Hot or Cool
THINKPIECE

Universal Basic Services:

Provisioning for our needs within a fair consumption space

Anna Coote

Abstract

Universal basic services (UBS) is a proposal to meet everyone's needs within environmental limits. While some needs can be met through market transactions, most can only be met universally and sufficiently through collective action – by delivering services, by investing public funds and by regulating for quality and sustainability. UBS contributes to a fair consumption space by securing social foundations below which no one should fall, by ensuring equity for all within the space and by avoiding breach of the ecological ceiling. It offers a principled framework for policy and practice, which applies to all areas of need. These include a universal right of access to life's essentials, devolved power, participatory decision making, sufficient and sustainable practice, and a mixed economy of providers, all bound by public interest obligations and supported by an enabling state. Investment in UBS will yield substantial benefits in terms of equity, efficiency, solidarity and sustainability.

Keywords: Universal basic services, human needs, sufficiency, equity, fair consumption space

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Introduction

The climate emergency calls for radical change to cut greenhouse gas emissions and limit the rise in global temperature to below 1.5 degrees Celsius. Change must be rapid and wide ranging, resetting social and economic activity at all levels and transforming everyday life, most dramatically in higher-income countries. Democratic governments need the consent of their electorates to act effectively and legitimately. The relationship between climate action and people's everyday experience is therefore of the utmost importance. Indeed, every climate policy programme should have a strong social dimension, recognising that human and planetary wellbeing are inextricably linked and must be pursued in tandem. This involves carving out a "fair consumption space" – with a social floor below which no one should fall, an ecological ceiling that should not be breached and equity within the space (Akenji et al., 2021; Raworth, 2017).

This paper sets out the basic architecture for universal basic services (UBS), which constitutes a "social pillar" of an effective green new deal. It rests on a simple commitment: every member of society should have access to life's essentials, which are the minimum resources needed not just to survive, but to participate in society and to flourish. These can be delivered through a cash income derived from a real living wage and from a guaranteed minimum income, and an in-kind income or "social wage" derived from collectively provided services.

Services are often marginalised in discussions about social policy and welfare reform, which tend to focus disproportionately on reforming cash transfer systems, or on particular problems such as population ageing. We aim to correct the balance, building on the emerging interest in "sustainable welfare" and "social investment" (Gough, 2021; Koch, 2021; Morel, Palier and Palme, 2012).

The phrase "universal basic services" is used here as shorthand to describe a range of collective measures that aim to ensure universal access to life's essentials. As this paper argues, collectively provided in-kind benefits have considerable potential for supporting decent living standards, maintaining democratic consent and delivering the twin goals of social justice and ecological sustainability that define a fair consumption space (Akenji et al., 2021; Button and Coote, 2021).

The paper begins by setting out the philosophical basis of UBS: the right of every individual to have their basic needs met and how this requires a customised approach. Next, it describes the UBS framework for policy and practice. It then considers potential impacts on the two key dimensions of a fair consumption space: social foundations and ecological ceilings. It gives practical examples in two areas – childcare and transport – drawing on current experience in a range of European countries. It ends with a brief resume of challenges that require further exploration.

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Philosophical basis of UBS: needs and rights

Meeting basic human needs

There is a broad evidence-based consensus about what basic needs are. Theorists have defined needs and capabilities, respectively, as "participation, health and critical autonomy" (Doyal and Gough, 1991) and "affiliation, bodily integrity and practical reason" (Nussbaum, 2000). Since these definitions were first articulated (more than 30 years ago), one other essential factor has come sharply into focus: what people need most fundamentally is a sustainable ecosystem – a planet that is thriving. By making human needs the starting point, we can anchor political economy in a realistic context that reflects everyday experience, and puts climate action at the top of the agenda.

Basic human needs are universal across cultures and places. How they are met varies widely, but there are certain generic need satisfiers that are constant: these are life's essentials. They include (not an exhaustive list) clean air and water, nutrition, care, education, housing, energy, security, and access to motorised transport and – these days – to the Internet. They are reflected in the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which includes, among much else and notably in Articles 22-26, all the essentials covered by UBS – except access to motorised transport and digital communications, which were only deemed essential many decades after the Declaration was published (UN, 1948).

Unlike wants or preferences, human needs are satiable. One can reach a point where needs are met sufficiently and having more would be redundant or even harmful. Aiming for universal sufficiency is a radical departure from orthodox economics, where the imperative is to satisfy wants and preferences, which have no limits, through market transactions (Gough, 2021: 17-20).

Once life's essentials are recognised, it follows that access to them should be a right, not a privilege or concession. As the UN Declaration stipulates, everyone is entitled to have their rights upheld "without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status" (UN, 1948). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) develop the theme for the 21st century, establishing planetary wellbeing as an essential precondition for realising human rights (UN, 2018).

