

71 Universal Basic Services

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Definition

Universal basic services (UBS) describes a set of proposals for achieving universal access to life's essentials within planetary boundaries. The component terms can be defined as follows:

Services: Collectively generated activities that serve the public interest

Basic: Services that are essential and sufficient – rather than minimal – to enable people to meet their needs

Universal: Everyone is entitled to such basic services according to need, not ability to pay.

An inherent normative assumption is that governments should ensure that every individual has access to the core necessities that make life possible and worth living. The concept has emerged in the Global North, though its influence is spreading globally.

There is broad agreement on what “necessities” or “essentials” are: nourishing food, clean air and water, a decent home to live in, domestic energy, education, people to look after us when we cannot do so ourselves, healthcare when we are ill, transport to take us where we need to go, access to the internet, and – underpinning them all – a safe environment.

None of us (not even the rich) can meet all our needs without sharing risks and pooling resources to generate a *virtual income* or *social wage*. This is made up of “in-kind” benefits – collective measures provided or financed by public authorities. They include a range of social and economic services, commonly described as the “welfare state”. UBS aims to improve existing services, such as healthcare and schools, and to extend collective measures to areas where basic needs are not met universally or sufficiently (see **Sufficiency** and **Consumption Corridors**). The scope and priorities advocated will differ across time and place according to social, economic, and political contexts (see also **Doughnut Economics** and **Fair Consumption Space**).

Advocates of UBS contend that “sustainable consumption” can best be advanced by further expanding the share of collectively provided services in total consumption. UBS reflects and builds on experiences of high-quality universal services in health, education, and other areas of need that have endured in many countries for 70 years or more. The case for such an expansion combines social and environmental arguments; hence, the centrality of UBS for sustainable consumption.

History

The idea of UBS was first outlined in a 2017 report by Moore et al. entitled *Social prosperity for the future: A proposal for Universal Basic Services*. In 2019, the idea was theorized in terms of human needs by Gough (2019). It received book-length elaboration in 2020 by Coote and Percy. Subsequent work has developed the ecological case for UBS (e.g., Vogel et al., 2024).

The UBS label was initially designed as a critical alternative to the campaign for Universal Basic Income (UBI). The case for UBS recognizes that everyone should be entitled to a sufficient cash income, but that an unconditional grant to all would be insufficient or unaffordable or both. UBS has aimed to reassert the value and efficacy of public services and other *in-kind* benefits at the heart of policy development. Debates continue about whether UBS could be combined with some version of UBI, or (more plausibly) a guaranteed minimum income.

Different Perspectives

Advocates of UBS make the following arguments:

First, it would directly meet needs via collectively provided “needs satisfiers”. This contrasts with the “transfer arm” of the welfare state, which augments people’s incomes but leaves provisioning to market forces. The latter may work well for providing tomatoes or gyms, but much less well for essential goods and services. There are strong efficiency arguments for the latter based, *inter alia*, on economies of scale and network benefits.

Second, free or low-cost delivery of life’s essentials is inherently equalizing because necessities *by definition* account for a greater share of the expenditures of lower-income households. This is the case in all tax-funded systems, even when the tax burden is not progressive.

Third, it achieves redistribution without moral or consequentialist drawbacks. State transfers are also progressive on balance, but this is mainly achieved by targeting, which typically involves “means testing” with its associated problems of demeaning treatment and conditionality. Public services and their extension via UBS automatically redistribute the social part of consumption according to need, without these disadvantages, while enhancing the total value of households’ disposable real income.

Fourth, many of these essential items, such as education, health, and social care, are not simply about consumption. They are investments that yield a stream of social benefits into the future, for example by enhancing health and wellbeing, strengthening social cohesion, and building knowledge and skills. Many of these benefits have been evaluated in **money** terms, and research suggests their rate of return can exceed that of some “productive” investments in manufacturing. Such returns will be critical in moving toward a less commodified economy.

Fifth, social consumption and provisioning can directly contribute to the abatement of greenhouse gas emissions and other environmental goals. UBS is a needs-based approach that identifies and prioritizes satiable needs over some unsustainable wants (see **Conspicuous/Positional Consumption** and **Personal Carbon Allowance**). Comparisons of the carbon footprint of health care show a significant excess in the USA compared with socialized healthcare in Europe, while delivering worse outcomes in terms of need-satisfaction. Social provisioning can embed sustainability goals in day-to-day practice.

Advocates of UBI argue that UBS “pre-selects what people need”, rather than offering a choice via adequate incomes and market provisioning (see **Choice Editing**). Against this, the case for UBS singles out everyday necessities from other consumption goods that would continue to be distributed via market mechanisms. It has affinities with the concept of a distinct “**foundational economy**”: mundane, taken-for-granted networks and services that people depend on in their daily lives.

Application

UBS is inherently disaggregated and context-specific. Can any general guidelines be agreed upon to achieve a coherent public system of universal services? Determining what constitutes universal

basic services in a specific context must involve a collective democratic process, a role that has traditionally been the prerogative of representative governments at national and sub-national levels. Many supporters of UBS now advocate a complementary role for dialogic methods such as deliberative assemblies, which can more effectively tap into the practical realities of day-to-day life, for consideration alongside expert and practitioners' knowledge (see also **Living Labs**).

Coote and Percy (2020) outline three key government functions required for implementing a UBS strategy:

- Guarantee the entitlements of citizens/residents to essential services and ensure equality of access: The codification of rights and entitlements will differ across services and between countries, for example through constitutional law, other justiciable laws, regulatory bodies, professional ethics, and other processes.
- Raise taxes or borrow money and distribute resources: Much of the focus will be on current expenditure, but capital and infrastructure spending will gain new importance, for example, the UK's Infrastructure Strategy Commission calling for Universal Basic Infrastructure (see **Sustainable Finance**).
- Set standards and regulate: This would require meaningful devolution of power to regional and local authorities, combined with strong central direction to ensure equal access and quality through investment, distribution, regulation, and coordination.

While no city or country fully exemplifies UBS in practice, Coote and Percy point to many examples of services delivered in ways that reflect the ambitions of this agenda – from childcare in Norway to housing in Copenhagen, transport in London, social care in Germany, and much more. There are signs of growing interest in policy circles: the report by Enrico Letta (2024) to the European Council urges the EU, for the sake of social cohesion and a viable single market, to prioritize the pursuit of “universal access to essential services – including water, sanitation, energy, transport, financial services and digital communications – to meet basic human needs to live and to participate in society”.

Further Reading

- Coote, A., & Percy, A. (2020). *The case for universal basic services*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Gough, I. (2019). Universal basic services: A theoretical and moral framework. *Political Quarterly*, 90(3), 534–542. ISSN: 0032-3179.
- Letta, E. (2024). Much more than a market. *Report to the European Council*. Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/ny3j24sm/much-more-than-a-market-report-by-enrico-letta.pdf> (pp. 90–120) (accessed: 8 January 2025).
- Stakelum, R., & Wiese, K. (2024). *Universal basic services: Road to a just transition*. Available at: <https://www.socialeurope.eu/universal-basic-services-road-to-a-just-transition> (accessed: 8 January 2025).
- Vogel, J., Guerin, G., O'Neill, D., & Steinberger, J. (2024). Safeguarding livelihoods against reductions in economic output. *Ecological Economics*, 215, 107977. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2023.107977>.