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Towards a Sustainable Welfare State: The Role of Universal Basic Services

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The idea of pooling resources and sharing risks to provide universal services according to need not ability to pay was at the heart of the post-war settlement. However, decades of market ideology and deep spending cuts have left most services starved of power and resources. Universal Basic Services (UBS) offers a principled framework for policy and practice that aims to ensure everyone has access to life's essentials. Based on need theory it combines universality with sufficiency to provide a secure social foundation for all within planetary boundaries. Needs are met in different ways, combining collective and individual measures, as illustrated by examples of childcare, housing and food. UBS can be combined with an income guarantee to ensure no-one's income falls below an agreed level of sufficiency. Cash and services, which represent a 'social wage', are best understood as two sides of the same coin, supporting rather than competing with one another.

Keywords: Universal basic services, human needs, sufficiency, collective provision, in-kind benefits.

Introduction

The concept of a sustainable welfare state involves fusing the two objectives so that they become mutually reinforcing: urgent action to cut GHG emissions and ensure planetary boundaries are not exceeded, and a reformed welfare system to counteract rising levels of poverty and widening inequalities. The post war settlement that determined welfare systems in many industrialised countries embodied and enhanced social solidarity – by collectively providing essential services according to need not ability to pay. For the last forty years the incremental effects of neoliberal market ideology and deep public spending cuts have left most services starved of power and resources. Governments have measured success in terms of orthodox GDP economic growth rather than human or planetary wellbeing. The results are greater poverty and insecurity, widening inequalities, deepening distrust of politics and government, huge imbalances of power and acceleration towards ecological catastrophe.

Reversing this trend calls for a radical restoration of the collective ideal: pooling resources, sharing risks and acting together through public institutions. Recent experience of global pandemic has shown how much people depend on each other and on public resources and democratic governments to cope with risks and create conditions that enable everyone to survive and flourish. However, the goal is not to revive the post-war model, but to reinvent it as a new eco-social system that combines universality with sufficiency.

In this article I set out an approach developed in the UK described as 'Universal Basic Services' (UBS). First set out by the Institute for Global Prosperity, University College London (Portes *et al*., 2017), the idea was further developed in a book I co-authored, *The Case for Universal Basic Services* (Coote and Percy, 2020). I draw on the content of the book (and on other literature) to show how UBS can help to build a sustainable welfare state for the twenty-first century. I briefly describe its basis in need theory and how it constitutes a principled framework for policy and practice. I show how the UBS framework might be implemented in three areas of human need (childcare, housing and food) and consider the potential benefits in terms of equity, efficiency, solidarity and sustainability. While this approach can make significant contributions to the social and economic dimensions of sustainable development (Coote and Percy, 2020: 47-51), I focus mainly on how it can support the ecological dimension.

Meeting human needs

The normative goal of UBS is to ensure that everyone has access to life's essentials – the things that every individual needs to participate in society and lead a life they value.

Theories of human need and capability converge around what these things are. Doyal and Gough identify participation, health and critical autonomy as basic human needs (Doyal and Gough, 1991). Nussbaum describes three 'core' capabilities: of affiliation, bodily integrity and practical reason (Nussbaum, 2000). While such needs are universal across time and space, the practical means by which they are satisfied vary widely, as norms, resources and expectations shift and change between generations and countries. But there are certain generic categories of universal 'intermediate needs' that are more enduring. They are listed by need theorists as water, nutrition, shelter, secure and non-threatening work, education, healthcare, security in childhood, significant primary relationships, physical and economic security, a safe environment (Doyal and Gough, 1991; Miller, 2012) and (added to the list more recently) access to motorised transport and to digital information and communications (Rao and Min, 2017).

These, then, are life's essentials. They satisfy basic human needs. Unlike wants or preferences, they cannot be substituted for one another (a lack of water and shelter cannot be offset by more education or healthcare). And, while wants and preferences vary infinitely and can multiply exponentially, needs are satiable: there are limits beyond which more food, more work or more security are no longer helpful and could even be harmful. Thus, *sufficiency* is integral to the process of meeting *universal* needs. The combination of these two concepts – universalism and sufficiency – is central to UBS. In line with Raworth's 'safe and just space for humanity', the goal is to keep everyone above a secure social foundation without breaching planetary boundaries (Raworth, 2017).

