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Does a guaranteed income protect an individual's rights?

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For some time now, and more so recently, there has been a growing call for a *guaranteed income* in Canada. From a rights perspective, the idea has merit. It appeals to core Canadian values like dignity and equality that are embedded in our Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

In a country as wealthy as Canada, it is reasonable and just to expect that all its people should be able to live with dignity. A crucial part of living a dignified life is having an adequate income that ensures that everyone has enough to eat, a place to live and clothes to wear.

A guaranteed income as an idea also speaks to the requirement for every person to have *access* to their rights and entitlements. The “guarantee” invokes a sense of accountability – a social contract between the state and its people to ensure that each person has access to enough income to meet their basic needs.

However, the call for a guaranteed income goes beyond a value-based idea and recommends its implementation as a social policy to solve poverty. Details about how to do it are currently vague.

As Ken Battle of the Caledon Institute outlines in his paper *Guaranteed Income or Guaranteed Incomes?* (<http://www.caledoninst.org/Publications/PDF/1078ENG.pdf>), we already have a wide array of policy instruments aimed at income security. We have the Canada Child Tax Benefit, Working Income Tax Benefit, Guaranteed Income Supplement, Old Age Security and a long list of other government supports that have been developed over time to target particular needs and circumstances. Tied to the tax system, which is our primary tool of redistribution, they are effective instruments for protecting Canadians from poverty.

The challenge we have today is to make sure that these supports are fully funded, that their designs correspond to the current realities of our labour market and to ensure the accountability of the state in delivering on them.

As well, we need to consider how people access their entitlements and whether there are barriers.

Since many of our current benefits and entitlements are delivered through the tax system, those who don't file taxes will miss out. Often this will be the very poor and most vulnerable: the homeless, people with mental illness, women. These are the gaps that need to be filled.

Delivering on income is only part of the equation when looking for solutions to poverty. Part of the state's obligation is ensuring a healthy and vibrant social infrastructure; affordable housing, a system of childcare, skills training and employment programming that connect people to work, as well as services and programs that close the opportunity gap for young people.

A guaranteed income will not solve these more complex issues – in fact, it could leave people with minimal resources subject to a free market of housing, daycare, health supports, and other basic needs. It runs the risk of potential trade-offs for government spending: for example, instead of investing in a national pharmacare program, the government could provide a guaranteed income cheque and let individuals navigate the market on their own to meet their needs.

If we pull back the curtain on guaranteed income, it could be seen as part of a wider trend toward emphasizing the personal responsibility of individuals to keep themselves out of poverty. It removes the state from the equation and, in turn, relieves it of its responsibility.

We cannot allow this to happen. Reducing the role of government would in itself become a barrier to protecting rights. To build a society that truly protects against poverty, the legal protection of individual rights must be the foundation; otherwise we remain vulnerable to the winds of political change.

The current discussion around guaranteed income is helpful in shining the light on the accountability of our governments to deliver on the promise they hold with their people. But without a legislative and regulatory framework for protecting rights, the most vulnerable will be left without recourse and without justice.

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