

Reflections on Developing a National Campaign for Basic Income in Ireland

Paper presented at BIEN congress, Munich, Sept 2012

Anne B Ryan and John Baker¹

Anne.B.Ryan@nuim.ie John.Baker@ucd.ie

Abstract

In May 2011, a number of people got together to reactivate BIEN Ireland, which is one of BIEN's oldest national affiliates. This paper gives a brief narrative of the activities of the group over its first 15 months. Because many of the members had not previously been involved in BIEN, our aim was to develop an approach to our objectives and strategy that involved the development of shared understandings and mutual learning. Recognising the limits on participation set by people's other commitments, we aimed to spread the workload in ways that were sustainable and inclusive. This paper is intended to give us a chance to reflect on what we have achieved and failed to achieve, to share our experience with others, and to learn from the experience of others.

Keywords: basic income, social welfare, civil society, campaigning, Ireland, participatory learning

Introduction

On Saturday May 7th, 2011, twenty people met in the Central Hotel, Dublin, with a view to re-activating the BIEN Ireland network. This paper tells the story of how we planned the re-activation, the actions we have taken, the priorities that emerged to guide our actions, and what we plan to do next. What we have done could be described as a combination of learning and activism and this paper both records and reflects on what we have done. We believe the paper could be a useful resource for other groups as they plan how to develop their work on basic income. We also wish to elicit feedback on our work to date, in order to help shape the work of BIEN Ireland in the future.

We'd like to emphasise at the outset that although we mention a number of people by name below, the process we are describing has involved many people whose names are not mentioned: people who have often travelled long distances to attend meetings, who have made crucial contributions to how all of us have come to understand the issues and to think about strategies, and whose presence and warmth have made the process so positive.

The background

¹ Respectively: Dept of Adult and Community Education, National University of Ireland Maynooth; Equality Studies Centre, School of Social Justice, University College Dublin. We are grateful to all of the members of BIEN Ireland for making this paper possible.

BIEN Ireland has been in existence since the 1990s and hosted the international conference in 2008. But its public profile was low and it had been largely inactive since 2008. From early on, most of the high-profile research about and lobbying for BI in Ireland had been done as part of the work of CORI Justice, and subsequently Social Justice Ireland, steered by Brigid Reynolds and Seán Healy. But as of 2010, no group in Ireland had a sole focus on basic income.

In September 2010, Anne B Ryan emailed John Baker to discuss how BIEN Ireland might be re-vitalised. John was a long-standing member of BIEN Ireland and had a track-record of research and teaching about basic income, as part of his work in the Equality Studies Centre of University College Dublin (UCD). Anne had an interest in universal basic income and had written and taught about it, but had had no previous involvement with BIEN Ireland.

The email of Sept 2010 was the start of a series of emails and phone calls, working together to set up an initial meeting to launch the re-activation. John already had the role of BIEN Ireland coordinator, and had access to a mailing list of members and others interested in basic income. They agreed it would be useful if they became joint coordinators. John contacted Seán and Brigid, to seek their opinions on the re-activation of BIEN Ireland; both were in favour of developing the network in any ways that would further the cause of BI. The first date that Brigid, Seán, Anne and John were all available to attend a meeting was May 7th, 2011.

The Dept of Adult and Community Education at National University of Ireland Maynooth (NUIM), where Anne is a lecturer, made a small amount of money available to pay an administrator to sort through the old database, trace people named on it, get up-to-date email or other contact addresses, and to delete the names of those who were no longer contactable. NUIM also allowed us to set up a web-based email account, which we are using until we get a dedicated account.

John, Anne, Seán and Brigid also sent out a general notice to their various contacts and networks, explaining briefly the concept of basic income and inviting people to join the mailing list and /or attend the first re-activation meeting.

BIEN Ireland already had a bank account, which contained at the end of 2010 about €2,000. John was an account signatory, and arranged for Anne to become a signatory also. It was agreed that the money could be used to pay for meeting venues, printing flyers, or anything else that might be useful.

