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Tackling 'scandalous inequalities': a global policy proposal for a Humanity Identity Card and Basic Income Supplement

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Food insecurity and the absence of legal identity are the most severe deficiencies in vital and existential human capabilities. These extreme situations expose 'scandalous inequalities' between the haves and have-nots on a global scale. The article proposes addressing these issues simultaneously by introducing a Humanity Identity Card (HIC), coupled with a Basic Income Supplement (BIS) of US$ 1 per day for the most vulnerable half of the world's population. This global social policy aims to expedite the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals 16.9 and 2.1 of the United Nations. The initial funding for the HIC could be sourced from contributions amounting to 0.66% of the gross domestic product of sovereign states, 0.66% of the market capitalisation of major corporations, and 0.66% of the wealth of billionaire households. The HIC would permanently provide universal recognition of individual identity, while the BIS is designed to be gradually phased out as its benefits take effect. Additionally, implementing this policy worldwide can foster a sense of shared responsibility in addressing the global challenges humanity faces.

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Introduction

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic and a plethora of socio-economic and political issues unsettling the planet, humanity is at the height of its overall economic capacity as a species. The world's gross domestic product (GDP) reached an all-time record high in 2024—over US$ 110,000 billion—and is likely to break that record in the years to come (IMF, 2025). Never in history have we been so collectively rich (and so numerous)[1], and yet the global population is still plagued by persistent tragedies affecting vast numbers of people. While the list of miseries and injustices affecting our societies is long, this paper argues that the lack of sufficient nutrition (i.e. hunger) and the lack of legal identity (i.e. public recognition of one's existence as a person) are the two most morally grave public problems of our age. The article proposes a global policy solution that addresses these two issues simultaneously through a supranational scheme to be implemented by the UN, possibly via a new specialised agency. This policy consists of a Humanity Identity Card (HIC) attributed to each and every human being living on the planet. On top of supplying individuals with a UN-recognised legal identity, this card would entitle half of the human population living on less than US$6.85 per day to a Basic Income Supplement (BIS) of US$1 per day. A tax on sovereign states, billionaire companies and billionaire households is designed to fund this redistribution scheme.

Scandalous inequalities: a definition

In a landmark essay, Therborn (2006: 6–9) builds on Amartya Sen's (1992) foundational concept of capability to distinguish three forms of social inequalities that impinge on human beings as biological organisms, persons, or social actors. He calls them, respectively, 'vital', 'existential', and 'resource' inequalities.

Vital inequalities refer to the capability to survive. They include differences in exposure to health risks, but, most fundamentally, they appear in terms of access to the key factor for survival—food (including water). Access to food is the most essential dimension of vital inequalities. *Existential* inequalities, in turn, pertain to differences in recognition of human dignity. Access to rights protection is the main capability at stake. Slavery, caste, and apartheid are among the instances in which the global distribution of this capability is at its lowest point. However, the phenomenon that takes existential inequality to its lowest low is the deprivation of one's legal identity as a person. This lack of identity is evidenced by an individual's absence from public records, making any claim to social recognition radically impossible (Lamont, 2023). Finally, *resource* inequalities are found in the differential control of material resources. While such differences can trigger vital and existential threats (like in the case of zero or negative income for the indebted), they are part and parcel of the socially stratified landscape of any human society (Treiman, 1977), with historical variations depending on the degree of social mobility and social welfare regime (Korpi, 2000; Van Leeuwen and Maas, 2010). Resource inequalities are ethically debatable, but they do not always belong in the domain of the morally intolerable, except from a position of radical (or telic) egalitarianism by which equality is a supreme goal per se, regardless of the consequences for individuals (Nielsen, 1985).

We define an inequality as 'scandalous' when the distribution of a capability in a population is skewed to such an extent that the physical or moral existence of those at the lower end is jeopardised. Such inequalities are scandalous in the first place because they imply the physical death or social annihilation of the persons on the left-hand side of the distribution curve. Furthermore, they can be deemed scandalous because no consideration of personal merit can morally justify an inequality between human beings that reaches the brutality of barring some from access to food and a publicly recognised identity (i.e. a name)—that is, the cornerstones of minimal biological and social functioning (Sen, 1999).

We maintain that hunger and the lack of legal recognition as a person are the extreme outcomes of vital and existential inequalities. In the language of John Rawls (1999: 54−56), food and legal identity champion the 'natural' and the 'social' form of 'primary goods' which every human being is expected to want regardless of the context in which they happen to be born and live. Their denial verges on what Martha Nussbaum (2006), echoing Sen, calls the 'question of fundamental entitlements'. Dubbing them 'scandalous' in front of the whole of humankind also recalls Peter Singer's (1972) 'rescue principle'—the notion that all human beings have a moral commitment when confronted with severely degraded living conditions of other humans, no matter where these are located on the planet (on cosmopolitan responsibilities, see also Pogge, 2002). Finally, the obligation to act upon such inequalities resonates with Derek Parfit's 'priority view' in dealing with inequalities: 'benefitting people matters more the worse off these people are' (1995: 101).

