

The case for a Social Guarantee: Universal access to life's essentials

Anna Coote

The Social Guarantee refocuses progressive politics on human relations, on how we care for each other, and on the importance of investing in the social infrastructure on which the rest of the economy depends. It draws on current thinking about the foundational economy, the care economy, and sustainable economic prosperity. It offers a coherent, ethical, and well-evidenced basis from which to address such issues as investment, regulation, and carbon mitigation.

Introduction

The internationally agreed goal of reducing carbon

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emissions to "net zero" certainly calls for a rapid transformation of the economy. But the economy is not just a bundle of interacting mechanisms – such as investment, debt, interest rates, trade, competition, supply chains, pricing, consumption patterns, and so forth – to be tweaked by experts. Rather, it is a social construct that involves processing human and environmental resources. And it is a means, not an end in itself. To restate the obvious, "we live in societies with economies, not economies with societies".¹ So the "Great Turnaround" must focus on people as well as the planet and put human as well as ecological needs at the heart of economic change.



Foto by [Matthew Waring](#) on [Unsplash](#)

¹ Barry (2016), "Green Political Economy: Beyond Orthodox Undifferentiated Economic Growth As a Permanent Feature of the Economy", in *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental Political Theory*, ed. T. Gabrielson et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 304-317.

This paper starts from the premise that the end to which the economy is a means is human and planetary well-being, calibrated to be mutually reinforcing. It introduces a framework for policy and practice known as the Social Guarantee (SG), which has three goals. The first is to satisfy basic human needs in order to improve and support well-being for all. The second is to develop collective systems and structures for satisfying needs. The third is to support planetary well-being by satisfying needs in ways that are both universal and sufficient – that is, by meeting “the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”.² This signals an emerging recognition in new economic thinking that social justice and ecological sustainability are interdependent goals that can only be achieved together. It goes well beyond the European Commission’s proposal for a Social Climate Fund, which seeks only to compensate “vulnerable households” for the regressive effects of climate mitigation.

The paper begins by explaining what is meant, in this context, by human needs and how needs differ from wants. It explores the role of the Social Guarantee in shaping collective provisioning of in-kind benefits to satisfy needs, and how meeting needs in ways that are both universal and sufficient can bring multiple gains for human and planetary well-being. It then sets out ways in which this approach can make a substantial contribution to a green transformation.

Understanding human needs

What is required for the “Great Turnaround” is a reimagining of entire economic systems, grounded in an understanding of what everyone needs to survive, to participate in society, and to flourish – and a recognition that the primary purpose of the economy should be to satisfy those needs.

Theorists have defined basic human needs as “participation, health and critical autonomy”.³ These are the things that none of us can live without. There is broad, evidence-based consensus about what they are. Theories of human “capabilities” (which are distinct from, but overlapping with need theory) hold that “affiliation, bodily integrity and practical reason” are basic necessities for anyone to live a life that they value.⁴ And since these definitions were first articulated (more than 30 years ago), one other factor has come sharply into focus: What people need most fundamentally is a sustainable ecosystem – a planet that is thriving, not burning or drowning.

Basic human needs, as defined above, are universal across time and space. The detail of how they are met varies widely between locations, cultures, and generations. However, certain generic “need satisfiers” are fairly constant: We call these “life’s essentials”. As well as a safe planet, they include (not a definitive list) clean air and water, nutrition, care, education, housing, energy, security, transport and – these days – access to the internet.⁵

Human needs are not the same as wants. We often want what we need, but we do not need everything we want. Want is generally self-defined and inherently insatiable: We can always want something else and something more. Needs on the

² Brundtland Commission (1987), *Our Common Future* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

³ L. Doyal and I. Gough (1991), *A Theory of Human Need* (London: Palgrave Macmillan).

⁴ M. Nussbaum (2000), *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

⁵ A. Coote and A. Percy (2020), *The Case for Universal Basic Services* (Cambridge: Polity Press).

Economies should aim above all to carve out this “safe and just space” ... “not on achieving growth, but on meeting society’s primary goals”. It marks a radical departure from orthodox economics, where the imperative is to satisfy wants and preferences, which have no limits, through market transactions.

other hand can be objectively defined and are satiable. You can reach a point where your needs are met sufficiently, and having more would be redundant or even harmful – think of food, security, and transport, for example.