A customised approach to meeting universal needs

There is an important distinction to be made between, on the one hand, the universality of needs and of the right to have one's needs met and, on the other, the specificity of how needs are met. Universal access to life's essentials involves a great deal of differentiation to ensure that every individual gets what they need. Services should be appropriate, rather than uniform, and experienced as sufficient for all by all (Coote, 2021a).

Some needs, such as food, can generally be accessed through individual market transactions. For many other needs, however, individual access is beyond the means of all but the rich and can only be achieved collectively. In all cases, some collective measures are required to make sure everyone's needs are met. While arrangements vary among countries, it is possible to make some generalisations – at least for the rich world. For some necessities, access is typically through public services that are free at the point of use (education and healthcare are obvious examples).

For other areas of need, it is more often a combination of state and non-state service provision, with public investment and government regulation to ensure that life's essentials are genuinely accessible and affordable for all who need them (as in the case of housing, childcare, adult social care, transport and Internet access). Even for food, which people usually expect to buy for themselves, collective measures are required (such as hygiene and safety requirements, controls on advertising, and standards for production and processing) to ensure universal access to food that is sustainable and sufficiently nutritious. All these collective measures fall within the concept of UBS.

Aiming for universal sufficiency is a radical departure from orthodox economics, where the imperative is to satisfy wants and preferences, which have no limits, through market transactions.

A framework for policy and practice

While universal services differ from each other, reflecting the specific functions they perform, all have certain features in common because they have the same fundamental purpose. Together, these features constitute a normative framework for policy and practice.

Key elements, which apply across all areas of need, are as follows:

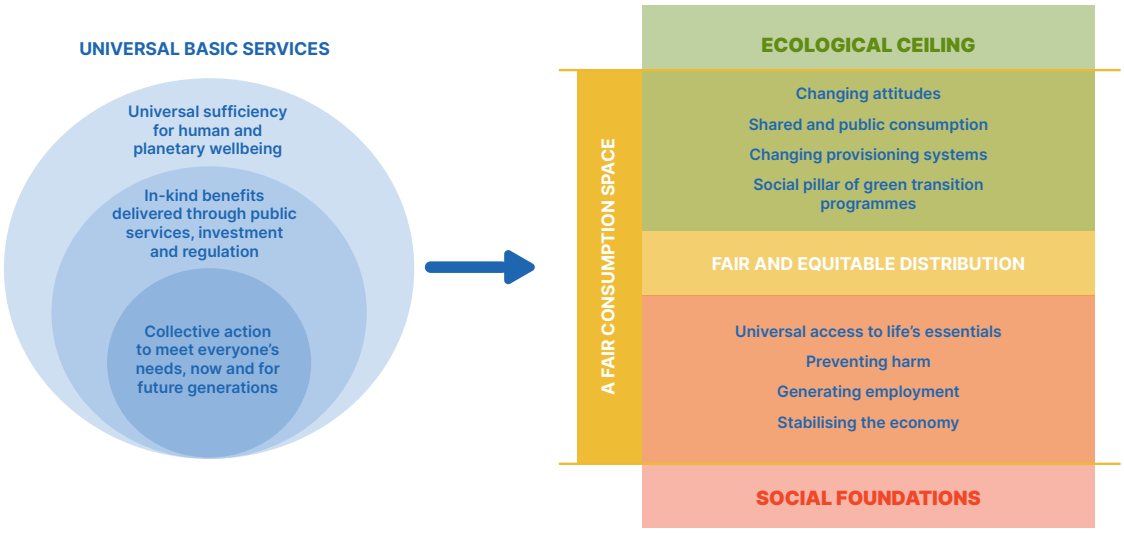
- Everyone has access to life's essentials according to need, not ability to pay.
- Key decisions – for example about the scope of universal services, who is eligible and how providers are held accountable – should be subject to democratic dialogue, with citizens' assemblies and juries or similar models to inform and enrich representative politics (Coote and Percy, 2020: 111-112).
- Those who use services should have a chance to participate meaningfully in designing and (where appropriate) delivering services, working in close partnership with professionals and other service workers, in line with the concept of co-production (Boyle et al., 2010).
- Power is devolved to the lowest appropriate level, according to the principle of subsidiarity.
- Services are delivered by a range of state and non-state organisations with different models of ownership and control.
- All providers share a clear set of public interest obligations, established and enforced through a system of social licensing. Obligations cover equality of access, quality standards, pay and conditions of workers, sustainability of working practices and products, and engagement with residents and service users.
- Where appropriate, the state is a direct provider of services, often working through local government. However, the aim is to avoid overly centralised government or state monopoly of public services.
- The national state has four essential functions, beyond direct provisioning:
  1) to ensure equal rights of access, between and within localities;
  2) to set and enforce standards and public interest obligations, through social licensing (see above);
  3) to collect and invest the necessary funds, distributing them to maximise inclusion and fairness;
  4) to encourage diverse models of provision and to co-ordinate functions across the different areas of need, in order to get the best possible outcomes.

