

Full text of Rutger Bregman on *Why We Should Give Everyone A Basic Income* @ TEDxMaastricht conference.

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TRANSCRIPT:

Ladies and gentlemen, today I'd like to share a big idea with you. In fact, I believe it could be one of the biggest ideas of the 21st century. It's an idea that could unite politicians from the left to the right in fixing our broken social security system. It's an idea that could give dignity to millions and accomplish what we should have accomplished long ago especially in our rich and wealthy countries: eradicating poverty.

But first, I have to be honest with you: it's actually not my idea.

Now, in fact it's the idea of this man, *Thomas Paine*, who sadly wasn't able to make it today because — well, he died 200 years ago.

But it was also the idea of these guys: some of history's greatest thinkers.

Now I can hear you think: What kind of idea could unite men so different such as the civil rights campaigner, Martin Luther King, on the one hand, and the free market economist Milton Friedman, on the other hand? What idea could unite thinkers so different such as Thomas Paine, who thought that the government is the solution to most of our problems, and on the other hand, Friedrich von Hayek, the Austrian economist, who said that, well, the government is in fact the problem, most of the time.

What is this idea, that goes against the spirit of our times, right through the old political divisions between the left and the right? What is this great idea, this utopian idea that so many of history's greatest thinkers have been dreaming about for centuries, yet which has failed to come true, so

far?

Well, some people call it the *citizen's dividend*; other people call it the *basic income*. Now, I like to call it *free money for everyone*. Now, that sounds good, right? I know, it obviously also sounds like a utopian fantasy, something that will never come true, especially not in our lifetime.

But I want to remind you beforehand: Utopias have a tendency of coming true. Just think of how the end of slavery, equal rights for men and women, and democracy, they were all regarded as impossible ideals, once. But in history, there is something called progress.

So let's start with this simple, basic question: *What is the basic income?*

Well, it is a monthly grant, enough to pay for your basic needs: food, shelter, education. That's it.

Now, some of you might ask: Don't we have this already? Isn't there something called social security, don't we have the welfare state?

Well, yes, but the basic income is something entirely different. In the first place, it's universal, so everyone would get it. Whether you're a billionaire or a beggar, whether you're a man or a woman, whether you're employed or unemployed, the basic income is a right, a right as a citizen of your country.

Moreover, it's also unconditional, so you get it no matter what. No one's going to tell you what you'll have to do with it; no one's going to tell you what you have to do for it. The basic income is not a favor, but it's a right, just like, for example, the freedom of speech is a right as well.

But most importantly, in the past few decades, in the past 30 or 40 years, it has become more than just an idea. *Free money for everyone* is more than just an idea nowadays, it has become a proven idea.

As you can see on this map, there have been experiments — this map is from 2012, by the way — there have been experiments all over the world and especially in the South, from Mexico to Brazil, from South Africa to India, researchers and governments have experimented with giving people free money. This map shows all the *cash transfer programs* as they call them, that reach at least 5,000 individuals.

And there have also been very large-scale experiments in the '70s and '80s in Canada and in the United States. They're almost forgotten nowadays, but they were a big success.

Now, what researchers have shown, time and time and again, by comparing a test group of poor people who receive free money, and a similar control group, so that they could see the effects — time and time again, they have shown that free money results in — well, lower inequality, lower poverty, obviously; but it also results in less infant mortality, lower health care costs, lower crime rates, better school completion records, less truancy, higher economic growth, better emancipation rates, and all kinds of other positive social outcomes.

Time and time again, researchers have shown that free money may be the most efficient, the cheapest, and the most civilized way to combat poverty.

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Now, I'm not going to be able to summarize all the experiments that happened on it, so I want to tell you about just one experiment that was done a few years ago in the City of London. Now, this was an experiment with some homeless men. To be exact, 13 homeless men that lived on the streets of London. They were *street veterans*: Some of them had been living on the cold tiles of *square mile*, which is the financial district of London, for more than 40 years.

And I have to mention, their presence was far from cheap — think of health care costs, legal costs, policing costs — they were costing the British taxpayers hundreds of thousands of pounds every year. So, everything had been tried at that point and it was time for something new.

In the spring of 2009, a local charity decided: Well, why not try free money instead? So, each of the homeless men received £3,000. Cash. No strings attached. They were completely free to decide whatever they wanted to do with the money. The only question they had to answer for themselves was: What do you think is good for you? Counseling services were completely optional. Now, of course, most of the aid workers, they didn't have high expectations: they thought that, well, the men are probably going to spend the money on alcohol or drugs or gambling or something like that.

But then, something amazing happened. What happened in the first place was that the men turned out to be extremely frugal with the money they received. At the end of the first year only £800 had been spent on average. And what did they spend it on? A phone or a passport or a dictionary, each had his own idea of what would be best for him.

Moreover, a year after the experiment had started, the impossible had happened; 7 out of 13 of the men had a roof above their head. Two more had applied for housing. Some of the men took gardening classes; another learned how to cook, for example. They visited their children, again. And all of the men made plans for their future. It sort of seemed as if the cash had empowered them.