The Social Guarantee: A framework for universal sufficiency

The Social Guarantee aims for universal sufficiency, recognising that everyone should have enough to meet their needs. There are well-established methods for deciding what is sufficient, notably the minimum income standard determined through qualitative research in the United Kingdom (UK).⁶ In the context of the Social Guarantee, sufficiency implies both the adequate and appropriate quality of what is provided to meet needs as well as constraints on excessive resource use or consumption, so that needs can be met for all, now and in the future. This aligns with Raworth’s vision of a “safe and just space for humanity”: between a floor consisting of secure social foundations, below which no one should fall, and a ceiling consisting of planetary boundaries, which cannot be breached without imperilling the ecosystem that sustains life on Earth.⁷ Insisting that economies should aim above all to carve out this “safe and just space” is consistent with Barth and Jacobs’ stipulation that economic policy should focus “not on achieving growth, but on meeting society’s primary goals”.⁸ It marks a radical departure from orthodox economics, where the imperative is to satisfy wants and preferences, which have no limits, through market transactions.

Meeting human needs

While some of life’s essentials can be purchased individually through conventional markets, others are beyond the means of all but the rich. All require some degree of collective effort – through public services (education and health care, for example) or through various combinations of services, public subsidies, and government regulation – to ensure they are genuinely accessible and affordable for all who need them (as in the case of water, energy, housing, child care, transport, and internet access). Even where food is concerned (which people typically expect to buy for themselves), collective measures are required to ensure universal access to food that is sustainably produced and sufficiently nutritious.

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The concept of a Social Guarantee arises from this analysis.⁹ It comprises not only a living income derived from a fair wage and an income guarantee, but also a range of universal services. The latter term (which is the main focus of this paper) covers services and a range of other collective activities – including taxation, investment, and regulation – to enable everyone’s needs to be met. The SG revives the collective ideal featured in post-war welfare states and learns from their successes and shortcomings to create a framework for contemporary policy and practice.

⁶ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2021), “A Minimum Income Standard for the United Kingdom in 2021”, <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/minimum-income-standard-uk-2021>.

⁷ K. Raworth (2017), *Doughnut Economics: 7 Ways to Think like a 21st Century Economist* (London: Random House).

⁸ See Barth and Jacobs (2022) in this series.

⁹ See <http://www.socialguarantee.org>; see also L. Akenji et al. (2021), *1.5 Degree Lifestyles: Towards a Fair Consumption Space*, Hot or Cool Institute, Chap. 6.

A “framework” is distinct from a manifesto or blueprint. Since each of life's essentials can only be met effectively through systems and structures that are customised for the purpose (a provisioning system for housing would be very different from one for transport or education), the SG framework offers a principled approach that can be applied in every case. Briefly summarised, this includes: universal entitlement according to need rather than ability to pay; subsidiarity of provisioning; diverse models of ownership of provider organisations, all governed by public interest obligations; sufficient and sustainable service quality and provisioning practices; decent pay and conditions for service workers; democratic control of strategic decisions; and citizen/resident engagement in co-design and co-production of services.¹⁰

This framework can be seen as the social pillar of a green transformation. It reflects many aspects of President Joe Biden's social safety plan (from child care, home health care, and housing, to paid sick leave and free school meals), which has yet to pass through Congress.¹¹ It echoes the idea of a “just and inclusive transition”, which is a goal of the Green Deal of the European Union (EU), but it goes beyond its current focus on employment, energy, and housing. It is closely aligned with the EU's Pillar of Social Rights, but with a stronger emphasis on ensuring universal access to all of life's essentials. Furthermore, by offering a coherent set of principles that can be applied in a range of different socio-economic contexts, it can help to shape the kind of “economic convergence” across the EU that Grabner and Hafele argue is a prerequisite for tackling the climate crisis.¹²

Implementing the Social Guarantee

While the Social Guarantee is a big, radical idea, it is pragmatic in that it can be put into practice on a small, local scale and developed incrementally, learning from experience within and between countries. There are numerous practical examples in which some or all of the SG principles are applied to satisfy human needs by collectively providing one or more of life's essentials.

For example, Norway offers an enviable model for child care. It has well-qualified staff, relatively high staff-child ratios, a consistent form of child care setting (the kindergarten), and continuity of care from age one to six as the norm. It

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combines “a legal guarantee to a place for all children with fees that are both low overall and income-related”.¹³ Where housing is concerned, the town of Freiburg in south-west Germany is reportedly a trailblazer for sustainability, involving “far more than simple technological conversion” of housing stock by promoting “urban eco-living, facilitated by a strong

long-term vision, national policy frameworks and a focused commitment to change and community engagement”.¹⁴ Other examples include free public transport in Estonia,¹⁵ housing co-operatives in Denmark,¹⁶ funding for long-term

¹⁰ See <https://www.socialguarantee.org/principles>; see also A. Coote (2021), “Exploring the Case for Universal Services”, in *Economic Policies for Sustainability and Resilience*, ed. P. Arestis and M. Sawyer (Cambridge: Palgrave), 230-232.