Initial meetings

Twenty people came to the first meeting on May 7th, 2011. John and Anne facilitated. We asked people to introduce themselves and state any organisational affiliations. The people present had experience in facilitation skills, academia, political activism, voluntary organisations, professional politics, civil service and trades unions. Some had long experience of and commitment to BI – theory and action; others came out of personal interest and passion for the idea; many were concerned with the future for young people.

We then asked people to talk to each other in groups of four, to discuss what they saw as the ‘state of play’ for a universal basic income in Ireland at this time – opportunities, opposition, etc. Each group reported back and there was a general discussion, from which the following points emerged:

- Need for education, bring the idea to ordinary people
- Need to agree on definition of BI
- How to pay for BI: contingencies, pathways, strategies
- Need to take on standard counter-arguments against BI, including the myth/counterargument of ‘scroungers’
- Relationship of BI to dignity, creativity, diversity
- Aim at practical deliverables, such as:
 - relevant search projects on child benefit, refundable tax credits, pensions
 - awareness/education: team up with Green Works, offer FETAC course
- Use social media, Facebook etc.
- Relate BI to overhaul in banking system. Cf. Permaculture Credit Union
- Target younger, middle class people: good prospects
- Provide personalised accounts of how BI would affect typical individuals
- BI can encourage economic growth via creating easier access to paid work
- BI streamlines public services
- For certain groups of claimants, we already have BI in effect (for unemployed people the system is not pursuing with any diligence), but BI would regularise their position and remove stigma

- BI recognises value of unpaid work
- There is already a considerable amount of research and argument to tap into; we do not have to reinvent the wheel
- Value of working at two levels: general big picture and detailed transitional reforms

We set dates for two further meetings, June 12th and Sept 24th 2011, to identify key arguments for BI ('the message'), counterarguments that we needed to anticipate, and initial strategies for the network.

Ten people joined a steering group, to plan subsequent meetings. This group first met on May 19th 2011. We decided to focus the June 12th meeting on developing a strategy for the network, with reference to the points listed above that had emerged from the May 7th meeting. It was agreed that the Sept 24th meeting would focus on refining / approving the strategy, along with some information on the history of BI in Ireland, and beginning to develop key messages about BI.

Planning our approach

Sunday, June 12th 2011, the day of the second general meeting of the network, was pouring rain. Fifteen people attended a meeting in a cold dark room in the city-centre premises of a sustainability organisation. Because of a misunderstanding over our use of the room, there was no tea, coffee or heating available. The surroundings were depressing and the task appeared difficult. Nevertheless, Ivan Cooper successfully facilitated the drafting of a strategy. By the end of the afternoon, we had a draft document, which we circulated to all members of the mailing list and made available for suggestions and edits using Google Docs.

At our Sept 24th meeting, with twenty people present, we approved an overall strategy (Box 1).

We never intended the plan to be perfect, or to be set in stone. We thought of it more as a way of setting out our goals and important steps for achieving them. It has so far been a useful guide, both for identifying tasks and monitoring our progress. More importantly, the discussion that led to the plan helped us to begin to develop a shared understanding of basic income and of the approach we might take in promoting it. One thing we were sure of was that it could not be implemented sequentially: we would need to operate on a variety of issues simultaneously.

Implementing the strategy (6.3): Establishing an organisational structure

Before the Sept 24th meeting of the general network, Ivan and John contacted a number of other BIEN affiliates to find out what they do, and proposed that we adopt for the time being the following structure:

1. a formal membership based on a simple membership form
2. a core steering committee
3. a wider email list of people who want to be kept informed regardless of membership
4. an annual meeting of the members

This proposal was accepted at the Sept 24th meeting.

Basic Income Ireland Network: Strategy**VISION**

An Ireland where every child, woman and man has an unconditional guaranteed basic income sufficient to live life with dignity.

