

MEETING NEEDS WITHIN LIMITS

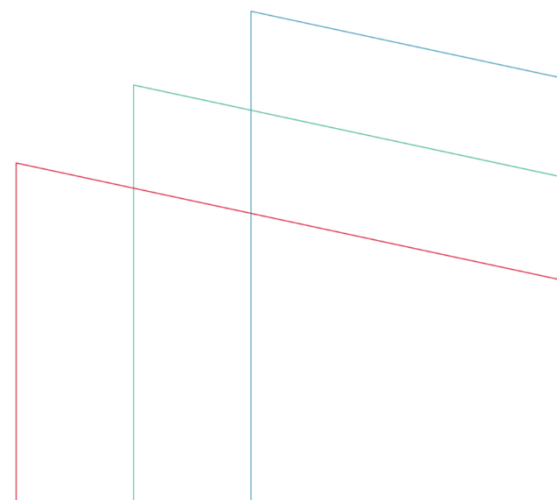
THE ECOLOGICAL CASE FOR UNIVERSAL BASIC SERVICES

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Published: December 2023

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SUMMARY

Universal basic services (UBS) aims for universal access to life's essentials within planetary boundaries. Ecological sustainability is built into its purpose and design. It is not a social 'add-on', but indispensable for achieving environmental goals. This briefing summarises its proposals, then details how it can play a key role in protecting nature and reaching net zero.

WHAT UBS PROPOSES

The first job of a good government is to meet people's needs universally and sufficiently. Some needs can be met through markets, but all require collective measures: public services, investment of public funds, and regulation in the public interest. The term UBS is shorthand for this combination of measures.

UBS seeks to improve services that already exist, such as healthcare and schools, and to extend collective measures to areas where basic needs are not adequately met – including housing, domestic energy, childcare, adult social care, transport and digital access.

As different needs are bound to be met in different ways, UBS offers a principled framework to guide policy and practice in every case. Key features are a universal right to life's essentials, built-in sustainability, devolved powers, a mixed economy of providers bound by public interest obligations, and fair pay and conditions for service workers.

WHY UBS MATTERS FOR ENVIRONMENTALISTS

UBS is grounded in the vision of a 'safe and just space for humanity'. It seeks to realise the vision by cutting greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and safeguarding ecological limits, by promoting greater equality and by establishing secure social foundations for all. It resonates strongly with UN Sustainable Development Goals and findings of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

Cutting GHG emissions and safeguarding planetary boundaries

UBS contributes proactively to maintaining ecological limits by:

- *Prioritising needs and recognising limits.* Basic needs are intrinsically satiable, unlike wants and preferences which can escalate endlessly. Without a safe planet, all efforts to satisfy them are ultimately futile. A needs-based approach recognises limits to what is necessary to live well - enough for all, so that everyone can have enough.
- *Enlarging the sphere of public consumption.* Services that deliver life's essentials are not commodities but public goods, subject to shared responsibility and democratic control. Adequately supported by public funds, they can be made accessible to all according to need, not ability to pay. They can improve quality of life by preventing harm arising from unmet needs. They also reduce demand for 'downstream' services, which are generally more resource intensive and take a heavier toll on the planet than 'upstream' preventative measures.
- *Transforming service provision.* Where public services are democratically controlled with the main purpose of serving the public interest, they are better able to safeguard ecological limits than market-led systems. Good public service providers can lead by example and influence their networks to coordinate sustainable practices including: active travel, resource-efficiency in construction and maintenance of buildings, and local food procurement. This helps avoid duplication and waste, minimise excessive demand, and contribute to implementing national strategies for reducing GHG emissions.
- *Building knowledge, shaping attitudes and behaviour.* Public services can demonstrate what is possible through their own practice including: raising awareness, supporting different ways of doing things, discouraging behaviour harmful to the environment and preventing people being locked-in to unsustainable routines. Across all areas of need, public services that share the same ethos can create powerful visions of what is normal and desirable, and real opportunities for change across the population. UBS values solidarity and helps create favourable conditions for working together to safeguard the planet.

- *Generating new green jobs.* Implementing UBS would generate new employment at all skills levels to all corners of the country. Most would be low-carbon jobs, where services depend on people and relationships rather than on energy-intensive hardware.

Creating greater equality

Implementing UBS would reduce inequalities by redistributing resources. This is vital for meeting carbon targets.

