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# Addressing Social Pathology and Precarity via A Community Basic Income in North-West Tasmania

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## Abstract

The discourse on the need for systemic transformation is becoming more coherent and integrated. However, substantial concrete approaches to progress towards this transformation are still lacking. This paper aims to fill this gap in terms of a policy that can help progress the long-term systemic transformation needed. First, however, the paper briefly outlines the literature on the evolution of social pathology and precarity, which indicates the nature of our challenge in re-creating sustainable societies. It is contended that the current prevalence of a level of irrationality and lack of reason characterizes late modern society, creating major problems for human survival and thriving. One key challenge is the increased cooperation as the basis for interdependence as our only sustainable survival and thriving strategy. Transcending the desire for independence and the denial of our dependence on each other (Wilding, 2013) is an important part of this challenge.

Community Basic Income, a community co-produced and community co-designed scheme where participants are paid income for engaging in activities beneficial for individual health, environmental health, and/or to build social systems, is posed as an eco-social policy to, in the short term, address un-and under-employment, poverty, a non-fit for purpose welfare system, and a lack of resourcing of eco-social community-based projects that can help progress systemic transformation. The more commonly discussed Universal or Unconditional Basic Income (UBI) is contrasted with the conditional Community Basic Income (CBI), with the CBI posed as a stepping stone to building the capacity needed to capture the benefits of a UBI. Finally, a campaign for a Community Basic Income in North-West Tasmania is briefly discussed for its potential to help progress towards transformation.

## Introduction

This article provides a perspective on addressing the socio-ecological 'wicked problems' that are currently threatening human survival and thriving. It assumes that community-based collective action is one of the most important actions we can engage in our current time of socio-ecological dysfunction and maladaptation.

> *Despite the urgency of what many take to be imminent catastrophe on an unprecedented scale, social theoretical consideration of climate change revolves around a handful of slow-moving, essentially classic problems (Shove, 2010).*

So begins Shove's discussion of the links between social theory and climate change. This article concurs with Shove's contention that it is a slow-moving, essentially classic problem that is the issue for human survival and thriving. The classic problem we have not solved since becoming 'civilized' is the social dilemma of balancing self-interest with other interests, necessary for us to live peacefully together. We are an ultra-social species, hence, the way we relate to each other is of crucial importance to our collective well-being. Donati (2018), for example, states that 'the destiny of the human being is connected to the future of the social relation. Human flourishing or alienation cannot depend on individual rational choices, on technological progress, on Industry 4.0, or on a materialistic ecologism… but depends on how society will configure social relationality' (p 450).

However, the way we relate to each other has profoundly and adversely been shaped by our political-economic system (for example, dominance hierarchies, late capitalism and/or neoliberalism, and the competitive individualism they promote). Intensification of individualization via neoliberalism and an 'intolerant, exclusionary politics' (Cornish et al., 2018), as well as 'legitimated market egoism' (Lynch, 2008), are two important dynamics reducing relationships of goodwill.

Rather than the hyper-separation promoted by our political-economic systems, Shove (2010) states that climate change is 'fundamentally a cooperative problem, requiring collective action to develop, communicate, and implement effective adaptation and mitigation measures.' Wright (2001) identifies a pattern over history whereby new technologies continually arise, some of which have the potential to help us achieve our collective goals, but at the same time, they require that we pay more attention to how we organize ourselves to manage them in ways that are beneficial. The key challenge once again is cooperation as the basis for interdependence as our only sustainable survival and thriving strategy. Transcending the desire for independence and the denial of our dependence on each other (Wilding, 2013) is an important part of this challenge.

Therefore, it is proposed humanity faces two major challenges that must be addressed for our survival and thriving, summarised imperfectly as Ecological Climate Change (environmental precarity) and Social Climate Change (psychosocial precarity), which are both undermining our socio-ecological life support systems. Using the term 'social climate' points to our failure to cooperate as casting a death knell for our species just as much as climate change (and, of course, other environmental problems of ecological overshoot). Two framings of why we have a social climate change crisis are discussed in terms of social pathology and precarity.

