

Universal Basic Income in the Spanish construction sector: Engaging businesses in a public-policy debate

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ABSTRACT

Universal Basic Income (UBI) is receiving increasing attention as a policy alternative, both from academia and the general public, because its implementation would open the window for a systemic questioning of our current “social contract”. However, the body of evidence for or against UBI is still insufficiently developed, especially when concerning changes at the system level – a scale at which it has never been implemented anywhere in the world. At this scale, labour market dynamics and the behaviour of different economic agents, such as businesses, take on particular relevance. Our main research objective is to investigate shared beliefs and opinions among business managers about UBI, about its impact at the system level, and, more specifically on labour market supply and demand. In order to achieve this objective, we conducted a focus group session involving managers from the construction sector in Spain, a country whose demographics, unemployment rate, productivity and public expenditure make this policy plausible. The target group showed little understanding of UBI, as well as other welfare policies, and demonstrated a dominant position against such a proposal. Our main findings show that most companies “live day-to-day” and do not undertake a structured analysis of such radical horizons but rather concentrate on incremental adaptations, even if they are worried about the need to increase productivity as a condition for survival – of both companies and the welfare system. We suggest that, in order to address this stakeholder group, communication around UBI should stress its potential to simplify bureaucracy and lead to significant savings. The results of this study can be used to inform policy design processes around UBI.

Introduction

Universal Basic Income (UBI) is defined as “a regular transfer in cash to every individual irrespective of income from other sources and with no obligations” (Van Parijs, 2015). UBI’s ethical roots are grounded in the 16th century (Thomas More); and it was systematised as a public policy at the middle of the 19th century, particularly by Joseph Charlier (1848), and by J.S. Mill (1904) within a wider debate on political economy.

In recent years, UBI has become established as a relevant topic in social policy debates, although it has not yet been adopted by any country. The reason for the increasing attention it receives can be explained by different

contextual factors, mainly related to concerns over growing inequality, the stigmatization and insufficient coverage of conditional aid for development programmes (Banerjee, 2016), rising unemployment rates due to increasing work automation (Robins, 1985), and paid labour no longer being a guarantee of poverty alleviation (Robins, 1985).

Basic income has been presented as a disruptive option which could at the same time abolish poverty and empower individuals, allowing them to escape the “poverty trap” (Haushofer & Shapiro, 2016). People affected by a “poverty trap” avoid working (or do it informally) because they fear to lose conditional social assistance. Notwithstanding, academics and policy-makers have repeatedly expressed important concerns about UBI feasibility, mainly due to high implementation costs (Calnitsky, 2017), but also about its desirability and uncertain effects at the individual and the

system level, particularly upon the labour market equilibrium (Murray, 2016). In the Spanish context, Casado and Sebastián (2019) and Oyarzábal et al. (2019) provide a good example of confronting views regarding the feasibility and desirability of UBI's implementation in Spain.

This debate is part of a more general revision of our “social contract”, of which Navarro (2020) offers a systematic review analysing the reality and roots of inequality. In particular, the “future of work” is studied not only from the perspective of digitalization but also in terms of its capacity to reduce social and financial inequalities. Pucci et al. (2019) shed light on the increasing limitations of employment to reinforce cohesion. When employment is no longer much of a solution against inequality or even poverty, UBI might appear to be “the worst solution... that is, until all other options are considered” (Pérez, 2015, p. 196).

UBI has never been adopted anywhere in the world at the system level. A number of limited experiments have been conducted in different geographical regions of the world in order to provide evidence of the effects of UBI upon individuals' behaviour. However, as UBI has never been implemented at a whole system's level, there is no empirical evidence regarding the effects of this policy at the system level, and particularly, regarding its effects upon labour demand strategies. Experimentation on UBI faces structural difficulties because providing basic income to just a portion of the population does not allow one to observe changes at the system level – and particularly those affecting job market dynamics and the behaviour of different economic agents, such as businesses.

As suggested by prominent authors in the field (Van Parijs & Vanderborght, 2017), it would seem that – as was the case with the implementation of retirement allocations during Bismarck's time – the decision to implement UBI should be a matter of principle and require a “leap of faith”, rather than waiting for it to be a logical consequence of an evidence-based decision-making process. In this paper, we summarize the limitations for experimenting with UBI and provide inputs which could assist public-policy makers and other stakeholders interested in promoting UBI.

