

**ESF Exploratory Workshop 03-182**

*Toward a European Basic Income Experiment*

Barcelona International Convention Centre (CCIB), Forum-site

Barcelona, 18 september 2004

Scientific Report<sup>1</sup>

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Chairman workshop: Robert-Jan van der Veen (University of  
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<sup>1</sup> This report was written by Loek Groot (SISWO - Netherlands' Institute for the Social Sciences/ Utrecht School of Economics, Utrecht University, contact [Lgroot@siswo.uva.nl](mailto:Lgroot@siswo.uva.nl) or [L.Groot@econ.uu.nl](mailto:L.Groot@econ.uu.nl)) with the help of many others, especially Robert van der Veen and Karl Widerquist.

# 1. Executive Summary

## **Background information and main objectives of the workshop**

The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the merits of a basic income/ negative income tax experiment in Europe and to comment upon the design of the experiment. For this reason experts in the field of randomized field experiments, income taxation, social security arrangements, gender issues, political scientists and philosophers were invited to participate in the workshop. In the introductory text to inform prospective participants, the following summary of the topic to be discussed at the workshop was used.

The Basic Income Earth Network (B.I.E.N., [www.basicincome.org](http://www.basicincome.org)) defines a basic income as an income unconditionally granted to all on an individual basis, without means test or work requirement. In its pure form, a basic income is equivalent to a negative income tax. The main difference, apart from the fact that Europeans are more inclined to use the term basic income (hereafter abbreviated as BI) and Americans the term negative income tax (NIT), is that the former is paid ex ante, whereas the latter is paid ex post. Any design for a new BI or NIT experiment in Europe should be informed of the NIT experiments in the USA started in the late 1960s. Although the outcomes of these experiments cannot be considered representative for the expected effects of the introduction of a BI in Europe or even the USA today, some important lessons can be drawn for setting up a new experiment. Atkinson (1995: 150)<sup>2</sup> states that "The NIT experiments are generally considered to have reduced the range of uncertainty surrounding the response of hours of work to taxation..." However, "... there is no necessary reason to expect the results to apply equally in a European context. Those interested in a BI/FT [BI/flat tax] scheme in Europe might like to consider launching such an experimental research project, which would serve both to throw light on the economic effects of the reform and to demonstrate how it would work in reality."

BI and workfare can be seen as opposed ways to reform the welfare state. Comparing BI and workfare, it is interesting to note that a BI experiment may serve as the right counter-experiment for all kinds of ongoing workfare-oriented experiments. Running a workfare and BI experiment simultaneously may show what a difference it makes if recipients must participate, as a condition of income support, in programmes designed to improve their insertion in paid work as under workfare, or if they can freely choose themselves what to do as under BI. Because there are no BI experiments going on, we can only guess what the differences would be. For instance, it may well be the case that workfare experiments show better results in terms of labour market inclusion, but that BI experiments show better results in terms of inclusion in all kinds of unpaid work. However, if labour demand is the short side of the market, it is likely that no large differences emerge in labour market participation rates between both groups. In any case, comparing the evaluation findings of workfare and BI experiments may give us crucial information about the effectiveness of welfare-to-work activities performed by welfare and employment agencies.

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<sup>2</sup> Atkinson, A.B. (1995), *Public Economics in Action. The Basic Income/Flat Tax Proposal*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.

The emphasis in the design of the experiment will be on the labour market effects. There is much disagreement in this area, and these effects are of great importance for determining the feasibility and desirability of a BI. There are numerous factors at work which influence labour supply decisions. One cannot hope to include all these factors simultaneously within the confines of an economic model. Economic models can, at best, isolate the effects of a few of these factors. A limited field experiment may enable us to solve part of the puzzle, because the limitations of an experiment are of a different nature than those of economic models, whether theoretical or empirical. The main difference is that models rely on assumptions, whereas an experiment allows one to observe changes in labour market behaviour *directly*. Will people work less or will some people even stop working? Will beneficiaries be more prepared to accept low paid or part-time jobs? Will non-participating partners ('housewives') seek and take more or less paid work? What will be the effects of the division of paid and unpaid work within the household? Will a BI cause interesting behavioural reactions in all sorts of other areas? Although the latter may not be crucial for the judgement of BI's feasibility, it is nonetheless worth watching. For instance, the effects of a BI on consumption patterns, family composition (living together or separate), role division between men and women, the way leisure time is spent and things like participating in volunteers work, social participation, etc., are all possible consequences worth taking into account.

