

# Basic income in Germany | The Green discussion on basic income in Germany – its development and current status

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## The early years

The discussion on basic income in the Green Party in Germany is as old as the party itself. The debate in the 1980s was influenced by writers such as André Gorz<sup>91</sup> and Thomas Schmid<sup>92</sup>. Within the Greens, one of the main advocates was Michael Opielka, who was the academic advisor for social policy of the Greens parliamentary group in the Bundestag from 1983-1987 and had already written extensively in the 1980s about basic income.<sup>93</sup> In addition, some Green Party members (such as Claus Offe) were among the co-founders of the Basic Income European Network (BIEN) in 1986, which later became the Basic Income Earth Network.

## The start of the millennium: Broadening discussion

In the 1990s, after German reunification, other topics were at stake in the German Green Party as well as in German society, and the discussion about basic income receded into the background. However, that changed as a result of the discussions around the so-called “Hartz” labour market reforms in Germany at the start of the millennium. Particularly the reform of social assistance (known as “Hartz IV”) generated contradiction and discussions about alternatives; not surprisingly, one of which was basic income. On the same day as the Hartz IV act was adopted

in the German Bundestag, the independent “Netzwerk Grundeinkommen” (Basic Income Network) was founded, with the support of several Green Party members, among others.<sup>94</sup> The discussion on basic income then became more prominent again and also within the Greens.

In contrast to the discussion in the 1980s, which mainly took place within the Green Party and its surroundings and in academic circles, this new discussion about basic income was much broader. At the beginning of this century, representatives beyond the alternative-left-academic scenes also participated in the discourse. Dieter Althaus, prime minister of Thüringen and member of the conservative party (CDU) proposed his own very specific basic income model, which he called *Solidarisches Bürgergeld*<sup>95</sup>. This model proposed a basic income at the upper end of the current minimum income (like Hartz IV) and was to be implemented as a negative income tax. It also included a health flat rate of €200 per month. The unemployment insurance was to be substituted by the basic income, but there was an additional pension insurance which was fully financed by the employers. Interestingly, the CDU-affiliated political foundation Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung hired two Green academics, the two authors of this article, to carry out a financial study of Althaus’s proposal.<sup>96</sup>

91 Gorz, A. (1984). *Wege ins Paradies. Thesen zur Krise, Automation und Zukunft der Arbeit*. Berlin: Rotbuch.

92 Schmid, T. (1986). *Befreiung von falscher Arbeit. Thesen zum garantierten Mindesteinkommen*. Berlin: Wagenbach.

93 See, for example: Opielka, M. (1985a). *Jenseits von Armut und Kapitalismus. 20 Thesen zur Begründung eines “garantierten Grundeinkommens”*. *Widersprüche*, Heft 14, February 1985, 55-60; Opielka, M. (1985b, ed.). *Die ökosoziale Frage. Alternativen zum Sozialstaat*. Frankfurt: Fischer 1985; Opielka, M. & Ostner, I. (1987, eds.). *Umbau des Sozialstaats*, Essen: Klartext; Opielka, M. & Vobruba, G. (1986, eds.). *Das garantierte Grundeinkommen. Entwicklung und Perspektiven einer Forderung*. Frankfurt: Fischer; Opielka, M. & Zander, M. (1988, eds.). *Freiheit von Armut. Das grüne Modell einer bedarfsorientierten Grundsicherung in der Diskussion*. Essen: Klartext

94 <https://www.isoe.org/en/aktuelles/blog/15-jahre-netzwerk-grundeinkommen-blick-zurueck-nach-vorn/>

95 Althaus, Dieter (2007). *Das Solidarische Bürgergeld. Sicherheit und Freiheit ermöglichen Marktwirtschaft*. In: Borchard, Michael (ed.): *Das Solidarische Bürgergeld – Analysen einer Reformidee*. Stuttgart: Lucius & Lucius.

96 See: Opielka, M. & Strengmann-Kuhn, W. (2007). *Das Solidarische Bürgergeld. Finanz- und sozialpolitische Analyse eines Reformkonzepts. Gutachten für die Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung*. In: Borchard, Michael (ed.): *Das Solidarische Bürgergeld – Analysen einer Reformidee*. Stuttgart: Lucius & Lucius.