¹¹ T. Luhby and K. Lobosco (2021), “Here's What's in Biden's Build Back Better Plan”, CNN, November 19.

¹² See Gräbner-Radkowsch and Hafele (2022) in this series.

¹³ A. Ellingsaeter (2014), “Towards Universal Quality Early Childhood Education and Care: The Norwegian Model” in *An Equal Start? Providing Quality Early Education and Care for Disadvantaged Children*, ed. L. Gambero, K. Stewart, and J. Waldfogel (Bristol: Policy Press), 53-76.

¹⁴ N. Falk and J. Rudlin (2018), *Learning from International Examples of Affordable Housing* (London: Shelter), 13.

¹⁵ Smart Transport (2020), “How Tallinn Provides Free Public Transport for 420,000 People”, <https://www.smarttransport.org.uk/features/how-tallinn-provides-free-public-transport-for-420-000-people>.

¹⁶ Stories.coop (n.d.), “25. KAB – How Cooperative Housing Works in Denmark”, <https://stories.coop/stories/kab-how-cooperative-housing-works-in-denmark/>.

care in Germany,¹⁷ and free meals during school holidays in Finland.¹⁸ Many well-documented cases can be found elsewhere,¹⁹ but I cannot do justice to them here.

Potential benefits: Equality, efficiency, employment

These examples highlight the value of services as in-kind benefits, which are highly redistributive, as they are worth much more to those on low incomes. A study of services providing education, health care, social housing, child care, and elderly care as “in-kind benefits” free at the point of use in countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development found that the poorest 20% of these populations would have to spend 76% of their disposable income if they had to pay for them out of pocket, compared with an average of 29%.²⁰

It is increasingly apparent that collectively provided services tend to give better value for money than individual market transactions. This is because they can achieve economies of scale, whereby people share what is provided (think of public transport and child care centres) and eliminate excessive profit extraction (compare housing co-ops with private landlords). They can avoid advertising and other transaction costs associated with multiple individual consumer choices, as well as moral hazards that are encountered when profit incentives combine with unequal knowledge in markets. Public services have been accused of inefficiencies to justify introducing market rules. However, privatisation, competition between providers, and “customer” choice have largely failed to improve outputs, let alone outcomes. These failings have been greatly exacerbated by public spending cuts and by efforts to cope with a global pandemic.

Furthermore, investment in services can generate employment at all skills levels across all regions and localities, because people need services wherever they live. Recent research from the New Economics Foundation has shown that an investment of £962 million in UK social care would create nearly 50,000 social care jobs in one year alone.²¹ Most services are labour-intensive and most jobs are low-carbon, dependent on human relationships, and not easily automated: Teaching, caring, and health services are obvious examples. Investing more in these essential services can offer routes out of dependence on industries that depend on fossil fuels.²²

Defending democracy

Effective action on climate change depends on democratic consent, unless governments turn towards authoritarianism

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by pressing ahead regardless. Defending democracy means addressing the causes of political inertia, polarisation, and resistance. People who resent fuel taxes, for example, are worried about falling living standards, lack of opportunity, and threats to perceived “freedoms” to carry on as usual.²³ They feel disenfranchised and abandoned, assuming, with some

¹⁷ C. Glendinning and M. Wills (2018), “What Can England Learn from the German Approach to Long-Term Care Funding?”, <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/german-approach-to-long-term-care-funding/>

¹⁸ See Big in Finland (n.d.), “Children Eat for Free in Helsinki in the Summer”, <https://en.biginfinland.com/children-eat-free-helsinki-summer/>.

¹⁹ Coote and Percy (2020), *The Case*, pp. 57-107 (see note 5).

²⁰ G. Verbist, M. Forster, and M. Vaalavuo (2012), *The Impact of Publicly Provided Services on the Distribution of Resources: Review of New Results and Methods* (OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers No. 130), https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/social-issues-migration-health/the-impact-ofpublicly-provided-services-on-the-distribution-of-resources_5k9h363c5szq-en.

²¹ D. Button and A. Coote (2021), *A Social Guarantee: The Case for Universal Services* (London: New Economics Foundation), 21.

²² See Gräbner-Radkowsch and Hafele (2022) in this series.

