

## Title

# The Unlikely Rise of Basic Income from Agenda Universe to Decision Agenda: How Policy Entrepreneurs Navigate Institutions

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## Abstract (200 words)

Introducing Universal Basic Income (UBI) at the official agenda-setting is rare, although not a completely unlikely occurrence –it might be the case that partial versions of UBI and related policy proposals could somehow emerge in the public discourse given the right circumstances. Yet, just what combination of agency (from policy entrepreneurs) and the institutional settings bring this result is not clear from existing empirical literature. This study aims to investigate why UBI proposals have risen to the point of becoming a national-level presidential pledge in South Korea during the 2022 elections. Using the theoretical frame of multiple streams approach (MSA) in agenda-setting, we distinguish different levels of agenda-setting relevance, ranging from the “agenda universe” to the “decision agenda”. We argue that, in a context which presents a hierarchical central-local governments structure and a rich “policy primeval soup” a premium goes to policy entrepreneurs who expertly navigate the institutional settings with innovative, change-triggering ideas. Our policy analysis shows that progressive presidential candidate made shrewd use of the institutional bureaucratic settings and the possibilities offered by local governments in policy innovation, building coalitions by enacting partial introductions of UBI at a local level under contexts of high ambiguity and loose policy design.

**Keywords:** basic income, agenda-setting, agenda universe, institutional agenda, policy entrepreneur, South Korea

## Introduction

When the first public forum on Basic Income took place in South Korea (hereafter Korea) in 2009, with the inauguration of the Korean branch of the “Basic Income Earth Network (BIEN)”, only a minority group of politically progressive-oriented people met, in the general lack of interest from the public (Choi, K.E., 2014). Fast forward thirteen years later, and Universal Basic Income (UBI) was the main electoral pledge during the 20th Presidential election in 2022 from progressive candidate Jaemyung Lee from the Democratic party. Eventually, Mr Lee narrowly lost to President Suk-yeol Yoon by 0.7%. However, it is undeniable that upgrading UBI discourses from a distant option amongst infinite possibilities from the agenda universe to a concrete proposal at the institutional level within a little more

than ten years was definitely a remarkable result. During this arch of time, a series of cash transfers inspired by UBI discourses were implemented by central and local governments, such as the pioneering Youth Allowance in the city of Seongnam, the Rural Basic Income in the Gyeonggi province, and the (quasi-)universal disaster relief payment in the aftermath of COVID-19.

As early as 2017, UBI discourses were institutionalized to the point that the conservative Bank of Korea and the Ministry of Strategy and Finance invested a copious number of dedicated reports and surveys to the possibility of introducing UBI at a national level. Basic income discourses grew to become one of the key issues among political debates surrounding the 2017 and 2022 presidential elections in Korea. UBI reforms rising to the official agenda-setting of national governments is quite unheard of; they tend instead to remain policy proposals or issues in the public debate (De Wispelaere & Fitzpatrick, 2011; De Wispelaere & Noguera, 2012). Partial versions of universal basic income (aka the “low road” to basic income) (Jordan, 2011, 2012), a lack of competitor social policy programs (Schickler, 2001), an adequately generous welfare state such as the Scandinavian one (Haagh, 2011), and a high degree of public support (Mintrom, 1997; De Wispelaere, 2016) may somehow facilitate the introduction of UBI policy proposals. In light of this, it is quite puzzling to observe the rise in popularity of a UBI agenda, which grew to the point of becoming a presidential pledge in a welfare state that is considered still immature (Yang, 2017). The case of Korea might be used to respond to the following question:

What combination of institutions and policy entrepreneurs’ strategies improves the chances for UBI discourses to grow in the government’s institutional agenda?

More specifically, this study aims to investigate why Korea has represented fertile ground to raise UBI ideas high in the institutional agenda, using the theoretical frame of the multiple streams approach (MSA) in agenda-setting (Kingdon, 2010). We argue that, in a context which presents a hierarchical central government-local government structure, and a rich “policy primeval soup” in the absence of a robust social security system, a premium goes to those who expertly walk up the institutional settings, thus increasing the leverage of their innovative, change-triggering ideas. In this case, progressive presidential candidate Jaemyung Lee made shrewd use of the institutional bureaucratic settings and the possibilities offered by local governments in policy innovation, building coalitions by enacting partial introductions of UBI at a local level in a context of high ambiguity and loose policy design (Zhu, 2008; Mintrom & Norman, 2009; Mintrom, 2013; Zahariadis, 2014).