## 2007: A year-long debate culminating in a showdown

In 2007, there was a particularly intense debate on basic income within the Greens. The party board founded a committee known as “Zukunft der sozialen Sicherung” (Future of social security) under the leadership of Reinhard Bütikofer, the main topic of which was the discussion on basic income. One half of the committee were advocates of a basic income while the other half were against it. In the end, there was no total agreement between these two sub-groups; although, a lot of common ground was found, such as on basic goals, the necessity of a better minimum income system, and critique of the Hartz IV system. Therefore, the final report took the form of a Y, with a trunk of agreement and two branches: one arguing for a basic income with a concrete basic income model and the other branch arguing for a means-tested minimum income system.<sup>97</sup>

In parallel to this committee, there was a broad discussion going on within the Green Party in most local and federal states.<sup>98</sup> Some states (Länder) adopted resolutions that advocated for a basic income. The resolution of the Greens in Baden-Württemberg<sup>99</sup> was based on the proposal that was made by the committee of the federal party and was then an alternative at the federal party congress of 2007 in Nuremberg. The end of the Nuremberg-resolution stated: “With this resolution the debate on basic income is not finished, all the more so as the discussion is going on in society. The discussion shall go on. For example, on the question of whether and how a negative income tax, which is proposed in some basic income models, can be combined with the Green minimum income concept.”<sup>100</sup>

One of the points of common agreement within the Greens in Germany is the further development of social insurances into citizen insurance schemes (Bürgerversicherungen)<sup>101</sup>. This is important for the basic income supporters within the Greens as well because basic income should not be a substitute for social insurance. For most of the Green basic income supporters, the idea of basic income and the idea of citizen insurance schemes for pensions, health, and care belong together. Michael Opielka even made a proposal of a basic income insurance that combines both ideas.<sup>102</sup>

## 2010 to 2013: Looking for a compromise

In the years following the Nuremberg-resolution, the discussion on basic income somewhat slowed down within the Greens. From 2010-2012, another committee of the federal party dealing with the social profile of the Greens once again was implemented. The committee was called “Zukunftsforum Antworten auf die auseinanderfallende Gesellschaft” (Future forum for answers on the diverging society). The aim was to describe and to sharpen the Green social profile. As a result, two consecutive reports were published, each containing a chapter on basic income, based on the work of a sub-working group of five persons: some of them in favour of; some against a basic income<sup>103</sup>. In contrast to the committee in 2007, this group made a compromise proposal, which they called “Grüne Basissicherung” (Green basic security).

The basic idea of this compromise was the assessment that, on the one hand, an *unconditional* basic income *for everyone* was not a consensus in the party, but that on the other hand, a basic income or benefits like a basic income focusing on some groups could make sense for

97 Bündnis 90/ Die Grünen (2007a). Bericht der Kommission „Zukunft Sozialer Sicherung“ von BÜNDNIS 90/DIE GRÜNEN. [http://www.stefan-ziller.eu/wp-content/uploads/2007/11/202219.bericht\\_der\\_kommission\\_zukunft\\_sozialer.pdf](http://www.stefan-ziller.eu/wp-content/uploads/2007/11/202219.bericht_der_kommission_zukunft_sozialer.pdf)

98 For an overview of proposals discussed within the Greens, see: Strengmann-Kuhn, W. (2007b). *Armut und Grundeinkommen*. In: Zwengel, Ralf (ed): *Gesellschaftliche Perspektiven: Arbeit und Gerechtigkeit*. Jahrbuch der Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung Hessen, Klartext Verlag Essen.

99 Bündnis 90/ Die Grünen in Baden-Württemberg (2007). *Armut bekämpfen, Bildung verbessern, Chancen eröffnen. Der Weg zu einem grünen Grundeinkommen – eine solidarische und freiheitliche Zukunft gestalten*. <https://www.gruene-bw.de/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Grundeinkommen.pdf>

100 Bündnis 90/ Die Grünen (2007b). *Aufbruch zu neuer Gerechtigkeit*. <https://wolke.netzbegrueung.de/s/5JacEQFKG-2k4rrA?path=%2F2007-11-N%C3%BCrnberg>

101 See: Strengmann-Kuhn, W. (2005, ed.). *Das Prinzip Bürgerversicherung. Die Zukunft des Sozialstaats*. Wiesbaden: VS-Verlag.