The aim of the project is to deliver a solid design for a BI or NIT experiment to be held in Europe. It would be interesting to launch an experiment in one of the former 15 EU members as well as in one of the new members from Eastern Europe. In designing the experiment many questions must be answered and decisions made: the levels of the income guarantee and the withdrawal rates; the number of questionnaires (a screening interview to determine eligibility, a pre-enrolment interview, regular interviews during the experiment, a follow-up interview after the experiment); the topics to be included in the interviews (work and income patterns (about job training, job history, wife's labour force history, child care and welfare history), family life and background (about family composition, educational background, social class, etc.), political and social life (about political awareness, social networks) and other assorted topics (e.g. social status, self-esteem, worry and happiness, attitudes toward work, and job satisfaction); and finally, the content of the enrolment kit containing the rules of operation of the experiment.

## 2. Scientific content of the event

Prior to the workshop, a reader was assembled with the contributions of the speakers at the workshop. In this section, a summary of the oral contributions can be found. Loek Groot provided the basic design of a basic income experiment. The lessons to be learned from the U.S. negative income tax experiments was taken care of by the contributions of Karl Widerquist, Rebecca Maynard and Robinson Hollister. Finally, Marx and Peeters explained why the study of *Win for Life lotteries* is interesting for basic income research. For further details, please download the underlying papers of the workshop.

### *Loek Groot*

According to Groot, the best selling point for a basic income experiment is that it offers the opportunity to measure more adequately the effectiveness of thousands of workfare-oriented experiments going on all over Europe. Comparing the results of basic income and workfare-oriented experiments will show what the net effect is of all kinds of ‘make-work policies’ compared to when it is left to the treatment group itself what to do or not to do. For the basic income research, an experiment may provide additional information about the to be expected labour supply effects of introducing a basic income, so reducing the radical uncertainty surrounding the basic income proposal. An experiment might also show which variant (e.g. combination of guarantee level and withdrawal rate, to provide it on a household or on an individual basis, to disburse it as a NIT or as a basic income) is the most promising. The criteria used for the choice of groups to be included in the experiment are twofold. First, the emphasis of the experiment is to research the labour supply effects of the groups for which there is the greatest disagreement among labour economists about expected (negative) labour supply responses and which are of great importance for the feasibility of a BI. These groups are the social assistance recipients and the low wage workers. In addition, it might be interesting to include prospective entrepreneurs in the experiment. Second, the choice is influenced by the desirability to minimize the cost of the experiment. Given the total budget for the experiment, the lower its cost per participant, the higher the number of participants and the longer can be the duration of the experiment. For this reason, a group of workers is included in the experiment who would not experience a change in net income if they take part in the experiment. If the experimentals of these groups do not change their labour supply, no extra costs for the experiment are incurred. Extra costs only occur when they decide to work less.

### *Karl Widerquist*

As Karl Widerquist made clear, a review of nonacademic papers on the results of the NIT-experiments shows a combination of misperception, misinterpretation and overstating the conclusiveness of the NIT-outcomes on working hours. The most serious causes for the failure to communicate the results of the experiments adequately to policy makers and the public was firstly that the negative, although expected, labour supply response was communicated as a failure of the NIT-experiment (some newspapers labelled NIT as a failure simply because some

