

Plenary presentation: NABIG 2018, McMaster University

Barbara Boraks

The Very Real Realities of Convergence

I am aware that my presence on this panel may appear a bit confusing. Here I am, the Exec.Dir of a faith based organization - Christian Jewish Dialogue- speaking about convergence at the North American Basic Income Congress. My fellow panellists all bring a specific expertise and perspective to the issue – health, ethics, Indigenous - whereas my presence may appear somewhat perplexing and perhaps even out of context.

And that, in a nutshell, is the challenge of convergence: trying to create the context which will allow many different sectors – health, economics, business, labour, indigenous, faith, political, lived experience - to come to the table and to work together to ensure that a basic income model of social support is actually implemented. To put it bluntly, and I'm paraphrasing the Economist Dani Rodrik here, substituting one's own set of values – be they personal or professional – for a public set of values is an abuse of expertise. What that means is we need to do the difficult work of identifying, what the psychologist Joshua Greene calls, the common currency of values and the common currency of fact. It is these common currencies which will allow all of our sectors to work together in a productive manner.

What makes this work difficult is not so much the large number of issues we are dealing with – although that is a challenge – what makes it difficult is our human nature. I'll discuss this later on, but first I'd like to tell you a bit about the journey that has resulted in me being on this plenary panel talking about the challenge of convergence.

To do this, I need to go into a bit of recent history. In October 2015 the CJDT held a conference at St. Mike's college at U of T. It was called 'Responsibility to Engage'. It celebrated the 50th anniversary of a conference held in the Vatican in the early 1960's by the Catholic Church. One document which emerged was called *Nostra Aetate* – meaning In Our Time. This document began the reversal of almost 2000 years of an inward looking church which helped foment anti-Semitism, to one which took up the challenge of engaging productively with the world. Our conference decided to build on this challenge: we hired 4 Massey College students to each organize a session dealing with a topic: environment, culture, economics, politics. Their instructions were to put together a panel of speakers, each of whom had a very different perspective on the issue. The key element was to find speakers who were prepared to come to table and dialogue with each other – not debate. We wanted the audience to experience that it was possible to bring one's ideas to the table not in order to prove that they were right, but to share ideas and maybe come up with something even better. Some panels were better than

others, but the overall effect was stunning. The energy and excitement created was almost palpable. Immediately following the conference the CJDT decided to focus this momentum on the issue of basic income and thus the ByUs Economy Project was formed. ByUs is an arm's length project of the CJDT. Its participants, advisors, and leaders, represent a convergence of sectors and ideas: academics, business leaders, lived experience, faith, ngo, Indigenous, lgbtq, labour, social justice workers. These are all individuals who are comfortable saying – I don't know, or –I hadn't thought of that before. Both of these phrases are key to successfully converging ideas. We decided to organize a conference to test whether we could productively bring together numerous convergent perspectives. We called this conference the Basic Income Initiative and it was held in October 2016. Some of the organizers of, and speakers at, that conference are here today: Sheila Regehr, Evelyn Forget, Art Eggleton. For this conference we identified 3 topics: Work and Worth, Systemic Chains, and Health and Wellbeing. For each topic we had 3 speakers: a topic expert, a theologian, and a person with lived experience. 3 different perspectives, 3 different sets of experiences, 3 different contexts – all converging. The audience was by invitation only and represented over 60 agencies and organizations. Aric McBay, from the Canadian Farmers Union, was there as were Amanda Robar and Tracy Smith Carrier – all are speakers at this conference. Again, the response was extraordinary. The most commonly heard comment was that the stories from the individuals with the lived experience helped frame and make real all the issues raised by both the topic experts and theologians. What surprised us most was how open everyone was to having a faith based voice at the table - so we asked why. Here is what we heard: 1. the presence of a faith based voice helped to ensure a non-partisan agenda. 2. The deep experience faith based agencies have with front line work. We heard from those with lived experience that yes, they turn to the government agencies for financial support, but they turn to the faith and non-faith based agencies to be treated like a person.

We followed both of these conferences up with a third one – held in October 2017. One of the convenors of that conference was Katherine Bullock. Katherine will be on Justice Panel later this morning. This time we focussed on the multifaith perspectives toward Basic Income. The themes amongst all the presenters were consistent: the need to focus on issues of human dignity, the common good, and solidarity. Perhaps the ideas presented were best summed up by Charles Clarke, an economist from St. John's University in New York: he utilizes Catholic social thought to help evaluate economic outcomes. I suspect Dani Rodrik would support this perspective. Three of Rodrik's commandments to Economists are: Efficiency is not everything; Economic modelling is more a craft and less a science; and unrealistic assumptions are ok, but unrealistic critical assumptions are not OK.

