

Interview with Ángel Elías, main promoter of the ToShare Observatory

1.- In a few weeks, with the end of the current academic year, you will reach your retirement. How has the development of the ToShare Observatory been in this period of more than three and a half years since its birth?

I believe that it is achieving its objective of making the distribution of wealth a fundamental element in the development of human rights and social cohesion in our Basque Autonomous Community (BAC). This is evidenced by the fact that all the organisations and associations that wanted to form part of it at the beginning have remained and have been contributing their reflections to the monthly bulletin of this observatory. Likewise, there have been several students who have voluntarily collaborated with the observatory.

Moreover, more frequently than a few years ago, we are hearing slogans referring to the urgent need for a fair distribution of wealth. This is particularly evident in the field of labour when it comes to negotiations on working conditions in collective agreements.

In addition to the interesting documentation on the distribution of wealth published on the observatory's website, the observatory has also contributed to the training and dissemination of unconditional basic income (UBI), which is becoming increasingly important as a powerful instrument to increase the degree of autonomy and real freedom of citizens and to put an end to situations of poverty. Precisely, on 5 May last, [a popular legislative initiative](#) was defended in the plenary session of the Basque Parliament which proposed the introduction by law of an UBI, which would be an entitlement in favour of any person with effective residence in the territory of the Basque Autonomous Community and immediately preceding the application by at least three months. It consisted of a monetary benefit of 900 euros per month which would enable basic needs to be met, without requiring any kind of consideration and independently of participation in the labour market, and would be compatible with any salary or contributory benefit. And although this Initiative was not approved by the Basque Parliament, it managed to collect 22,075 signatures and receive the support of the EH-Bildu and Elkarrekin Podemos parliamentary groups, as well as many trade unions and social organisations.

Therefore, I have a positive view of the contribution made so far.

2.- Now that the most acute phase of the Covid-19 pandemic has passed, what is the situation regarding the distribution of wealth both on a global level and in Spain and the Basque Country?

At the beginning of the year 2020, the arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic slows down the fulfilment of the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations 2030 Agenda (SDGs) and exacerbates situations of poverty and enormous inequality, leading to the death of many people and the impoverishment of millions, including the bankruptcy of many states. Thus, [the United Nations said](#) that: "*It has provoked the deepest recession the world has suffered in almost a century and has pushed between 70 and 100 million people into extreme poverty.../... As of 11 September, the pandemic has affected all countries: the number of cases has reached 27 million and more than 900,000 people have died*".

In turn, as denounced at the [Second World Conference on Inequality](#), held in Paris on 7-8 December 2021, the richest 10% of the world's population currently receives 52% of the world's

income, while the poorest half of the population earns 8.5%. On average, a person in the top 10% of the global income distribution earns €87,200 per year, while a person in the poorest half of the global income distribution earns €2,800 per year. Global wealth inequalities are even more pronounced than income inequalities. The poorest half of the world's population has hardly any wealth, owning only 2% of the total. In contrast, the richest 10% of the world's population owns 76% of all wealth.

If we look at Spain, according to the [National Institute of Statistics](#), there has been an increase in the rate of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion from 25.3% of the population in 2019 to 26.4% in 2020, exceeding 12 million people. On the other hand, as indicated by [J.C. Llano and D. Quiroga](#), severe poverty reaches 9.5% of households, some 4.5 million people. To tackle this situation, the Spanish government approved the Minimum Vital Income (IMV) at the end of May 2020, which is an income conditional on the fulfilment of various requirements, which has proved to be very ineffective. Thus, as [European Anti-Poverty Network-Spain denounces](#), the official data on the processing of the MVI of September 2021 show that, out of 1,453,652 applications submitted, only 336,933 benefits have been granted, which represents 25.4% of the valid applications and, as [Fundación Hogar Si points out](#), has reached less than a third of the people in a situation of homelessness.