Theoretical Framework

Renaissance humanist More did not encourage the implementation of UBI as a statesman in England, but in his famous fiction *Utopia* (More, 1978) he depicted a society that recognised such a right. His friend Juan Luis Vives wrote about social assistance in Flemish cities in *De subventionen pauperum* (Vives, 2010), pioneering the idea that civil institutions (instead of the individual or ecclesial charity) should guarantee sufficient revenues for all, although he

argued that this aid should be in exchange of some obligations to the community.

With the emergence of modern capitalism, many authors, such as Paine (1974), had reflected about the right to distribute equally among all people the revenue of the land. Since humans could originally find in nature – their common property – what they needed to survive, a society that assigned those resources to private hands should compensate other individuals. While communism was raised as a political alternative, other voices preferred to suggest “corrections” to capitalism based on solidarity. *The Solution of the Social Problem* by Charlier (1848), published the same year as Marx and Engels' (2018) *Communist Manifesto*, was the first to justify an economic transfer that would be both universal and unconditional (UBI as we have defined it). Also from the same year, Mill's (1904) influential *Principles of Political Economy* supported propositions (with some degrees of conditionality) that were similar to those posited by Charles Fourier, which were widely discussed at the time.

Charlier (1848) already paid attention not only to the eradication of poverty but also to the provision of economic incentives to overcome undesirable jobs – or at least to compensate them with better wages. When basic income started to be more systematically evaluated as a potential public policy, authors such as Jordan (2018), Cook (1980) or Ashby (1984) dealt intensively with both the philosophical and economic implications for the role of work in society of UBI as compared to a policy of guaranteed employment.

UBI has now become a serious public policy option, and despite never yet having been fully implemented in any country, it is receiving increasing attention in academia and in social debates. The reasons for this popularity might be linked to the disruptive impact it could represent on the “social contract”, and to the counter-intuitive nature of some of its economic incentives, which provoke intense discussions among supporters and opponents, both in scientific and political spheres. Among the most explored arguments in public debates is the convenience of UBI as an answer to job scarcity resulting from increasing automatization, or the possible effects upon individual behaviour, while its impacts on innovation, entrepreneurship and productivity are less discussed (Gómez-Frías & Sánchez-Chaparro, 2020).

With the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, UBI has increasingly emerged in public debates as an emergency solution. Researchers from the World Bank and UNICEF (Gentilini et al., 2020) made a worldwide review of social-protection measures, identifying 937 measures enforced in 190 countries as of May 2020. None of these constituted a UBI (that is to say, an aid unconditionally attributed to the entire population of a country), not even

a temporary one. However, one can observe a significant trend in governments increasingly allocating monetary transfers to a large proportion of the population, with light conditions or bureaucratic burdens. Although this fact is relevant to the debate over UBI's feasibility or desirability, it would certainly not be conclusive, for the study reports only temporary measures and the possible impact of these policies would be strongly biased by the dramatic social and economic context of the pandemic.

If the progress of the academic discussion on UBI should then rely in actual real-scale experimentations, serious limitations would emerge due to two major reasons: (1) its important costs (for instance 10,000 € paid annually to 10,000 beneficiaries would mean an expenditure of 100 M€/year plus certain management costs); (2) the impossibility of observing system-level effects due to the limited extension of the experiments conducted. Indeed, governments from countries such as Finland, USA, Canada, Kenya or India, among others; NGOs; and even private donors have tried basic income experiments, but the broadest involved only 6,000 people in a developing country (GiveDirectly project in Kenya- Faye & Niehaus, 2016) or 2,000 in a developed country (Finland- Kangas & Pulkka 2016) Each of these two examples implied an important cost of about 30 M€, but they touched only 0.03% and 0.11% of the country's active population, respectively.

These experiments, involving a few thousand people receiving a basic income during a sufficient period of time, were enough to assess the impact on labour supply (willingness to work, salary expectations) compared to a control group. For instance, the Finnish experiment showed that "basic income did not create more work hours or higher incomes" although results were biased by a "new activation policy [that] contaminated the control group" (Hiilamo, 2019).