This framework reflects some of the themes of the European Pillar of Social Rights, which sets out 20 principles, including "access to essential services" as well as education, care and housing, with an Action Plan to achieve "a strong social Europe that is fair, inclusive and full of opportunity" (European Commission, 2021). The UBS framework provides a stronger focus on meeting human needs and on shaping collective action to ensure universal and sufficient provision.

Potential impacts on a fair consumption space

Evidence drawn from studies of existing public services suggests that collective provision of life's essentials can bring significant gains for equality, efficiency, solidarity and sustainability (Coote and Percy, 2020: 35-56). Furthermore, this approach has considerable advantages over cash-based strategies such as universal basic income (UBI) (Coote and Percy, 2020: 51-56). However, it is integral to the concept of universal access to life's essentials that more and better public services should be combined with a more generous, less conditional and non-stigmatising system of social security that gives everyone the right to a living income.

Figure 1: UBS and a fair consumption space



Source: Author.

This section deals with the potential impacts of UBS on a fair consumption space: how implementing universal services within a principled framework can help us all to stay within ecological limits "in a fair manner that allows everyone equitable opportunities for a life of dignity, including future generations" (Akenji et al., 2021: 25). We focus here on three dimensions: secure social foundations below which no one should fall; equity for all within the space; and avoiding breach of the ecological ceiling (Figure 1).

It is integral to the concept of universal access to life's essentials that more and better public services should be combined with a more generous, less conditional and non-stigmatising system of social security that gives everyone the right to a living income.

Secure social foundations

Universal services have a major role in creating the social foundations of a fair consumption space. They do this by providing basic necessities for human survival, participation and flourishing, which no one should go without. But they are far more than a minimal "safety net" that saves people from destitution. Their combined effect is to enable everyone to flourish. They consolidate secure foundations by pooling risks and preventing harm, by generating employment and by helping to stabilise the economy.

Pooling risks and preventing harm

Risks that individuals face, such as illness and frailty in old age, are often highly unpredictable and can have ruinous effects. By promoting universal access to life's essentials, UBS facilitates the pooling of risks, shifting responsibility for coping with them to collective institutions, which can remove or at least mitigate the potentially devastating impact on individuals (for example through health and social care services). In addition, when people can rely on getting an education, a decent home, and care when they need it, they are better protected over time against certain risks and vulnerabilities that are associated with poverty and that are more likely to accumulate among lower-income persons.

More generally, by helping to maintain and improve social wellbeing, universal services mitigate the risk of "downstream" services becoming overwhelmed by rising demand, enabling them to continue to function effectively (Gough, 2013: 1-21).

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has identified a range of social benefits that can be derived from "high-quality early childhood education and care", including better health, reduced likelihood of individuals engaging in risky behaviour, and stronger "civic and social engagement", with positive "spill-over effects" for society as a whole (OECD, 2011: 4). Enabling parents – especially mothers – to undertake paid employment can also bring considerable social benefits, including greater financial security, personal autonomy and development, and the avoidance of harms associated with unemployment, such as poverty, ill-health, low self-esteem and depression.

Poor-quality and precarious housing negatively affects mental and physical health, restricts access to employment and traps people in poverty (Braubach, Jacobs and Ormandy, 2011: 209-214; Centre for Ageing Better, 2020). These effects are even more severe when people are homeless. Making sure that everyone has access to decent living conditions can reduce these risks – improving quality of life and reducing demand for services to cope with problems that would otherwise arise from inadequate housing and homelessness.

In a similar vein, free bus travel has been found to improve wellbeing by increasing physical activity (because bus travellers walk longer distances than people travelling by car) and through easier access to jobs, increased independence, reduced isolation, a greater sense of belonging to one's local area, and contributing more to society (Jones et al., 2013: 202-209; KPMG, 2017: 12; Mackett, 2015: 12). The impacts of food on health are extensively documented (GBD 2017 Diet Collaborators, 2019), and there is strong evidence that changing to more nutritious diets would help prevent a range of chronic non-communicable diseases (Tilman and Clark, 2014: 1).

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Creating jobs and stabilising the economy

Public services can help to stabilise fluctuations by generating relatively stable employment. Universal services are mainly labour-intensive and require workers at all skills levels in all parts of a country. They are part of the "foundational economy" – the essential and mundane functions that maintain everyday life. It has been estimated that more than one in three workers in the United Kingdom (UK) are employed in the foundational economy – and the proportion rises to nearly one in two workers in parts of the country that are de-industrialised or otherwise "left behind" (Foundational Economy Collective, 2021). Investment in childcare and adult social care, for example, would not only create more jobs in the care sector but also enable parents and informal carers to take up paid work if they chose to do so (Button and Coote, 2021: 21).