²³ See Driscoll and Blyth (2022) in this series.

justification, that powerful elites are feathering their own nests. The same feelings drove public support for the Brexit campaign, once the EU was made a scapegoat for everything distant and disempowering. The Social Guarantee can help to reframe climate action as a key component of a political programme that aims to ensure that everyone gets what they need. Technical measures to cut harmful emissions become part of a package that includes public investment in universal services that supply life's essentials. What is more, the SG is not a "safety net" to avoid destitution, or a "bribe" to keep potential rioters at bay: It is a way of signalling that meeting people's basic needs is a political priority and central to the planned transformation.

A policy pathway to green transformation

In this section, I briefly summarise ways in which the Social Guarantee can contribute to the social and ecological goals of the Great Turnaround.

A supportive ethos

To ensure universal access to life's essentials, this approach embodies an ethos of collective responsibility and a needs-based approach to human welfare, based on sufficiency. As such, it offers a robust framework for policy and practice that is closely aligned with the goal of living well within limits.

It seeks to build solidarity and mutual support among people and groups in ways that cannot be achieved by systems based on market transactions alone. By encouraging an awareness of interdependence and developing practical experience of collective responsibility, it can help to create favourable conditions for society to "play a pivotal role in imposing limits" on individual freedom to consume more than is required to live a good life.²⁴ Put another way, there is security in knowing that everyone can have enough as long as no one has too much more than they need.

Provisioning in the public interest

The SG framework can influence provisioning systems so that they remain within ecological limits. Universal services are provided through a wide range of social and public institutions at national and local levels. Hospitals and schools are examples. Although they are run by for-profit companies, and although "market rules" such as competitive tendering have pervaded parts of the public sector, there remains – in Europe if not in the United States (US) – a critical mass of democratically controlled public-interest organisations that spend public funds to deliver services to meet people's needs. Where investment and management are in the public domain, they can influence what materials are used, what the sources of energy are, how waste is managed, and how emissions are controlled – all within upper and lower limits that aim to secure well-being for all within planetary boundaries.

Where health care is concerned, for example, market-led provisioning systems are manifestly unable to organise collectively in the public interest: that requires government intervention – either by directly controlling provider organisations or by regulating non-state providers. In the US, the carbon footprint of health care (which is largely market-led) is two and a half times greater than in the UK, and three and half times greater than in several European countries, where health care is wholly or partly controlled by government.²⁵ Meanwhile, the UK's National Health Service (NHS)

²⁴ D. Fuchs (2019), "Living Well within Limits: The Vision of Consumption Corridors", In *Routledge Handbook of Global Sustainability Governance*, ed. A. Kalfagianni, D. Fuchs, and A. Hayden (Routledge), 296-307.

²⁵ P. Pichler et al. (2019), "International Comparison of Health Care Carbon Footprints", *Environmental Research Letters* 14(6), <https://dx.doi.org/10.1088/1748-9326/ab19e1>.

has a detailed, long-term plan to deliver net zero.²⁶ For the year 2020/2021 it reported that its planned emission reductions were on target: "By the end of the financial year the NHS will have reduced emissions by 1,260 kilotons — the equivalent of 1.7 million flights from London to New York."²⁷ While it is true that private corporations could – and must – be equally ambitious, they are constrained by (among other factors) competition rules and obligations to shareholders.

Inherent in the SG framework is a stipulation that all organisations that receive public funds to provide universal services subscribe to public interest obligations, which include the requirement to cut emissions and safeguard natural resources. This entails a system of social licensing,²⁸ which can be built into contracts with suppliers, who can be selected for their ability to deliver – through their own practice and what they supply (on sustainability rather than simply on price).

The SG offers a route to collective behaviour change by influencing consumption patterns of people using services.

Public consumption and collective behaviour change

The Social Guarantee puts collective (or public) consumption on the agenda in the effort to achieve net zero.²⁹ It offers a route to collective behaviour change, not only by shaping the practice of provider organisations, but also by influencing consumption patterns of people using services. For example, a free bus service can discourage other, more energy-

The GS can help to constrain excessive consumption by changing attitudes and by redirecting resources.

intensive forms of travel. Housing policies can be designed not only to create zero-carbon homes made from renewable materials, but also by planning homes as part of neighbourhoods that have vegetable allotments, amenities for repairing, sharing, and recycling goods, active travel and good public transport links – all of which encourage residents to tread more lightly on the planet. Child care services can be managed in ways that raise awareness about sustainable consumption and encourage it in practice. Schools can directly support healthy eating and sustainable diets. And so forth.

Sufficient consumption: Maintaining limits

The SG supports sufficient levels of consumption, both by underpinning the lower limit and by helping to constrain excess. Where the lower level is concerned, it helps to maintain the social foundation of a safe and just space for humanity, as I have noted. It can also help to constrain excessive consumption in (at least) two ways: by changing attitudes and by redirecting resources.