In brief, lack of food and legal identity stand out as ultimate offences to humanity in the contemporary world. They would be unacceptable no matter the size of the population concerned—be it one single person only. The reality is that the number of people suffering from hunger—to start with—is considerable and hardly diminishing, given current demographic trends. As Sen (1999: 15) poignantly stated, 'famine […] den[ies] to millions the basic freedom to survive'. It thus represents the number one form of 'unfreedom'. A quarter of a century later, despite a decline in the proportion of the world population affected by it, about 735 million people still face hunger; 11.3% of the world population endure 'severe food insecurity', and 22.2% of children under the age of five are stunted (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP, WHO (2023): xvi; figures refer to 2022). In the absence of major policy changes, the key Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 2.1 of eradicating hunger by 2030 seems virtually unachievable (ibidem: 16). Unsurprisingly, hunger largely overlaps with the prevalence of absolute poverty country-wide. In North America, severe food insecurity affects 0.7% of residents; in Middle Africa, it is found among 39.1% of the population (ibidem: 20). Hunger magnifies the extent of global economic inequality writ large (Milanovic, 2016).

Lack of legal identity exposes global inequality in the domain of access to human rights. If you cannot prove who you are, you are deprived of access to a host of public services such as public health care, legal protection in case of abuse, and all sorts of social welfare provisions. Inequalities accumulate further as many essential basic services require ID credentials: getting a phone and internet line, opening a bank account, obtaining a lease, or sending and receiving financial remittances (Demirgüç-Kunt et al., 2022: 38–39). The World Bank has called this 'the global identification challenge' (Desai et al., 2018), launching the Identification for Development Initiative. This initiative resonates with Target 16.9 among the SDGs: 'Provide legal identity to all, including birth registration'. In 2017, the World Bank surveyed 128,000 adults in 123 countries for its Global Findex Database. This survey led to an estimate of ~850 million persons worldwide without an identity document; about half of them are children who were not registered at birth (Metz and Clark, 2019). Most relevant here is that the situation is strongly associated with extreme poverty. In the low-income countries (LIC) surveyed, 36% of the population lacked an ID (with even larger proportions in the lowest deciles of the income distribution), as opposed to 5% in lower-middle-income countries and 2% in upper-middle-income countries (ibidem: 4). In most cases, the poor simply cannot afford the high fees charged by national authorities to release identity documents. Moreover, in LICs, the strongest individual-level predictors of a lack of ID are poor education, living in a rural area, and gender. Women in the lowest quintile of the income distribution, in particular, suffer from a double vulnerability in this respect (ibidem: 7−8).

One global policy for two global problems

Humanity Identity Card (HIC). A unified solution to both of these scandalous inequalities is to provide every individual on the planet with a formal and universally recognised HIC. Regardless of nationality, ethnicity, geographic location, occupation, or any other personal attribute that reflects the 'birthright lottery' (Shachar, 2009), this card could provide every human being with a legal identity. Upon presentation of their own card (at their own will), individuals would be recognised by any administration in the member states of the United Nations (UN). The card could be distributed in a worldwide campaign through delegated offices of the UN or a specialised UN agency, in every corner of the planet.[2] Individuals would register personally, free of charge, with their name, date and place of birth, photograph, fingerprint or iris scan recognition, and indication of whether they require food assistance. The sensitive part of this information would be collected and stored exclusively by the UN with the proviso that it would not be shared with any other organisation, including sovereign states. Information about cardholders could only be used by UN officials for humanitarian and public health reasons (for instance, future vaccination or health assistance programmes). In fact, the card is designed as an asset for individuals, not public or private organisations. It is up to the cardholder to use it as they see fit.

Here are a few examples to illustrate some of the uses and benefits of the HIC.

1. BIS.The primary intended use of the HIC is to indicate whether the holder is eligible for a BIS. To be eligible, the holder should earn less than US$ 2500 per year. This information is initially collected during the application process. Other aspects of the BIS are discussed below.
2. Communication and financial services. Many services, such as getting a phone line or registering a bank account, require identification. For example, mobile money systems have become one of the most widely used payment systems in low-income countries, with broad poverty-reducing and financial risk-reducing effects for their users (Suri, 2017; Suri et al., 2023). Among the advantages of mobile money is that it works through a mobile phone's SIM card and does not require a smartphone or a formal bank account. However, even the purchase of a SIM card often requires the presentation of government-issued identification (Suri et al., 2023: 7). Our proposed HIC will facilitate access to mobile money and can help individuals bridge to more formal financial systems. It thus contributes to the financial inclusion of the poorest of the poor. Similarly, it could also facilitate registration for microcredit schemes (Banerjee, 2013). Since the HIC will, in principle, be issued to everyone on the planet, the poorest individuals in high-income countries could also use the card to access bank accounts and other financial services.
3. Medical care for undocumented migrants. Access to health systems is often protected by identity checks. This can be particularly problematic in the case of undocumented migration. The HIC could provide undocumented migrants with a secure means of identification to receive health care. It would also provide greater legal certainty for medical personnel, protecting them from political interference in their humanitarian services. While the HIC is not intended to circumvent residence permits, it can normalise at least some of the interactions that mobile populations have in their current place of residence.
4. Travel services and hotel check-in. In some circumstances, disclosing one's national identity can lead to discrimination and potentially life-threatening situations. Individuals who do not wish to declare their nationality could use their HIC while abroad (e.g. to buy a travel service or check into a hotel). Since all sensitive information, including place of birth, is stored by the UN and not shared with other parties unless the holder chooses to do so, the HIC provides a way to identify oneself without presenting national identification documents.