A principled framework

UBS is a framework for exercising collective responsibility to meet shared needs. It includes an income guarantee to ensure that everyone has sufficient disposable cash (I briefly discuss later how this links with 'universal basic income' or UBI). But it recognises the value of services and other collective activities that provide necessities most people could not afford to pay for directly themselves – and these profoundly influence what level of cash is sufficient. Healthcare and education are obvious examples of services that

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already exist. In most rich countries, governments take some responsibility (however flawed) for making them generally available and they are partly or wholly funded through taxation. They are not acquired simply through individual market transactions.

The aim is to defend and improve services that already exist to provide life's essentials, and to reach out to other areas where they are less common but no less needed, such as childcare, adult social care, housing, transport and access to the Internet.

For the medium and longer term, UBS offers a vision and a pathway, but importantly it also offers a set of manageable steps for the short term. So, it is both radical and pragmatic. In any administration, it is possible to develop universal and sufficient services with a pace and reach that suit local conditions. Each area of need requires a customised approach. What matters is understanding what people need and how needs can be satisfied, applying the same set of principles in each case.

According to the UBS framework, the following principles apply. Access to life's essentials is a universal entitlement. Access is based on need, not ability to pay. Power in deciding how needs are met is devolved to the lowest appropriate level. Services are delivered by a range of organisations with different models of ownership and control, but all share a clear set of enforceable public interest obligations, which support collaboration and reinvestment instead of competition and profit extraction. There is meaningful participation in planning and delivering services by residents and service users, working in close partnership with professionals and other service workers, reflecting the model of co-production (Boyle *et al.,* 2010: 13). Service workers have fair pay, secure conditions and high-quality training and career development. There are clear rules and procedures for establishing and enforcing entitlements. Last, but most important in this context, services are designed and delivered to promote and enable sufficiency within planetary boundaries.

Within this framework, the state will provide some services directly – at national and local levels. In addition, it has four essential functions: to guarantee equality of access for individuals, between and within localities; to set and enforce ethical and quality standards; to collect and invest the necessary funds, distributing them to maximise inclusion and fairness; and to encourage and support diverse models of service provision and to coordinate activities across the different areas of need – to achieve optimal results.

Like the post-war settlement, this approach addresses failures in the market economy to meet human needs. But it differs in several respects. It combines state and non-state organisations in delivering services and maps out a key role for government as facilitator rather than default provider. It is committed to devolving power, and enabling participation by residents and service users. It seeks to establish access to life's essentials as a universal entitlement rather than a concession. It engages directly with the overriding challenge of the twenty-first century – to safeguard the natural environment and meet today's needs without compromising the capacity of future generations to do likewise. Accordingly, it supports decommodification of needs satisfaction, promotes universal sufficiency, and asserts ecological sustainability as a guiding principle for collective action.

Because it is focused on the *outcome* of meeting needs, the UBS framework entails more than service delivery. Where each of life's essentials is concerned, a package of measures is required to ensure universal access according to need not ability to pay. The nuts and bolts of that package will be different in each case while the package as a whole complies with the principled framework.

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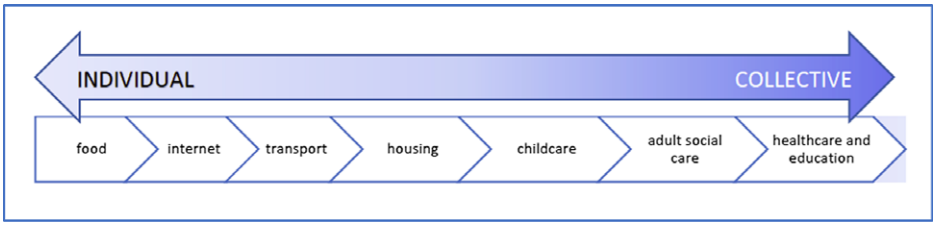

Figure 1. Individual-collective spectrum for securing life's essentials

It is proposed that key decisions – for example, about designing services and other measures, or about the order of priorities and pace of change – be made through a three-way democratic dialogue. This combines the experiential wisdom of lay residents with the codified knowledge of experts and the strategic and tactical insights of elected representatives. Citizens' juries and citizens' assemblies provide useful models that can be adapted for decision-making at national and local levels.