However, all the experiments that have taken place only represent a very marginal effect in the aggregated labour market demand, as the relative figures are, for example, far lower than other important factors that impact the job market, such as the number of people that migrate every year or those who inherit. In other words, a few thousand people receiving a basic income, within a context typically comprised of several million job positions in a national economy, is not relevant enough for companies to consider adapting their labour demand strategies.

Van Parijs and Vanderborght (2017) justify the impossibility to conduct real basic income experiments that can affect not only the beneficiaries' behaviour but also the strategies on companies operating in a given market. There are solid econometric models – for instance, Jongen et al. (2014) conducted a simulation for the Netherlands Central Planning Bureau – which observed elasticities that link lev-

els of employment with household income and calculate an expected variation of macroeconomic figures, taxes and public budget expenditure. But if basic income were permanently implemented, it would probably also impact perceptions about the balance between work and leisure, and lead to generalised debates on the acceptable levels of inequality, all of which would probably fundamentally alter the foundations of workers and recruiters' behaviour.

In current societies in developed countries, public expenditure is now at levels around 40% which means that new structural policies such as UBI would probably need a reconfiguration of other instruments. An incremental transformation is therefore more plausible than a "big bang" (Van Parijs & Vanderborght, 2017). Some social activists and academics defending UBI suggest discussing first steps towards universality of basic income, such as initially providing it to children (Bradshaw, 2016; Ferrarini et al., 2013; Ortiz, 2015; Van Mechelen & Bradshaw 2013), to the young (Bidadanure, 2014), the elderly (Abrahamson & Wehner, 2013; St. John & Wilmore, 2001), or to women (Fraser, 1997; Miller, 1998); or else to begin with a low amount (Van Parijs & Vanderborght, 2017).

Van Parijs and Vanderborght (2017) recall that when retirement pensions were created by German Chancellor von Bismarck in 1889, no prior experimentation was conducted on the matter. That is to say, the policy was not tested over a number of years in a few villages before its implementation. It was based on principle, as well as having some practical implications. It constituted a strong political decision, meant to counter revolutionary winds and to show that the State understood its obligation to take care of workers and guarantee a minimum standard of living above what the market could assure for all. In practical terms, the cost of this policy was not high, since the retirement age was initially set at 70 years when life expectancy was only 40, but symbolically it was effective, and it is still considered the birth of the contemporary Welfare State. Van Parijs and Vanderborght's (2017) bet, not simply as academics but also as active defenders of UBI, is that this public policy could also be introduced by allocating a small amount, which would then be progressively raised if public opinion were satisfied with the results.

Research Approach and Objective

As previously explained, there are contrasting opinions among experts regarding the desirability and feasibility of UBI, and current experimentation on the matter does not provide a sound empirical base to inform these opinions, because experiments are limited in scope and do not allow to observe possible systemic effects. We acknowledge the claim of Van Parijs and Vanderborght (2017) regarding the

impossibility of conducting UBI experiments at a sufficient scale to be conclusive, as it would be necessary to actually change the welfare-state model of a particular country. As researchers, we intend to be neutral about the political desirability of UBI, but we are interested in providing inputs for policy makers that could be attracted by UBI but are set back by the insufficient experimental results.

If the decision on UBI's implementation should primarily rely on political will (as has been the case with the introduction of retirement pensions or the granting of marriage rights to people of the same gender, for instance), policy design might still have an importance in the decision-making process if it manages to have an impact on the narrative of the different stakeholders. This logic fits into the model of "organised anarchy" or "garbage can theory" (introduced by Cohen et al., 1972). Due to the limited rationality of actors, complex decisions do not consist of an organised argumentation from a problem to a solution, but rather on a quite random set of connections among problems, possible solutions, and stakeholders (the garbage can). "Windows of opportunity" (such as those provided by crises) accelerate this chaotic process, intensifying debates and decision-making processes.

Civil society is then fundamental in giving popularity to an "idea" (a possible solution) so that it has greater chances of sooner or later being dragged out from the garbage can. As we have seen, UBI has been mostly an issue discussed from the perspective of the impact on workers and not employers, which are also an influential part of society.

Our main research objective is to investigate shared beliefs and opinions among business managers about UBI, about its impact at the system level, and, more specifically on labour market supply and demand. Our approach has been to confront company executives with the thought experiment and ask them about the implications of a UBI being adopted in their sector. Their reactions can be useful to UBI proponents (activists or politicians) and can also be considered as a preparatory phase for experimentation with real transfers of money.