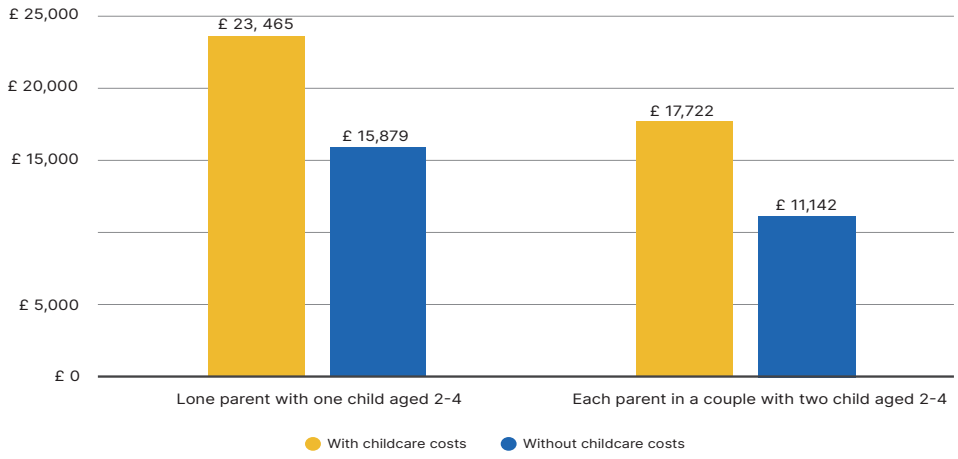
Many jobs in universal services – in caring and teaching, for example – depend on human relationships that cannot be usurped by robotics or artificial intelligence. By generating more employment outside markets and providing security through meeting everyday needs, universal services act as a counter-cyclical buffer, helping to offset the effects of market downturns and recession, contributing to the economy's "capacity for continuance". More broadly, collective forms of provision avoid inefficiencies that routinely arise from market processes, due for example to inflexible contracts, higher transaction costs and moral hazards that are encountered when profit incentives are combined with unequal knowledge in markets. Money raised through taxation and invested in shared services and other aspects of the social infrastructure can achieve economies of scale, minimise profit extraction and enable re-investment of any surplus to improve quality and scope.

Equity within the space

Universal services are redistributive and have a profound effect on the cost of living. They reduce income inequalities by providing a virtual income, made up of in-kind benefits that do not have to be paid for directly and are worth much more to people on low incomes. For example, UK research shows that the amount of income required to meet a designated "minimum income standard" (Davies et al., 2021) would be dramatically reduced if parents did not have to pay directly for childcare. As Figure 2 shows, a lone parent with one child (aged 2-4) would gain more than £7,500 a year, while a couple with two children (aged 2-4) would gain more than £13,000.

Money not spent on childcare can be spent on other necessities such as food, clothing and rent. These gains represent a far higher proportion of income for poorer families, and the findings indicate how universal services in other areas such as adult social care, housing and transport could narrow the gap in living standards between rich and poor. For example, the UK Office for National Statistics estimates that in-kind benefits (specifically education, healthcare, adult social care, free childcare hours, housing subsidy, bus and rail subsidies, school meals and Healthy Start Vouchers) account for nearly three-quarters of disposable income for poor families, compared with one-sixth for rich ones (ONS, 2021).

Figure 2: Displaced income value of childcare in the UK, 2021



Source: Button and Coote (2021: 19)

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Avoiding breach of the ecological ceiling

In 2022 for the first time, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reviewed evidence on demand-side measures, services and social aspects of climate mitigation. It recognised the role of "government actions to support the services for provision of public goods" and the importance of changes that "reinforce sufficiency and emphasis on solidarity, economies built around care, livelihood protection, collective action, and basic service provision, linked to reduced emissions" (IPCC, 2022).

Implementing the UBS framework can contribute to ecological sustainability in (at least) three ways that are interrelated and can be mutually reinforcing: by influencing public attitudes and consumption patterns; by transforming provisioning systems; and by underpinning political programmes to bring about a green transformation.