Implementing the framework

The question of how the UBS framework can be realised in practice has been addressed elsewhere (Coote and Percy, 2020: 57-106). Drawing on experience in a range of countries (mainly European), examples of good practice have been identified that could be adapted and developed in other settings. So far, the main focus of our research has been on childcare, adult social care, housing, transport and Internet access, but the same approach could be applied to other areas of need.

Broadly, we can distinguish between, on the one hand, what people can reasonably be expected (for historical and cultural reasons) to purchase out of cash income and, on the other, where it makes sense to exercise collective responsibility to ensure universal access. In some cases this will mean services that are free at the point of use; in others, there will be a combination of individual payments and collective provision (for example through investment in personnel and materials, or subsidies to limit fees or rents). In almost every case, some degree of collective intervention is required to make sure everyone can meet their needs in ways that are affordable, sufficient and sustainable.

To illustrate these points, I briefly consider how the framework can be applied to childcare, housing and food. These could be said to occupy different points of a spectrum between provisioning systems that are largely based on individual market transactions and those that are primarily collective. Figure 1 suggests how certain areas of need satisfaction are distributed across the spectrum. It could equally include others, such as utilities, legal services and social work.

In the three cases here, I consider why the UBS framework should be applied and how it could be implemented. I then touch briefly on the social and ecological impacts.

Childcare[1]

Education, security in childhood and access to paid work are recognised as generic 'satisfiers' of basic human needs and childcare is a means of meeting those needs – by

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providing early education and care for pre-school age children, and by enabling parents to go out to work. It can only be made available and affordable for all by exercising collective responsibility. Poor children and families have more to gain from it – and are more disadvantaged without it – than those who are better off (Lloyd and Potter, 2014: 78). For a lone parent in the US, present average childcare costs are over half of net income and in Ireland that figure is 42 per cent. Couples in the UK and New Zealand spend around a third of their income on childcare (OECD, 2016). Thus, where childcare is free or subsidised it can free up a significant portion of cash income for expenditure on other necessities and private purchases.

Well-developed childcare systems can be found in many OECD countries, but the challenge almost everywhere is to ensure that a sufficient quality of childcare is universally accessible. Factors that contribute to quality include training and qualifications of staff, ratios of children to staff (lower is generally better), a good mix between children with different social and ethnic backgrounds, suitably warm, consistent relationships between children and staff, parental involvement in managing childcare centres, and opening times to suit parents' working lives.

Childcare is typically provided by a mix of for-profit, public and voluntary organisations. The role of for-profit providers has a bearing on both cost and quality, and where for-profit provision is combined with a demand-led, fee-paying system, the observed effects are 'a rise in the fees charged by providers, a drop in standards in poorer areas, and an increase in inequalities of access' (Penn, 2014: 453).

Norway, which sets an enviable example, has well-qualified staff, relatively high staff-child ratios, a consistent form of childcare setting (the kindergarten) and continuity of care from age one to six as the norm. It combines 'a legal guarantee to a place for all children with fees that are both low overall and income-related' (Ellingsaeter, 2014: 53-76). It has reportedly managed to expand provision, open it up to private businesses and still maintain quality. This is attributed to the fact that government covers 85 per cent of childcare costs, caps fees, imposes tight regulations on staff qualifications, limits profit to what is 'reasonable' and ensures that parents sit on kindergarten boards.

The OECD has identified a range of social benefits that can be derived from 'high quality early childhood education and care', including better health, reduced likelihood of individuals engaging in risky behaviour and stronger 'civic and social engagement', with positive 'spill-over effects' for society as a whole (OECD, 2011: 4).

