undernutrition among children under five year is a significant public health problem in India. The present study was carried out to assess trends in nutritional status, nutrients, and food intake among children under five year over two time periods. It was a community-based cross-sectional study, carried out in tribal areas of India. A total of 14,587 children,

Role of Welfare Schemes. In: Batabyal A., Higano Y., Nijkamp P. (eds) Disease, Human Health, and Regional Growth and Development in Asia. New Frontiers in Regional Science: Asian Perspectives, vol 38. Springer, Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-6268-2_2

¹⁵ Press Trust of India October 17, 2020

0-5 years old were covered for nutritional assessment in terms of underweight, stunting, and wasting.¹⁶

According to the World Health Organization, the nutritional status of women of reproductive age is important, as it does affect their own health and moreover is proliferated and passed onto future generations. More than one-third of Indian women in the reproductive age group are in a state of chronic nutritional deficiency during the preconception period leading to poor health and likely resulting in low birth weight babies. This study was aimed to assess the food insecurity and nutritional status of preconception women in a rural population of north Karnataka.¹⁷

IV. UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME AS A MEDICINE FOR POVERTY

As mentioned above, food is often a luxury for a certain sect of the world population. However, in a more pragmatic manner, money and in turn, food can be acquired through trading and exchange. It is really important to emphatically realize the cogency of demand in order to alleviate the fear of inflation and inability to procure food. If people are going to have money at hand or in their bank accounts by a direct cash transfer policy by the government in form of UBI, they will have the power to buy and sell, that is, trade, and also have profitable small businesses of their own, which can systematically save them from hunger and the maladies that accompany poverty. This eventually opens the door to a myriad of possibilities like the money hence acquired can be used for agriculture, farming and agro-based trading, especially in a country like India, where farmers are financially indebted and often resort to suicide due to lack of funds. The provision of Universal Basic Income will hence alleviate poverty giving them a social safety net that they can resort to, in times of dire need. Docile mothers and oppressed women can have access to healthcare and well-being opportunities when they're deprived of them in the current scenario.

Universal Basic Income is an important tool¹⁸ to remove poverty from India. UN Statement, June 1998 – signed by the heads of all UN agencies says that “Fundamentally, poverty is a denial of choices and opportunities, a violation of human dignity. It means a lack of basic capacity to participate effectively in society. It means not having enough to feed and clothe a family, not having a school or clinic to go to, not having the land on which to grow one's food or a job to earn one's living, not having access to credit. It means insecurity, powerlessness and exclusion of individuals, households and communities. It means susceptibility to violence, and it often implies living in marginal or fragile environments, without

access to clean water or sanitation”. The World Bank defines poverty in absolute terms. The bank defines *extreme poverty* as living on less than US\$1.90 per day and *moderate poverty* as less than \$3.10 a day. It has been estimated that in 2008, 1.4 billion people had consumption levels below US\$1.25 a day and 2.7 billion lived on less than \$2 a day. According to the United Nations, “Fundamentally, poverty is the inability of having choices and opportunities, a violation of human dignity. It means a lack of basic capacity to participate effectively in society. It means not having enough to feed and clothe a family, not having a school or clinic to go to or not having the land on which to grow one's food or a job to earn one's living, not having access to credit. It means insecurity, powerlessness, and exclusion of individuals, households, and communities. It means susceptibility to violence, and it often implies living in marginal or fragile environments, without access to clean water or sanitation”. The House of Commons Scottish Affairs Committee¹⁹ asserted that, "There are basically three current definitions of poverty in common usage: absolute poverty, relative poverty, and social exclusion.

There is an effective index of measuring poverty, the Multidimensional Poverty Index. The MPI captures distinct and broader aspects of poverty. The percentage of people living in poverty according to the MPI is higher than the percentage living on less than US \$2 a day in 43 countries and lower than those living on less than US \$1.25 a day in 25 countries. In some countries, the difference between MPI poverty and income poverty is particularly marked.

Let's have a look at how UBI will be able to effectively confront substandard and abominable living conditions in India.