This paper is structured as follows. First, we discuss the MSA theoretical approach and the usefulness of incorporating institutional settings in its empirical applications, following Birkland (2017)’s distinction of different levels of agenda-setting. Secondly, based on such classification, we offer an overview of the development of UBI discourses in Korea over time, focusing on the political career of Mr Jaemyung Lee, a locally rooted politician and presidential hopeful in 2022, as the main policy entrepreneur promoting UBI ideas. Following his career as a political leader in local politics, serving as a mayor for Seongnam City, governor for the province of Gyeonggi-do, up to his presidential electoral bid in 2022, it is possible to identify three distinct developments of UBI agenda-setting transitions: a first phase, from agenda universe to systemic agenda; a second phase, from systemic agenda to institutional agenda; and a final phase, where UBI was supposed to transition from institutional agenda to decision

agenda. Based on policy reports, statistical data, and other relevant documents, we depict Mr Lee's strategies to navigate institutions as the main UBI policy entrepreneur following each transition phase, describing how with the victory of the current President Yoon the decision agenda could not materialise. Finally, in the discussion and conclusion section, we reason on how policy entrepreneurs' strategies can be shaped according to institutional settings, and how future research should investigate agenda-setting issues in a more nuanced way based on this perspective.

## **Policy entrepreneurs and institutional settings**

Based on which mechanisms do some policy issues gain salience in agenda-setting in comparison to others? This section attempts to articulate this problem by referring to our conceptualization of the agenda-setting stage (Birkland, 2017), and by considering the important interplay that exists between policy entrepreneurship and institutional settings (He, 2018; Zohlnhöfer et al., 2016) within the MSA frame. We pay particular attention to the role of local governments in enriching the 'policy primeval soup' where ideas float, waiting to be picked in the policy agenda (Kingdon, 2003; Bae, 2023).

First, a more detailed definition of agenda-setting is necessary. In this study, we divide the agenda-setting stage into different phases: the 'agenda universe', which takes into consideration all possible ideas in a society; the 'systemic agenda', which includes any policy ideas that could be taken into consideration in the policymaking process; the 'institutional agenda', which consists in the articulation of a policy idea in concrete proposals and experts' reports for the consideration of the government; and the 'decision agenda', which refers to the final decision entering agenda-setting (Birkland, 2017: 63-65). Whilst in Korea UBI did not manage to enter the decision-agenda at the national level, yet, with the help of local government politics, it did rise in the public discourse sphere to the point of becoming institutionally relevant.

Secondly, it is necessary to add some insights on the interplay that occurs between policy entrepreneurs and their institutional settings within the MSA framework. Kingdon (1984)'s classic work on MSA is a widely used approach that focuses on policymaking under conditions of ambiguity, when timing might matter more than rationality (Zahariadis, 2014). The MSA model envisions three streams which run separately. First, the issue needs to be problematized and understood as such by the public (*problem stream*); secondly, policies must be selected from a set of possible policy alternatives that are already made available by an active community of academics and activists (*policy stream*); finally, political parties, interest groups, and national mood will represent the *political stream* (Kingdon, 1984). *Policy entrepreneurs* are depicted as the main agents in the MSA model, attempting to 'couple' the three streams, that is, pushing forward some specific policy alternatives in the agenda, whilst seeking the opening of *windows of opportunity* at some given crucial times (Zahariadis, 2014) with their resources (in terms of time, energy, reputation, and even money) to get a future return (Kingdon, 1984: 122). In order to successfully influence the policy agenda, there is a wide range of possible strategies they might recur to: framing the policy discourse to influence the public mood and to increase the salience of an issue, building up supporting coalitions, defining problems and amassing evidence to support the feasibility of their proposals, leading by

example by creating working models of the change they propose, conceding more gradual and partial introductions of policy change (the “salami tactics”), and so forth (Mintrom & Norman, 2009; Carstensen, 2011; Mintrom, 2013; Cairney & Zahariadis, 2016; Zohlnhoefer et al., 2016). Both the MSA and the actions of policy entrepreneurs have been profitably used in public policy research, coming up with more nuanced understandings of how policy entrepreneurs navigate institutions using their inside knowledge (He, 2018). Generally, it is believed that policy entrepreneurs wait for problems to float by to which they can attach their solutions, and wait for a development in the political stream they can use to their advantage (Kingdon 1984: 165-166). Yet, this view overlooks the proactive nature of policy entrepreneurs. Policy entrepreneurs are not just waiting; they know when to surf the waves (Cairney, 2018). In particular, policy entrepreneurship can be more effective at lower administrative levels (Henstra, 2011; Obron et al., 2011; Dudley, 2013; cited by Cairney and Jones, 2016: 46). The autonomy which local politicians have in their districts helps to enlarge their policy initiatives and ideas more proactively (Bae, 2023).