**Social Pathology**

Thompson (2019), Smith (2017), and Harris (2010) support the view that cultural maladaptation is a root cause of our current super wicked problems. One specific dynamic is the distortion of social relations since the beginning of the Agricultural Revolution (Smith, 2017). The rise of hierarchies as a result of food surpluses can be seen as the first trigger to both reducing social connectedness and purpose and meaning (Angle, 1976). Angle (1976) further notes that inequality tends to become entrenched wherever economic surpluses occur. Maladaptive schemas (or worldviews) can be the result (Tallis, 2021), leaving individuals less resilient, that is, less able to deal with stress and more likely to rely on unconscious immature defense mechanisms (Vaillant, 2011). Smith (2017) identifies the extent of unreason and irrationality in late modern society as the main symptom of social pathology,

including not only a deficit of reason but also shortfalls in general health and well-being. The concept of social pathology is based on the constitutive relationship between individuals and society, particularly collective institutions, whereby the (deficient) capacities of one constitute the (deficient) capacities of the other in a recursive relationship. The frustration caused by an inability to meet basic needs is an important underlying dynamic (Burton, 1990). A corollary is the concept of collective trauma, which Rinker et al. (2018) define as 'the transgenerational psycho-social impacts of past colonization, structural, and cultural violence on groups of people' (p. 150) and contends this is a significant cause of ongoing social conflict today. These dynamics constitute the underlying mechanisms of 'social climate change' and precarity, as will now be discussed.

**Precarious Relationships, the Precaritised Mind, and Community Psychology**

A significant result of social pathology is precarious relationships and the 'precaritised mind.' For Rosario and Rigg (2019), "precarity" points to different ways in which policies and processes aimed at promoting economic growth can simultaneously lead to precarity or precarious living. Falzon (2020) uses the term 'manufactured precarity' to denote a politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death' (p. 9). The symptoms of a precaritised mindset include anger, anxiety, anomie, and alienation (Egan, 2011).

In contrast to the current (and arguably increasing) prevalence of precarity, many are calling for efforts towards the aims of 'Liberation Psychology' and the broader aims of Community Psychology (CP). For Sanborne (2002), [c]ommunity Psychology concerns the relationships of the individual to communities and society. Through collaborative research and action, community psychologists seek to understand and enhance quality of life for individuals, communities, and society. The challenge is deep-seated and urgent to address 'the erosion of life's potentialities through domination and excessive greed …, resulting in widespread violence and gross social, cultural, political, and economic inequities' (Watkins et al., 2011, p. 9). Empowerment, particularly as a means of achieving social justice and systems change, is a core concern for CP, whereby people have greater control over their lives, have greater participation in genuine democracy, and greater awareness and understanding of their socio-political environment (Sonn et al., 2022).

In turn, the goals of liberation psychology are healthy, free, and creative minds in a free, dynamic, and just social body (Martín-Baró 1994, p. 121). Martin-Baró contends a more just society depends on mental health, requiring a focus on finding theoretical models and methods of intervention that facilitate culture change, promoting a greater quality of social relationships. Critical community psychology is an umbrella term linking depth psychology, indigenous psychologies, ecopsychology, and liberation psychology that can promote the insights, competencies, and skills to help create this vision (Watkins et al., 2011).

Martin-Baró (1994) highlighted the need to transform our dysfunctional institutions, whereby all those who participate in them must be transformed through 'participatory dialogue and creative imagination about alternatives of action for social transformation based on social justice, global peace, and sustainability" (p. 183). Helping to build this vision is the aim of the Community Basic Income project.

**Universal Basic Income and Community Basic Income**

Widerquist et al. (2013) define a Basic Income (BI) as 'an income paid by a political community to all its members on an individual basis, without means test or work requirement". This is often called a Universal or Unconditional Basic Income (UBI). They further note that since about 1960, the literature discussing BI has expanded and increased, covering a range of topics such as the 'philosophical justification of the idea; its economic and political feasibility; its impact on freedom, social justice, economic activity, psychological well-being, and so on.' This article, however, agrees with Perez-Munoz (2018), who, in her paper 'Participation Income and the Provision of Socially Valuable Activities' contends that a Participation Income (PI), as a variation of the BI model, has greater potential to achieve unmet socio-ecological needs than a UBI.

A common definition of Participation Income is a payment made to all adults of a given political community, conditional on the performance of a socially useful task in exchange for receiving the payment (Perez-Munoz, 2018). Hilamo (2018) notes the definition of society as comprising of the group of people who participate in it, a 'living and active unit that thrives on the contribution of its members,' whereby 'anyone who is part of this group can derive social benefits from it.' According to Hilamo (2018), the concept of a participation income highlights the variety of ways people can contribute to society beyond paid employment. Rather than the assumption that paid employment is the exemplary way for people to contribute to society, there is a substantial body of work that shows this is often not the case (Tyssedal, 2023).

