

transformative
social innovation
theory

Transformative Social Innovation: BIEN & Basic Income

A summary of the case study report on BIEN & Basic Income



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About TRANSIT

TRANSIT is an international research project that aims to develop a theory of Transformative Social Innovation that is useful to both research and practice. It is co-funded by the European Commission and runs for four years, from 2014 until 2017. The TRANSIT consortium consists of 12 partners across Europe and Latin America. For more information, please visit our website: <http://www.transitsocialinnovation.eu/>.

About this Document

This is a summary of a case study report on basic income, i.e. the idea of a monthly payment to every citizen independent of personal wealth and without work requirement, and about BIEN, the international network of academics and activists who seek to promote, and facilitate exchange about this idea.

Both the case study report and this summary are guided by empirical research questions based upon a preliminary conceptual framework of the TRANSIT project. These questions concern inter alia:

1. Emergence of Social Innovation
2. Transformative Social Innovation dynamics
3. Agency in (Transformative) Social Innovation

For a full account of our analysis of the BIEN network and basic income research and action in Germany and the Netherlands, including interview quotes and expressed nuances by respondents, please refer to the case study report which is available via us authors (see below for contact details). The case study report forms the basis for future research activities and publications. This summary provides a brief overview.

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1. Introduction to BIEN and Basic Income

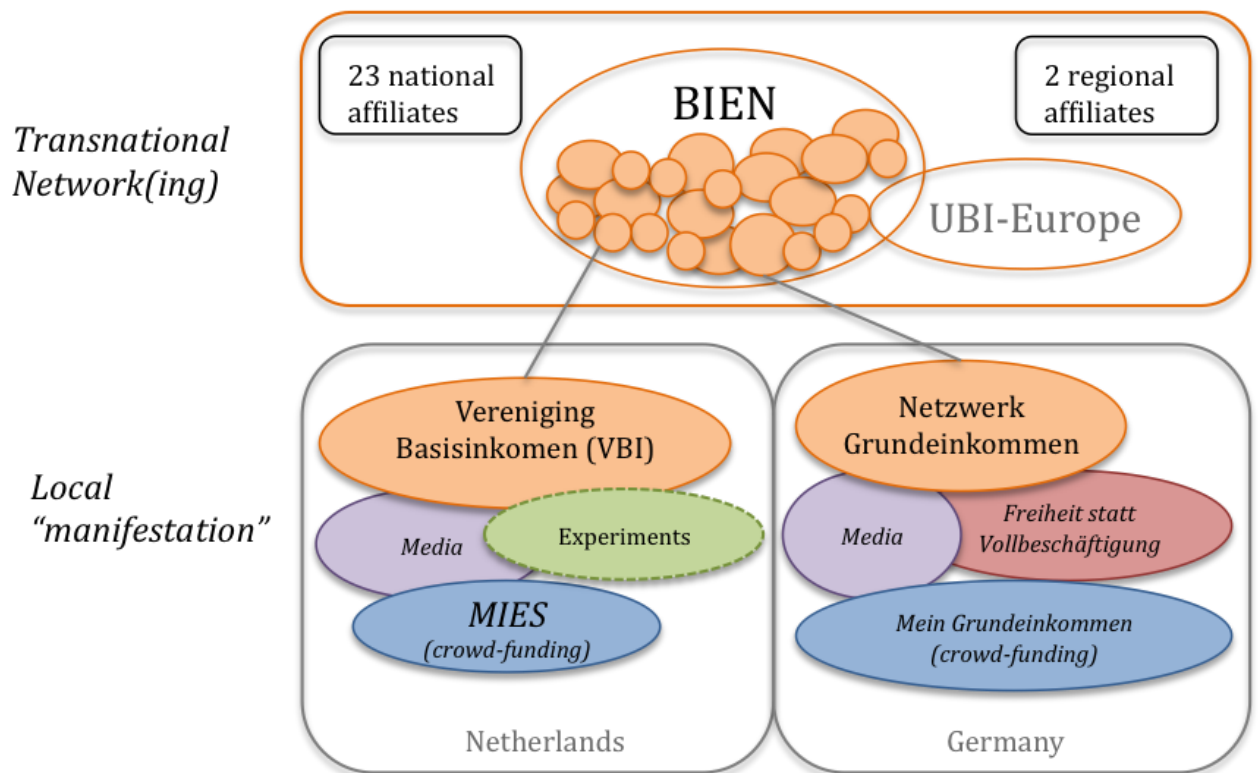
Basic income (also known as demogrant, citizen's income or basic income guarantee) denotes a monthly payment to every citizen irrespective of wealth, work and income. It has occasionally been dubbed as “free money for all” (e.g. Bregman, 2014). Basic income is not a new idea but despite its century-old legacy it remains—some small-scale experiments aside—still only an idea to date. At the same time, its implementation would constitute a societal transformation of unknown (yet much debated, researched and conjectured) magnitude.