- *Redistribution.* Public services represent a far higher proportion of total income for poorer households compared to richer. Investing in more and better public services will necessitate increasing taxation and curbing luxury consumption by higher income groups (e.g. on second homes, multiple flights, exotic holidays), which is responsible for high levels of harmful emissions and resource depletion.
- *Vital for meeting climate targets.* Given the speed and intensity of reduction measures required to prevent climate breakdown, an undifferentiated distribution of impact across income groups would drive the poorest below any acceptable minimum living standard. This calls for two integrated trajectories - falling emissions and falling inequalities - to achieve net zero.

Establishing secure social foundations

Meeting basic human needs universally and sufficiently can compensate for regressive effects of green policies and help build popular support for them.

- *Compensating for regressive effects.* For example, rising fuel duties would take a lower toll on individuals' budgets if they could switch to public transport. If housing were managed in the public interest, the costs of retrofitting could be subsidised and shared so that they did not land most heavily on low-income households.
- *Building popular support.* Experience of poverty and insecurity leaves people feeling powerless, hopeless and resentful – and inclined to distrust governments' efforts to meet climate goals. UBS could shift that, so people feel better about their daily lives and more likely to trust their governments.

This briefing is the start of a process. Next, we must build consensus among environmentalists that UBS is central to their agenda and influence policymaking at all levels. This calls for an alliance of supportive organisations and generating further evidence to show what can be achieved.

INTRODUCTION

The term UBS describes a set of proposals for achieving universal access to life's essentials within the limits of a finite ecosystem. Ecological sustainability is built into its purpose and design. This briefing demonstrates why UBS must be central to the environmental agenda. It is not a social "add-on" or "nice-to-have", but indispensable for achieving a sustainable future.

In Section One, we set out what UBS proposes and briefly describe the key features of this agenda. In Section Two, we show why it matters for environmentalists, detailing ways in which UBS plays a key role in protecting nature and reaching net zero.

SECTION ONE: UNIVERSAL BASIC SERVICES

UBS starts from the premise that the first job of good government is to meet human needs – to ensure that everyone has access to the core necessities that make life possible and worth living.¹

There's broad agreement about what basic needs are: a home to live in, nourishing food, education, people to look after us when we can't look after ourselves, healthcare when we are ill, air, water, domestic energy, transport to take us where we need to go, access to the internet and a safe environment.² While some of us can buy some of these things privately, none of us (even the rich) can meet all our needs without collective measures – primarily public services backed by investment of public funds and regulation in the public interest. UBS describes this combination of measures.

While acknowledging that everyone should have a sufficient *cash income*, derived from access to paid employment with fair wages, backed by a minimum income guarantee, UBS focuses on ensuring that everyone has a sufficient *virtual income or social wage*, made up of “in-kind” benefits that are collectively provided.

COLLECTIVE MEASURES: SERVICES, INVESTMENT AND REGULATION

Meeting needs within environmental limits requires a range of collective measures: pooling resources, sharing risks and responsibilities, and working together to help each other through services, investment and regulation.

Universal services

Proposals for developing a range of universal services are set out elsewhere, drawing on examples of good practice in the UK and across Europe.³ The aim is to improve services that already exist, such as healthcare and schools, and to extend collective measures to areas where basic needs are not met universally or sufficiently – including housing, domestic energy, childcare, adult social care, transport and

digital access. To be universally accessible, these must be free or genuinely affordable for all who need them and of sufficient quality to meet people's needs.

UBS recognises that individual services are not stand-alone coping mechanisms to be dealt with in separate silos. Instead, they work together, reinforcing each other's effects across the range of needs. There's no point having a better NHS if people keep getting ill because they are poorly housed or fed, or better childcare, if health and social care services are failing to maintain the wellbeing of children and other family members. The aim is to meet all basic needs, rather than waiting to treat problems that arise when any one of them is unmet. UBS promotes an integrated system that keeps people well and prevents harm.

Investment of public funds

Estimates of what it would cost to deliver more and better services, with a review of proposals for raising the necessary funds can be found elsewhere.⁴ A key point here is that this is not just public spending, but an essential investment in the social infrastructure, without which everyday life and the economy would grind to a halt. It is a sure way to make savings by avoiding harm and to generate dividends for the public purse. For example, it has been estimated that for every £1 invested in the National Health Service, £4 is recouped through gains to the economy,⁵ and that investment in "high-quality, universal childcare provided free at the point of use" would outweigh costs by "around £1.50 for every £1 spent".⁶

Similarly, public investment in education, housing, transport and care will yield dividends by supporting health and wellbeing, building knowledge and skills, preventing harm through early intervention, and creating conditions that enable people to feel secure and fulfil their potential. Where this is a collective endeavour, with services that are managed through public institutions, it is likely to achieve better value for money than a system based on competitive markets and profit maximisation. Public services can apply economies of scale, lower transaction costs, restrain profit extraction and reduce risks arising from inequalities of knowledge and power.⁷ In practice, this can happen whether services are provided directly by the state or supported and regulated in the public interest by a mixed economy of providers.