Influencing public attitudes and patterns of consumption

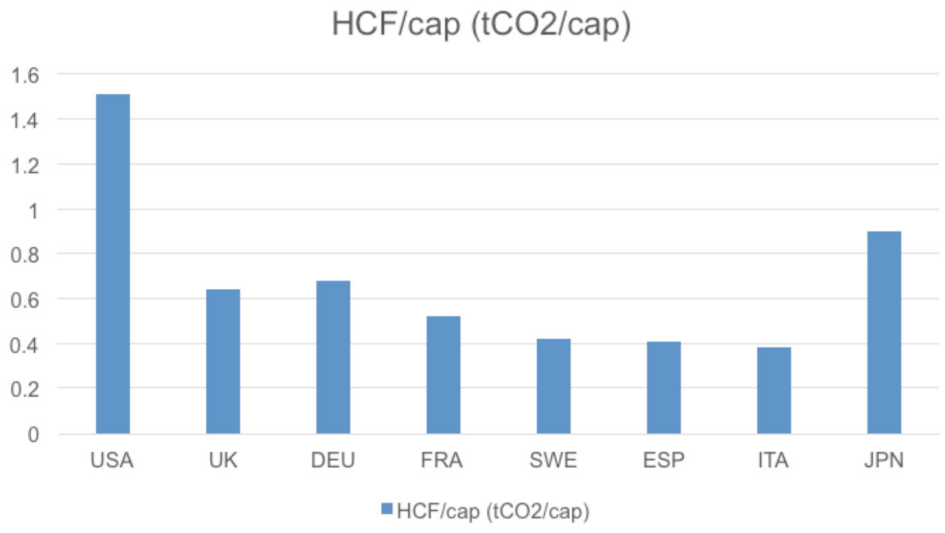
UBS is about meeting human needs within planetary boundaries. The guiding ethos is universal sufficiency: to make sure that everyone has enough of what they need, rather than to satisfy people's wants and preferences, which can escalate without constraint, with some getting much more than others, and at the expense of others. UBS can help to address the upper limits of a fair consumption space by reshaping attitudes and promoting public (or collective) and decommodified consumption through universal services.

It involves pooling resources, sharing risks and working together to make sure everyone has enough to meet their needs. By raising awareness of interdependence and developing practical experience of collective responsibility, UBS can help to create favourable conditions for society to play a pivotal role in imposing limits on individual consumption levels that are above what is required to live a good life (Fuchs, 2019).

Policies to address ecological sustainability through consumption tend to focus on what individuals buy in markets – such as food, cars, clothes, holidays and household gadgets – and on how to change patterns of individual behaviour. By meeting needs collectively, UBS can take some kinds of consumption out of the marketplace – for example, by replacing individual travel in private vehicles with public transport. UBS can also constrain or modify other kinds of consumption through investment in services and their provisioning, and by using regulation to enforce sustainable practice.

There is some evidence that collectively provided services have a smaller ecological footprint than privately funded alternatives. For example, the carbon footprint of healthcare in the United States, where the system is market-led, is three-and-a-half times greater than in several European countries, where the system is wholly or partly controlled by the government (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Health carbon footprints per capita in selected countries, 2014



Source: Pichler et al. (2019)

The official survey of housing in England offers another example: the social rented sector has consistently higher ratings for energy and environmental performance than the owner-occupied and privately rented sectors (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2021: 39-41). This is explained partly by the nature of the stock (the social sector has more apartments) and partly by the absence of profit extraction and by the fact that local authorities and housing associations are more likely than private landlords and many owner-occupiers to comply with national goals on climate change and to invest in upgrading and insulating homes.

UBS can also help to curb excess by redistributing resources through taxation and investment. Improving and extending universal services will require higher taxation, unless debt rises. Even where a tax system is proportional rather than progressive, spending power at the higher end of the income scale is likely to be reduced (all else being equal). This is where luxury consumption (on second homes, multiple flights and exotic holidays, for example) is otherwise most abundant, accounting for high levels of harmful emissions and resource depletion. Meanwhile, more and better in-kind benefits for all will leave lower-income families with more disposable cash so that they are more comfortable and secure, but with moderate spending power unlikely to mirror the excesses of today's wealthy consumers.

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Changing provisioning systems

Provisioning systems that are democratically controlled with the purpose of serving the public interest have greater potential than market-based systems to safeguard ecological ceilings. The UBS agenda supports the development of "social licensing", through which service providers are bound by a shared set of public interest obligations. The idea links with the European Union's notion of "services of general interest" being subject to specific obligations (European Commission, 2011). Froud and Williams, in their work on the foundational economy, describe social licensing as a "disruptive innovation" that "gives corporate enterprises or sectors privileges and rights to trade whilst placing them under reciprocal obligations to offer social returns on issues such as sourcing, training and payment of living wages" (Froud and Williams, 2019: 23-32). The same approach can be used to limit debt finance and profit extraction, and to commit service providers to ecologically sustainable practices.

Through their networks of employees, service users, and suppliers, providers contracted under social licensing obligations can co-ordinate sustainable practices such as active travel, resource-efficient buildings and local food procurement, avoid duplication and waste, minimise excessive demand and implement national strategies for reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Where public bodies work with non-governmental partners or sub-contractors, they can spread sustainable practices among a wider range of organisations and sectors.

Underpinning a green transformation

By providing secure foundations and constraining excessive and unsustainable consumption, UBS can play a vital role in greening the economy in a just way. As the IPCC confirms, there is a high level of agreement that "development targeted to basic needs and well-being for all entails less carbon-intensity than GDP-focused growth" (IPCC, 2022).