Attitudes can change if collective provisioning becomes an acceptable – even popular – way to secure much of what is necessary for everyone to live well within limits. People would have less to fear in terms of scarcity and inequality, and this would help to shift norms and expectations, influencing what people want to buy and what they consider "enough", while raising awareness of the negative effects of material accumulation.

At the same time, funding universal services is likely to require higher taxation, unless debt rises. Even where a tax system is proportional rather than progressive, higher disposable incomes are likely to be brought below the level they would otherwise be, reducing luxury consumption (all else being equal). High levels of greenhouse gas emissions are

²⁶ See NHS England (2021), *Delivering a Net Zero NHS – One Year Progress*, <https://www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/item4-delivering-net-zero-nhs-updated.pdf>.

²⁷ See <https://twitter.com/nhsengland/status/1446070329084891148>.

²⁸ J. Froud and K. Williams (2019), *Social Licensing for the Common Good*, <https://renewal.org.uk/social-licensing-for-the-common-good/>.

²⁹ A. Coote (2021), "Universal Basic Services and Sustainable Consumption", *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy* 17(1), 32-46.

strongly associated with upper-income groups: The higher the income, the more energy-intensive lifestyles are ratcheted up through second homes, multiple flights, more private vehicles, household gadgets, sports equipment, yachts, heated pools, and so forth. At the other end of the income scale, where people shift from poverty to having enough, their ecological footprint may increase, but not on a scale that remotely compares with the rich.³⁰ For optimal impacts on ecological sustainability, a tax system would include a progressive income tax alongside wealth and inheritance taxes, as well as taxes on energy-intensive luxuries – and tax revenues would be invested in collective measures to meet needs.

*The Social Guarantee
refocuses progressive politics
on how we care for each other.*

Conclusion

The Social Guarantee refocuses progressive politics on human relations, on how we care for each other, and on the importance of investing in the social infrastructure on which the rest of the economy depends. It draws on current thinking about the foundational economy,³¹ the care economy,³² and sustainable economic prosperity.³³ It offers a coherent, ethical, and well-evidenced basis from which to address such issues as investment, regulation, and carbon mitigation. The main reasons why this approach should be central to the Great Turnaround can be summarised as follows:

1. *Moral imperative.* If the goal is to transform the economy and it is recognised that every individual has a right to life's essentials, including a safe planet, then this should be the starting point for transformation.
2. *Political incentive.* People need to feel secure and able to live well to build trust and create the conditions for democratic consent. Giving priority to meeting people's needs addresses some of the underlying causes of inertia, resistance, and political polarisation.
3. *Practical pathways.* Universal services contribute directly by generating low-carbon jobs across localities, by supporting people through the transition, and by bringing shared purpose and democratic control to bear on transforming energy-intensive areas of need such as housing, transport, and food.

Finally, it is important to stress that the Social Guarantee is not a single policy lever but a proposed route for policy-making across a range of different areas that supply life's essentials. The framework is shaped by distinctive values, favouring collective action to meet shared needs – now and in years to come. But how far these proposals are able to fulfil their promise depends on how services are devised, organised, and funded, where power lies, models of ownership, how people participate, conditions of eligibility, and how entitlements are realised. The SG agenda can start small and local, building incrementally, but its ambitions go well beyond piecemeal reform. It is essentially about changing whole systems to achieve a sustainable future.

³⁰ L. Chancel (2017), *Unsustainable Inequalities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 65-77; I. Gough (2017), *Heat, Greed and Human Need* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar), 146-170.

³¹ J. Froud and K. Williams (2018), *Foundational Economy*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press).

³² See Women's Budget Group (2020), *Creating a Caring Economy: A Call to Action*, https://www.thewomensorganisation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/WBG-Report-Final_.pdf.

³³ [33] T. Jackson (2017), *Prosperity without Growth*, <https://timjackson.org.uk/ecological-economics/pwgf/>.

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❖ **About Jus Semper:** The Jus Semper Global Alliance aims to contribute to achieving a sustainable ethos of social justice in the world, where all communities live in truly democratic environments that provide full enjoyment of human rights and sustainable living standards in accordance with human dignity. To accomplish this, it contributes to the liberalisation of the democratic institutions of society that have been captured by the owners of the market. With that purpose, it is devoted to research and analysis to provoke the awareness and critical thinking to generate ideas for a transformative vision to materialise the truly democratic and sustainable paradigm of People and Planet and NOT of the market.

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