HIGH LEVEL GOALS**1. DEVELOP KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING AMONGST MEMBERS OF THE NETWORK OF PREVIOUS WORK ON / MODELS OF BASIC INCOME**

- 1.1 organise session(s) for network members to share knowledge
- 1.2 conduct a summary review
- 1.3 develop a detailed document on the current situation
 - 1.3.1 history of basic income in Ireland
 - 1.3.2 assemble main arguments for basic income
- 1.4 develop a clear powerpoint presentation
- 1.5 develop a website (resources/links for members to draw on)

2. ESTABLISH THE ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL VIABILITY (DEMONSTRATING THAT WE CAN PAY FOR THIS) OF MODEL/S TO SHOW THAT A GUARANTEED BASIC INCOME CAN BE IMPLEMENTED

- 2.1 draw on and build on existing work demonstrating viability
- 2.2 explore specific pathways

3. RAISE AWARENESS OF, AND SUPPORT FOR, THE CONCEPT BY INVOLVING PEOPLE IN DIALOGUE

- 3.1 develop key messages
- 3.2 promote an all-island conversation
- 3.3 hold education and awareness events and activities
- 3.4 build as wide a constituency as possible
- 3.5 develop a PR / communications plan
- 3.6 defend universality
- 3.7 launch the finalised strategy
- 3.8 develop a website (resources/links for public to draw on: continuous with 1.5)

4. MAKE THE CASE / PUT THE ARGUMENT (TO EVERYONE) – BUT TARGETING THE MESSAGE at key stakeholders: government, economists, political parties, employers, trade unions, faith communities etc

- 4.1 identify potential allies/partners
 - 4.1.1 talk to Green-works, Cultivate and others
 - 4.1.2 establish alliances and partners
- 4.2 speak to / brief politicians on basic income
- 4.3 speak to / brief all identified key stakeholder groups on basic income

5. BUILD THE NETWORK

- 5.1 build an e-list of interested people
- 5.2 establish presence on social media
- 5.3 produce something short and snappy to convey to people
- 5.4 contact ngos / talk to community groups, trade unions, etc - roadshows
- 5.5 use everyone's individual networks
- 5.6 create links with BIEN on social networks
- 5.7 investigate the Equalitytrust.org model
- 5.8 create youtube channel
- 5.9. link to other likeminded think-tanks – such as New Economics Foundation, TASC, Centre for Progressive economics, Social Justice Ireland, Feasta, BIEN, etc.

6. AGREE AN APPROPRIATE STRUCTURE, PROCEDURES ETC. PUT IN PLACE A STRUCTURE / MECHANISM TO DRIVE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE STRATEGY

- 6.1 agree a name for the network/group/organisation
- 6.2 source resources
- 6.3 have a discussion to agree structure

Box 1: BIEN Ireland strategy document

We chose to establish a formal membership for maintaining some accountability on the part of the steering group and for giving some organisational weight to our public engagement. However, to date we have not prioritised this objective and have continued to operate more loosely. There is perhaps a sense that it is too early in the process to formalise membership.

We decided that the steering committee would continue to be constituted by volunteering rather than election. As mentioned, ten people had volunteered for the steering group at the May 7th meeting. Of this group, one person emigrated, one didn't respond to emails, one (from Belfast) decided it wasn't practical to be part of the steering group, although he continues to be active on the wiki (see below for information about the wiki). The group of ten did not 'take off' as it was envisaged. A smaller (first six-, now five-member) 'key messages' group, which emerged later in response to a specific task, has become the de facto steering group. We refer to the strategy document and consult the attendees at the general meetings of the network, when we want to decide on the agendas and actions to be taken. This raises the question of whether we should move to formally reconstitute this group as the steering group, or rethink our organisational decisions.

We envisaged that the email list would be used to keep the wider set of members and contacts in the picture, and have in this case stuck to our intentions. It has grown from 64 to 135, as of July 2012. The convenors, John and Anne, have established a practice of writing up reports after network meetings, and circulating them to the whole email list. The list is also used occasionally to send out further information, links, and invitations to participate.

We intended the annual meeting, which could be combined with another event, to be an occasion for reviewing the work of the steering group and of the network generally and for renewing the steering group. We have not yet had our first annual meeting, which is due this autumn.