Basic Income Supplement (BIS). A crucial added value of the HIC would be the entitlement to a BIS. Ideally, the supplement might consist of a food stamp, as the primary policy associated with the HIC would target reducing hunger. However, for both practical and symbolic reasons discussed next, food stamps are better replaced by money: US$ 1 per day (converted into local currency at Purchasing Power Parity: Deaton and Dupriez, 2011), provided by the UN agency in charge of HIC through a centralised online database. The BIS could be distributed using existing financial systems, such as Mobile Money (like in other assistance programmes: Arnold, 2025), benefitting from their broad reach and low transaction costs.

Why distribute a cash stipend? The impact of cash transfers is a central concern in the development literature. The debate revolves around the cost-effectiveness of (unconditional) cash transfers versus other forms of official development assistance. Cash transfers offer several advantages. First, they are often found to be more effective than other development programmes (McIntosh and Zeitlin, 2022), with beneficial effects on poverty reduction, human capital development, health outcomes, and food security (Handa et al., 2018; Pega et al., 2022). Second, they require lower administrative costs and management overheads. As mentioned earlier, the BIS could be distributed using Mobile Money or similar financial systems. Third, following from the above, cash transfers are more effective 'pound for pound' than most other programmes. For this reason, USAID has begun using cash benchmarking, which compares the efficiency of each proposed programme to a cash transfer of the same financial size (Handel, 2023). Fourth, cash transfers are empowering because they recognise that the poor are often the most efficient agents in allocating poverty relief, thus giving recipients dignity and autonomy (Gentilini, 2007). Fifth, cash transfers are a neutral form of development assistance. Their cost-effectiveness is less likely to be influenced by donor interests or the interests of the governing regime in recipient countries, unlike other forms of development assistance (Dreher et al., 2015). Sixth, cash transfers can facilitate access to formal financial systems, with positive impacts on poverty alleviation and development (Demirgüç-Kunt et al., 2017).

The question then arises: to whom? In principle, a basic income that recognises the right to a minimal collective support should be universal. However, to be more affordable and realistic, we propose that the BIS be conditional on individual income and targeted 'only' at the poorest half of the world's population. Our reasoning is as follows: The planet currently hosts 8.1 billion humans, 8% of whom earn less than US$ 2.15 per day (the extreme poverty line: World Bank, 2022.) For these individuals, one extra dollar per day means at least a 46% increase in income —a crucial lifeline. One extra dollar a day would undoubtedly be vital also for the additional 40% of the world population that

Table 1 Sources of funding for the Humanity Identity Card and Basic Income Supplement.

Contributor	Amount	Total (in US$)
States	0.66% of GDP per capita	683,647,346,295
Billionaire companies	0.66% of market value	718,512,068,718
Billionaire households	0.66% of household wealth	93,720,000,000
Total		1,495,879,415,013

Sources: GDP per capita (World Bank, 2024), company market value (Companiesmarketcap, 2024), billionaire households (Forbes, 2024).

survives on between US$ 2.15 and US$ 6.85 per day (the latter being the poverty line in upper-middle-income countries: ibidem). Overall, the BIS should be distributed to all persons (including minors) with a yearly income of less than US$ 2500 (that is, earning less than US$ 6.85 per day.)[3] At current levels, approximately half of the world's population, 4.05 billion people, could be eligible for BIS, with a raw cost (excluding administration and campaigning) of almost US$ 1.5 trillion (4.05 billion persons x US$ 1×365 days = US$ 1,478,250,000,000).

Financing

How would this policy be financed? We imagine three sources: sovereign states, companies with a market capitalisation of over US$1 billion, and billionaire households. The yearly tax could correspond to 0.66% of the GDP per capita for nations, 0.66% of market capitalisation for billionaire companies, and 0.66% of wealth for billionaires (for a breakdown of contributions by states and companies, see Supplementary Materials). Note that this is less than the 0.7% of donors' national income established by the UN as a target for Official Development Assistance since 1970.[4] Our proposal affects 192 sovereign states, 5292 companies (among which 1964 are based in the US), and 2692 billionaire households (among which 813 are in the US).

As for sovereign states, each of them should be able to decide independently on the most appropriate system to levy the tax—either through its existing state budget or through an extra ad hoc tax (which in poorer states may target the richer part of the population). Appendix 1 in Supplementary Materials also reports the cost of such a possible tax by the average resident, ranging from US$ 1590 in Monaco to US$ 1.32 in Burundi annually. However, this is not what real-life individuals will actually pay, as taxes tend to be progressive, and governments could split the tax between individual and corporate taxpayers. In fact, billionaire companies and households would have to pay the UN directly, receiving recognition as a 'HIC Benefactor' in return.