When it comes to ecological sustainability, there are three ways in which childcare can contribute. While these are not quantifiable, they help to illustrate the potential contribution of a range of public services (such as education, healthcare and adult social care), which could have a significant combined effect. Childcare can help prevent various kinds of harm that would otherwise impair people's wellbeing and require costly and often resource-intensive interventions by a range of public agencies (Aked *et al.*, 2009). A well-regulated and securely funded system can be brought within a shared set of protocols for sustainable use of natural resources – covering, for example, the way childcare centres are constructed, equipped and maintained, how much energy and non-renewable resources they use, and how children travel to and from home. And they can encourage children from a very young age to value, enjoy and safeguard the natural environment.

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Housing

Housing is widely acknowledged as one of life's essentials and is central to the UBS agenda. The aim is not to give everyone free accommodation, but to ensure that everyone has access to accommodation that is secure, sufficient, accessible and affordable. What matters is the quality of housing, neighbourhoods and local amenities, how far residents are engaged in planning and managing their homes and surroundings, the quantity and affordability of housing supply, fair access and distribution, and sustainability (for example, in relation to heating and cooling to prevent energy poverty). None of these can be achieved through markets alone.

Implementing the UBS framework would involve a combination of individual/private and collective/public participation. The former would typically include a combination of capital investment and expenditure on rent, mortgage payments and maintenance, while the latter is required, through public authorities, to invest, regulate and distribute.

Markets are unlikely to produce sufficient and affordable housing unless they are actively shaped and managed by local and national government, using regulation, public investment and partnerships between commercial, state and other non-profit bodies. Public Asset Corporations in Copenhagen and Hamburg, and Montpellier's Special Purpose Vehicles for pooling and developing land are examples. In Vienna, the city government has kept housing affordable by owning most of the land, using municipal developments and supply-side subsidies to keep costs down. Denmark levies a tax on land which is collected nationally and distributed to local government for reinvestment in housing and infrastructure. In England and Wales, a growing network of Community Land Trusts, set up by local people, develop and manage affordable housing and other local assets. There are countless initiatives in cities across Europe that aim in these and other ways to boost the supply of affordable housing (Falk and Rudlin, 2018).

Residents' experience of housing will be influenced by the quality of their surroundings, relationships with neighbours, and how easily they can find their way to transport, jobs, schools, public services, shops, leisure facilities, and open spaces. Furthermore, where residents have some control over their day-to-day living conditions, they tend to be healthier and happier: this stems not only from being able to influence what happens to their homes and surroundings, but also from the very experience of control (Marmot *et al.,* 2018: 98). Public policies can protect residents' role in decisions and support housing cooperatives and other collaborative arrangements. Housing co-ops flourish in many countries, including Austria, Denmark, Germany, Spain and Switzerland, where they run a considerable chunk of the housing stock.

Poorer households generally pay a much larger slice of their income in rents or mortgages (OECD Affordable Housing Database, 2019). So further measures are needed if housing is to be genuinely affordable for all. These may take the form of demand-side benefits, such as housing benefit in the UK (widely considered a poor use of public funds) or supply side measures, whereby prices, including rents and purchase deposits, are capped or subsidised, as is common in parts of Austria, Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands.

The social benefits of universal and sufficient housing are well documented. Poor housing conditions are associated with a wide range of health conditions, including respiratory infections, asthma, lead poisoning, injuries, and mental ill health (Krieger and Higgins, 2002). Secure access to a decent and affordable home can contribute to

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wellbeing by relieving anxiety and stress, supporting employment, enhancing family and social relationships; more generally, it can make the difference between struggling and flourishing (Academic-Practitioner Partnership, 2016).

At the same time, the housing sector is responsible for a substantial share of GHG emissions and resource use. For example, homes account for around 15 per cent of all the UK's GHG emissions through their use of oil and gas for heating and hot water (Timperley, 2019). So there is great potential to improve ecological sustainability through collective measures such as improving home insulation, applied at local and national levels (Gouldson *et al.,* 2020: 34-5).

A notable local example is Freiburg in South West Germany, which promotes 'urban eco-living, facilitated by a strong long-term vision, national policy frameworks and a focused commitment to change and community engagement' (Falk and Rudlin, 2018: 13). It has invested in renewable energy, imposed strict building standards, constructed an entire low-emissions neighbourhood, built bicycle lanes and tram lines, and pushed cars out of the city centre. The result is that greenhouse gas emissions in the city of 230,000 people have fallen by more than 37 per cent per head since 1992, significantly better than the German average (Buck, 2019). But city leaders have made it clear that meeting climate targets ultimately depends on supportive policies at national level.