Regulation

The idea of “social licensing” is an important part of the UBS agenda. This is a regulatory system through which all service providers that receive public funds (directly or via subsidised user fees) must comply with a shared set of public interest obligations.⁸ These would aim to ensure access according to need, sufficient service quality, and fair pay and conditions for service workers, as well as to embed sustainable practice in service provision. A well-developed system of social licensing could make it possible for a mixed economy of providers to deliver services universally and sufficiently. It would encourage innovation by local authorities, community-based organisations and other third-sector players, and curb the anti-social and extractive tendencies of financialised capital. It could reverse the momentum of “new public management”, which since the 1990s has contrived to introduce market mechanisms into the state sector.⁹ Instead, it would reassert the public interest by putting people first - not as ‘customers’ but as citizens and residents who have a right to life’s essentials, so that this can become a driving force in transforming public services to meet everyone’s basic needs.

The UBS framework

Basic human needs are universal but how they are satisfied will vary widely between locations and generations. UBS offers a principled framework to guide policy and practice in every case – as follows:

- *The right to life’s essentials*: everyone should have what they need to survive and flourish – as a right, not a privilege or concession.
- *Built-in sustainability*: services should be designed to cut harmful emissions and safeguard natural resources, and be able to continue meeting needs for successive generations.
- *Devolved powers*: subject to the principle of subsidiarity, services should be planned and delivered at the lowest appropriate level, with decisions shared by residents.
- *A mixed economy of provision*: services can be delivered by a range of state and non-state organisations, provided all are bound by a shared set of public interest obligations.

- *Fair pay and conditions for service workers:* to include a living wage, good working conditions, career development and trade union recognition.

This is a big idea but it is also pragmatic. It can start small and local, developing incrementally, learning from experience and adapting to change.

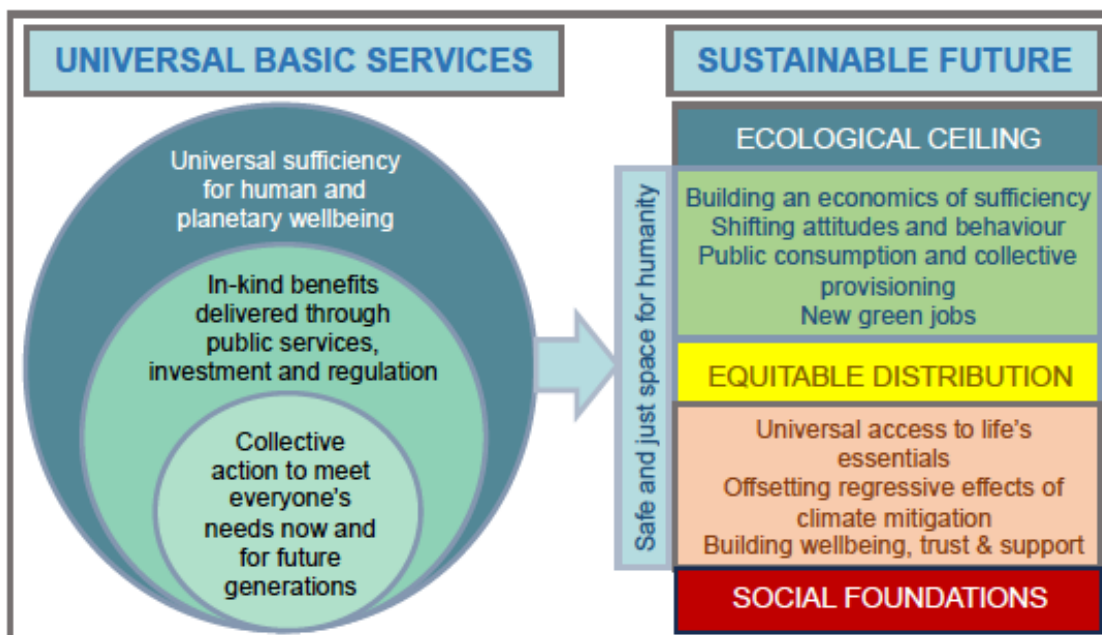
SECTION TWO: WHY UBS MATTERS FOR ENVIRONMENTALISTS

UBS is grounded in the concept of a “safe and just space for humanity”¹⁰ and the closely related idea of sustainable “consumption corridors” between a social floor and an ecological ceiling.¹¹ It seeks to realise this vision by:

- Endorsing globally agreed targets for cutting GHG emissions and safeguarding planetary boundaries.
- Promoting greater equality.
- Establishing secure social foundations below which no-one should fall.