Table 1 illustrates the total revenue generated by this global tax scheme. Note that such revenue exceeds the needed cash for redistribution (US$ 1,478,250,000,000) by 17.63 billion. This is a 1.2% surplus geared to support the campaigning, management, and distribution costs of the whole HIC scheme (i.e. transaction costs).[5] The amount of the tax should then be adjusted periodically, since extreme poverty is expected to decrease as a consequence of the policy, with a view to phasing it out in the mid-term. Whereas the Card is meant to grant universal recognition of potential basic needs to all human beings worldwide permanently, the virtuous effect of the income supplement should lead to a progressive reduction of this part of the policy.

In the spirit of this scheme, the tax should be universal and collected by a global entity emanating from the United Nations—something that we could provisionally call the UN Taxation Authority. In the constituting legal document introducing the HIC and its BIS, mention should be made of international sanctions for tax-paying reluctance or evasion. This non-compliance is a foreseeable obstacle, given the absolute value of the contributions required from each taxpayer. However, the limited number of actors involved should protect against shady behaviours, such as tax evasion. The fact that the number of taxpayers is extremely small would make them subject to visible public scrutiny. We can surmise that states that would refuse to pay could be sanctioned by the other states; reluctant companies might be exposed to extra corporate taxes at the national level, as well as boycotted by consumers; billionaires evading the tax could be shamed in the public opinion, with possible repercussions on the profitability of their business.

In principle, the HIC tax is designed to complement both official development assistance (ODA) and philanthropy. But even if countries and billionaires decided to reduce their ODA and philanthropy to poorer countries in order to pay the tax, the damage would be relatively small. Overall, the HIC system is estimated to channel about US$ 150 *trillion*; in 2021, global ODA was US$ 202 *billion* (https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/DT.ODA.ALLD.CD). The global amount of foreign aid provided by charities is US$ 70 *billion* worldwide (https://globalindices.indianapolis.iu.edu/tracker/index.html). The gap between the HIC fund and global ODA plus charity funds is so large—three orders of magnitude—that even in the extreme (and unlikely) event that the new tax were to reduce existing aid channels, international aid would still increase enormously.

A preliminary roadmap

We are fully aware that designing and implementing the HIC scheme is a complex endeavour that involves considerations of privacy, security, technology, international cooperation, and legal frameworks, which exceed the scope of this introductory proposal. While the UN should play a decisive and pivotal role, a global initiative of this nature shall require extensive collaboration between international organisations, governments, and private actors (particularly the previously mentioned taxpayers). In this section, we list issues that need to be addressed in view of the implementation of the project, illustrating (some of) the hurdles one would need to overcome. A preliminary roadmap for the implementation of the project might follow these stages:

1. *Feasibility study*: Assess the legal, ethical, economic, and technical aspects of implementing the HIC infrastructure. Engage with governments, intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations, and experts to gather input, address concerns, and ensure broad support. Particular attention needs to be paid to means testing for BIS claimants, possibly using algorithmic and AI-based techniques to estimate the most likely recipients, leveraging recent pioneer experience (Arnold, 2025). A diverse set of countries could be chosen to participate in pilot programmes to test the effectiveness of the system.
2. *International agreement and design*: Secure an international agreement to establish the HIC, including its redistribution scheme and a governance structure. The UN should take a leading role in facilitating this agreement and ensuring its global adoption, eventually leading to the creation of a specialised agency.

3. *Data security and privacy protection*: Implement robust data privacy and security measures to protect sensitive personal information associated with the HIC, employing advanced encryption technologies. Design a secure and scalable technology infrastructure for the identity card system, incorporating biometric data and advanced encryption techniques (like blockchain or other novel systems.) Establish clear data usage guidelines, regular audits of data management, and sanctions for any infringement backed by an international court.
4. *Issuance and registration*: Set up a standardised HIC issuance and registration protocol, as well as dedicated offices worldwide (including an online registry and taxation authority.) These offices should ensure that every individual can have access to a secure and verifiable card and determine the indicators of individual eligibility for the redistribution scheme.
5. *Training*: Develop training programmes for officials and other stakeholders involved in implementing and enforcing the HIC system.
6. *Civic and economic opportunities*: Leverage the HIC to facilitate civic participation and economic opportunity for all. This aspect could involve using the HIC to access information and engagement platforms, establishing digital wallets linked to the card, and enabling individuals to subscribe to financial services and online commerce through it.
7. *Public awareness and communication strategy*: Devise and implement a global public awareness campaign to inform individuals about the benefits, purpose, and safeguards of the HIC and eligibility for its redistribution scheme.
8. *Monitoring and evaluation*: Establish a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation framework to assess the effectiveness of the HIC and card-based redistribution scheme. Regular reviews and adjustments would ensure the scheme remains aligned with evolving needs and challenges, including the periodic revision of taxation levels.