As the Freiburg experience suggests, achieving universal access to sufficient housing will depend not only on integrating social and environmental policies, but also on integrating local initiatives with overarching environmental policies. The European Union's 'Green Deal', for example, calls for doubling the rate of renovating private and public buildings to improve energy efficiency, climate proofing and compatibility with the circular economy; it stipulates that particular attention should be paid 'to the renovation of social housing, to help households who struggle to pay their energy bills' (European Commission, 2019). The UK's Green New Deal Group has proposed large-scale investment in energy efficient and affordable homes (Green New Deal Group, 2013). The 'Green New Deal' put to the US Congress in 2019 called for all new and upgraded buildings in the United States 'to achieve maximum energy efficiency, water efficiency, safety, affordability, comfort, and durability, including through electrification' (Congressional Western Congress, 2019).

Food

Everyone needs adequate nutrition. Food is one of life's essentials and arguably every society has a responsibility for ensuring that everyone has enough to eat. It is uncontroversial to assert that no child should go to school hungry and no family should have to choose between heating and eating. Yet these things happen routinely in poor countries. In rich countries, food poverty and hunger are on the rise; and food banks – provided by charities to supply free food to the needy – are multiplying.

Applying the UBS framework to food does not mean that governments have a duty to supply free food to everyone or to subsidise more food banks. Indeed, most charities agree that food banks should be an emergency response only (Perry *et al.,* 2014: 7-13). They are not the answer to the problem of food poverty, which is linked to a complex web of factors including income insecurity and corporate profiteering, as well as poor housing, ill health, unemployment, family breakdown and social isolation. Food banks are a symptom not a cure.

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Typically, people buy food for themselves. It sits at the 'individual' end of the UBS spectrum and is widely regarded as a matter of personal choice. A radically improved social security system that establishes a guaranteed income floor would certainly help. However, food choices are severely edited by material and cultural factors. These have to be addressed in order for everyone to have sufficient, affordable and culturally appropriate nutrition – and it is here that collective measures are called for.

One example of a service that reflects the UBS approach is the provision of free meals for all schoolchildren, regardless of family income. In the United Kingdom, free school meals are provided to all pupils in reception and years one and two, but thereafter the service is means tested, although some local authorities provide free school meals to all primary school pupils (Coote and Percy, 2020). Finland has provided universal free school meals since 1943, and children can now get free hot lunches in Helsinki's parks during the summer months (Lambert, 2019). The point of universal provision is not only to make good the failings of the means-tested system, which has been found to stigmatise and exclude too many, but also to improve the well-being and educational performance of all children (Taylor, 2019).

This rests on the assumption that meals provide a decent quality and quantity of food, which is not always the case. A UK government scheme to give weekly food parcels to children during a Covid-related lockdown in January 2021 turned out to be scandalously inadequate (BBC, 2021). Whether meals are free or individually purchased, it matters what quality of food people can obtain and afford, and whether it is sufficiently nutritious to enable them to flourish.

Systems for producing food have multiple impacts on the natural environment. Growing, processing, packaging, storing, transporting, marketing, selling, cooking and wasting food variously determine the quality and sustainability of land, air and water, biodiversity, use of fossil fuels and plastics, and GHG emissions (among much else). In the food sector, unlike childcare and far more than housing, the implications are global. What people eat in rich countries – not least the balance between animal- and plant-based foods – will affect the diets and life-chances of people in poor countries, as well as the carrying capacity of the planet (Willett *et al.,* 2019). The challenge for a sustainable welfare state is therefore to ensure that healthy diets are universally accessible, globally sufficient and sustainable over time.