Finally, according to data from the latest Survey on Poverty and Social Inequalities, published by the Basque Government in May 2021, in 2020, 54,197 people in the Basque Autonomous Community did not receive care in the system, equivalent to 29.8% of the group at risk, while of the 127,953 people receiving care in the system that year, 67,306 did not escape poverty, which means that only 33.3% of the group at risk managed to do so. Moreover, in 2020, 132,173 people were at risk of serious poverty.

3.- After this panorama, do you see reasons to be optimistic about the medium-term future?

Today, more than ever, guaranteeing all human beings the means for adequate personal development is a question of political will, as the necessary material resources exist.

Conditional minimum incomes, the philosophy behind the draft bill on the Basque income guarantee and inclusion system currently being debated by the Basque Parliament's Labour and Employment Committee, are ineffective in eliminating poverty and guaranteeing the human development of all people. The doctrine, after analysing many experiences of minimum and conditional income programmes, which have been implemented both in Spain and in the rest of the world, has highlighted at least six major limitations of these programmes in tackling situations of poverty: budgetary restrictions, insufficient coverage, stigmatisation of beneficiaries, high administration costs, the poverty trap and, finally, that they always arrive late.

However, unlike conditional minimum incomes, the UBI overcomes these limitations thanks to the principles of universality, unconditionality, accumulability of income and an amount at least equal to the poverty threshold. However, as well as being effective in alleviating situations of poverty, it is also a preventive instrument which, by giving everyone an amount equivalent to the poverty threshold, avoids its appearance and makes it possible to increase the degree of autonomy and real freedom of citizens, empowering them in their choices of work, training and life projects, favouring the undertaking of collaborative projects and creating a more cohesive society. Furthermore, UBI in itself implies a distribution of wealth, which directly reduces the

enormous contemporary inequalities of income and wealth. At the same time, it is an instrument that, better than any other, allows progress to be made in the fulfilment of the 17 SDG 2030 of the United Nations.

[K. Wignaraja](#), UN Under-Secretary General and Regional Director of the UN Development Programme in Asia and the Pacific, came to a similar conclusion in 2020: "*The time has come to incorporate a new element into the policy package that governments are adopting. A factor that is well known, but completely forgotten: the RBI, a necessary mechanism as part of the economic package that will help us out of this abyss*".

[The same idea was confirmed](#) that year 2020 by UN Secretary General A. Guterres, in the Nelson Mandela International Day Speech: "*A changing world requires a new generation of social protection policies with new safety nets including universal health coverage and the possibility of a universal basic income*".

In turn, Pope Francis' position is reiterated, first in his book *Dreaming Together. The Road to a Better Future* (2020) and, subsequently, in October 2021, in his address to the [4th Meeting of Popular Movements](#), where he raises the urgent need for a universal citizen's income, as well as the sharing of working time.

The [Gaztebi](#) project has shown that 67% of UPV/EHU students are in favour of the introduction of a basic income in the Basque Country, 13.2% are opposed to it and 19.8% are not in favour. Specifically, 78.4% of students agree with the individual nature of basic income, 73.8% are in favour of financing it through a progressive and redistributive tax reform and 69% agree with the universal nature of this income.

But in contrast, as the [Executive Report of the Second World Conference on Inequality](#) points out, over the last 40 years, countries have become significantly richer, but their governments have become much poorer. The share of wealth in the hands of public actors is close to zero or negative in rich countries, meaning that all wealth is in private hands. This trend has been magnified by the Covid-19 crisis, during which governments borrowed the equivalent of 10-20% of Gross Domestic Product, essentially from the private sector.

The current low level of government wealth has important implications for the ability to afford the UBI and the other instruments required for the welfare state in order to make economic, social and cultural human rights a reality. Adequate tax reform is therefore essential. In short, the current neoliberal model must be replaced by another, where, together with the consolidation and improvement of universal rights to education, health, social services and housing, the universal right to an unconditional basic income is recognised.