recipients worked any amount less); secondly, that the overall labour supply response was interpreted as the market response, entirely disregarding the demand response to NIT (or alternatively, assuming that the demand for labour is perfectly elastic), which will partly counteract the negative labour supply response. As a consequence of the latter, the findings of the NIT-experiment should be interpreted as upper-bound estimates for the decline in hours worked and for the cost of the program in terms of taxes and efficiency loss, but as a lower-bound estimate for the effect of the program on the income of recipients. There are some additional considerations not to focus too much on the labour supply response. Firstly, a reduction in labour supply can be good for some groups (e.g. workers with young children) and bad for others. Secondly, the observed reduction in labour supply in the NIT-experiments was for a large part due to longer unemployment spells, i.e. people who lost jobs took a longer time on average to find new jobs. What proved hard to communicate was that redistribution usually has an efficiency price [I deleted this because most of the reduction in working hours was not an efficiency cost], but that that price was small (the income improvement for the low wage families receiving NIT was substantial).

#### *Rebecca Maynard*

Conducting randomized field trials or social experiments is a professional industry in the United States. Classical experiments are adequate for answering the “what if” questions that are central to public policy deliberations. What if we offered wage subsidies to low-income workers, what if we offer them a basic income? What if we required adults on public assistance to perform community service jobs? To answer the questions Why consider a basic income experiment? What would an effective evaluation look like? How can you get this done at a reasonable cost? complementary evaluation strategies are required (see next section and for more details the presentation slights). To give an example, ideally the experiment gives answer to the question what the effect is of intervention X on output variable Y, but the mechanisms that are responsible for the causal effect can still remain unclear. To get more insight into this black box, it is advisable to run alongside the large-scale randomized field experiment a qualitative case study on a focus group of cases to get more insight into the hypothesized causal mechanisms.

#### *Robinson Hollister*

Robinson Hollister made a strong plea for studying the **non**-labour supply effects in a basic income experiment, although Groot argued to study these effects only marginally. The point is that when there are substantial changes in the incomes of low income families, it becomes interesting to look for indirect changes, such as in education, drop out rates, birth weights, food expenditures, housing and family structure. Important changes in these dimensions may affect the estimates of the overall benefits of the program. It turned out that the NIT-experiments, although not specifically designed as an intervention to raise birthweight, housing expenditures, etc. in poor families, did show positive effects. These findings are the more salient, given the very limited, and often only short-term, success of direct intervention programmes (e.g. food stamps, anti drop-out programmes) on this score. In the NIT-experiments, one third of the overall negative labour supply response compared to the control group came from adolescents in the family extending their schooling career, which illustrates that measuring only the labour supply response is a risky strategy. In addition, Hollister presented some insider information from the New Jersey NIT experiment. What triggered this first NIT-experiment was, besides the average labour

supply response, the question whether people would quit working, which turned out not to be the case (in fact, according to Widerquist, in some NIT-experiments the researchers were unable to find even a single instance of complete withdrawal).

#### *Marx and Peeters*

To a considerable extent, the Belgian lottery game Win for Life (W4L), granting every winner an unconditional lifelong monthly payment of 1000 euro represents a good proxy for what happens after the introduction of a basic income. The many insights that can be obtained from the W4L for basic income research rests on the following claim. If the winners do not stop working, or work less, or start-up a business of their own after winning W4L, they will certainly not do so under a BI scheme. The reason is that the monthly payment for winners under the W4L scheme is, at least for the short and medium term,<sup>3</sup> higher than any reasonable level of BI would be in the near future. Compared to a BI experiment, which is most likely a limited group of persons in a geographically narrowly defined area who receive a BI during only a limited time period, the W4L has several advantages (see paper for more details).

### 3. Assessment of the results

The basic design of the experiment entails the choice of the (possibly varying) guarantee level and the (varying) tax or withdrawal rate. Given this choice, the following recommendations and suggestions were made:

- Since former social assistance recipients entering the experiment are not forced anymore to return as quickly as possible to paid work, there is a danger that they will also be cut off from resources (e.g. training, job counselling services, etc.) that are required to return to paid work. This may be ethically problematic. To solve this problem, it might be a good idea to give experimentals the same per capita value of the cost of these services in the form of a voucher, so that making use of these services remains on a voluntary basis, as it should be under a BI scheme.
- In the original proposal, besides social assistance recipients, workers with break-even incomes would be selected for the experiment. It is possible to narrow down this group even further in a sensible way, by allowing only families with young children in this group. The reason is that this group (being in the rush hour of life), is the category most at risk, e.g. in terms of burn-out, insufficient time to care adequately for the children, etc. and that for this group a large and significant labour supply response can be expected.
- Based on the preliminary outcomes of the W4L, it is advisable to remove prospective entrepreneurs from the groups to be included in the experiment.
- We did not arrive at the stage of discussing practical matters like the number of questionnaires or the country (of the former EU 15 and/or

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<sup>3</sup> Only in the long term a BI will be higher in real terms than the nominally fixed payment of W4L due to indexation of the former to inflation and economic growth.

one of Eastern Europe) most suitable to conduct a BI experiment. There was no consensus whether to launch a BI experiment would be a good idea after all. For one thing, the Win for Life lotteries will provide much of the information in the near future that a BI experiment would bring about. Besides some disadvantages, the W4L has two comparative advantages over a standard BI experiment. Firstly, a major shortcoming of a BI experiment is its limited duration. For instance, participants might not change their work pattern just because they know the experiment will only last a limited number of years. In W4L, however, because the winners receive a *lifelong* benefit of 1000 euro per month, the behavioural responses found will include the long term effect of receiving an unconditional benefit over the rest of one life. Secondly, high income earners will not participate in a BI experiment if this would mean that, *ceteris paribus*, their net income would decrease (the BI received does not compensate the higher taxes to be paid). Therefore, the participants of the BI experiment will not be a representative sample of the population. In W4L, however, it is possible to compose a group of winners which is more or less a representative sample of the population (except that there is a selection bias because they are all member of the group which buys lottery tickets).

- During the ensuing discussion, two proposals were made to remedy shortcomings of the BI and W4L experiments (see the previous point). For the BI experiment, it was suggested that it is possible to include the high income earners in the experiment by giving them a higher (lump sum) BI to compensate their income loss because of the higher taxes to be paid. The result of this operation is that the income effect is set to zero, but the substitution effect is maintained. To avoid the selection bias of the W4L, it was suggested to forfeit for once the automatic inflation adjustment of the tax allowance (in e.g. Belgium) in return for a lottery ticket to all. In this way, it is possible to get a group of winners which is both representative of the population as a whole and not affected by a selection bias.

Some minor points:

- In the experiment, an *individualized* basic income is strongly to be preferred above a *household based* basic income, because appropriately defining the family unit proved extremely difficult in the NIT-experiments.
- Instead of giving all experimentals a BI, you can give them the choice between a NIT or a BI.
- For data collection purposes it is very important to get access to various administrative sources (e.g. social insurance, tax authorities, etc.).
- Experiment with different guarantee levels, do not truncate at 1 or 1,25 times the social minimum.
- Since a small labour supply response in a subgroup with a high density in the population can make a big difference for both the tax cost and the economic feasibility of the programme, it is important to include

enough cases of these groups in the experiment (e.g. low wage male workers) to get reliable results.

- A serious limitation of W4L is that the W4L grants are not financed by income taxation, like the grant from the Alaska Permanent Fund is not financed by income taxation (but from oil revenues). In this sense, studying the W4L gives reliable information on the income effect of unconditional grants, but not on the substitution effects (due to higher tax rates required to finance the unconditional BI).
- Rebecca Maynard stressed that the main rationale for random field experiments in the U.S. is the strong evidence of unreliability of the non-experimental evidence on many relevant topics of social policy. Although the high cost of an experiment, alongside with ethics, may constitute an obstacle to launch an experiment, the cost of policy making based on unreliable evidence and beliefs may be many times higher: to implement a policy without conducting a small scale experiment beforehand amounts to putting the whole population to the experiment. For the design of the experiment, it is of paramount importance to know the important questions, to identify the main population groups to be included in the experiment and to know the critical features of the intervention which the experiment has to mimic. A practical point to keep in mind is that the effects of the experiment or intervention can change when the overall circumstances change. For instance, the effects of a BI in an economy with an unemployment rate of only 3% can be entirely different from the same economy with a 10% unemployment rate. If such a dramatic change would occur during the experiment, a smart response would be to increase the sample size. In general, to correct for changes over time, much is to be said for a staged entrance into the treatment group.
- According to Widerquist, the major focus of the experiment should not be the labour supply response, as was the case with the U.S. NIT experiments, but the efficiency costs or losses of providing welfare (see Widerquist's paper "What would we like to learn from a European Basic Income Experiment?", written after the workshop, for more details). To illustrate this point, and as is well known from public economics, efficiency costs arise from the tax rate, not from lump sum grants.
- As will be clear, although more clarity is achieved how such a BI experiment would look like and what exactly we want to know, it is much too early to draft a blueprint for an European Basic Income experiment.



