

Unpacking the ‘universal’ in Universal Services

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What do we mean when we talk about ‘universal services’? The concept of universalism has many different and contested meanings. For the Social Guarantee, where the aim is to ensure that everyone has access to life’s essentials through a combination of cash and in-kind benefits, it’s important to consider what we mean – and don’t mean – by calling for universal provision.

The Social Guarantee offers a framework for policy and practice, not a blueprint or manifesto. It says what we aspire to and points to ways of getting there. So we recognise that what ‘universal services’ means in practice is not fixed but evolves over time, reflecting changing economic and social conditions.

That said, we understand life’s essentials to be universal. Here, we mean that everyone, across time and place, has the same basic human needs – the things that make it possible for us to survive and participate in society¹. How such needs are met – the form they take, and how they are provided and resourced – will vary widely between locations, cultures and generations. But there are certain generic need-satisfiers (or life’s essentials) that are constant and enduring. Whether we scour the academic literature or engage in local conversations we find the same list of what’s necessary for people to live a life that they value. Of these, the Social Guarantee highlights education, healthcare, childcare, adult social care, housing, transport and digital access. It’s a pragmatic focus on what we see as the ‘social infrastructure’, not a definitive list of essentials, which would include (for example) access to clean air and water, energy and sanitation.

Once life’s essentials are recognised, it follows, in our view, that everyone should have access to them as a right, not a privilege or concession. No-one is excluded from what it takes to satisfy their basic human needs. This is consistent with the UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which declares that everyone is entitled to the rights specified in its 30 Articles ‘without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.’² The Declaration includes, among much else and notably in Articles

22-26, all the main components of the Social Guarantee (except access to motorised transport and digital communications, which were only deemed essential many decades later).³

It is one thing to declare that rights exist universally and quite another to realise them in practice. The goal of the SG initiative is to stimulate debate on exactly this issue – the practical contemporary application of the general principle. At this point the focus shifts from global to national and local. The idea that everyone should have a right to life's essentials is a global aspiration, but when rights can only be realised through collective action at national and local levels, the term 'universal' applies to the whole population of a country, rather than of the world.

According to the political philosopher T.H. Marshall's concept of 'social citizenship', every member of society has *positive* economic and social rights as well as the more traditional '*negative*' rights that protect us from harm and maintained our civil liberties.⁴ Social citizenship is anchored in both ethical and practical considerations. People are to be helped by their fellow citizens, rather than blamed and punished, if they fall on hard times; and a thriving population is good for the economy. Civil and political rights cannot be realised unless people have sufficient social and economic means to live and act. Collective responsibility implies mutual obligations as well as rights. It's a dynamic process where everyone gives and receives, in a positive rather than zero sum game. Yet people cannot fulfil their obligations unless their basic needs are met. This depends not simply on freedom from injury or interference, but on collective provision (of benefits in kind and in cash) within a nation state, which are funded through taxation and distributed according to decisions of elected governments at national and local levels.

Unsurprisingly, since public funds are finite and often scarce, enforcing positive rights involves rigorous debate and tough decisions, not least on who is eligible, and on what basis. Should it be everyone who happens to be in the country where provision takes place? Or those who are settled residents? Or just those who can prove citizenship? What about visitors, prisoners, refugees or asylum seekers?

UK economist Tony Atkinson put forward the idea of entitlement based on resident participation (he was thinking about access to income support but the criterion might equally apply to services). This could be broadly defined as making a social contribution – for example by full or part time waged employment or self-employment, by education, training or active job search, by home care for children or the elderly or disabled, or by regular voluntary work in a recognised association, or a portfolio of activities equalling around 35 hours per week.⁵ Atkinson's idea could point towards a reimagined social citizenship where entitlement is a matter of belonging to human society, rather than owning a passport. On the other hand, it calls for conditionality based on individual behaviour rather than on need, leaving too much room for prejudice and power-play between different social groups. It could present a near-insuperable challenge, in conceptual and practical terms, for both residents and providers of public benefits.

In any event, attaching the principle of 'universal' access to the practice of collective provision as a goal should help to support greater inclusion and solidarity, while acting as a barrier against unfair discrimination. Crucially, however, universal access is not about treating everyone the same.