UBI advocates tend to assume that a significant number of recipients of a UBI will spend their free time engaging in activities that are currently undersupplied by both the private market and governments. There are many indications that this may not be the case, including that the uncertainty and insecurity that characterize the condition of humanity around the world leads us to narrow our priorities to those of self-protection and self-interest rather than broader intentions of addressing unmet socio-ecological needs. For instance (Rinker et al., 2018) discuss traumatized societies and the psychological problems they engender, and Standing (2018) the requirement to adapt capabilities in conditions of generalized uncertainty leads to the precariatised mind, 'not knowing how best to allocate one's time and thus being under almost constant stress' (p. 118). The previous discussion regarding social pathology supports the contention that the self-regulation required for a UBI to generate the action needed does not exist at the levels currently required. Work by authors such as Kegan (1994) also supports the view claiming we are 'In over our heads,' whereby our mental capacities are insufficient to deal with the current levels of technological and institutional complexity.

To this end, it is argued that a Community Basic Income, as a variation of a Participation Income, has the potential in the short term to address problems such as poverty, unemployment, a non-fit for purpose welfare system, and the gap between the projects that could be initiated in the community to improve neighborhoods, and those that the public and private sector currently provide. The difference between a PI and CBI is that the latter deliberately steers away from a participation requirement that is narrowly defined and from strict enforcement mechanisms, whereby the community decides what participation activities qualify for the income and ensures that social support to participants is the norm, rather than a focus on surveillance and strict enforcement.

The need for a Community Basic Income can be summarised in three main points. First is the need for substantial labor and collective action, particularly for eco-social work, due to firstly the urgent need to reduce pressure on the environment (address climate change and other forms of environmental degradation, commonly called ecological overshoot). Secondly, there is an urgent need to increase collective action to address socio-ecological dysfunction, both Ecological and Social Climate Change. Thirdly is the need for increased connection, purpose, and meaning to support psychological well-being: there is evidence that eco-social work can provide meaningful work toward well-being.

A Community Basic Income can be considered as a stepping stone to an Unconditional Basic Income: it is contended that first we need greater individual, community, and institutional capacity for collaboration, including, importantly, collective decision-making via deliberative processes.

The imperative for the transformation of both the welfare system and the wage labor system is the final point made here of the need for a CBI. Both the social security/welfare system and the current wage system are unsustainable and highly inefficient. Financial precarity is increasing, and the costs of a social security system that relies on a punitive model based on a priority of making profits rather than human well-being will only keep increasing. The trends of rising unemployment, such as due to automation (Chessell, 2018) and restructuring due to the need to address climate change (Stilwel, 2021), as well as the importance of and lack of meaningful work (Yeoman, 2014) are but some of the issues related to the need for the transformation of work and wage labor.

**Why the CBI Needs to Be a Stepping Stone to a UBI**

The case has been made of the urgency of community development with a focus on regenerating relationships of goodwill. Schwarzenbach (2002), for example, discusses the importance of reproductive labor (which is highly under-valued and under-supplied) involving 'work,' which is explicitly aimed at the direct need satisfaction of the other, as well as the 'encouragement of their abilities.' The argument has been made that there has been substantial degeneration of relationships affecting self-determining, self-actualizing, and self-governing capacities, which a UBI relies on to be effective. In light of Smith's (2017) comments that despite advances in science and technological development, there remains a significant level of irrationality and lack of reason in late modern society, indicates that the negative freedom afforded by an unconditional basic income is likely to fail to result in the actions needed to address both the climate and environmental emergency and the socio-political emergency we are currently faced with.

Furthermore, in the article 'A Swedish-Style Welfare State or Basic Income: Which Should Have Priority?' Bergmann et al. (2006) conclude that basic income would have to come at the expense of "merit goods"—namely health care, housing, transportation, child care, and education—which ought to have priority over paying people a basic income. The CBI project likewise argues that investment in these merit goods is vital for building the capacity needed to address our two major socio-ecological challenges.

**The Community Basic Income Trial**

Live Well Tasmania has the mission of building capacity for us all to care for each other and our environment and hence increase quality of life in the Waratah-Wynyard Region in North-West Tasmania. The strategy is to use evidence-based practices to increase health and well-being for all, connecting people to each other and increasing skills for sustainable living, with a focus on the basic non-material needs of connection, purpose, and meaning.