In the "Further Research" section we argue that our results could also be used in designing a UBI prototype limited to an economic sector, which could be a promising alternative for gaining broader knowledge on UBI's impact on labour demand.

Method

This study used focus group discussions. Focus groups are a form of group interview that, rather than relying on an alternation between a researcher's questions and the re-

search participants' responses, capitalizes on the interaction within the group in order to generate data (Kitzinger, 1995; Morgan, 1996). Focus groups were originally used within communication studies to explore the effects of films and television programmes during the Second World War and became popular in social research in the 1980s (Krueger, 2014; Morgan & Spanish, 1984). They are currently extensively applied in many different disciplines, including health studies (Kitzinger, 1995), education (Field, 2000), and economic and management sciences (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014).

The method is particularly useful for exploring people's knowledge, experience and opinions, and can be used to examine not only what people think, but how they think and why they think that way. Focus groups are useful for studying dominant cultural values and exposing dominant narratives within a group (Kitzinger, 1995). Focus groups are particularly appropriate for exploratory research, when the theoretical categories need yet to be constructed or refined. When group dynamics work well, the participants work alongside the researcher, taking the research in new and often unexpected directions (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014).

Focus groups need to be carefully planned in order to respond to the research aims and adapt to the particular research context (Morgan & Spanish, 1984). In this particular case, consistent with the pursued goals, a focus group was put together, composed of 15 middle and top managers belonging to different companies in the construction sector in Spain. A variety of profiles were included to allow for the exploration of different perspectives within the group. In effect, the sample included managers from public and private companies, with different seniority levels and belonging to companies in different positions within the construction value chain. Specifically, the average age in the panel was 45 years old, ranging from 27 to 65; the average salary was 66,000€/year, ranging from 35,000 to 150,000 €/year. Regarding gender balance, only one of the participants was a woman. Although a more balanced composition would have been desirable in this regard, this ratio nevertheless reflects the gender unbalance found within the construction sector in Spain. Participants were selected according to their profile and availability among a list of members of the Spanish Order of Construction Engineers. The focus group convened at the facilities of said institution.

Although the number of people included can be considered high regarding the 6 to 10 "rule of thumb" generally applied when composing focus groups, a larger number was considered in this case to be more suitable to the research aims, as it allowed to incorporate a richer sample. Following Morgan's (1996) recommendations for running large

focus groups, an experienced moderator was used to guide the discussion and was able to effectively manage the group (Morgan, 1996). The moderator was assisted by a junior researcher, who recorded the session and took notes during the meeting. A duration of 3 hours was allocated to allow for the effective participation of all participants.

Regarding the structure of the discussion, a funnel approach was adopted, starting with open questions, but moving towards a more structured discussion further on to avoid digression. A particular difficulty was posed by participants confusing UBI with conditional social aids such as the Minimum Income (MI), a misconception that is frequent among the general public and even in the media (Gómez-Frías & Sánchez-Chaparro, 2020). To help focus the discussion, after a first round of presentation and open questions around the individual positions and knowledge of the participants concerning UBI and the welfare state, a 5-minute video was shown to the panel. It presented a summary of the coverage done by the Spanish Public Television of a 2-hour evening conference for the general public about Universal Basic Income organised by the “Basic Income Research Group” at Universidad Politécnica de Madrid in October 2019. The event was organized around two round-tables with 10 experts from different disciplines (economy, law, business administration, sociology, philosophy) discussing the desirability and feasibility of a basic income in Spain, and presented contrasting views and opinions on the matter. The group of experts discussed the implementation of a particular basic income scenario in Spain. This scenario, which proposed roughly 5,000€ for each individual (426€/month) while suppressing part of the existing monetary transfers but respecting all welfare in-kind services such as health or education, is extensively described in Gómez-Frías and Sánchez-Chaparro (2020). The 5-minute video, which provided the panel with a good summary of the general debate around Universal Basic Income and a particular scenario to reflect upon, was released in January 2020 and is available on the Spanish Public Television website (RTVE, 2020).