Now, I don't know if there's a politician in the room, but a politician would probably ask at this point: Well, this is a very interesting story, but what did it cost? What did the experiment cost? Well, the answer is £50,000, including the wages of the aid workers. So, in addition to giving at least seven individuals another shot at life, the project had saved money by a

factor of at least seven. And this is a very conservative estimate.

Even the liberal, free market magazine, *The Economist*, concluded at that point: The most efficient way to spend money on the homeless might be just to give it to them. Experiments such as these, and they've been done all around the world, show us that we need to rethink what poverty actually is. Poverty is not a lack of character; poverty is a lack of money. Nothing more, nothing less. So, it turns out that it's a great idea just to give money to the poor if you want to resolve that problem.

Ladies and gentlemen, we are living through a time and age in which our societies and economies are changing faster than ever. It's an age of automation; the robots are coming for our jobs. Now, this will bring, obviously, great prosperity, but it also means that we will have to adjust. If we do not adjust, if we keep applying the solutions of the 20th century to the challenges of the 21st century, then the middle class will crumble, and inequality will soar. And truly this is a dystopian future.

Nowadays, governments are obsessed with pushing people into jobs, even when there are no jobs. It's like the great inventor Richard Buckminster Fuller once said: So we have inspectors of inspectors, and people making instruments for inspectors to inspect inspectors. The true business of people should be to go back to school and think about whatever it was they were doing before somebody came along and told them they had to earn a living.

I believe that the basic income is a better alternative to our current welfare mess. But I have to admit, throughout history, there have always been three arguments against it, three formidable objections.

Now the first goes something like this: Oh, it's an interesting idea, but — I've done some calculations and it's too expensive. Sorry, can't pay for it. It's not going to work. Now, this might have been true in the times of

Thomas Paine, 200 years ago, when almost everyone, almost everywhere, was sick, poor, hungry and ugly. But it's not true anymore.

As a society, we are richer than ever. I'd like to see the basic income as a dividend of progress. Because our forefathers worked so hard to achieve our current level of prosperity, we can now afford to give everyone a share of their accomplishments. And remember, eradicating poverty is actually an investment.

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As one economist calculated that it would cost about \$175 billion to eradicate poverty in the United States. That's quite a lot of money, right? \$175 billion each year — But it's only a quarter of the country's military budget. So this is entirely possible, it's entirely doable. And after ten, or maybe twenty years, it will turn out that the investment has paid for itself. Because the government will save billions in lower health care costs, there will be less crime, and there will be lots more productive citizens who will be able to fulfill their dreams.

So, let's move onto the second objection, maybe that one's better. The second objection goes like this: Ah, this is an interesting idea, we might be able to pay for it, but um — when you give people free money, they will stop working. You know, it's human nature, people are lazy, nothing can be done about that.

The interesting thing here is that if I would ask each and one of you in this room: Would you stop working when I'll give you about €1000 each month? About 99% of you would say: Of course not. I've got dreams, I've got ambitions, I'm not going to sit on the couch, no.

But if I would ask each and everyone of you, what would other people do,

when they will receive €1000 each month? I think about 99% of you would say: Yeah, other people, they'll probably stop working. You know, it's human nature, they're lazy -

Well, if that's what you're thinking, I've got some news for you. The experiments that were conducted all over the world, and also common sense actually tells us that most people want to contribute to society. Most people want to make something of their lives. In fact, some of the experiments have showed that poor people, especially poor people, actually work more, when you give them a free grant. Because it gives them the opportunity to invest in their lives, or in their business, for example.

The third objection, ladies and gentlemen, might be the most difficult to overcome. I hear people sometimes say: *"Well, this is a great idea. We might be able to pay for it and I won't stop working, and maybe they won't too — but er — this is too big. You know, politicians nowadays they're too busy with themselves. And it's never going to happen, they're always shortsighted, and this is just too big an idea. I don't think it's going to happen."*

Well, if that's what you're thinking, I want to introduce you to this man. You know him, right? This is Richard Nixon. The conservative president, the corrupt president, from the Watergate scandal? Yes. It was this man who almost implemented a modest basic income at the beginning of the '70s in the United States. It almost happened. Actually his proposal got through the House of Representatives and it hit the Senate floor where doubts returned because some of the more progressive senators said: Oh, this is a great idea, but we want a larger basic income, so we're going to reject this proposal, and — well, we never heard of it again. It's an almost forgotten episode in the history of United States. But it shows us that of course it's possible.

Remember, once again: Utopias have a tendency of coming true. The end of slavery, equal rights for men and women, democracy, they were all regarded as impossible Utopian ideals once. But in history, there is something called progress, however slow and erratic it might be. All we need is a little more patience, sometimes. All we need is a lot more collective ambition.

Now, I understand that a short TED talk is probably not enough to convince you that free money for everyone is going to be the biggest idea of the 21st century. So, I encourage you to read more about it, to look at the evidence for yourself, and think: Isn't it time to update my worldview?

As I said, our ideas often lag behind the speed at which our societies and economies are changing. The basic income may not be implemented in the next 3 or 4 years, but it may be implemented in the next 30 or 40 years. Ideas can and do change the world. In fact, history is ruled by little else. It's like the famous Irish poet, Oscar Wilde, once said: "*Stronger than a thousand armies is an idea whose time has come.*" And I believe that in this century the time has come for free money for everyone.

Thank you very much.

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