Live Well Tasmania began the campaign for the trial of a CBI in 2022. The model currently being explored involves three trial sites: the first would be based on a UBI, the second on a CBI, and the third would be a control site. Potentially, a fourth sire could be added, which could offer a UBI but at the same time offer voluntary participation opportunities. The first phase of the project involves information gathering and wide consultation on how a CBI would work best, as well as awareness raising. The second phase takes the result of the consultation to develop a basic model and then begins a campaign to implement the trial. We believe the North-West of Tasmania has a number of benefits as a site for the trial, mainly because of significant disadvantages and, therefore, significant gains to be made in areas such as health and education. In addition, perhaps owing to our rural and relatively remote location, there is a history of government and non-government groups working together to a greater extent than may occur in other jurisdictions, which overlaps with the idea of government being 'closer to the people' enhanced by the lower populations of rural and regional areas.

**Methodologies and Co-design**

It is hoped there will be 1,000 participants for each of the three trial sites. The co-design process, which will determine the details of the project, including how people with differing levels of health and well-being will be able to participate, will be influenced by the level of engagement that can be achieved with the local community. One basic model is the formation of a Community Coalition (CC) consisting of representatives of local councils, local businesses, service providers, community organizations, educational organizations, judiciary such as the police, and individuals. Project officers, which could be called Community Connectors, will elicit participation ideas both from the CC and from the broader community. These will be accepted or rejected by the CC according to criteria such as value to the community and feasibility, including financial feasibility. Participants could log their participation hours (for example, up to 25 hours per week) on a regular basis, and seek assistance to match their skills and interests with the opportunities from Community Connectors when needed.

The methodology of the evaluation of the trial will be a mix of quantitative and qualitative data. Examples of the specific outcomes sought include increases in mental and physical health, reduced stress levels, increases in skills of value to society, increases in collaboration, including increased deliberative processes, increases in capacity to reduce environmental pressures, and a well-supported/co-created/co-designed, diverse list of community projects and other opportunities for participation that directly or indirectly improve neighborhoods, health and education outcomes. These would be evaluated by surveys, semi-structured interviews, and quantitative evaluation of the changes that may occur during the trial.

**Potential Risks and Challenges**

The initial major challenge to this project is combatting the inertia and lack of imagination inherent to the 'There Is No Alternative' thesis to capitalism, even though it relentlessly undermines socio-ecological life support systems (Cox, 1999). To be successful, this project must convince the government that it will ultimately save money; given that governments generally face short terms in office, this will be a challenge to persuade them to think long term. While there have been meetings with five Tasmanian politicians to date who have all expressed support for the concept, the $55 (Australian) million dollars required for each year of the trial is a substantial commitment for any government to make. Likewise, engagement of the community might be difficult, at least initially, due to levels of inertia and 'learned helplessness,' particularly resignation to a system that people feel they have no control over. It is hoped, however, that there are enough activists with the capacity and imagination to work towards transformational change to address this challenge.

Secondly, there may be a concern that the projects generated by a CBI initiative will replace or reduce local economies. However, the 'jobs' that would be provided by this project are not ones that are generally provided by the private sector; they are more in the realm of public goods, being about achieving outcomes that everyone can benefit from versus generating profits for local businesses. It is hoped rather that the project will invigorate the local economy, such as via the creation of social enterprises that use the market to achieve a social mission.

A third challenge is the transition from a CBI to a UBI. This would need careful consideration of the level of both individual and collective capacity to engage in socio-ecological regeneration projects without relying on the coordination supplied by a CBI. However, perhaps a model may emerge whereby income is paid not dependent on participating in socio-ecological projects or other health and well-being initiatives, but these projects are still resourced and encouraged, whereby ideally, people will volunteer to the extent needed so they can be implemented to tackle climate change and other urgent problems.

**Conclusion**

The social pathology and resulting irrationality and lack of reason are major barriers to the 'healthy and creative minds' who can collaborate to solve our super wicked problems. A transformation of work, which can satisfy our need for connection, purpose, and meaning, is a vital element of this quest. In turn, Community Basic Income, based on co-design and co-production, has the potential to begin the long journey toward the intentional cultural evolution needed to ensure health and well-being for all. Healthy cultural evolution, of course, has many dimensions. Implementing a Community-Based Income is one aspect of the larger challenge of changing the system that drives ecological and social degeneration. We know that to change the system, we must change the underlying thinking, that is, values, beliefs, and worldviews. This project aims to work towards the deepest levels of this transformational process.

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