We consider that incepting a message about basic income through a 5-minute professional TV programme freely edited by journalist is the closest we could get to a means of bringing about a large-scale social debate. However, we identified a very relevant aspect that was not adequately covered by the TV programme and that would certainly constitute an important part of a real political debate on basic income – namely, its financing. The reaction of some interviewees to this aspect was a skeptic refusal of UBI because they feared the negative impacts of a very high increase in taxes, while others feared cuts in education or healthcare. Our plan for future research is to incorporate succinct material that presents interviewees with a public budget model that explains that a UBI would substitute other cash trans-

fers but not public services, as well as some estimations of the budget increase (e.g. 2% for Spain in the 5,000€/year scenario used in our exercise).

Following the video, participants were asked to reconsider their position regarding the desirability of UBI in the Spanish context. Next, they were asked to give their opinion on how UBI would affect labour demand in the construction sector, taking into account job profiles, wages, the number of job positions, automatization levels, and profit levels.

Participants were asked to express their individual opinions regarding each question posed by answering a Sli-do survey. The survey was followed by a collective discussion around the topic. The focus group was closed with a final wrap-up round.

The recorded material from the session was fully transcribed. Both the notes taken and the transcription were coded by two independent researchers. Discrepancies regarding the codes applied were solved through several iterative rounds. The analysis of the coded material was jointly conducted through various meetings between the authors of the paper.

Results and Discussion

Prior Knowledge on UBI and Awareness about the Role of the Welfare State

Participants showed a limited knowledge regarding UBI as well as limited interest and awareness regarding the role of the Welfare State. 27% of participants did not know the difference between UBI and Minimum Income (MI, which consists of completing revenues up to a threshold) at the beginning of the group session. This rate went down to 8% after the 5-minutes video was shown. Throughout the focus group session, confusion between UBI and MI was still evident among certain participants who continued to refer to UBI as if it were a conditional allocation addressed at the “poor”.

Significantly, 33% declared not having an opinion regarding what the Welfare State should provide to all citizens, and showed limited awareness and concern regarding rising levels of inequality in Spain. Although Spain can be considered a prosperous country in terms of income per capita, occupying eighth place among the world’s significantly populated nations (IMF, 2019), in terms of inequality, 60 countries present better results on the Gini scale (World Bank, 2020). Interestingly as well, participants did not seem to be aware of the existence in Spain of several Minimum Income policies at the regional level. Only 9% of participants proposed alternatives to the policies under discussion (see Table 1).

Table 1
Welfare state opinion

What do you believe the Welfare State should provide to all citizens?

	Minimum Guaranteed Income	(Universal) Basic Income	One or the Other without Preference	I do not Understand the Difference	I do not have an Opinion	Other (free text)
Before the Video	27%	9%	0%	27%	27%	9% (combine several policies)
After the Video	33%	17%	0%	8%	33%	9% (combine several policies)

Beliefs Regarding Consequences on Individual Behaviour

The focus group enabled the clear identification of a number of dominant narratives shared among the members of the group. Particularly, most participants felt that the application of UBI would increase absenteeism and lower productivity, as workers “would not be afraid of being fired and would become less engaged with their work”. Some participants even stated that UBI would increase the rate of unemployment. Participants also feared that UBI could encourage young people to drop out of school and thus lead to a lack of commitment to life-long learning and training.

Nevertheless, a few voices in the group showed a certain level of disagreement and provided a more nuanced view as they distinguished between “people who want to thrive and people who are conformist in nature”, suggesting that different behavioural segments could be established. Some people in the panel stated that disincentives were more likely to occur “at low salary levels”.

A topic upon which the group showed no consensus was the possible effect of UBI upon entrepreneurship. On the one hand, an unconditional income could favour risk taking. On the other hand, others stated their opinion that people could become “conformist” if they benefited from UBI. Certain people expressed their view that people engage in business creation “not because they have less risk or more need but because they have that inner strength”.

Beliefs Regarding Consequences at the System Level

The focus group also discussed possible effects at the system level. A strong belief shared by the participants was that UBI would generate inflation. Significantly, this statement has no sound economic grounds since UBI would not have an impact upon the monetary mass, and thus the general level of prices would hardly be modified (Gómez-Frías & Sánchez-Chaparro, 2020, among the many authors that deal

with this recurrent “urban legend”).