It is in the concept of 'critical assumptions' that the realities and challenges of working convergently becomes evident and this is where human nature comes in to play. In order to organize these 3 conferences a lot of discussions took place. We met with representatives from

many organizations involved in social justice, social policy, research, and delivery. No one disagreed that poverty is bad, that poverty leads to marginalization, to uncertainty, to fear, to disruption. No one disagreed that everyone deserves to live with self-respect and dignity. No one disagreed that current systems (including knowledge building) do not reflect the diversity of our societies. But when we ask institutions to help create the catalytic changes required to adapt our social support systems to the new realities of our global economies, people hesitated. We heard, over and over again, that the issue of basic income was a 'file being watched', that it didn't fit into the mandate of the organization. We heard it was anywhere from a 'military industrial plot to enslave those in poverty' to 'an attack on work and the fulfillment a person receives from work'. We were intrigued. The same people who were working with organizations to help those most in need, were shying away from a structural change that could actually help those in need. So we investigated further, and here is what we identified as the critical problem: over the past 40 years our institutions – business, academic, faith, government, labour, left, right, middle – have developed processes and ways of working that sustain the institution but do not allow for openness to ideas or ways of working that do not easily fit in to their status quo processes. We have found that it is less about the idea then it is about the internal structures – the ways in which decisions are made and our assumptions about what is important – that are preventing us from adapting to new realities. What we have done, societally, is created institutional structures that facilitate team work, cooperation, consensus building – this is all good. But the other side of these structures is that they can frequently lead to an inability to act catalytically because taking an innovative and visionary stance may lead to us losing our place in the institution and maybe even our jobs. Leadership has been – to a large extent – replaced with the need to maintain ones position. We are comfortable working in a 'convergent' or 'multidisciplinary' manner as long as the convergence and multidisciplines are still under the umbrella and control of the institution for which we work. Once we broaden out the definitions of convergence to be broadly multi sector – when we have to begin to question our critical assumptions – well, that's where we feel uncomfortable and even threatened. To paraphrase Bernie Sanders, some of us would rather go down with the Titanic as long as we have first class seats.

Which brings us back to the original point. Frequently, our human natures do not allow us to review our critical assumptions. We confuse what is relevant to our jobs and our positions with what is communally important. We are substituting our values – be they labour, business, academic, faith, social justice, - for public values. As Thomas Kuhn wrote: 'The answers you get depends on the questions you ask'. The conferences organized by CJDT and ByUs questioned some of our critical assumptions. As a result of what we learned, we have begun to develop 4 projects.

1. A 20 minute media piece – a film – linking the problems of living in poverty with the systemic and administrative issues which are sustaining the problem
2. 10 podcasts focussing on the assumptions we need to address, for example: how do we define work? the difference between charity model and a justice model for social support? The inherent indignity of our social support structure – how does this affect our democratic structure? Our tax system – is it helping or hindering progress?
3. A multi sector consortia to build the business case for broadening out smart city development to include a definitive social context
4. The multisector leadership table to address the concerns of sectors with respect to basic income. We want to ensure that realities – not myths – are informing the sectors.

Believe it or not, there is a logic tying these projects together. They are all focussed on questioning our critical assumptions and they all came out of a convergence of ideas, experiences, and vision.

All these projects require funding, but the same internal structures that prevent many institutions from working catalytically apply to many of our funding agencies. The use of terms such as ‘innovation’, ‘vision’, ‘systemic change’ by many funding agencies is only matched by ‘we are focussed on housing’, or ‘youth’, or ‘mental health’. These are all important issues, but it’s hard to address systemic change if you parse out and isolate all the factors from each other. Another frequent requirement is the need for definitive metrics such as how much change you have influenced over a 12 month period – essentially the rate of return on investment. Systemic change can take years and many mistakes are made. Our funding structures have become impatient with both.

Thus far, almost all funding for the projects has come from faith based organizations and individuals.

One last comment. We forget that neither a business case nor an economic model was developed for the Marshall plan. It was just done because it was the right thing to do based on lessons learned. The Bretton Woods agreement was established and many of its basic tenets were negotiated during a 3 week meeting. Basic Income is a lot simpler than either of these. It only needs co-operation, convergence of ideas, and leadership. Everyone has the capacity to contribute to the greater good – we just need to be brave - and lead.