

What is Basic Income?

Does Islam favor the concept of basic income?

BY KATHERINE BULLOCK



BASIC INCOME (BI), ALSO KNOWN AS GUARANTEED ANNUAL Income, Unconditional Basic Income, Universal Basic Income, Citizen’s Income, Social Dividend, Universal Grant, and Demogrant, seeks to ensure people an income that meets their basic needs and their right to live a dignified life regardless of their work status.

In the face of the growing wealth gap, the shortcomings of the welfare state, technological challenges to the labor force, the rise of the precariat (i.e., an emerging class of people facing insecurity, moving in and out of precarious work that gives little meaning to their lives) and the changing nature of work, this concept is gaining traction. In 2016 the governments of Brazil, Finland, Kenya, the Netherlands, and Ontario (Canada) announced pilot projects to study its implementation.

Muslims, who have been largely absent from these public policy debates, should find a way to contribute since they will be affected as much as anyone else. Indeed, because the Islamic view of life is “essentially spiritual and ethical,” Muslims have something special to offer, especially when it comes to issues of socioeconomic justice.

THE NEGATIVE INCOME TAX MODEL

The Negative Income Tax (NIT) model of BI is very similar to zakat, except that the government, as opposed to the individual, makes the payments. Ontario’s pilot project is

based on this model (Hugh D. Segal, *A Basic Income Pilot Project for Ontario: A Discussion Paper* [Toronto, 2016]; <https://www.ontario.ca/page/ontario-basic-income-pilot>). When a person’s income falls below a set amount (under Can\$34,000 per year for a single adult or under Can\$48,000 per year for a couple), they begin receiving money from the government.

Despite certain similarities with the welfare model, there are two very significant differences: the lack of any attached work requirements and the eligibility of employed people. BI advocates argue that a NIT is better than welfare precisely because the welfare system both punishes employment advancement and is patronizing, policing, dehumanizing, embarrassing and degrading to recipients, for it represents a loss in their autonomy as human beings (Segal, pp. 15, 21).

WEALTH AND CHARITY

Muslims pay zakat because they understand the Quranic directives about wealth and what to do with it. Wealth is not considered evil in and of itself, for people are encouraged to seek it through lawful means. In fact, honest work is considered a form of worship. Wealth belongs to God and is entrusted to human beings as a blessing and a trial — in terms of how it is earned and spent.

Prophet Muhammad (*salla Allahu ‘alayhi wa sallam*) said, “No doubt this wealth is sweet and green. Blessed is the wealth of a Muslim, from which he gives to the poor, the orphans and needy travelers” (“Sahih al-Bukhari,” vol. 2, book 24, hadith no. 544). In other words, while wealth can be “sweet,” God rewards those who spend it in charity. So the problem for humanity is not wealth itself, but how to acquire and then use it properly.

A central Quranic goal is to prohibit the circulation of wealth only among the wealthy, for “And what Allah restored to His Messenger from the people of the towns — it is for Allah, the Messenger, [his] near relatives, orphans and the [stranded] traveler — so that it will not be a perpetual distribution among the rich from among you” (59:7).

This is why God repeatedly stresses charitable giving. Muslims are taught that because wealth is a gift, a “loan” from God, the poor have a right to “some of God’s wealth, which He has given you” (24:33) and “Those in whose wealth there is a recognized right for the beggar who asks and for the unlucky who has lost his wealth” (70:24). Moreover, charity benefits the giver as well as the recipient, for it both purifies one’s wealth (9:103) and enables one to avoid arrogance by always remembering the true source of his/her wealth.

SUPPORTERS HAVE EXAMINED THIS OBJECTION VERY CAREFULLY AND, HAVING COSTED OUT THE EXPENSES INVOLVED IN IMPLEMENTING IT, ASSERT THAT IT’S CHEAPER THAN WHAT SOCIETY NOW PAYS FOR THE CONSEQUENCES OF POVERTY.

As current income inequalities continue to rise, it is obvious why this verse is such an important guide to follow. Income inequality leads to an economic imbalance — some people have far more than they need, which leads to luxurious and wasteful living, whereas others don't have enough even to feed themselves. BI is a very good way of ensuring that wealth is more fairly and evenly distributed than any welfare system devised to date.

THE MAQASID AL-SHARIAH AND THE BASIC INCOME DEBATE

Muslims can contribute positively to these BI and social justice public policy debates based on their belief in and experience of zakat, as well as the Quranic injunctions against socioeconomic injustice. The scholarly consensus is that the whole point of Islamic law is to attain justice in society, for justice is nearest to piety (5:8). Moreover, this has been a primary mission of God's messengers, for "We sent our Messengers and revealed through them the Book and the balance so that justice may be established among humanity" (57:25).