As this paper serves to conceptualise the first outline of an ambitious policy, it does not address all the details of the proposal's implementation. Large infrastructural investments are certainly required to establish the collection, storage, and protection of individual data for the global population. Worldwide distribution of the card and—even more demandingly—the income supplement pose major organisational challenges as well. Consider, for instance, issues about ascertaining the means tests for access to the BIS. This testing would require coordination between the UN Tax Authority and national governments, whose cooperation is, in any case, necessary to have the policy approved at the UN level in the first place. Here is, in fact, where we can imagine the most arduous barrier to this policy. Some of the potential beneficiaries of the HIC belong to groups that are voluntarily marginalised by governments for ethnic, religious, tribal, or other historical reasons. These same governments may oppose the proposal on the grounds of national sovereignty. However, the overarching ethical component of the plan should take centre stage. The HIC would need to be strongly bolstered by a bottom-up transnational mobilisation, which may blossom from existing anti-poverty and human rights NGOs and ad hoc movements, spread and supported through traditional and social media. Although some superpowers could drag their feet, the objective of this initial campaign should be to garner support from a majority of UN member states. Once the proposal is adopted, even if there are some opt-outs, top-down UN campaigning can add traction to it. The objective would be a domino effect that can progressively win over governmental reluctance as the scheme is implemented worldwide.

Discussion

Intellectual antecedents. The novelty of the present project lies in linking SDG 16.9 ('By 2030, provide legal identity for all'), and SDG 2.1 ('By 2030, end hunger'), through the provision of a single instrument—the HIC—that would additionally represent the gateway to a BIS for the poorest half of humankind. Our proposal echoes previous contributions in the development literature, which address its individual elements separately.

Legal identity for all. In proposing a legal identity for all, this paper refers to existing initiatives such as the World Bank's 'Identification for Development', which aims to help countries transition to identification and registration systems and achieve higher levels of identification coverage (https://id4d.worldbank.org/). Legal identification has been highlighted as a key link between human rights and development, enabling the holder's claim to full participation in economic, political, and social life. Without de jure and de facto legal identification, 'most positive legal and civil rights enshrined in constitutional declarations and the socio-economic provisions granted by states to their citizens are inaccessible and practically worthless to unregistered or otherwise legally non-existent individuals' (Szreter, 2007: 68).

In this realm, over the last two decades, digital identification methods have played an increasingly important role. However, while new technologies can accelerate and optimise the registration of individuals, critics warn that such technologies can be used to enforce the interests of the nation state through increased control and surveillance, rather than in the interests of the subjects whose access to rights was the original aim of SDG 16.9 and related calls (e.g. Manby, 2021). In fact, our approach differs from other proposals in that the identity-conferring authority is not the nation state. This builds on Szreter's (2007: 81) conclusion that identity registration systems are best constituted as autonomous institutions, independent of elected national governments and their changing political agendas, and ultimately accountable only to the United Nations and international law. In this sense, our proposal is a truly global (i.e. non-state) solution to a global problem.

Universal basic income. Through the BIS, this paper also builds on existing debates on the Universal Basic Income (UBI). UBIs have been discussed, tested and implemented in many settings and forms: from local to national to regional basic incomes (Van Parijs, 2013), from natural resource dividends in Alaska (Widerquist and Howard, 2012) to employment guarantee schemes in India (Imbert and Papp, 2015), from social dividends on public assets (Standing, 2017) to negative income taxes (Friedman, 1962).

Our BIS is not a UBI scheme in the strict sense, as it is not provided to everyone and is therefore not universal, as 'only' the poorest 50% of the world's population qualify. In this respect, the BIS is more like a cash transfer with very lenient conditions compared to other types of cash transfers. However, while in rich countries the BIS will apply to a small number of recipients, in low-income countries the proportion of recipients will be substantially larger. Therefore, in certain contexts, the BIS can be considered quasi-universal. The BIS is comparable to what Banerjee and Duflo (2019) call a 'Universal Ultra Basic Income' (UUBI), as it is much lower in value than most UBI schemes discussed in the global North (Hoynes and Rothstein, 2019; Banerjee et al., 2019). The main difference is that while Banerjee and Duflo are discussing their UUBI plan at the national level (proposing a PPP transfer of US$430 to 75% of India's population at a cost of 4.9% of GDP), our BIS programme has a global scope that transcends national borders.

Indeed, the global nature of the BIS scheme leverages the idea that UBI loses much of its social justice appeal once applied on a local scale, creating incentives for free-riding behaviour—that is, the opportunistic exit of net contributors and the opportunistic entry of potential beneficiaries (Van Parijs, 2013: 178). This flaw possibly stands as the major issue in existing basic income pilot projects: a conception of 'societies' as closed territories in a world that is, in fact, increasingly interconnected and mobile (Recchi et al., 2019; Deutschmann, 2022). For this reason, Philippe Van Parijs' (2013) plan is originally scaled at the continental level, imagining a European Union (EU)-wide application. While this is still preferable to elaborating a national or subnational scheme, the Van Parijs plan does not resolve the problem of dealing with migration in and out of the EU area. Instead, the scheme proposed here takes the logic of basic income to the global level, making the exit and entry of free riders simply impossible.