When we adopted proposals on structure, we were not sure how often we would hold general network meetings. As it has worked out, we have held general meetings more or less monthly between September 2011 and May 2012, with an attendance of 13 to 20 people. There has been a strong core attendance from many of the people who attended the first re-activation meeting in May 2011. These meetings have remained the focus for discussing and deciding the general development of the network, including its central themes and priorities, and this may be another reason why there has been no great anxiety about

the erosion of the steering committee. It remains to be seen if this will continue to be our mode of operation.

Implementing the strategy (3.1): Developing key messages about BI

Our Sept 24th agenda contained an item 'key messages for our publicity material'. Before the meeting, John and Anne met and drafted texts about the benefits of BI for work, equality and social justice, and green/sustainability economies. At the general network meeting, others present added the headings of security, freedom and eliminating income poverty.

The general meeting decided, after discussion, that it would be better to target groups or people in specific situations in Irish society, rather than focussing the messages on such general themes as work, or equality. It was decided to work towards a simple, short general statement about basic income, and to have separate statements showing how basic income could benefit

- Families
- Young people
- Employed people
- Students
- Unemployed people
- Employed poor
- Carers / Unpaid workers
- Volunteers
- Self-employed people
- Employers
- Employed and overworked (but not cash-poor)
- Insecure employed people
- Artists
- Activists
- Older people

There was some debate about whether women should be a distinct target group, an issue on which we haven't yet reached a resolution within the network.

The meeting also concluded that it was too messy a task for a large group such as the network meeting to work on texts. It was decided that a smaller 'key messages' group should draft texts and bring them to the general network meetings for discussion, feedback, approval and subsequent refinement. Róisín Mulligan, Michelle Murphy, Ivan Cooper, Rits Guiran, John Baker and Anne B Ryan volunteered to act as a 'key messages' group.

The 'key messages' group met several times, separate from the general meetings of the network. At our first meeting on October 12th, we refined the two-part approach to the key messages:

1. A simple, short general statement, which could appear on the home-page of a future website. We envisaged that random visitors would read this, and then be able follow it up by reading in more detail how BI benefits specific groups (see 2 below).
2. Tailored key messages for each group. First, the identification of the needs of and the challenges facing each group at this time. Then, showing how a guaranteed basic income could help to meet those needs and assist in overcoming the challenges. Finally, a caution that basic income is not a panacea but one necessary element that could help with the problems faced.

The first work of the key messages group was focussed on writing the one-page general statement, to include an introduction to the concept of basic income and why it is appropriate for our times. We had lengthy discussions about what should be included, and John eventually drafted a text to which the rest of the group made contributions. The text is 569 words and has three headings: a caring society, the smart economy and quality of life.

Before the key messages group began working on the texts for specific groups, we had another general network meeting on Oct 15th, 2011. The meeting selected two groups (unemployed and young people 15+) and Ivan facilitated discussion and recording of the challenges/needs of the groups, followed by the benefits of basic income for them. This discussion gave the key messages group a good idea of how to approach writing texts for other target groups.

At the centre of our approach was to think of BI from the point of view of the 'target' audience, and ask, 'How can this benefit me or people I know and care about?' Drawing on the experience of members of the group, we tried to look at BI from the point of view of people who find themselves in financial insecurity,

and who perhaps never expected to be there; of people experiencing the benefits trap; of people whose unpaid work makes an important contribution to economy and society.

We did not emphasise the role of basic income in bringing about freedom. But we did imply that basic financial security had a role to play in helping people get free *from* ‘the issues’ they faced (the burden of oppression) and its role in creating conditions where everyone would be have freedom *to* realise their humanity in diverse ways.

Meeting subsequently, the key messages group decided to prioritise some of the target groups listed at the general meeting, and chose to concentrate on young people, unemployed people, artistic and creative work, care work, and self-employed / entrepreneurial work. The group also decided to shift the focus slightly from groups to statuses or activities – that is, to talk in terms of the relevance of BI to ‘being unemployed’ rather than to the group of unemployed people, to ‘caring’ rather than to the group of carers – in recognition that these groups overlapped. In tailoring the message for each target status/activity, we were guided by our original idea at 2 above, and arrived at a sort of template that included decisions about the overall structure, the tenses of verbs, etc. We also decided we needed to keep each key message text to one page. Each ‘key message’ page first states the ‘issues’ facing different groups or types of work at this time; then it lists how a BI can help. It finishes with some points about the things that BI cannot achieve. An example text is given in box 2.