In the political arena, UBS offers a clear moral frame as well as a means of achieving the political consent that democratic governments need to make the transition to a genuinely sustainable economy. Introducing the UBS framework would mean that measures to reduce emissions and resource depletion would be designed to comply with its principles, rather than simply focusing on ecological targets. This would help to flesh out the concept of a "just transition" (ILO, 2015) so that universal access to life's essentials is seen as central to sustainable living, and costs of climate mitigation are not loaded onto the poorest people and communities.

By providing secure foundations and constraining excessive and unsustainable consumption, Universal Basic Services can play a vital role in greening the economy in a just way.

Universal services in practice

UBS aims for radical improvements in healthcare, schooling and other services, such as policing and social work, which in many countries are already (in theory, if not always in practice) in the public realm and are universally available according to need, not ability to pay. But there are other areas where such services are not generally available, leaving many without sufficient access to life's essentials. The crucial innovation proposed here is to extend the provision of services so that all needs are covered.

This section describes briefly what this could look like in practice in childcare and transport. What follows can be seen as different parts of the jigsaw, drawn from research and practical experience, which can be combined over time to realise the full ambition of this agenda.

Childcare

Why a universal service?

Education, security in childhood and access to paid work are recognised as generic "satisfiers" of basic human needs. Childcare[1] is a means of meeting those needs – by providing early education and care for pre-school age children and enabling parents to go out to work. Poor children and families have more to gain from it – and are more disadvantaged without it (Lloyd and Potter, 2014: 78). More often than not, however, only high-income parents can afford to meet the full costs themselves. While many countries have well-developed childcare systems, the challenge almost everywhere is to ensure that a sufficient quality of service is universally accessible.

[1] "Childcare" is the term used here to denote early childhood education and care, for pre-school age children. The age range it covers varies among countries, but broadly it spans the years between the end of statutory parental leave (where that exists) and the start of compulsory schooling.

Accessibility, quality, cost

Levels of public investment in childcare vary widely among countries, and this in turn affects how far childcare is accessible to families. Figure 4 compares spending across OECD countries, using the latest available data.

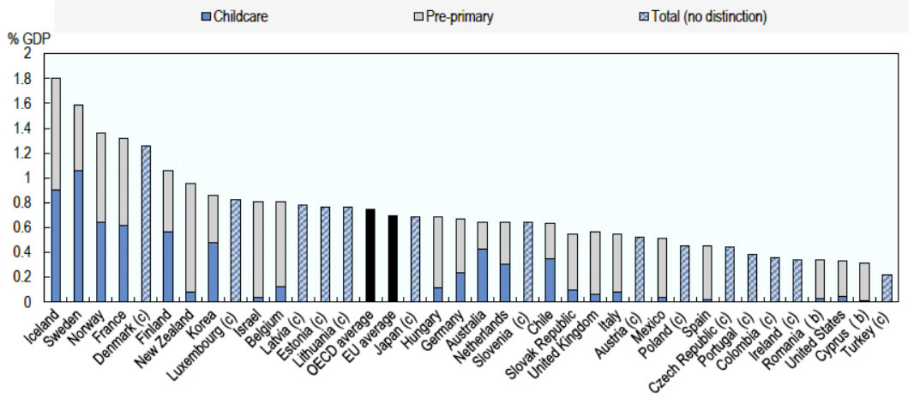
Key factors contributing to quality in childcare include training and qualifications of staff, ratios of children to staff (lower is generally better), a good mix between children with different social and ethnic backgrounds, suitably warm and consistent relationships between children and staff, parental involvement in managing childcare centres, and opening times to suit parents' working lives (Gambero, Stewart and Waldfogel, 2014).

Norway sets an enviable example. It has well-qualified staff, relatively high staff-child ratios, a consistent form of childcare setting (the kindergarten) and continuity of care from age one to six as the norm. It combines "a legal guarantee to a place for all children with fees that are both low overall and income-related" (Ellingsaeter, 2014: 53-76).

The role of for-profit providers has a bearing on both cost and quality: the effects can be detrimental if resources are "siphoned off for shareholders rather than invested in staff wages and other quality inputs" (Stewart et al., 2014: 19-42, 209-226). However, Norway has reportedly managed to expand provision, open it up to private businesses and still maintain quality – not least because the government covers a high proportion of childcare costs, caps fees, imposes tight regulations on staff qualifications, limits profit to what is "reasonable" and ensures that parents sit on kindergarten boards.