V. UBI AND MULTIDIMENSIONAL POVERTY IN INDIA

According to the UNHDR²⁰ report, in India, the multidimensional poverty index is 0.123. The headcount of the population living in multidimensional poverty(%) is 27.9. The number of multidimensionally poor people (as of 2018), came out to be 377,492 thousand people. And it also confirmed that 8.8% of the population is living under severe multidimensional poverty. And that 19.3 % of the population is vulnerable to multidimensional poverty. The population that contributes to overall multidimensional poverty is 31.9 % in the health dimension, 23.4 % in the education dimension and 44.8 percent in the standard of living dimension.

¹⁶ Asia Pacific Journal of Clinical Nutrition, Vol. 21, No. 4, 2012: 568-576 Indrapal Ishwarji Meshram; Nimmathota Arlappa; Nagalla Balakrishna; Kodavanti Mallikharjuna Rao; Avula Laxmaiah; Ginnela Nag Veera Brahmam

¹⁷ Mastiholi, S.C., Somannavar, M.S., Vernekar, S.S. *et al.* Food insecurity and nutritional status of preconception women in a rural population of North Karnataka, India. *Reprod Health* 15, 90 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12978-018-0535-2>

¹⁸Anil. K. Antony, It's time for a universal basic income programme in India www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/its-time-for-a-universal-basic-income-programme-in-india/article31717471.ece

¹⁹ “Definitions-Poverty”, *BBC*, 16 Oct 2014. Web 21 Jan 2021. [BBC article](http://www.bbc.com/news/health-20141016)

²⁰ United Nations Development Programme - Human Development Report 2020 - <http://hdr.undp.org/en/2020-MPI>

The percentage of the population living under the national poverty line is 21.9 and living under the PPP standard that is \$1.9 a day, is 21.2%.

The first dimension of the Multidimensional Poverty Index is nutrition, and the data available in the data bank of the World Bank tells us that India is far from a well nourished economy as a huge number of people, including a startling number of women and children suffer from hunger, undernutrition and premature death due to inadequate food and nourishment. The provision of Universal basic Income would mean an open door for all individuals to have access to better nutrition. One scheme run by the Indian government for tackling the problem is the Mid-Day Meal Scheme, which had a significant number of proponents. A scheme such as the UBI policy would help tackle the problem at hand in a more inclusive manner where women and other persecuted communities can have their right to food. Künnemann (2004), goes as far as saying, “a state without a basic food income programme violates prima facie the human right to food.” The ratified policy would further result in lower child mortality rates as access to proper nutrition means stronger immunity and no hunger. \

The next dimension of MPI pertains to education, the years of schooling and school attendance, and UBI is surely going to facilitate the attendance of children, both boys and girls at school. It would facilitate the finances and fees required to attend school and at the same time, would give more freedom of choice to the girls, who are often denied school primarily, due to lack of funds at home, and the mass-consideration of girl education as a redundancy. UBI is going to facilitate the funds needed for education of girls and would give them the freedom to educate themselves without being considered a burden at home²¹. The next dimension of the MPI pertains to living standards, which entail in a nested manner - cooking fuel, sanitation, drinking water, electricity, housing and assets. It is more than conspicuous to say that the provision of Universal Basic Income would lead to access to all of these basic amenities for the people vulnerable to poverty. Especially the more vulnerable communities who have to bear the brunt of the absence of these facilities, the women and the members of the persecuted communities, who often pay with their lives. There is ample evidence of instances and practices of unequal distribution within families among multiple nations in Africa and Asia, wherein women, some downtrodden and tyrannized communities are deprived of food and are subjected to inadequate provision of food and unequal share of benefits a family can reap. Hence we need a catalyst that can alleviate the problem by imparting financial help to these vulnerable groups. These disparities can be reduced by introducing social, political and economic changes, and a wide range of evidence corroborates the same.

²¹The Hindu, Average dropout rate of girls recorded at 17.3% at secondary level in 2018-19: WCD Ministry,

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<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/average-dropout-rate-of-girls-recorded-at-173-at-secondary-level-in-2018-19-wcd-ministry/article33761098.ece>

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