Over the centuries, the idea of a basic income resonated with a larger audience at times and in places facing high unemployment or concerned with social justice and equality and seeking welfare state reform. Although the entire history of the concept since the 16th century would make for an interesting object of study, we mainly consider recent developments.

Ideas how to establish a basic income conventionally assume implementation through national policy. Our case study highlights actors advocating this avenue to (eventually) establish payments that are high enough to cover basic subsistence and allow social participation for everyone. On the transnational level, the report discusses BIEN (the Basic Income Earth Network), a network of basic income proponents founded in Belgium in 1986, and its political complement UBI-Europe. On the national level, our analysis focuses on Germany and the Netherlands. While the *Vereniging Basisinkomen* (VBI), the Dutch basic income association and BIEN affiliate is one of the oldest basic income organisations, celebrating its 25th anniversary in 2016, the German BIEN affiliate *Netzwerk Grundeinkommen* is more than a decade younger, yet with 4,000+ individual members one of the largest and (politically) most active groups. Next to the professional academics and passionate activists who are BIEN members, we also consider other relevant groups, individuals or events who are not necessarily associated with the BIEN network but also seek to promote basic income ideals (fig. 1).

As numerous and manifold as the supporters of basic income are the types and numbers of publications related to the topic. The still nascent idea was first mentioned in philosophical writings by Thomas More and Thomas Paine in the 16th and 18th century, respectively. Variants of social security for particular age or population groups and possible finance models have been discussed ever since and many ideas have found their way into political reality. Basic income, postulating a universal and unconditional right to basic subsistence and social participation is certainly the most radical of all social security models that inspired the institutionalisation of the modern welfare state in Europe and North America after World War II. In current debates, its proponents uphold basic income as a logical next step in welfare state reform. This case study report draws from the vast literature available on the topic and from interviews conducted with central figures involved in the transnational BIEN network or engaged in basic income-related activities in Germany and the Netherlands.

Figure 1 Key groups and initiatives promoting basic income covered in the TRANSIT case report



On the translational level, the case study report on BIEN and basic income discusses the emergence of the BIEN network and [Transformative Social Innovation dynamics](#) between BIEN members and a range of other actors, including the nowadays so important online activities of BIEN and the more politically oriented UBI-Europe initiative.

As detailed above, the national focus of the case study is on the Dutch and the German BIEN affiliates, *VBI* and *Netzwerk Grundeinkommen*, as well as other actors who have played a prominent role over the years; for example, the German group *Freiheit statt Vollbeschäftigung* (Freedom, not Full Employment), crowd-funding initiatives such as the German *Mein Grundeinkommen* or the social experimenters of the Dutch *MIES* collective and critical writers and documentary makers.

The discourse and developments surrounding basic income have gained fresh impetus in recent years when new groups of actors started to engage with the topic. These actors are often less committed to realising a full basic income for all and more concerned with easing the conditionality for the payment of social benefits. Notably, a number of Dutch municipalities are planning the rollout of basic income-inspired *experiments* for the coming years.

In addition, we pay due attention to social and conventional *media* as transmitter and amplifier of basic income-related news. Current top-stories frequently feature Finland, where national government is planning experimentation with basic income, and Switzerland, where a national referendum about a universal basic income is scheduled for June this year.

Key dates and phases of the BIEN network and of basic income thinking and action in Germany and the Netherlands

2. The Emergence of Social Innovation

1980

The idea of a basic income (re-)emerges in the Netherlands during the second half of the 1970s and debate thrives well into the 1980s when the Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR, 1985) advises the government on the introduction of a basic income, which is however rejected by leading parties. In Germany, several organisations of unemployed and liberal Greens discuss the topic fondly in the first half of the 1980s, yet this first wave of basic income-related thinking and activity is comparatively softer.

In 1982, professor Philippe Van Parijs writes a concept note about an “*allocation universelle*” (universal allowance) following a sudden inspiration. Together with (ex-)colleagues at the Université catholique de Louvain (UCL, Belgium) he forms the Collectif Charles Fourier (after an 18th century utopian socialist thinker who proposed a decent minimum allowance for people unable to work). They publish a special issue of a journal widely read among French-speaking intellectuals. During research visits to the UK and the Netherlands, PVP encounters other individuals and groups discussing the topic (including the WRR).