These combined contributions interact and are mutually reinforcing. Together, they help to create conditions for a just transition to a sustainable future. They are also key to securing electoral support for environmental policies.

Figure 1: How UBS contributes to a sustainable future



Source: Author

Our proposals for UBS resonate strongly with the UN Sustainable Development Goals. These insist that ending poverty and deprivation must go hand-in-hand with strategies to improve health and education, and reduce inequality and promote economic prosperity, at the same time as “tackling climate change and working to preserve our oceans and forests”.¹² When the IPCC reviewed evidence on demand-

side measures, services and social aspects of climate mitigation, it recognised the role of government actions to support “services for provision of public goods”. It also recognised the importance of changes that “reinforce sufficiency and emphasis on solidarity, economies built around care, livelihood protection, collective action, and basic service provision, linked to reduced emissions”.¹³ Debates about how the EU should pursue a just transition increasingly feature UBS.

However, while our ideas are gaining traction among some environmentalists, many have yet to be convinced that the UBS agenda belongs in the mainstream of green politics. The rest of this briefing shows why a strategy for meeting needs universally and sufficiently is an indispensable part of the green agenda and crucial for achieving environmental goals.

CUTTING GHG EMISSIONS AND SAFEGUARDING PLANETARY BOUNDARIES

In debates about environmental policy, public service provision, cash transfers and other social policies are most often seen as compensating for regressive effects of mitigation measures, such as rising fuel prices. This is true, but greatly underestimates the potential of UBS to contribute proactively to maintaining ecological limits. It does this by prioritising needs and recognising limits, enlarging the sphere of public consumption, transforming service provision, building knowledge, shaping attitudes and behaviour, and generating green jobs.

Prioritising needs and recognising limits

The aim of meeting human needs is central to UBS, as we have seen. A safe planet is fundamental, because without it all efforts to satisfy needs are ultimately futile. Ecological sustainability is therefore at the centre of this agenda.

Basic needs are intrinsically satiable, unlike wants and preferences which can escalate endlessly. Once a need is satisfied, having more is redundant and can even be harmful: think of food, transport or care, for example. A needs-based approach thus recognises limits, both upper and lower, to what is necessary to live well. The goal of *sufficiency* - enough for all, so that everyone can have enough – is embedded in the concept of UBS.¹⁴

This challenges conventional ideas about what constitutes value and how success is measured. The primary objective of most orthodox economists and OECD governments is to maximise growth, yet it is increasingly recognised that economic growth cannot be absolutely decoupled from carbon emissions.¹⁵ The needs-based approach of UBS offers a sustainable alternative. The IPCC has reported a “high level of agreement” that “development targeted to basic needs and well-being for all entails less carbon-intensity than GDP-focused growth”.¹⁶

Enlarging the sphere of public consumption

By meeting needs collectively through services, rather than individually through market transactions, UBS enlarges the sphere of public consumption. Where services are provided directly by public institutions, or by non-state organisations regulated by government, they are not commodities but public goods. They are subject to shared responsibility and democratic control. Where they are adequately supported by public funds, they can be made accessible to all according to need, not ability to pay.

A system built on public consumption and dedicated to meeting human needs will improve quality of life across the population by preventing harm arising from unmet needs.¹⁷ It will thereby reduce demand for “downstream” services that are required to cope with problems that arise when needs are unmet. For example, some 40 per cent of the NHS budget is spent on preventable conditions, mainly attributed to socio-economic inequalities.¹⁸ “Downstream” services are generally more resource intensive and take a heavier toll on the planet than “upstream” preventative measures.

