Building consensus across the political spectrum: designing solutions to socio-economic insecurity

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*Last year, **Michael Orton** started a debate on how we can generate solutions to the problem of socio-economic security in the UK. Now, a new report outlines the final '5+ Solutions' produced as part of that conversation. These ideas come from across the political spectrum and represent the building blocks of a common ground in a bid to now bring the ideas to fruition.*

The 5+ solutions to socio-economic insecurity (i.e. 5 substantive ideas + a number of additional points) – and where they originated – are:

- 'above inflation increases [in the national minimum wage level] should become the norm in periods of economic growth until there is an indication of a negative impact on employment' (Centre for Social Justice) + 'make improving productivity and improving the quality of employment mutually reinforcing policy objectives' (Smith Institute);

- 'a Harold Macmillan-sized, state-supported housebuilding programme… designed to the highest environmental standards' (The Good Right) + improve 'security for home-owners through… a "right to sell" and a "right to stay", so that those who can no longer meet mortgage repayments can sell their properties but remain as tenants paying fair rents' (Friends of the Earth) + 'curb future rent growth and improve security for tenants' (Civitas);

- 'unleash the power of the social sector' (Centre for Social Justice) + implement non-financial help for families and relationship support (various);

- make Early Childhood Education and Care a specific and distinct element of the universal care and education system, free at the point of delivery (various) + 'significant real increases to child benefit' (Fabian Society and Sir Tony Atkinson); and,

- given current lack of consensus about how to provide a decent basic standard of living, Compass offers to work with other civil society groups on building agreement around a shift from welfare for some to social security for all right through to older age + many social actors from across the political spectrum commented that democratic renewal is a necessary condition for change – so relevant additional ideas are put forward on PR, devolution of power from Westminster to the rest of the country and votes for 16 year olds.

Socio-economic insecurity is a widely acknowledged contemporary problem. It is a tangible experience in relation to issues such as employment, household finances and housing, but also speaks to worry, anxiety and the sense that things are just not right. The 5+ Solutions were identified by examining ideas and plans already in existence within civil society. The research took a pragmatic approach drawing on a very wide range of organisations and individuals from very different political perspectives and traditions.

There is a strong emphasis on proactively building a more secure future through upstream measures that prevent problems from arising in the first place. The rationale is that it is far better to focus spending and investment on proactive measures which create security and prevent difficulties arising, rather than finances going on reactive downstream policies that deal only with symptoms and consequences of problems.

The pragmatic approach meant promises of silver bullets and shopping lists of policy tinkering were rejected, instead the selected 5+ ideas are: realistically achievable within current circumstances; are affordable, feasible,

gradualist and sustainable; and offer concrete ways forward based on practical steps.

The solutions tackle key causes of insecurity focusing on good jobs, decent incomes, secure and affordable housing and the best start in life for our children and grandchildren – with 'belonging' as an interwoven theme. Many are self-evident e.g. good jobs and decent wages are vital to security, hence ideas on these points. Similarly, if short tenancies cause housing insecurity then lengthen them, and if rapidly rising rents adds to insecurity then use measures to rein in those increases.

Insecurity is about financial and non-financial factors. So in relation to families for example, this means solutions based both on implementing non-financial ideas such as relationship support and also on increases to Child Benefit.

Early Childhood Education and Care and large-scale house building are issues around which there is already broad-based support. House building is a great example of an approach that serves several ends and creates its own upward virtuous cycle as it: delivers affordable housing; speaks to belonging and quality of local place; drives down the cost of living by reducing energy waste and rents; can be linked to training, skills and good jobs; and reduces carbon impacts so ensuring greater sustainability.

A point on which there is little agreement, however, is ensuring a decent basic standard of living for all. This involves contentious issues such as taxation and a fit for purpose system of social security. Within civil society there are certainly no detailed plans as exist for issues such as housing and employment.

The solution relating to a decent basic standard of living is based on civil society groups working together to identify and agree ideas and this underpins a key theme: consensus building. Redressing insecurity requires major and sustained national change. That in turn demands broad-based agreement. Consensus building is therefore critical and potential for doing so is provided by the 5+ solutions precisely because they are not based on any one political tradition.

On the basis of seeking to build consensus, readers are warmly invited to join that process by answering the following two questions. First, which of the 5+ ideas do you agree with? (Even if you only agree with one of them, that is an important first step in building consensus)? Second, if there are ideas you don't agree with, what better suggestions can you make?

Responses are greatly welcomed by posting a comment below or emailing *michael.orton@warwick.ac.uk*

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The full research report is available by clicking here *and will be launched at a free event hosted by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Poverty, 27 April 2016 at the Palace of Westminster – details and registration are* here.

About the Author

Michael Orton is a Senior Research Fellow at the University of Warwick. The research presented here is generously funded by the Webb Memorial Trust and published by Compass.

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