Our process in the key messages group for writing these texts was to list ideas at random about each target issue, followed by a general conversation / discussion. We made notes and then one member of the key messages group worked alone to draft text using the template agreed. We each brought the draft to the next meeting of the key messages group for feedback, then we re-drafted and developed the texts to a stage where content and structure were robust but still flexible. We brought these texts back to general network meetings to constructively discuss and comment on them. These discussions were intense and lively, and often resulted in substantial changes in both the content and tone of the texts themselves. After the general network meetings, the key message-group member with responsibility for the text revised the text in light of the meeting’s discussion.

Artistic and creative work

How does basic income support artistic and creative work?

The issues

- Artistic and creative work adds economic value to society, but it is often valued only for its potential contribution to economic growth.
- Artistic and creative work is also intrinsically valuable, but this receives little recognition. There is also a narrow appreciation of the contribution of art and creativity to social and individual development.
- Those who make artistic and creative work their chief occupation often experience income insecurity, cash-flow problems, even poverty. There is often pressure to 'get a real job' or to do commercially valued work, in order to earn a living. Financial stress can impede creativity.
- If an artist takes a 'real job' in order to earn money, it is usually difficult to find time and energy for the artistic and creative work. For those not currently engaged in artistic or creative activities, the need to earn money may mean there is little time or energy left to learn artistic skills or to develop their creative capacities.
- Many full-time artists and creative workers are dependent on grants or patronage, which may not support the kinds of work they want to do. This may result in an unfulfilled passion or a sense that one cannot make the contribution one is capable of or would like to make.
- Some artists and creative workers are supported by family members, which may put financial strain on those providing the support.
- Those who engage full time in low-paid or non-paid artistic and creative work may end up putting the rest of life 'on hold', in order to prioritise artistic or creative activity.

How basic income can help

Basic income is not payment for artistic and creative work. It is recognition of everybody's need for financial security, regardless of the kind of work they do.

- With basic income, everyone engaged in artistic and creative work has a small regular cash flow and can make financial plans. There is no need to apply for social welfare or prove eligibility for benefits, in times when no money is coming in from work.
- Individual basic financial security reduces personal dependency on family members, grant committees and other patrons. The other people in one's life also have a basic income, so they are not 'dependent' in the way they might be now. In all, this frees up time and reduces stress for everyone, which in turn is good for creativity and learning.
- Basic income increases freedom to practice all kinds of art and creative activities, including work that is of deep personal interest, or of direct social benefit. It reduces pressures to pursue work that is commercially viable.
- Basic income increases opportunities for everybody to try out creative and artistic activities and to include them in the range of work they do, whether that be full- or part-time, as professional or amateur, paid or unpaid.

What basic income does not do

Basic income is not a panacea. It will not automatically create a greater appreciation of the value and range of artistic and creative work. Society as a whole needs to create such an appreciation. If we wish to have a society that values art and creativity as intrinsic activities, and as activities that are of social and personal benefit, we need to have active public conversations about these issues. Basic income has a part to play in a wider attempt to give art and creativity the support and recognition they deserve.

Box 2. Example of 'key message' page

The texts that have emerged are quite nuanced and tailored for the current Irish political and economic and emotional climate, as the network meetings read it. We have made judgements about what is more or less acceptable or liable to be 'heard' or to make sense to people in Ireland at this time. We reflected on the Irish scene and the kinds of things people are looking for and ready to hear. These could be compared to pedagogical entry points – judging what will resonate with any target audience and get them interested in wanting to know more.

At Rits's suggestion, a members-only wiki was set up and all of the texts have been posted on it for any member to read and edit. The wiki is also a repository for the strategic plan, notes of meetings, and some online discussion.

We invited everyone on the mailing list to join the wiki, read the material and participate in further minor editing or development of the texts. Although most of the editing has been done by a few people, a dozen or so members have participated at some level. There are currently about 25 wiki members.