Transforming service provision

The UBS framework specifies that sustainability must be built into service design and delivery. Where public services are democratically controlled with the main purpose of serving the public interest, they are better able to safeguard ecological limits than market-led systems. An international analysis of social provisioning concluded in 2021 that “need satisfaction and associated energy requirements depend on socio-economic set-ups” and that “public services are linked to higher need satisfaction and lower energy requirements”.¹⁹ The carbon footprint of

healthcare in the United States, where the system is market-led, is three times greater than in several European countries, where the system is wholly or partly controlled by the government.²⁰

Good public service providers can lead by example and influence their networks of employees, service users and suppliers, to coordinate sustainable practices such as active travel, resource-efficiency in construction and maintenance of buildings, and local food procurement. They can avoid duplication and waste, minimise excessive demand, and contribute to implementing national strategies for reducing GHG emissions.

The NHS is estimated to account for 4-5% of UK carbon emissions, with the NHS in England alone responsible for 40% of the public sector's emissions.²¹ Yet it is governed as a national service with explicit public interest values. NHS England (followed by Scotland and Wales) has announced targets for delivering net zero, with detailed plans for achieving them. In its first progress report, NHS England declared it was on-track to meet the ambitions it outlined 12 months earlier: "with a total emissions reduction of 1,260 ktCO₂e expected in 2021/22".²² This was calculated as "equivalent to a reduction of 1.7 million flights from London to New York".²³ The rate of reduction has since declined, but the potential remains for concerted climate action, where there is effective and adequate public investment.²⁴

In housing and transport, where there is no such national service, the UBS framework offers a means of transforming provision through investment and regulation, as well as enhanced powers for local authorities to ensure delivery in the public interest. Retrofitting programmes and integrated transport systems, for example, could be designed and funded to reduce GHG emissions and safeguard natural resources.

Care services are seldom associated with environmental sustainability but there are nonetheless opportunities to influence the design and management of facilities and materials used day-to-day. The London Early Years Foundation is a social enterprise supplying 39 nurseries in the London area. It has its own detailed Sustainability Strategy that aims for net zero by 2035 and starts with "little wins" such as "removing single-use plastics where possible, changing all milk deliveries to glass bottles so they could be reused and recycled, banning glitter, placing wormeries and

composters in every nursery garden to reduce food waste etc".²⁵ Several countries in the European Union have national childcare strategies that include sustainability, although most focus on achieving this through children's learning and experience.

Building knowledge, shaping attitudes and behaviour

Public attitudes, customs and patterns of behaviour are crucial for achieving environmental goals. All public services can influence these – by demonstrating what is possible through their own practice (as noted above), by raising awareness, encouraging and supporting different ways of doing things, discouraging behaviour that is harmful to the environment and preventing people being locked-in to unsustainable routines. A decent public transport system will help reduce reliance on private cars, for example. Hospitals and schools can serve food that is sustainably produced and reduce or even eliminate meat from their meals. Childcare and education services can make a significant impact on the experience, awareness and learning of future generations. Across all areas of need, public services that share the same ethos can create powerful visions of what is normal and desirable, and real opportunities for change across the population.

They can help to dislodge the individualism that has dominated policymaking for many decades. The idea that we all thrive by exercising personal choice and competing for advantage is clearly at odds with the climate agenda. Global warming and resource depletion are felt collectively and cannot be tackled by individuals on their own. They require shared effort and mutual aid within and between social groups, across nations and regions. UBS is a collaborative endeavour. It asserts the value of solidarity and supports a politics where collective action is central rather than marginal. This helps create favourable conditions for working together to safeguard the planet.²⁶

Generating new green jobs

Improving and extending services would bring new jobs at all skills levels to all corners of the country. Most services have to be where people are – so the jobs would be local, enabling more people to work, earn and contribute. Crucially, most of these would be low-carbon jobs, because so many services depend on people and relationships rather than on energy-intensive hardware. Caring and teaching are

obvious examples. At the same time, more and better public services would further boost employment by maintaining health, relieving informal caring responsibilities, and helping with travel and digital access. Services that supply life's essentials make it possible for people to enter and stay in paid work.

CREATING GREATER EQUALITY

Implementing UBS would have a strongly redistributive effect, both by expanding resources for lower income groups and by constraining excessive consumption.

Inequalities are a barrier to public support for environmental politics and it would be impossible to meet climate targets without substantially reducing them.