Figure 4: Public spending on early childhood education and care as a share of gross domestic product, 2017 or latest available data

Chart PF3.1.A. Public spending on early childhood education and care
Public expenditure on childcare and pre-primary education and total public expenditure on early childhood education and care, as a % of GDP, 2017 or latest available [a]



Note: In some countries, local governments play a key role in financing and providing childcare services. Such spending is comprehensively recorded in Nordic countries, but in some other (often federal) countries it may not be fully captured by the OECD social expenditure data.
a. Data for Romania and Cyprus refer to 2018 and for Australia to 2016.
b. For non-OECD EU member states (Cyprus and Romania), the data are not are not adjusted for any differences in the entry age for primary schooling and cover all public expenditure on childcare and pre-primary education regardless of the age of those using/enrolled in services.
c. Data cannot be disaggregated by educational level.
The present publication presents time series which end before the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union on 1 February 2020. The EU aggregate presented here therefore refers to the EU including the UK. In future publications, as soon as the time series presented extend to periods beyond the UK withdrawal (February 2020 for monthly, Q1 2020 for quarterly, 2020 for annual data), the "European Union" aggregate will change to reflect the new EU country composition.

Source: OECD (2021))

Supporting the ecological ceiling

Childcare can generate a substantial number of low-carbon jobs. It can help to prevent harms that would otherwise impair people's wellbeing and require costly and resource-intensive interventions by a range of public agencies. Childcare can also encourage children from a very young age to value, enjoy and safeguard the natural environment. A well-regulated and securely funded system can be brought within a shared set of protocols (through social licensing) for sustainability – for example, covering the way childcare centres are constructed, equipped and maintained; how much energy and non-renewable resources they use; and how children travel to and from home.

Applying the UBS framework

Childcare can play a vital role in maintaining the social and ecological boundaries of a fair consumption space. But it only serves this function if it is of sufficient quality and is universally accessible according to need, not ability to pay. This is where the UBS framework comes in: universal and sufficient childcare cannot be delivered through markets alone. Collective measures are required, including service provision either directly by government bodies or indirectly by suitably regulated businesses and non-profit organisations. This involves recognising childcare as a right, and exercising collective responsibility through investment of public funds and regulation for quality standards, appropriate settings and equipment, sufficient training and pay for childcare workers, and public subsidies and cost-control measures to ensure that services are affordable for all.

Childcare can generate a substantial number of low-carbon jobs and also encourage children from a very young age to value, enjoy and safeguard the natural environment.

Transport

Access to some form of motorised transport (which will vary among countries) is said to belong to "a set of universal, irreducible and essential material conditions for achieving basic human wellbeing" (Rao and Min, 2017: 138-225). Thus, it fits within the UBS agenda. Universal access to transport may be achieved through a range of measures, including free services.

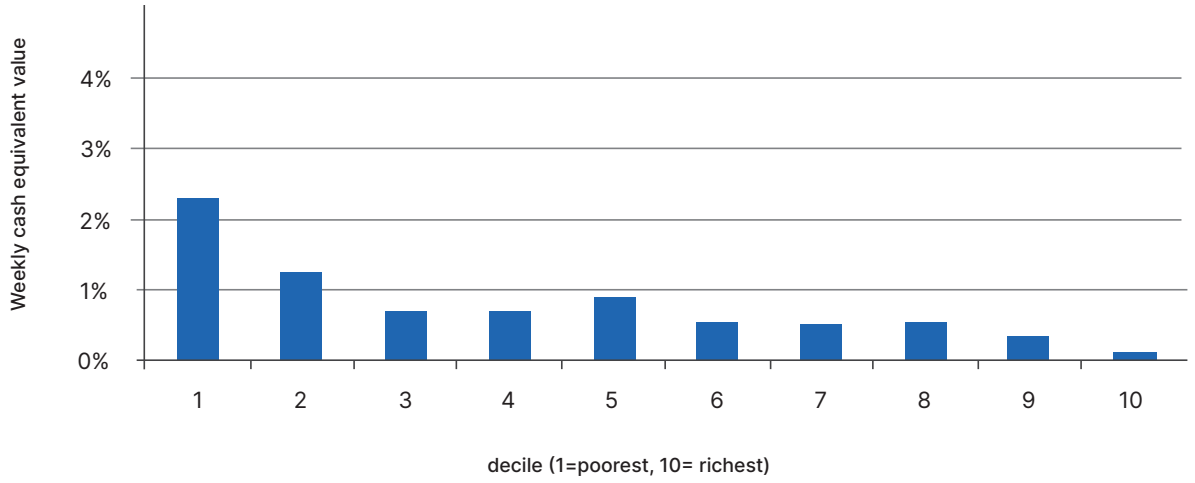
Accessibility, quality, cost

The ultimate goal of transport as a universal service is to provide access to all who need it by means of a well-regulated, inter-connected, frequent, reliable and adequately funded scheme that also discourages car use and encourages safe walking and cycling alongside public transport. Transport services would have to be genuinely useful to as many people as possible, so that these services are widely adopted as a preferred form of travel.

Free bus travel has been proposed as a possible first step, not least because of its value to those on low incomes, as indicated in Figure 5 (Portes, Reed and Percy, 2017).

