

SUMMARY

WHAT DOES UNIVERSAL BASIC SERVICES MEAN?

In this context, 'services' are collectively generated activities that serve the public interest, 'basic' means essential and sufficient, rather than minimal, enabling people to meet their needs, and 'universal' means that everyone is entitled to services that meet their needs, regardless of ability to pay.

The proposal rests on two key principles: shared needs and collective responsibilities. The aim is to improve the quality and reach of existing services such as healthcare and education, and to extend this approach into areas such as care, transport and information.

WHAT CAN IT ACHIEVE?

UBS can produce substantial benefits in terms of equity, efficiency, solidarity and sustainability. On all these grounds it offers better results than a system based on unconditional cash payments to all individuals, known as 'universal basic income' (UBI).

Public services represent a social wage, providing essentials that people would otherwise have to pay for. They are part of a 'social infrastructure' and should be treated as investment that yields social and economic returns.

WHAT ARE THE MAIN CHALLENGES?

Critics argue that UBS would lead to big government; that the state lacks competence; that it is not clear who will decide what; that UBS would boost profits for big corporations; that it would be too costly to win voter support; that it will be strongly resisted by incumbent providers; and that it is incompatible with capitalism.

Addressing these challenges will involve: adopting diverse models of ownership and fostering genuine public participation; being clear about the role of the state, and making a commitment to institutional learning and systemic change; building an inclusive, deliberative model for decision-making; tightening regulation of business and supporting non-profit providers; assessing long-term social and environmental, as well as economic, returns on investment; and introducing change incrementally.

HOW CAN IT BE IMPLEMENTED?

To implement UBS effectively, it is important to understand how responsibilities and power are distributed, different models of ownership and control, funding arrangements, degrees of participation by residents and service users, relationships between locally generated activities and state institutions, criteria for eligibility and methods for establishing and enforcing entitlements.

While relationships and mechanisms for design and delivery will need to be customised to suit each service area, certain features should be shared across all of them:

- collective responsibility for meeting shared needs, exercised through democratically elected governments and public investment;
- accessibility and affordability for all, according to need not ability to pay;
- devolution of power to the lowest appropriate level;
- diverse models of ownership and control, with collaboration and partnerships within and between service areas;
- meaningful participation by people who use services, alongside service workers, in decisions about design and delivery;
- a key role for the state in distributing funds, setting standards and ensuring equal access;
- clear rules and procedures for eligibility and entitlement.

NEXT STEPS

These findings are based on an indicative review of relevant literature. They are intended to shed more light on the subject as well as to reveal uncertainties, questions, knowledge gaps, and areas for further study and debate. Much more work is needed to flesh out aspirations for UBS, its philosophical bases, its costs and benefits, and the nuts and bolts of implementation.