So, the law is to promote what is good and remove what is harmful to such a degree that Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyyah (d. 1350), a jurist who lived in Damascus, observed that "any ruling that replaces justice with injustice, mercy with its opposite, common good with mischief, or wisdom with nonsense, doesn't belong to the Sharia, even if it is claimed to be so according to some interpretations."

Abu Ishaq al-Shatibi (d. 1388), a Sunni scholar who resided in Granada, addressed these concepts through the idea of the *maqasid al-shariah* (the aims and purposes of Islamic law). He argued that law should address society at three levels:

- *Daruriyyat* (necessary/necessities), things without which life cannot exist (i.e., state protection of religion, self, family, property and intellect). These include, among many others, food, shelter, clothes, education and health care.
- *Hajjiyyat* (needed/needs), those less essential items that remove various hardships and difficulties (e.g., marriage, trade and means of transport).
- *Tahsiniyyat* (commendable), luxuries and items that beautify (e.g., perfume, stylish clothing and elegant homes).

The idea that the state should ensure that all of its citizens' needs are met at the most basic level of *daruriyyat* is in symmetry with the ideas behind Basic Income. Both Umar and Ali (*radi Allahu 'anhuma*) provide some early examples in this regard: Umar would distribute what was left in the public treasury once a year; Ali would do so every Friday.

Some people worry that BI isn't affordable. Supporters have examined this objection very carefully and, having costed out the expenses involved in implementing it, assert that it's cheaper than what society now pays for the consequences of poverty. Interested readers can look at the resources provided on the Basic Income Earth Network (founded 1968; <http://basicincome.org>).

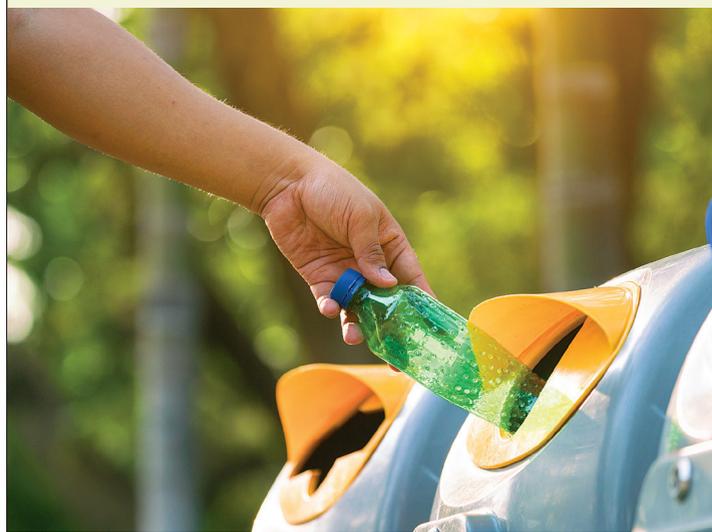
The Prophet said, "Muslims share three things: water, pasture and fire" ("Sunan Ibn Majah," vol. 3, book 16, hadith no. 2472). This suggests that all taxes levied on the businesses that harness these resources are to be fairly distributed to all of us through a Basic Income. A contemporary example of this is The Alaska Permanent Fund (<https://apfc.org>), which pays a small percentage of dividends from the state's oil revenues to qualified Alaskan residents each year. 

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Recycling: A Goal or a Means?

Is recycling the be-all and end-all to our current environmental challenges?

BY SALEH MUBARAK



ALTHOUGH RECYCLING MAY SEEM LIKE A MODERN concept introduced by the environmental movement of the 1970s, it's actually been around for thousands of years. In the 1940s, goods such as nylon, rubber and many metals were rationed and recycled to help support the war effort.

Recycling has two objectives: to reduce the amount of garbage piling up and to reuse those materials that would have added to it. According to environmental scientists, this activity comes within the context of the famous 3Rs motto: reduce (our level of consumption), reuse (whatever can be reused) and the recycle (whatever can't be reused). Many people, however, have traditionally focused only on recycling, even though it is the third best option as well as the second worst option behind doing nothing.

This particular option, however, is an expensive one. Most municipalities provide recycling bins, but have to hire people to sort out those items that can be recycled and then group them into smaller piles of plastic, paper, glass, metal and other items. Each item then has to be cleaned, cut or shredded, packaged in large pallets and shipped to manufacturers who may be located thousands of miles away. These manufacturers then turn these materials into useful products and ship them to the consumers' locations. In those localities that have MERFs (material energy recovery