## 4. Final programme

### **Programme Exploratory Workshop** *Toward a European Basic Income Experiment*

Sponsored by the European Science Foundation

Barcelona International Convention Centre (CCIB), Forum-site, 18 september 2004

<b>Programme*</b>	Chairman: Robert-Jan van der Veen
9.00-9.15	Registration
9.15-9.30	Welcome address by ESF representative & José A. Noguera on behalf of the Spanish conference organization
9.30-10.30	Rebecca Maynard: The Make-Up of the Experiments (Political process, set up, manpower requirements)
10.30-11.00	Coffee break
11.00-11.45	Loek Groot: Proposal for a design of a new experiment
11.45-12.30	Karl Widerquist: The Failure to Communicate the Results of the NIT Experiments
12.30-14.00	Lunch & siësta
14.00-14.45	Axel Marx & Hans Peeters Win for life: What, if anything, happens after the introduction of a basic income?
14.45-15.30	Robinson Hollister: The Design of Social Experiments
15.30-16.00	Coffee break
16.00-17.00	Recapitulation and discussion
17.00- 18.00	A blueprint for a European Basic Income experiment?

\* Presentations include subsequent discussions

- Robert-Jan van der Veen is university lecturer at the University of Amsterdam, Dept. of Political Science and co-editor (with Loek Groot) of *Basic Income on the Agenda* (AUP, 2000) and author of several articles about basic income and political theory in e.g. *Economics and Philosophy*, *Ethics* and *Philosophy & Public Affairs*.

- Rebecca Maynard replaced Harold Watts who was unable to come. Professor Rebecca Maynard (University of Pennsylvania and former Vice President at the Mathematica Policy Research, the institute which monitored the New Jersey NIT experiment) was involved in the set up of several social experiments (including the NIT-experiment) at many different levels from basic design, data collection instruments, persuading authorities to undertake experiments, data cleaning, analysis, presentation of results to funders and policy makers. Harold Watts is emeritus professor of economics and public affairs at Columbia University, former director of the Institute for Research on Poverty, co-author of *The New Jersey Income Maintenance Experiment*, Volumes II and III (1977) and co-editor of *Income Maintenance and Labor Supply* (1973).
- Loek Groot wrote his Ph.D on basic income (1999) and was working at SISWO/ Institute for the Social Sciences at the time the workshop took place. He is now working as senior lecturer Economics of the Public Sector, Utrecht School of Economics, Utrecht University.
- Karl Widerquist holds a Ph.D. in economics from the City University of New York and is currently a doctoral candidate in politics at Oxford University. He is the coordinator of the U.S. Basic Income Guarantee Network, co-author of *Economics for Social Workers* (2001), and co-editor of *The Ethics and Economics of the Basic Income Guarantee* (forthcoming).
- Axel Marx and Hans Peeters are both working at the Dept. of Sociology, Catholic University of Leuven (K.U. Leuven).
- Robinson Hollister is professor of economics at Swarthmore College and co-author of *Labor Market Policy and Unemployment Insurance*.

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Italy 2  
The Netherlands 2  
Spain 3  
Sweden 1  
United Kingdom 2  
USA 2

### **Age:**

< 30	5
30- 50	10
> 50	11

### **Gender:**

M: 21  
F: 5