Global taxation. This proposal also builds on pre-existing ideas of global taxation. Several scholars have proposed plans for global taxes aimed at mitigating excessive concentrations of financial wealth and thereby addressing economic inequality (Tobin, 1978; Pogge, 2002; Piketty, 2015; Stiglitz, 2015; Saez and Zucman, 2019). Of all these proposals, Tobin's has been the most successful so far. While not adopted exactly as drafted (i.e., a 0.5% tax on currency exchanges) and on a full supranational scale, it has inspired a number of working financial transaction taxes at the national level (for a review, McCulloch and Pacillo, 2011). Others have envisioned a global tax as the appropriate scale to address planet-wide problems, such as climate change, through a global carbon tax (Nordhaus, 2007; more recently, Duflo, 2024). Scholarly schemes of global taxation have also spurred the OECD's Global Minimum Tax on large multinational enterprises (https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/global-minimum-tax.html), which was introduced in the EU in 2023 (https://taxation-customs.ec.europa.eu/taxation/business-taxation/minimum-corporate-taxation_en). The present project takes stock of these intellectual antecedents to reduce ethically unacceptable inequalities, using global governance to solve global priorities—that is, cutting extreme (and morally scandalous) levels of economic and civil deprivation.

Political sustainability: addressing critiques. We can now review potential objections that could be raised to weaken the political sustainability of the project.

Legitimacy issues. Taxpayers funding the HIC—particularly corporations and billionaire households—have their vested interests in stymying the project. Thus, the authority of the UN should be invoked to minimise its possible demonisation, which could arise if the HIC were brought about by an NGO or a private foundation, for example. After all, the UN and its agencies 'have long experience in promoting global policy schemes of social protection that aim to deal with unjust deprivation and vulnerabilities of people' (Papaioannou, 2022: 124). The legitimacy of the project should be further strengthened through endorsement by reputable figures and possible contributors. For instance, the group of wealthy individuals who call themselves the 'Patriotic Millionaires' and campaign for higher contributions for top incomes could speak out in favour of the tax, as it resonates with their pleas (BBC, 2022). Billionaires' average return on capital is estimated to have been 7.5% gross per year between 1987 and 2024 (Zucman, 2024); a 0.66% tax would still keep their return on capital above the typical return on savings.

Another likely argument against the project could target the inclusion of low-income countries among the contributing states. While this may seem to add an extra burden on the financially weakest parts of the world, the choice to levy the tax universally in all states is a recognition of their formal equality in the global community of nations. With this rationale, the Charter of the UN (Article 17) establishes that all member states contribute to the organisation's budget proportionally to their population and economic prosperity. The same principle applies to other international organisations (e.g. the EU). However, the redistribution scheme involved in the project will make poor countries net receivers and rich countries net contributors depending on the share of their population being entitled to BIS.

Privacy issues. We can also expect opponents of this project to evoke and magnify surveillance risks. Historically, this concern emerged when identity cards were introduced in democratic states that do not have a tradition of such documents—typically in common law countries (Whitley and Hosein, 2010). A malevolent narrative could portray the HIC as an unprecedented Orwellian scenario, arguing that the card would generate a centralised registry of the human population with the potential of Panopticon-like control of every person on the planet. This fear is not unfounded in state-based schemes like Aadhaar (the Indian digital ID programme), where abuses have been recorded among minorities (Panigrahi, 2022). However, as even a prominent scholar of surveillance remarks, ID cards per se are not a threat to personal liberties; it is rather electronic infrastructures and registries 'where the real surveillance lies, to discriminate between different categories or groups, for differential treatment' (Lyon, 2007: 112). As a response, access to the HIC underlying database should be absolutely restricted to the UN agency in charge, without any exception for government institutions, as the policy is geared to empowering card-holders regardless of their national citizenship or residence. In this respect, the scheme is premised on the 'invisibility' of cardholders vis-à-vis any non-UN authority —unless card-holders themselves decide otherwise. It must be crystal clear that the use and exhibition of the HIC is an exclusive prerogative of the card-holder for access to rights or benefits on their own will (like a credit card). If anything, states should commit to recognising cards at face value without any power to check the underlying registry. UN offices on the ground should be in charge of attesting the validity of the card, in case of contestation.

Furthermore, the programme needs to establish a protocol by which any HIC holder or group representative can solicit a supranational court against possible infringements of privacy or misuse of HIC information. Indeed, identity fraud threats are a potential risk, though this issue is not entirely new. Technically, the creation of the HIC should incorporate the digital safeguards of privacy enacted whenever population databases are established, regardless of their scope and scale. Vaccination schemes during the COVID-19 pandemic posed similar problems, which were solved in liberal societies by limiting the type of information stored and a strict regulation of access to data. For instance, the EU introduced a supranational digital COVID certificate that complies with its privacy-protection regulations, without major collateral damage (Gstrein, 2021). The HIC should implement all these technical and legal safeguards. To further enhance security, the card should not include information related to individuals' locations, such as personal addresses or phone numbers. The HIC is conceived as and must be devised as a gateway to rights, not as an instrument of governmentality or biopolitics of any sort.

Critics might voice concerns about the potential incompleteness of the HIC registration scheme due to a lack of information, interest, or suspicion among the world population. Unlike national equivalents, it would not be possible to implement enforcement mechanisms for individuals who fail to register or refuse to do so.[6] However, the income supplement of the HIC should function as a built-in incentive for the deprived population for whom it is primarily designed. Absence of registration is more likely among the better-off, for whom the HIC should appeal primarily as a civic duty. In an effort to strengthen its value, the card could also be acknowledged as a credential for access to commercial services (like phone line subscriptions, currency exchange, transportation tickets, and hotel bookings). Such uses could make the HIC of interest to the 'other half'—that is, world citizens who are not eligible for the BIS. Although this is far from ideal, it does not diminish the value of the scheme in relation to its primary goal of addressing scandalous inequalities.