In 1986, the First International Conference on Basic Income is held at UCL. A group of about 25 people agrees to found a network. Guy Standing proposes the chosen name BIEN, Basic Income European Network.

1990

Politically, basic income experiences ‘seven lean years’ in the Netherlands between 1986-1992. In the same period, academic exchange flourishes. The BIEN-affiliate Vereniging Basisinkomen (VBI) is founded in 1991.

For lack of implementation, BI remains an idea(l) bearing the promise of Transformative Social Innovation. In his widely appraised ‘Real Freedom for All’, Van Parijs (1997) developed the concept as a political-philosophical synthesis (new knowing), a ‘third way’ that reaps the best of liberalism and socialism to guarantee maximum freedom for all. It is a proposal for a drastically restructured social security arrangement (new organising), allowing people to reconsider their choices of paid work, caring and volunteering and more generally their purposes (new doing). Finally, the concept also provokes a reconsideration of the social norm of ‘earning one’s living’ through paid labour and of what it means to be a good citizen or a successful individual (new framing). The BIEN network concentrates on its core aim, the facilitation of informed exchange, through organising biennial congresses, publishing a monthly newsletter and hosting a website.

2000

The Dutch VBI can contribute to a lively BI debate in politics in the first decade of its existence. The national 2001 tax reform has been described a covert implementation of basic income (Groot & van der Veen, 2000).

The German Netzwerk Grundeinkommen is founded in 2004. A year before, the group *Freedom, not Full Employment* had caused a public stir with a poster campaign promoting basic income. Both groups are motivated by governmental plans of unemployment policy reform to be implemented in subsequent years.

2010

In 2004, BIEN is re-named into the Basic Income Earth Network in recognition of the increased involvement of non-European members (e.g. Argentina, Australia and Brazil).

The German Left and Green parties include the establishment of a national commission of enquiry into basic income in their programme for the 2013 national election. Circumstances prevented its establishment.

In 2013/14, the European Citizen’s Initiative fails to collect sufficient signatures for a petition to the European Parliament but leads to the establishment of UBI-Europe and many national groups.

BI crowd-funding initiatives commence in Germany and the Netherlands in 2014 and 2015, respectively.

NOW

Since 2015, some 20 Dutch municipalities are planning BI-inspired experiments.

The BIEN network and BI supporters around the world keenly follow developments in Finland, where the government plans BI experiments for 2017, and in Switzerland where the second national BI referendum takes place on 5 June 2016. The 16th BIEN Congress will be held in Seoul, South Korea, 7-9 July 2016.

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3. Transformative Social Innovation dynamics

Whether viewed as political proposal for radical reform of welfare arrangements or as **Transformative Social Innovation** fostering new social relations, the idea of a basic income is an interesting phenomenon. Despite periods when it could be presumed dead because it was barely discussed, it has always been kept alive by convinced academics, intellectuals, artists or activists, critical of prevailing arrangements and the norms or values they are based on (for instance, gainful employment as the main purpose in life and full employment as a political priority).

Both inside and outside commentators hold that the concept gains traction in times of high structural unemployment, when it becomes particularly evident that policies of full employment and highly conditional welfare payments are falling short. Basic income then presents itself as a fair, efficient and elegantly simple alternative. In a similar vein, economic upswings decrease the sense of urgency for structural social security reforms. Basic income may then appear like an unnecessary 'gamble' for which more reliable and controllable policy alternatives exist. At least in the contexts of European welfare states like Germany and the Netherlands, this oscillating movement along with (or rather, in opposition to) economic up-and-downswings is one indication for the **transformative impacts** of the basic income concept.

At the same time, there are several other **contextual developments** that also shape the societal and political support for basic income. It has gained popularity in connection with gender politics (liberating women from dependence on male breadwinners), sustainable development or degrowth (as part of green tax reform and as impulse towards restrained consumption), reconciliation of work and care (facilitating part-time work), re-valuation of not-for-profit productivity (ensuring a basis for less directly profitable work) and growing social inequalities (as a redistributive mechanism). Moreover, a recurring theme in basic income discussions is the expected continuation of work mechanisation: In a (future) highly robotised economy, the basic income is considered to cushion the fall of the many whose work is then done by machines.