102 See: Opielka, M. (2005). *Die Idee einer Grundeinkommensversicherung – Analytische und politische Erträge eines erweiterten Konzepts der Bürgerversicherung*. In: Strengmann-Kuhn, W. (ed.): *Das Prinzip Bürgerversicherung. Die Zukunft des Sozialstaats*. Wiesbaden: VS-Verlag; Opielka, M. (2009). *Gerechtigkeit und Garantismus. Grundlagen grüner Sozialpolitik*. In: Siller, P. & Pitz, G. (eds): *Politik der Gerechtigkeit. Zur praktischen Orientierungskraft eines umkämpften Ideals*. Baden-Baden: Nomos, 101-120.

103 Bündnis 90/ Die Grünen (2011). *Erster Bericht des Zukunftsforums „Antworten auf die auseinanderfallende Gesellschaft”*. Bündnis 90/ Die Grünen (2012). *2. Bericht des Zukunftsforums „Antworten auf die auseinanderfallende Gesellschaft” Teilhabe*. [https://www.gruene.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Dokumente/20120618\\_Zweiter\\_Bericht\\_Zukunftsforum\\_Institutionen.pdf](https://www.gruene.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Dokumente/20120618_Zweiter_Bericht_Zukunftsforum_Institutionen.pdf)

a large majority of the party, particular a *Kindergrundsicherung* (children's basic security), a guarantee pension, and a negative income tax for workers. Besides these priority groups, in further steps, there could be basic income benefits or basic income-like benefits implemented for further groups. Additionally, there should be a better means-tested minimum income scheme, which should be simpler and should better safeguard against poverty. A *Kindergrundsicherung* and guaranteed pension has already been agreed by the Green Party. The *Kindergrundsicherung* was not very specific, but a specific guarantee pension model already existed as part of the Green pensions concept<sup>104</sup>. What was still missing, however, was a concept for a negative income tax for workers.

The election programme for the federal elections in 2013 contained the following: "We want to further discuss the idea of a financial basic security or the idea of a negative income tax. Particularly in the debate on minimum income security and basic income for everyone, it is important to combine our guiding principles of justice and an emancipatory social policy with the importance of public institutions and financial feasibility. We want to bring this discussion into society. Therefore, we think the implementation of an 'Enquete Commission' (Study Commission) of the Bundestag makes sense, in which the idea and models of basic income, as well as fundamental reform perspectives for the welfare state and the social security systems shall be discussed".

#### **2013-2017: Further development of basic income modules**

However, this decision was only implemented in part. The Green parliamentary group decided – with the support of the Green MPs in favour of a basic income – against requesting a Study Commission. This was mainly because in times of a grand coalition of parties who were all against a basic income and two opposition parties in which only a minority was in favour of a basic income, there was a high risk that such a committee, even with considerable effort, might fail to generate any productive debate, or could perhaps even result in a rejection of the basic income idea completely. What was done in the years 2013 to 2017 was to carry on developing the Green concept for a guaranteed pension and to develop a concrete concept for a *Kindergrundsicherung* by working groups of the party and of the parliamentary group in the Bundestag.

What was not fulfilled during these years was the promise to bring the debate into wider society. There was no intense, public debate on basic income within the party or in society as a whole. However, that changed due to the increasing

debates in other countries; especially the referendum in Switzerland in 2016 and the basic income experiment in Finland. In 2016, a conference took place that was organised by several Green Party working groups; particularly the working group on the labour market, social policy and health policy, and the working group on economic and financial policy.

#### **2018-2020: Long-term programme, Covid-19 and Future lab**

Since January 2018, the Green Party has a new federal Board with two new chairpersons: Annalena Baerbock and Robert Habeck. Robert Habeck supports the basic income idea and was already a member of the party committee dealing with basic income in 2007. In the same year, the party started the work and discussion on a new "Grundsatzprogramm" (long-term programme), which is the third such programme, following those of 1980 and 2001, and which was subsequently adopted in 2020. Both party chairs emphasised that the discussion on basic income would be a prominent discussion point. The goal was not to have a showdown at the end of the discussion as in 2007, but to have as broad as possible a consensus around a Green concept, which should supersede Hartz IV.

Not only within the Greens, but also in society, we now have a lively discussion about basic income. One reason behind this is the related debate on digitisation and the future of work. Even some top managers in Germany, such as Joe Kaeser from Siemens, Timotheus Hoettges from Telekom and others argue for a basic income, along with the philosopher Richard David Precht, who is often a guest in TV talk shows and who linked his demand for a basic income with the expected changes from digitisation. Thus, basic income is regularly a topic in the media.