Economic issues. Other critics may be worried about the potential adverse macroeconomic effects of the BIS component of the policy. For example, one could argue that the injection of cash leads to inflation in net recipient countries. The BIS may be seen as a money supply shock that increases consumer demand, where too much money is chasing too few goods, particularly in the food-producing sectors. As producers cannot match the increased demand, consumer prices will have to rise to cool down the overheating economy. However, such considerations apply only to unexpected money supply shocks. Since the BIS would be announced well in advance, and advertised as described above, its introduction would not come as a surprise, reducing the likelihood of an unexpected shock. In fact, if actors expect an increase in consumers' money supply, then the supply of goods (particularly, food) will adjust to match the increased demand, and the risk of inflation becomes relatively low.

Another concern, which mirrors arguments discussed in the development economics literature, is that too high financial aid flows may have negative effects on economic growth in recipient countries with unfavourable local conditions (i.e. institutions, structural parameters, and interests of the elite; see Burnside and Dollar, 2000; Dalgaard et al., 2004; Angeles and Neanidis, 2009). Aid flows have also been linked to Dutch Disease effects, which hamper economic growth and offset the effect of aid (Rajan and Subramanian, 2011). However, more recent evidence suggests that aid does not necessarily affect growth (Rajan and Subramanian, 2008; Dreher and Langlotz, 2020). Moreover, it may not be immediately apparent that the BIS policy, which involves a substantial cash transfer, falls within the same category of foreign aid as in the cited literature. Most of the above studies have an encompassing definition of official development assistance, including infrastructure funds and fiscal debt relief. While we concede that these kinds of foreign aid may have no or even a negative impact on economic growth, we question whether humanitarian cash transfers, such as those by the BIS, will have such effects. In fact, recanting our arguments from above, it is likely that the BIS cash transfer has positive effects on the receiving countries' economy through its impact on health, child education, labour market participation, and social inclusion writ large.

A further criticism of our proposed BIS might be that it is unsuitable to fight global poverty. One could argue that the BIS does not address the root causes of poverty and persistent income gaps between countries, such as differences in democracy and inclusive institutions (e.g. Rodrik, 2000; Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012; Acemoglu et al., 2019), factors tied to geography, climate, and disease burden (e.g. Gallup et al., 1999; Henderson et al., 2018), and culture, religion, colonialism and legal traditions (e.g. Fukuyama, 1995; Guiso et al., 2006; Nunn, 2008; La Porta et al., 2008). We agree that a basic income scheme like the BIS is not the silver bullet to solving global poverty in the long run, as it does not address structural differences between countries. However, the proposal aims to rectify currently existing *scandalous* inequalities as defined above. As such, it serves two important goals. First, as a variant of a UBI, it can help keep populations out of precarity (Torras, 2024), thus achieving SDG 2.1, which would be a significant achievement in itself. Second, it helps raise the floor on which inclusive institutions, improved education, health care systems, good governance, appropriate climate adaptation strategies, and sustainable infrastructure can grow more easily. People who no longer have to worry about surviving today or providing food for their families the next day are freer to engage in productive activities. Ideally, these activities occur in political, social, and economic environments that are conducive to development. Yet, while improving these environments is not the focus of this proposal, they could be accompanied by appropriate policies and programmes tailored to the needs on the ground (e.g. Banerjee and Duflo, 2019: ch. 9). As an unconditional cash transfer, the BIS provides agency to its recipients and is therefore a good starting point for engaging the affected population in more long-term and meaningful activities. Thus, unlike the permanent HIC, the BIS is intended to be temporary, but permanent enough to provide the poorest with a reliable source of income that will not be needed in the distant future. We see it as a piece of the puzzle in addressing global inequalities in the long run.

Conclusion

Food insufficiency and the lack of legal identity stand out as the most severe deficiencies in vital and existential human capabilities worldwide. These extreme situations are ethically unbearable—that is, they reveal scandalous inequalities. Such inequalities can be tackled globally with a HIC and an associated BIS for the most vulnerable half of the world population. This scheme would accelerate the simultaneous achievement of SDGs 16.9 and 2.1 by elevating the solution to a supranational level through an upgrade of UN capacities.

This project may sound like utopian thinking, but it is meant to belong in the realm of 'realistic utopias' (Wright, 2010, particularly 153–156 on basic income). Regardless of the political climate, with rampant neo-nationalism being inherently hostile to any global policy, the HIC is not technically unfeasible and does not belong to academic speculation only. Global taxation schemes are already featured in ongoing political debates. The worldwide taxation of the largest corporations and billionaire households has been advocated by the Brazilian government as President of G20, the Director of the International Monetary Fund, and the French Ministry of Finance jointly in April 2024 (Reuters, 2024). Along these same lines, in February 2025, the French parliament voted in favour of the so-called 'Zucman tax' (after the economist's name), aiming to levy 2% on residents whose wealth exceeds 100 million euros (0.01% of the total). Details of the law, which must be reviewed by the French Senate, address the risk of double taxation and calculation methods for wealth, setting a useful precedent for implementing the current scheme (Legifrance, 2024). After all, such measures would only bring the tax system closer to the higher progressivity of Western countries in the mid 20$^{\text{th}}$ century (Saez and Zucman, 2019).