The broad spectrum of **societal trends and discussions** that the basic income is related to indicates its volatility and its **transformative ambitions** in many dimensions and domains of social life. Yet despite the fickleness of the idea in response to contextual dynamics, it always preserves a stable set of moral, normative principles at its core. On the one hand, the basic income challenges the assumption that everyone should earn one's living and questions the preconception that recipients of an unconditional income will free-ride on the productive labour of others. On the other hand, the basic income responds to the moral conviction that, in a modern, affluent welfare state, everyone should be granted social security and be the master one's own life, free to choose care, career and compensation. Moreover, the patronising and inefficient workings of the bureaucracy that is part and parcel of the current welfare system are deplored across the political spectrum. The basic income is thus both in line *and* in diametric opposition with popular **moral institutions**.

Finally, notwithstanding the many ways in which basic income has become and can become politically viable, there is a striking gap between its high **transformative potentials** and its relatively modest **transformative impacts**. Basic income can only be realised through large-scale state reform but such undertakings are rare, especially in old democracies and established welfare systems like the Netherlands and Germany. One reason is that even the slightest changes are expected to reverberate throughout the system. The typical counterargument of unintended and uncontrollable consequences weighs very strongly in this case and basic income proponents are faced with the uphill struggle of having to 'prove' that 'free money for all' would not jeopardise macro-economic goals and patterns.

4. Agency in (Transformative) Social Innovation

Although the basic income may be in line with several popular moral institutions and present an answer to some problematic societal developments, it remains a particularly challenging idea(l) to realise. From our point of view, this makes it a rather intriguing proposal for **Transformative Social Innovation**. Given that the only viable option for the introduction of an unconditional basic income for every citizen is large-scale state reform, the two avenues potentially leading to implementation are the build-up of major societal support and the political will of people in power. BIEN and its affiliates have developed abundant arguments in support for such reforms, thought through various models of implementation and financing and carried out numerous studies of potential effects. In that sense, BIEN is a 'typical' **network of academics** interested in the same issue. In addition, BIEN, its affiliates and, in particular in more recent times, other actors, organisations and movements pursue a number of strategies to popularise the concept and 'spread the word'.

An important source of confidence and motivation for these activities is the moral conviction that a (universal, unconditional) basic income is the key to **social justice**, for which no good alternative exists. Another, related source is the more rational conviction that basic income is the demonstrably better performing **institutional arrangement**. These are partial answers to the question why a growing number of people and initiatives all over the world subscribe to the idea and engage in basic income **advocacy** – despite (or perhaps because) the focus of mainstream politics is on minimum wages, part-time work arrangements in support of private care and more flexible conditions for social benefits.

Of course, political advocacy and activism as well as the best use and handling of media are not learned overnight. The various people and organisations involved in the promotion of basic income pursue different strategies. While they may regard other approaches critically, there are many personal ties across initiatives and there is the uplifting feeling of fighting for a good cause, if not united at least collectively. A key source of (mutual) **empowerment** is therefore modern ICT: news items about basic income related developments in various countries, publications, presentations and interviews of relevance as well as strategies and instruments to 'spread the word' are shared and widely disseminated through the worldwide web. Furthermore, online petitions have been more or less successfully employed to demand political attention at different times and in different places.

Next to BIEN and its affiliates, the following groups are central in basic income **advocacy** and **action** in Germany and the Netherlands: Firstly and most obviously, there are key **media** actors, including social entrepreneur Daniel Häni and artist Enno Schmidt who are centrally involved in the Swiss national referendum and who shot the movie-essay 'Basic Income – a cultural impulse' in 2008 (1 million views), Dutch journalist Rutger Bregman (book 'Free Money for All' and TEDx talk with 150,000 views), the Dutch 'Tegenlicht' documentaries, the German newspaper DIE ZEIT who runs regular items on basic income both in print and online or the German media heavy weight and former CEO of a drug store chain Götz Werner who published several books on the topic and funds his own campaign. Secondly, **crowd-funding** initiatives who helped making the concept concrete and communicable have sprung up following an inspiration of Berlin-based Michael Bohmeyer who set up the first platform (Mein Grundeinkommen) in Germany in 2014 and, together with his team, supported the Dutch MIES initiative to do the same in the Netherlands in 2015 (Ons Basisinkomen). In the Netherlands, finally, is the remarkable development that several municipalities decided in the course of 2015 to **experiment** with less conditional payment of unemployment benefits – partly inspired by civic initiatives like MIES and partly by older discussions. Viewed in its entirety, the field of basic income advocacy and action is remarkably young and vibrant, given its century-old descent.

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