Participants showed a consensus regarding the impact of UBI on automatization. UBI would increase salary costs and, consequently, would be bound to increase automatization levels.

Participants also expressed their belief that UBI would favour the submerged economy, which challenges the views of experts in the field who make an association between UBI and a possible reduction of informal economy thanks to the possibility of escaping the “poverty trap” (Van Parijs & Vanderborght, 2017). The possible benefits in terms of bureaucracy and cost reduction associated with the application of UBI as opposed to MI were not mentioned during the discussion.

Most participants were of the opinion that companies could pay lower wages if UBI were implemented. However, there were certain dissenting voices that suggested that “the interest in working could decline, decreasing labour supply and raising salaries”.

Towards the end of the focus group session, an important and unintended discussion arose concerning the potential benefits for innovation and productivity, the idea being that financing a basic income mainly through direct taxes could provide an opportunity to diminish social contributions, which in Spain constitute a significant part of labour costs.

Additional Topics and Concerns

After the group discussion, only 8% of the panel members declared to be clearly in favour of the implementation of UBI in Spain (see Table 2).

For many of these participants, their negative opinion on UBI seemed to reflect values against unconditionality and universality. As one participant stated, “When I have children, how do I want to educate them? Rewarding them for good behaviour or giving them money even when they don’t behave well?”

Table 2
Position on basic income

Do you think that companies in your sector should take a position concerning an eventual adoption of this Basic Income?

In Favour	Against	They should not have any position	I do not have an opinion
8%	33%	33%	25%

In many instances during the conversation, UBI was referred to as an “unfair” policy. An expressed concern was the feeling that it would be unfair for people that have not been active in the workforce to benefit from a retirement allocation comparable to that received by someone who has worked for years. Participants agreed nonetheless that basic goods and services such as healthcare, food and shelter should be provided to all and are key to providing equal opportunities, but they were reluctant to provide unconditional cash transfers as it would be impossible to know “what people were going to spend it on”.

There was also a great deal of concern regarding UBI being a threat to universal healthcare or to the public education system. Indeed, the implementation of UBI would represent a structural reform and many other aspects of the welfare and economic system could be affected by it.

Interestingly, participants were reluctant to accept evidence from experiments conducted in other countries, such as Finland or Norway, for they did not consider them applicable to Spain due to supposed cultural differences in the South.

Conclusion

As an exploratory study, our conclusions should be considered a preliminary iteration with the aim of better preparing the methodology in order to conduct a broader programme of focus groups and questionnaires involving more countries and economic sectors.

The conclusions here presents concern, shared beliefs and opinions of business managers in the Spanish construction sector in relation to UBI and its impact at the system level, as set out in the research objective of this paper. Our main findings show that most companies “live day-to-day” and do not undertake a structured analysis of such radical horizons but rather concentrate on incremental adaptations, even if they are worried about the need to increase productivity as a condition for survival – of both companies and the welfare system. The specific conclusions drawn from this study are broken down into five points. The first four points indicate that this stakeholder group was rather negative about adopting UBI. Only the fifth point presents arguments in the opposite sense.

Conclusion 1. There is little knowledge about the reality (figures, causes) of inequality in Spain, with a tendency to explain it almost exclusively through meritocratic (rather than structural) terms. The Welfare State system is also widely unknown among managers.

Conclusion 2. There is significant confusion between UBI and Minimum Income (MI). In particular, it is widely unknown that an MI has already been in existence for many years in Spain and that it has significant problems due to the bureaucracy it involves. As an example, the Government announced the introduction of an MI as representing a novelty and a “big leap forward”, whereas in reality the MI already existed (only a certain harmonisation among regions was introduced), and yet the same bureaucratic troubles remain unresolved. Promoting UBI would thus require an effective campaign to explain how it is different from MI, with the participation of stakeholders other than the government communicating on the issue. As an additional consideration, the term “universal basic income” could benefit from being exchanged for a proxy name if it were to be implemented, due to the negative connotation already associated with it.

Conclusion 3. Managers in the sector shared strong views against UBI, based on arguments such as the impact on absenteeism, productivity and disincentives to work in general, which could fit in the classical “Theory X” of human resources stated by McGregor (1960). There is no evidence supporting such arguments. As a matter of fact, the results on a recent UBI’s experiment in Finland report positive effects in terms of creation of employment (Kangas et al, 2019); the COVID-19 pandemic might provide a relevant counterexample showing there is much more than remuneration-related motivation to work.