The war on hunger remains high on the agenda of international organisations. By the end of 2023, the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the UN (FAO) had issued an ambitious new programme to achieve food security in the context of climate-friendly actions (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP, WHO (2023)). The envisaged roadmap targeted the end of global chronic hunger by 2030 through synergies between lower greenhouse gas emissions and higher factor productivity in food production—for instance, promoting sustainable aquaculture or farming practices that reduce methane emissions. However, the

FAO programme does not mention any supranational intervention, instead emphasising nation-specific changes in agrifood systems and relying solely on state-level actions.

In contrast, this project assumes that global problems need global solutions. This is ultimately the hallmark of a truly 'global social policy' approach: 'a practice of supranational actors [that] embodies global social redistribution, global social regulation, and global social provision and/or empowerment' (Deacon, 1997: 195; see also Kaasch, 2019; Yeates and Holden, 2022). As has been noted, global social policies are likely to bring about a virtuous externality: cosmopolitan awareness (Holden, 2018). Human beings are confronted with enormous challenges that concern their survival as a species, not only as members of social groups or political entities. While devising local solutions can certainly alleviate much suffering, it also lends itself to divisive thinking—particularly along national, ethno-racial, religious, and class cleavages. Such solutions blind humankind to its pending 'tragedies of the commons'—the lack of supranational awareness to combat centrifugal and ultimately lethal forces in the face of collective problems. One positive side effect of adopting a global social policy like the HIC is its spillover in terms of general recognition of human commonalities. This universal policy would directly affect every person. Holding the same identity card at all latitudes, regardless of nationality, would enhance global recognition of our shared fate and the need to tackle global problems like climate change as one—that is, on a planetary scale. The HIC can help spread this sense of global unity as we increasingly face all-encompassing species-wide challenges.

Data availability

The data used in this paper are reported in the Supplementary Materials (Appendices 1 and 2).

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Notes

1 The extent to which population volume affects GDP is a long-standing issue in economics, dating back to Malthus' time (for reviews, Ehrlich and Lui 1997; Hansen and Prescott 2002). While population size must be factored in (and its demographic composition as well), it is but one driver of growth alongside many others.

2 While the financial scale of this proposal exceeds all precedents, no other organisation but the UN has the global legitimacy and the longstanding expertise in handling large-scale humanitarian interventions (for a review of the evidence, see www.financingun.report).

3 The policy should address individuals rather than households to protect better the most vulnerable categories (particularly women), who are known to be penalised when redistribution programmes target heads of households who may not cater to all family members equitably (e.g. Falkingham and Baschieri 2009).

4 For a history of the 0.7% target, see OECD (n.d.).

5 Although this proportion may be on the low side of organisational needs, it seems important for the legitimacy of the programme to make every effort to minimise this part of the budget in relative terms, rather than aiming for a conservative amount. The existing literature points out that the administrative costs of aid programmes are difficult to estimate and vary considerably according to the type of intervention. Building on a method developed by Caldes and Maluccio (2005), a meta-analysis of the annual cost-transfer ratio of nine conditional cash transfers for education found them ranging from 4% (in Bangladesh and Ecuador) to 63% (in Nicaragua) (García and Saavedra, 2017: 952). This heterogeneity mostly depends on the number of controls required by each programme, with the cheapest ones consisting of a test of enrolment and dropout only. However, education-related benefits are among the most expensive conditional cash transfers, as conditionality requires a series of coordinated monitoring processes at both household and school levels. BIS is definitely a simpler programme, with only a means test (i.e. a short interview with the applicant) at the beginning of the benefits application process. In any case, in the pre-implementation phase of HIC, transaction costs will need to be assessed on a country-by-country basis. As Brent (2013: 135) notes, in low-income countries where a large proportion of the population would be eligible for the benefit, the 'targeting' and 'screening' costs of beneficiaries may be redundant—people in need are visibly destitute. Where these costs may be higher (i.e. in middle-income countries), NGOs could be mobilised to assist UN officials. Another recommendation to minimise transaction costs (also for recipients) could be to pay benefits at longer intervals – for example, every two months rather than every month (Fiszbein and Schady (2009: 78). As an additional point of reference finance-wise, a leading disaster and emergency management organisation that deals with largely more complex tasks (Médecins Sans Frontières, MSF) spends no more than 3% of its revenues on administrative costs (Charity Intelligence 2024)). Economies of scale and the pre-existing structures of UN member states on the ground should also work in favour of significantly lower administrative costs than MSF's for HIC implementation.

6 For instance, in most high-income countries, not registering babies at birth entails a sanction for parents (Sheldon, 2009).

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Author contributions
ER conceived the study, drafted the manuscript and revised it. TG contributed sections on development economics and revised the manuscript.

Competing interests
The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical approval
Ethical approval was not required as the study did not involve human participants.

Informed consent
This study does not involve human participants.

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