Nevertheless, in Germany, none of the mainstream political parties are in favour of a basic income. Only a few social democrats have begun to contemplate it. Although, 10 years ago, a conservative prime minister of one of the federal states put forward an income proposal (see above), nowadays, in the conservative party, there are only a few supporters of a basic income, whose role in their group is only marginal. In the left-wing party, Die Linke, basic income is also controversial, discussed by some prominent advocates – such as the party's former chairwoman Katja Kipping –, but which also faces prominent opponents, such as the former chairwoman of the parliamentary group in the Bundestag, Sarah Wagenknecht. Compared to the discussion within the Green Party, it is even more controversial, and the opponents are even more strongly against a basic income.

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104 See: Strengmann-Kuhn, W. & Jacobi, D. (2012a). Die Grüne Bürgerrente gegen Altersarmut – garantiert für alle. In: Christoph Butterwegge, Gerd Bosbach, Matthias W. Birkwald (eds.): Armut im Alter – Probleme und Perspektiven der sozialen Sicherung. Frankfurt: Campus Verlag.



Thus, the discussion within the Greens – which has the aim of being more constructive – can have an important role for the debate on basic income as a whole in Germany. In this discussion, some key points are now at stake. The first step is that there should be a consensus about the goal to “overcome Hartz IV” and to look for an alternative. One of these alternatives is, of course, basic income. Thus, we need to have a new concrete basic income model. One possibility is an update of the 2007 model of Baden-Württemberg with a partial basic income, additional means-tested benefits and citizen insurances for health, care, and pensions. This update should also include the new concepts of child basic security and a guaranteed pension. However, the question remains as to whether the basic income should be partial or not. The key point of this question is how to deal with housing costs: should they be included in a basic income or not?

Besides the discussion on a new Green basic income model, there is a need to further develop or create new concepts for single groups for a gradual introduction of benefits, such as the child basic security, the guaranteed pension, a negative income tax for workers and – potentially – a basic income for students or artists, a minimum unemployment benefit, and so on. This could be one strategy to implement a basic income group by group<sup>105</sup>.

In 2020, the basic income debate was given an additional boost by the Covid-19 crisis because the flaws of the current minimum income scheme and the gaps in the social security system became clear. The debate accelerated by the Covid-19 crisis also had an impact on the discussion of the Green Party’s long-term programme. As expected, the issue of basic income was one of the controversial points at the party conference in November 2020. The Green Network on Basic Income (Grünes Netzwerk Grundeinkommen<sup>106</sup>) had prepared the debate intensively with a campaign “Grundeinkommen wird Grundsatz” (Basic income becomes principle), including a series of online discussions on different dimensions to the basic income debate. A few days before the party conference, an online event called “Grün. Europe. Grundeinkommen” (Green. Europe. Basic Income) with various guests from all over Europe was held<sup>107</sup>.

In the draft of the basic programme, there was a demand for a means-tested guaranteed security (“Garantiesicherung”), which is an individual right and should be paid out without

sanctions. It is also to be gradually integrated into the tax system to prevent hidden poverty. So, there are already some basic income elements in this guarantee security, although it should be still means-tested. In the end, there was a vote at the party conference on the supplementary sentence “Dabei orientieren wir uns an der Leitidee eines Bedingungslosen Grundeinkommens“ (In doing so, we orient ourselves towards the guiding idea of an unconditional basic income), which then received a majority of over 60%. The basic position of Bündnis 90/Die Grünen is thus clarified. In the short term, they advocate for a means-tested guaranteed income without sanctions, which they then want to develop, step-by-step, in the direction of an unconditional basic income. What this further development will look like in concrete terms, however, must be further clarified in future debates.