Free local transport schemes (mainly buses) are available in more than 100 towns and cities worldwide, including more than 30 in the United States and 20 in France, as well as in Australia, Estonia, Italy, Luxembourg, Poland, Slovenia, Sweden and elsewhere. Some are restricted to certain social groups and times of day. In the UK, for example, adults over 65 and disabled people are entitled to free bus travel. For their full potential to be realised, free buses would have to be coupled with disincentives for private vehicles, such as charges and parking fees for road users, as well as measures to support active travel (Storchmann, 2003: 89-105).

Figure 5: Value of free bus services for UK working-age households as a share of net income.



Source: Portes, Reed and Percy (2017)

Frequency and connectivity vary among countries. In the UK, large corporations dominate the public transport market, producing a patchwork of poorly connected and/or infrequent services with no shared system of ticketing and rising prices as government subsidies have diminished. Outside London, which has an integrated public transport system, passenger numbers have fallen as prices have risen sharply (Williams, 2022). Most other European countries have regulated bus services with better co-ordinated routes and timetables, as well as better links between town and country, and higher levels of public subsidy (Bayliss and Mattioli, 2018).

A wide variety of taxes are levied by public authorities around the world to pay for their public transport systems, ranging from local income and property taxes to sales and tourism taxes, corporation tax and road user charges (Taylor and Sloman, 2016: 115-116). In France, for example, public transport is funded through a payroll levy called Versement Transport (VT); more than 80% of France's urban transport authorities apply the levy, which pays for more than half of their infrastructure investment and subsidies to operators.

Supporting the ecological ceiling

Greenhouse gas emissions from the use of cars and taxis are more than seven times higher than from the use of buses, according to a UK study (Department for Transport, 2017: 6). Accessible, co-ordinated public transport across a large conurbation, even without free fares, has been found to reduce car traffic, improve air quality and lower carbon emissions (Sloman and Hopkinson, 2019: 6). Free bus fares would accentuate that effect, as would measures to discourage private vehicles, such as congestion charging and parking fees. Frequent, well-connected and affordable train services (along with long-distance buses) offer an important opportunity to reduce short-haul flights, which are a major source of greenhouse gas emissions.

Applying the UBS framework

Realising a fair consumption space calls not only for a comprehensive transport service including buses, trains, trams and underground railways, as well as safe cycling and pedestrian routes, but also for an integrated approach that makes all of these as widely accessible, well connected and as affordable as possible. Investment in the necessary material infrastructure such as vehicle fleets, stations, routing systems, railways and tramlines would be a crucial prerequisite, which could not be achieved through markets alone but would require a coherent package of measures designed to achieve universal and sufficient access. This would include a combination of collective interventions, through planning, investment, regulation and subsidy, with affordable ticketing where services are not free, and with provisioning by a range of organisations sharing public interest obligations.

Accessible, co-ordinated public transport across a large conurbation, even without free fares, has been found to reduce car traffic, improve air quality and lower carbon emissions.

Moving UBS Forward

The case for universal access to life's essentials is irrefutable on ethical grounds and is the bedrock of effective climate policy. UBS offers a principled framework for policy and practice, to make sure that everyone's basic needs are met in ways that are fair, sufficient and sustainable.

There are inevitably questions about how much it costs and where the money will come from. There have also been challenges on the grounds that UBS could lead to "big government", that it is not clear how decisions should be made, and that it cannot be implemented within today's capitalist system (Duffy, 2018; Foundational Economy Collective, 2018: 123-30; Frankel, 2018; Standing, 2020).

Some of these issues have been addressed elsewhere (Coote, 2021b: 249-261; Coote and Percy, 2020: 107-126), and the agenda is still evolving. A point worth emphasising here is that UBS is both radical and pragmatic. It is a "big idea" that aims to shift the central purpose of the economy from the pursuit of GDP growth to enhancing human wellbeing by ensuring universal access to life's essentials within planetary boundaries. Yet it can begin on a small scale, at the local level, through modest experimentation in meeting different needs – learning by experience and growing incrementally.

Issues for further exploration include:

- Costs of improving and extending services so that they are universally accessible, of sufficient quality and ecologically sustainable.
- Potential sources of funds in different countries.
- Structures and methods required to implement the UBS approach in different countries.
- Devolving power in line with the principle of subsidiarity and with measures to ensure equity between localities and regions.
- Building a system of "social licensing" whereby providers in all sectors comply with public interest obligations.
- Developing models of democratic dialogue and co-production so that residents and citizens are meaningfully engaged in decisions at all levels.
- Potential benefits including returns on investment in social, economic and environmental terms.
- Establishing the UBS framework as the social pillar of programmes for green transformation.
- Combining in-kind benefits with a compatible system for cash benefits.
- Implications for macroeconomic transformation.

Universal Basic Service is both radical and pragmatic. It can begin on a small scale, at the local level, through modest experimentation in meeting different essential needs – learning by experience and growing incrementally.

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