This requires a whole-systems approach. It would include policies for trade and agriculture that support sustainable food production, regulation of business to promote healthy, affordable food, and statutory controls of advertising and sales to restrict foodstuffs that are harmful. There would be policies to reduce 'food miles' with high emissions, to support local initiatives that promote collective food production and consumption, and to make sure good food is available everywhere so that there are no more 'food deserts' in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Health and education services would encourage healthy and sufficient diets; they work together to build knowledge across the population about what's good and sustainable to eat and why it matters. Schools, hospitals, childcare centres, care homes and other public institutions would supply appetising, nutritious and ecologically sustainable meals for all who use their services. Food banks would be history.

The impacts of diet on health are extensively documented (GBD 2017 Diet Collaborators, 2019). So are ways in which food systems affect the environment. According to the Lancet, adopting healthy and sustainable eating habits worldwide (with dietary changes differing widely between regions) could 'substantially benefit human health,

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averting about 10.8-11,6 million deaths per year' (Willett *et al*., 2019). At a global level, today's food supply chain is estimated to create 26 per cent of anthropogenic GHG emission (Poore and Nemecek, 2018). The world's current eating habits are neither healthy nor sustainable, but alternative diets have been identified that offer substantial health benefits and 'could, if widely adopted, reduce global agricultural greenhouse gas emissions, reduce land clearing and resultant species extinctions, and help prevent diet-related chronic non-communicable diseases' (Clarke and Tilman, 2017).

Comparing individual market transactions and collective provision

Childcare, housing and food occupy different points on the collective-individual spectrum for securing life's essentials. Together, they illustrate the inescapable logic of exercising collective responsibility to meet human needs in ways that are universal and sufficient. Applying the UBS framework to provide in-kind benefits can bring substantial gains in terms of equity, efficiency, solidarity and sustainability (Coote and Percy, 2020: 35-56). Universal services are highly redistributive because they are worth much more to people on low incomes. They minimise profit extraction and avoid the transaction costs and moral hazards associated with markets. They strengthen solidarity between and within groups because everyone has a stake in them and they embody the values of mutual aid and reciprocity. They can generate relatively secure jobs at all skills levels and across geographical locations. And they can help to achieve ecological sustainability, through action by public institutions and NGOs at all levels.

It is worth noting finally that campaigns for universal basic income (UBI) generally focus on cash payments to all, supporting individual expenditure and requiring very high levels of public spending. As such, they not only threaten to divert funds away from services, where they are badly needed, but also shore up conventional market ideology (Zamora, 2017). An income guarantee is one interpretation of the concept of UBI that is compatible with UBS. It is 'universal' as a guarantee, not as a payment to all regardless of current income. It is 'basic' in that no-one's income is allowed to fall below an agreed level of sufficiency. As with other components of the UBS agenda, it is an entitlement not a concession and what constitutes sufficiency would be determined through democratic dialogue and transparent, accountable political decision-making. It can be administered in ways that minimise conditionality and waiting times. And it can be paid at a level consistent with the Minimum Income Standard without an overall price that would be so vast as to absorb funds required for services and other measures (Stirling and Arnold, 2020). A key point is that cash and in-kind benefits should be understood as two sides of the same coin, which must support and complement, rather than compete with or threaten, one another (Coote and Lawson, 2021).

In conclusion

To conclude I briefly summarise the ways in which universal basic services can contribute to a sustainable welfare state.

First, the concept of UBS reclaims and reimagines the collective ideal, with a principled framework to guide policy and practice, in order to achieve a secure social foundation for all.

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Second, UBS offers benefits in-kind, according to need not ability to pay, that are intended to enable everyone to have access to life's essentials. They amount to a virtual income or 'social wage' that can bring substantial gains, individually and collectively, in terms of equity, efficiency, solidarity and sustainability.

Third, by combining universality with sufficiency the UBS framework can influence provisioning systems so that they remain within ecological limits. It offers a vehicle for shaping the practice of individuals and organisations involved in delivering services that meet human needs.

Fourth, by focusing on life's essentials and enabling people to live well within limits, while shifting power towards localities, residents and service users, the UBS framework can help to change norms and expectations, influencing what people want in life, how much is considered 'enough' and how current activities can affect the life chances of future generations.

Note

1 'Childcare' is the term used here to denote early childhood education and care for pre-school children. The period it covers varies between countries, but broadly it spans the years between the end of statutory parental leave and the start of compulsory schooling.

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