It was therefore of the utmost importance for the basic income discussion in Germany as a whole, and for the Greens in particular, that a “future laboratory” was agreed in June 2017 as part of the coalition agreement for a so-called Jamaica coalition of Christian Democrats, Greens and Liberals in the state of Schleswig-Holstein: “We will therefore set up a future laboratory with stakeholders from labour market policy and academia, in which the feasibility of new security models, i.e., a citizen’s income or further development of social security systems, will be discussed. The lab will discuss and evaluate the feasibility of new security models, such as a citizen’s income, a basic income or the further development of social security systems. Just as important as the social and economic flexibilisation of working life will be the debureaucratisation of labour and social administration. We want to carry the results of this process into the federal political debate in order to make our country fit for the challenges of the future and to keep existential fears away from our citizens.”<sup>108</sup>

The fact that Robert Habeck, who had led the coalition negotiations as deputy prime minister, left the state government in 2018 and took over the federal chairmanship of the Green Party, proved to be unfavourable for the Future Lab. After a two-stage tendering process, the ISÖ, led by Michael Opielka and with Wolfgang Strengmann-Kuhn on the board of the sponsoring association, together with subcontractors, above all the German Institute for Economic Research (DIW), was awarded the contract to coordinate the “Schleswig-Holstein Future Lab” project.

The project started at the end of 2018 and led to many workshops, surveys and model developments in 2019.<sup>109</sup>

In the end, a differentiated model of four reform scenarios was developed, which were to be simulated by the German Institute for Economic Research, DIW<sup>110</sup>, for their effects on fiscal and labour market policy.

All four reform scenarios included a more or less far-reaching basic income: 1) Citizens’ income; 2) Basic income; 3) Social insurance (with basic security or guarantee insurance); 4) Citizens’ insurance (see figure).<sup>111</sup> Unfortunately, the Ministry of Social Affairs led by the Liberal Party (FDP) –surprisingly, without any resistance from the Greens – cancelled the Future Lab at the beginning of 2020. The planned public discussion of the eagerly awaited research results therefore did not take place. Amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, these results could have provided significant guidance for the future.

## Outlook

The discussion on basic income within the Greens in Germany is still open and in the coming years, based on the decision on the *Grundsatzprogramm*, we will see just how far the party will go towards a basic income and which role basic income will play in further Green concepts of social security. The Green debate on basic income, however, still points to two major and fundamental dilemmas of modernity: on the one hand, the dilemma between universalism – for which basic income and citizens insurance stand – and particularism – for which, especially in Germany, the market- and privilege-oriented social system stands. The second dilemma is between change and preservation. We believe that the Greens can only hold their own in both dilemmas if they do not take one side but seek a balance. For basic income, this means that it is part of a future-proof social reform. But it is not enough.

Reform scenario 1: Citizens’ income	Reform scenario 2: Basic income	Reform Scenario 3: Social insurance (with Basic Security or Guaranteed Security)	Reform scenario 4: Citizens’ insurance
The Citizens’ Income in the form of a “negative income tax” serves primarily to support labour market and performance motivation in the lower labour market segments.	The basic income in the form of a “social dividend” is available to every legal resident on a monthly basis and is subsequently taxed as “primary income” and subject to contributions (if applicable, according to allowances).	Contribution-financed, living standard-securing (“Bismarckian”) social insurance with “capping” by means-tested basic security (“guarantee security”).	Basic income insurance based on the Swiss AHV model for all life situations (old age, unemployment, parenthood, illness, disability, childhood, education).

Figure: Four reform scenarios for the future of social security with basic income

105 Strengmann-Kuhn, W. (2012). Schritt für Schritt ins Paradies. In: Strengmann-Kuhn, W. & Jacobi, D. (eds.). Wege zum Grundeinkommen. Berlin: Bildungswerk Berlin der Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung.

106 [www.gruenes-grundeinkommen.de](http://www.gruenes-grundeinkommen.de)

107 Find the video here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LjigO\\_pG7SM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LjigO_pG7SM)

108 Coalition Agreement 2017, 31, cited in Opielka, M. (2019a). Ein Zukunftslabor für die Soziale Sicherung. In: Opielka, M. (2019, ed.): Zukunftslabor Schleswig-Holstein. Demographie und Digitalisierung #ZLabSH. ISÖ-Text 2019-1. Norderstedt: BoD, 5f.

109 [www.zlabsh.de](http://www.zlabsh.de), see Opielka, M. & Peter, S. (2020). Zukunftslabor Schleswig-Holstein. Zukunftsszenarien und Reformszenarien. ISÖ-Text 2020-1. Norderstedt: BoD

110 <https://www.diw.de/en>

111 See in detail: Hutflesz, T. & Opielka, M. (2020). Online-Delphi in der Zukunftsforschung zur Sozialpolitik. ISÖ-Text 2020-3. Norderstedt: BoD, 64ff.

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