We plan to set up a simple website, which will make the key-message texts, and other texts as we develop them, available to the general public. We are currently discussing how to do this with a new member of the general network, who has website-design skills. We hope that the website will eventually become an interactive forum for ideas about basic income in Ireland.

Implementing the strategy (1.1): Developing our own understandings

Although we had specific intended outcomes, namely one-page key-message texts, from this backwards-and-forwards conversation among members and between the key messages group and the general network meetings, we also realised from the beginning that we would need to engage in a process of learning and deepening our own understanding of basic income. In fact, the two objectives went hand in hand, because our discussion of key messages often raised important issues about what a basic income is, what it might or might not achieve, why it might be supported or resisted, and how it might be implemented. Our discussions were often lengthy, sometimes apparently chaotic and without solid outcomes. There was a lot of common ground, there was frequent discussion of nuance and detail, and sometimes there was

disagreement, especially around the issues of care and whether or not women should be selected and targeted as a distinct group that could benefit from basic income.

One thing that became clear as we went along was that different participants understood basic income and its attractions from quite different perspectives. Sometimes the differences were political in a fairly straightforward sense, such as the differences in rationale for supporting basic income among people coming from socialist, green, feminist or Christian outlooks. Sometimes the differences were more rooted in personal experience: being unemployed, being young, or engaging in care-giving, for example. The discussions were therefore an opportunity to learn not just from reading and argument but also from lived experience. They also helped us to learn about and understand each other.

The regular summaries and reports to the email list, together with the invitation to join and participate in the wiki, were partly aimed at extending this learning to the wider network. But it's clear enough that actual participation in these discussions is a more effective way of developing one's understanding.

It was clear to all of us from the outset that developing a strong and (largely) shared understanding of BI was a necessary condition for using the network to 'promote an all-island conversation' (3.2). But for most of the members, if not all, how we went about this as a process was also informed by experience in other contexts, including the community and voluntary sector, adult education and equality studies. That experience supported the idea of collaborative, dialogical learning as distinct from 'delivering' knowledge to subjects, premised, among other things, on the view that people's understanding and commitment to ideas depends on their participation in their development and articulation.

In some meetings, the learning process began in a more conventional way, with presentations of people's experience or ideas. For example, on Sept 24th, the general network meeting opened with a presentation from Seán Healy about the history of basic income in Ireland. Seán's paper, on which the presentation was based, was later distributed to all on the mailing list. On Oct 15th Róisín Mulligan presented key ideas from her MA thesis. Her study examined basic income as a tangible step towards the ideal of equality of recognition for all members of society. Discussion of the ideas followed, and Róisín prepared a summary of her presentation, for distribution to all on the mailing list. We have also had two presentations at general meetings of the network, about paying for basic income. But in all of these cases, the object has been to

start a dialogue about the issues in question, and our meetings have succeeded in developing understanding only to the extent that this dialogue has taken place.

In common with activists in many other movements, we believe that the *way* things are done is just as important as *what* is done. This principle refers not just to tactics or strategy, but to a method of relating to each other. In the conduct of our meetings and the invitations to all on the email list to join the wiki, we have made an effort to be inclusive and participative. This way of organising ourselves seems to be important to all of the members of the network, or at least to everyone who has been a regular participant in the meetings.

Conflicting objectives?

Our meetings so far have been intended as a space for learning and activism combined. Learning has dominated up to this point. So can we say we are activists at all? So far, our activism is taking a particular form – broadening awareness of basic income, and taking the first steps in trying to spark a national conversation about it. In effect, our network has functioned as a hosting space (cf Wheatley and Frieze, 2011) for developing ideas and actions concerned with bring about progressive social change.

One might have expected that those who had been researching and lobbying for so long about basic income would be frustrated by the lengthy process of hosting. One member of the general network, who has been reflecting on the issues for a long time, has expressed some frustration in emails, about the slow progress and our apparently limited foci. But if others shared this feeling, they didn't show it.