Conclusion 4. Even when talking in terms of “social justice”, participants expressed negative opinions about UBI, contradicting evidence of unconditional aids being more effective in terms of coverage than conditional ones. A narrative presenting UBI as a vector for efficiency was hardly understood by participants, despite it being one of the main arguments presented by its proponents. Participants continued to think about UBI exclusively as a social protection

tool, which would significantly increase social expenditure. This suggests that communication around UBI should stress its potential to simplify bureaucracy and lead to significant savings.

Conclusion 5. Some beliefs held among participants could be used as levers for promoting UBI. The main one being that companies could pay lower wages and furthermore diminish the total cost of labour. UBI would indeed fit into a reorganisation of the Welfare State, whereby employment would be disconnected from social coverage – which would be financed by general taxation (direct or indirect).

In any case, we have to be cautious about these conclusions for they might be very dependent not only on the country and sector but also on the specific UBI stipend considered in the proposed scenario for the exercise.

We consider that policy makers and UBI proponents could use these conclusions as an initial step within a larger campaign of understanding the positions of different stakeholders regarding this policy. Subsequent focus groups and questionnaires could be fine-tuned to delve deeper into the identified discourses or to study opinions regarding other issues such as innovation, digitalization or gender impact. As for practitioners in companies, the conclusions could guide them to build their lobby arguments (against UBI, if this focus group was in effect representative) or to prepare their business-model adaptations if UBI were to be adopted.

Future Research

This research can provide valuable input for a wider study regarding the shared beliefs and opinions among the business sector about UBI. Our research suggests that UBI is not an issue in the agenda of this stakeholder group; given the potential benefits in terms of efficiency and innovation associated to this policy, business or trade associations could consider developing a more informed position on the matter.

From an academic point of view, as has been seen, it is not possible to consider a full-scale UBI experiment due to the high cost involved (several percentage points of GDP even if other public expenditures and taxation are adapted (see Oyarzábal et al., 2019)) and due to the irreversibility of its effect. But, based on the study presented in this paper, a limited test could be designed in a particular sector that could be reasonably “isolated” from the rest of the economy.

Such intended isolation would in practice be difficult to ensure in an open economy: the labour supply (employees plus existing and potential job seekers) could not be for-

mally forbidden from applying to other sectors, and neither could companies be prevented from demanding labour from other sectors.

Notwithstanding, to illustrate the advantage of a sectorial approach, compare the provision of a UBI to all people belonging to the construction sector with the provision of a UBI to the same number of people but without focusing on a specific sector. In the first case, it would be possible to obtain results that are closer to reality because an entire sector is being influenced by the basic income, something that cannot go unnoticed by the companies in the sector. This would affect the need to work or the salary expectations of employees in the construction sector, which could lead to consequences closer to reality, such as the need to create attractive jobs so as to motivate workers to choose to work. In the second case, not focused on a particular sector, the bargaining power that workers could exercise due to the lack of a need to work would be blurred, making it harder to draw conclusive results.

An experiment that has not been considered in literature or policy reviews, as far as we know, would be to establish a basic income for a specific profession or sector with very limited mobility due to regulatory or training reasons. This hypothetical case would however face important difficulties due to possible substitute professions to which companies could turn to, and also due to ethical or legal limitations to justify this inequality for experimental reasons.

The construction sector in Spain is an interesting choice for the pilot of this experiment for several reasons (Gómez-Frías & Sánchez-Chaparro, 2020). On the one hand, Spain is a country with 8% of GDP less public expenditure than the European Union average, and there is public debate over diminishing this gap via new social policies. On the other hand, the construction sector has qualification and salary levels that represent a more defined perimeter as compared to other sectors in which greater inter-sectorial mobility is observed.

In any case, this type of experimentation would imply a very significant level of expenditure, counted in millions of Euros, and it would require careful preparation in choosing the sector or profession as well as the dimensions of the project. If it were to be carried out, this exploratory study and its findings regarding stakeholders of the chosen sector could help to elaborate models regarding the behaviour of businesses, as well as to design the communication campaigns to support the implementation of said sectorial UBI.

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