Expanding resources for lower income groups

As we have noted, services that deliver life's essentials are "in-kind" benefits that represent a virtual income or "social wage". Funded wholly or partly through taxation, they represent a far higher proportion of total income for poorer than for better-off households. Analysis by the Institute for Fiscal Studies shows how a range of services (or "benefits in-kind") substantially redistribute resources between lower and higher income groups.²⁷

Constraining excessive consumption

Building more and better public services will almost certainly require higher taxation. Whether this is done through a wealth tax, VAT on luxury goods, closing loopholes or raising income tax for higher earners, one likely effect is to curb spending power in the upper income deciles. This is where luxury consumption (on second homes, multiple flights and exotic holidays, for example) is otherwise most abundant, accounting for high levels of harmful emissions and resource depletion. In many countries, the richest 10% cause up to 40 times more carbon emissions than the poorest 10%.²⁸ At the extremes, the figures are even more shocking; according to Oxfam, the richest 1% is responsible for more carbon emissions than the poorest 66%.²⁹ Oxfam warns of "dire consequences for vulnerable communities and global efforts to tackle the climate emergency" and calls for "fair taxation of rich people's income and wealth" alongside "universal public services and social protection" because both have been shown to reduce inequalities fast.³⁰ If these measures leave

lower-income households with more disposable cash so that they are more comfortable and secure, their spending power won't get anywhere near the excesses of today's most wealthy consumers.

Vital for meeting climate targets

Inequalities generate feelings of ill-being, neglect and resentment that stand in the way of democratic consent for pro-environmental policies. More specifically, redistribution is itself seen as an indispensable item in the toolbox for reducing emissions to a safe level. It has long been acknowledged that GHG emissions cannot fall equally for each income group, either within or between countries. Given the speed and intensity of reduction measures that are required to prevent climate breakdown, an undifferentiated distribution of their impact across income groups would soon drive the poorest below any acceptable minimum living standard into utter destitution. Ultimately this would have terrifying consequences in terms of starvation, conflict and migration. Timing is everything here: while decarbonisation measures will ultimately benefit lower income groups (for example, switching to renewable energy would be cheaper than relying on fossil fuels and may help cut household bills), these gains would come too late and have too little impact to avert social calamity. Instead, what's required are *two integrated downward pathways* to achieve net zero: a falling aggregate emissions pathway coupled with a falling inequality pathway.³¹

ESTABLISHING SECURE SOCIAL FOUNDATIONS

The primary purpose of UBS is to ensure that everyone's basic needs are met. The UBS framework, described above, offers principled guidance for delivering life's essentials through a range of collective measures. Meeting basic human needs universally and sufficiently can be justified on ethical grounds alone. There are also strong justifications on ecological grounds, because this approach renders climate action socially and electorally viable.

Compensating for regressive effects

Collective measures to meet human needs can compensate for the regressive effects of some pro-environmental measures. For example, rising fuel duties would take a

lower toll on individuals' budgets if they could switch to decent, affordable public transport. If housing were managed in the public interest, according to the UBS framework, the costs of retrofitting could be subsidised and shared so that they did not land most heavily on low-income households.

Building popular support

By setting out to ensure that everyone has access to life's essentials, UBS points the way to eliminating poverty and relieving miseries inflicted by insecurity and unmet need. Experiences of poverty and insecurity leave people feeling powerless, hopeless, resentful. At best people feel apathetic, at worst strongly resistant, to any efforts by government to avoid damaging the natural environment. Right now, most people on lower incomes think governments don't care about them and certainly don't have their best interests at heart. More and better public services could shift that so people feel better about their daily lives and more likely to trust their governments, local and national, to be on their side. UBS could start to turn a downward spiral of poverty, distrust and resistance into a virtuous circle of wellbeing, confidence and support.

Without that support, democratic governments will find themselves unable to continue taking action necessary to avert environmental catastrophe. This is because people themselves must be persuaded not only to keep voting for governments that pursue sustainable policies, but also to change their own behaviour and lifestyles. As the UK Climate Change Committee has pointed out, "More than ever before, future emissions reductions will require people to be actively involved... Fairness is also fundamental to public support and must be embedded throughout policy. Only a transition that is perceived as fair, and where people, places and communities are well-supported, will succeed."³²

IN CONCLUSION

This briefing is the start of a process. It sets out arguments and brings together supporting evidence. We believe the case is compelling, but there is more work to be done.

1. First, we must build consensus among those working in the environmental field that UBS is central, not marginal to their agenda, and that they cannot achieve their goals unless they incorporate a collective, needs-based programme that is universal and sufficient. We must influence policymaking at local, national and international levels to this effect.
2. Second, we must build an alliance of organisations across social, economic and environmental fields, to support and develop UBS.
3. Third, we must identify and fill gaps in our knowledge, to build a compelling evidence base drawn from quantitative and qualitative research, which assesses the medium and long-term effects of meeting needs through collective measures and sets out practical examples to indicate what can be achieved.

ENDNOTES

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