There is always a temptation for people who are experts and who have been working with the ideas for a long time to take up a 'hero' role (ibid), to expect others to simply follow, adopt the ideas and concentrate on lobbying or other political activity. However, the 'experts' among us have been able to participate in the hosting activities that have dominated our process. They too, along with the less experienced members of the network meetings, have deepened their understanding of how people respond to the concept of basic income, by attending to the questions and responses of those with less experience. Those who had done little or no previous thinking about basic income, but were attracted to the principles behind it, gained a lot of information, as well as understanding.

By May 2012, we had half a dozen relatively stable texts, available to everyone on the email list to use among our networks or at any time we are talking to people about BI. They are our first publicity material. It may seem that a year was a long time to take to develop these texts. Any expert on BI could probably have written them quickly. Or we could have cut and pasted material from the BIEN website. However, we deliberately emphasised a high level of participation in constructing the texts, and it is probably fair to say that network members who have been at several meetings feel a high degree of understanding and ownership of the final texts. Moreover, the texts are nuanced for the current social, political, economic and emotional climate in Ireland. The hosting dimension of our work has enabled such participatory learning. It means that when any of us comes to use these texts in conversation with others, we will have already discussed in the general network many of the implications of what they contain. This is a participatory form of learning, which is in itself a form of activism. We believe it can and should exist alongside more conventional forms of activism such as political lobbying and argument.

Looking at arguments against BI

Once we had made some progress drafting the key messages about the benefits of BI, the general network meetings turned to the objections or arguments against it. Those attending the general meetings of the network were in favour of thoroughly listing and exploring the arguments against, and developing responses to those counterarguments. We used a different approach for this task. At a general meeting, we listed all the objections we could think of. We grouped them together under several headings and meeting attendees volunteered to select a heading each, to state the counterarguments under this heading and draft a response to the counterargument. The next step is to put the draft text on the wiki, and then everyone else on the wiki is encouraged to read and develop the material on all the pages. Progress on this work, using the wiki, has been much more uneven than with the key messages. We haven't yet anything like stable texts on counterarguments to BI, and responses to those counterarguments. Perhaps is it more difficult for people to participate virtually, rather than face to face? Perhaps it is less engaging to think about the objections to BI than to think about its attractions?

Implementing the strategy (3.2): Promoting an all-island conversation about BI

At our general network meeting in May 2012, we discussed how network members can begin conversations about BI with representatives of and others belonging to the following groups: unemployed people, carers

and others concerned with care issues and young people. Ivan facilitated an exercise to identify individuals within those groups. Several people present undertook to contact one or more person and to send the general statement and 'key messages' text relevant to the group in question. We hope that it will then be possible to have a series of one-to-one conversations with each person about BI. In line with our initial discussion of strategy, and our subsequently developed hosting process, we very much envisage these as genuine conversations, as distinct from sales pitches or lobbying. We want to hear how people respond to the idea of BI, to hear their questions and objections, and to engage them in the kind of knowledge-construction process that we are already involved in. At the same time, we will deepen and refine the knowledge already developed within the network. Those who respond positively following the initial conversations will be invited to attend our September 2012 general network meeting, thus broadening the active network and hopefully extending the conversation throughout Ireland. To date we have only held a few of these conversations, but they have already seemed fruitful.

Closing reflections

We should like to close this paper with some further reflections on the process we have been engaged in.

Building relationships

Although some of us know each other from other contexts, a great deal of the work we have done to date has rested on a foundation of personal relationships. Anne and John initially established a relationship in order to start the re-activation. The general network meetings are of a size that people can get to know names and recognise faces and converse with each other in productive ways. The key messages group likewise. We have not developed the same level of knowledge of each other as in friendships, but we seem to have developed relationships that have some of the characteristics of friendship, involving a sense of solidarity and not just a pragmatic interaction. The relationships are underpinned by our sharing of a measure of personal experience during the meetings and the participatory form of learning in which we have engaged.

Our approach to widening the conversation about BI is also relational, both because we are starting off by asking members to initiate conversations with people they already know, and because we hope to conduct these conversations in a spirit of mutual care and respect.