An important feature of the Social Guarantee is that meeting each area of need requires a customised approach. While basic human needs or life's essentials are universal and while access to life's essentials is a universal right in principle, once we move from the generic to the specific, needs are satisfied in widely varying ways. This is partly because historical circumstances, cultural norms and local resources determine what's adequate and appropriate. It is partly because the characteristics of each need call for a distinct set of actions. It is also because different people need different things at different times. I don't need childcare any more but I may need to be cared for in future. Some of us need surgery while others need eye drops. We all need education but what we need at 13 is seldom what we need at 31. Housing that suits you may not be what I need. Internet access was once a nice-to-have but is now widely regarded as essential. And so on. In this context, 'universal' access according to need involves considerable differentiation between individuals and a widely diverse – and evolving – range of collective measures. The goal is universally appropriate provision, rather than universally identical services.

'Appropriate' is a loose term, but in this context a service is appropriate if it is experienced by the recipient as sufficient to meet their need so that they have access to what is essential. A sure way to erode universal access is to allow the quality of a service to deteriorate so that those who can afford it opt out of collective provision and pay privately for an alternative – and then resent paying taxes for services they don't use. This leads to a tiered system where poor-quality services are only for the poor. It is the logic of a welfare 'safety net' rather than a universal system that provides secure foundations for all. 'Sufficiency', then, is not minimal or some kind of lowest common denominator, but what is considered good enough for all and by all.

This brings us to questions of power. How are decisions about needs and sufficiency made and implemented? Whose voices are heard and heeded? To achieve universal access to life's essentials, ways must be found to redistribute power to those who are currently disadvantaged and disempowered, so that they can influence the way services are designed and delivered. There are (at least) four complementary strategies for moving in this direction.

The first is devolution: decision-making and resources should be devolved to the lowest appropriate level, according to the principle of subsidiarity – but always remembering the importance of national-level policies that distribute power between localities as evenly as possible. The second is deliberative democracy: decisions about what constitutes sufficiency should be a matter for informed dialogue in which residents are directly involved and empowered, using models such as citizens' assemblies and citizens juries. The third is co-production: those who use services should be engaged as closely as possible in determining how their needs are met and in planning and (where

appropriate) delivering the service or whatever other measure is required. The fourth is pluralism: not an all-powerful, all-providing state, but a system that enables universal services to be provided by a wide range of organisations with different models of ownership and control, all sharing the same set of public interest obligations through a process of social licensing.

For each strategy there is extensive experience and analysis from which lessons can be learned – too much to do justice to here. The key point is that realising the goal of universal access requires a broad and equitable distribution of power. And there's a mutually reinforcing effect here. Sharing power helps to create favourable conditions for meeting needs universally. If everyone has access to life's essentials, everyone is able to participate in society and everyone has a fair chance to flourish. The benefits of universal services are not just individually experienced: they are universal. Everyone benefits in a society where everyone can live well within environmental limits.

In summary, the 'universal' in universal services can be understood in the following terms.

- Life's essentials are universal: an objective fact. Beyond this point, the term 'universal' is best understood as an aspiration or goal.
- Access to life's essentials should be a universal right.
- Action to achieve universal access is taken at national and/or local levels. While the goal remains universal in the global sense, universality in practice usually refers to the whole population of a country.
- Who is eligible in any one country to achieve access to social provision is a matter of debate, but the case for entitlement based on residency rather than citizenship is helpful.
- Universal access involves a great deal of differentiation to ensure that every individual gets what they need
- Services should be universally appropriate, rather than uniform, and experienced as sufficient for all by all.
- Universally appropriate and sufficient services can only be achieved by sharing power more equally across the whole population.
- The benefits of realising universal access to life's essentials are shared by all.

End Notes

¹Doyal, L., and I. Gough. 1991. *A Theory of Human Need*. London: Palgrave Macmillan; see also https://a9da3f62-db15-48ce-b4a0-deb5f1756d01.filesusr.com/ugd/c475e1_ebfbb37473104907a295a1849d402960.pdf

²https://www.ohchr.org/en/udhr/documents/udhr_translations/eng.pdf

³Rao, N., and J. Min. 2018. "Decent Living Standards: Material Prerequisites for Human Well-being." *Social Indicators Research* 138 (1): 225–244. doi:10.1007/s11205-017-1650-0.

⁴Marshall, T. (1965). 'The Right to Welfare. *The Sociological Review*', 13 (3): 261-272.

⁵Atkinson, A.B. (2015). *Inequality: What Can Be Done?*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, p.219.