One might, of course, say that relationship is at the conceptual and political heart of basic income also, since it concerns the relationships among members of a society. As an expression of their solidarity and mutual concern, they guarantee to each other the basic security of enough money to deal with the broad parameters of life. Within those parameters, everyone has the freedom to be creative and diverse in how they organise their personal and public lives, including how they relate to and organise work, time and money.

Scaling across

Our plans for broadening the network, extending the conversation about basic income and building influence for the idea could be seen as *scaling across*. It differs from the traditional notion of *scaling up*, or getting a tipping point or critical mass of people involved (ibid). The two are not mutually exclusive, but campaigns often emphasise scaling up.

This model for widening the network of people interested in and committed to BI is based, in part, on a recognition that none of us are able to do all the work required ourselves (a heroic model). We do feel able to host the kind of process we have described above, in the hope that it will act as a catalyst for the development of a wider social understanding of and support for BI.

Practical limits to our inclusivity

So far we have used Dublin as a venue for our meetings. An issue faced by nearly all Irish organisations is that although Dublin is an obvious place to meet, this makes it hard for people from other parts of the country to be involved. People have attended from Belfast, Dingle, and the Aran Islands, coming on long journeys to be physically present, because they recognise the value of the face to face learning and interaction. Since it is difficult for these members to attend often, it would be a good idea to meet elsewhere from time to time, recognising that people based in Dublin may not be able to attend on those occasions.

Even within Dublin, it is impossible to find a time that suits everyone. So far, all our meetings have been on Saturdays. We have three or four keen members whose paid work means they can never attend on a Saturday. They have asked if we could sometimes change the day.

The potential and limits of online communication

As detailed above, we have made quite a lot of use of email for keeping members of the network informed. The wiki has provided an opportunity for everyone to check up on the developing key messages and to contribute to their content. Now that some of the key messages texts are relatively stable, they are available on the wiki. Network members can access the wiki and print those texts any time they need them. The wiki is also a useful repository for our record of meetings, and has some potential for online discussion.

We have taken the first steps in developing a website for a wider audience, and as a link to other resources on the web. Our plan calls for the use of other online resources such as Facebook and Youtube. All of these have potential, but they also require resources in terms of time and energy. We have had to work within our own capacities, and hope that as the network grows, so will its capabilities.

These online resources have provided an opportunity for people to be involved in the network even if they are not able to attend meetings. At the same time, as we have mentioned above, we have found that the face to face engagement of members of the network has been invaluable. We could never have got this far if we had relied simply on electronic resources.

The value of diversity

The active members of our network, small as it is, are a diverse group in many ways, including age, gender, social class, religious affiliation, family status, employment status, occupation and educational background. In our view, this diversity has been a wonderful resource in helping all of the members of the network to see BI from a wide range of perspectives. For example, we might never have seen the need for a plan if it were not for Ivan. We might never have addressed the complexities of the relation between BI and care if it were not for Kate. We might never have considered using a wiki if it were not for Rits. Those of us who thought some of the issues surrounding women and basic income had been resolved were reminded by Martina's input that it is not as simple as we think. These are just a few examples of what we have learnt from our own diversity.

If our network is to grow and to achieve its aims, it will be because we will have managed to sustain this diversity in a spirit of solidarity and mutual respect. And regardless of what the future brings, our journey so far has shown the importance of these values.

Concluding remarks

In summary, since its re-activation, our network has

- Invited Irish basic income experts to bring their resources and talents to the process of renewed efforts towards basic income in Ireland
- Invited people hitherto not included in the process to bring their experiences to the creation of extended knowledge about basic income
- Constructed deeper understandings about the viability and potential of basic income in the current Irish context
- Developed a plan for and taken the first steps towards inviting an extended range of people and organisations to the process.

These are first steps only but it is our intention to underpin future activities for the network with the same or complementary principles and ways of working together. We welcome comments and reflections from readers of this paper on our process and on possibilities for the future of our network.

References

Wheatley, Margaret and Frieze, Deborah (2011) *Walk Out, Walk On: A Learning Journey into Communities Daring to Live the Future Now*. San Francisco: Berrett Kohler.