Empirical studies tend to rely on specific cases and people in understanding the actions of policy entrepreneurs, which might leave readers with the impression that each case example is idiosyncratic and difficult to generalize from. This limit might be overcome by focusing more on the institutional circumstances that make the actions of policy entrepreneurs, as ‘embedded’ agents in their contexts (Mintrom & Norman, 2009), easier to understand and generalize beyond the single case only. Indeed, the importance of institutions in understanding policy entrepreneurship is well acknowledged in concerned scholarship (Beland, 2005; Zahariadis, 2014), with empirical research so far contending that opportunities to maneuver vary greatly depending on the specific institutional settings at hand (Zhu, 2008; Mintrom, 2013). A recurrent theme in this literature is the possibility for entrepreneurs to utilize the structure of power, since “an authoritative decision-making position, such as the presidency or a congressional committee chairmanship” contributes to the policy entrepreneur’s success (Kingdon, 2011). Following this reasoning, Zahariadis (2007) opines that the higher the policy entrepreneur’s administrative or partisan rank, the more influence (s)he has over decision-making. Béland (2005: 9–10) also agrees that ideas need the backing of powerful actors, arguing that decision coupling might be far easier for policy entrepreneurs to attain if they directly control the relevant institutions (Zohlnhoefer et al., 2016). Policy entrepreneurs might even be policy implementers themselves (Lu et al., 2020). In fact, “bureaucratic actors who develop track records for innovative action and who are prepared to move across organizations are rewarded in terms of faster-than-usual career progression” (Teodoro, 2009; cited by Mintrom & Norman, 2009). Despite these many considerations, just how institutions matter in letting some policy alternatives rise in the political agenda of governments, is surprisingly understudied in empirical research.

We thus consider the case of Korea and the unlikely rise of UBI discourses on the public agenda as a result of rapidly changing institutional settings in the past few decades. Prior to 1987, senior economic officials occupied leading positions in the government, including the Ministry of Health and Welfare (MOHW) and several important positions in the Office of the President, in the absence of democratic elections economic growth-first concerns dominated the public agenda, leaving no space for welfare considerations and the voices of civil society

and local concerns (Bae, 2023; Lee, 2023). This policy framework has been labeled ‘developmentalism’. The key feature of developmental welfare states is that social policy is either developed or underdeveloped for achieving and maintaining economic growth (Kwon, 2005; Aspalter, 2006). The developmental legacy still looms large on Korean society even after democratization in 1987, reflected on the slow growth of civil societies’ participation in the public discourse, and an excessive concentration of political, economic, and cultural power in the big Seoul Metropolitan Area (SMA) inclusive of Seoul and the surrounding areas of Incheon, Suwon, and the Gyeonggi province (Bae, 2023). Under such circumstances, welfare reformers had little room to maneuver, and a strategy of economic growth first, with residual welfare as a second thought, was a well-established policy legacy (Yang, 2017).

Yet, the picture has changed considerably since the mid-1990s when the role of local governments gained prominence as local democratic elections started. A series of central government reforms, such as the Special Act on Decentralisation (2004) and the Local Autonomy Act (2020), aimed to improve democratic politics and a more balanced distribution of resources. This state of facts has considerably enlarged the pool of policy alternatives that could be proposed, and local politics has given more visibility to a new cohort of local politicians who proactively voiced their policy initiatives and ideas (Bae, 2023) – making it possible for them to ride the social ladder within institutions to reach more powerful administrative positions close to SMA. This is the background that, in combination with the pandemic emergency (2020), led to a rapid interest in UBI ideas through public debate and local governments’ policy innovations.

Our study contends that in a context with more pluralism and heightened political conflict, participants to the policy stream increase, the “policy primeval soup” is further enriched, and a premium goes to those with innovative, change-triggering ideas, who are able to navigate the institutional system from within, i.e. embedded policy entrepreneurs. This paper focuses on the thick policy primeval soup and policy entrepreneurs’ strategies of basic income as a developmental tool, mindful of local politics and the political opportunity structure (Estevez-Abe and Kim, 2014: 669) in Korea.

### **Stage 1: From Agenda Universe to Systemic Agenda (2010- 2016)**

In this section, we depict three different historical phases that evolved in tandem with Mr Jaemyung Lee’s ascendant political career. In this first transition stage, the problematization of UBI was not easy to come by, yet societal unrest and the emergence of welfare universalism in public discourse represented a fertile ground for new policies to be planned and proposed with the help of activism at the local government level.

#### ***The Problem Stream: Societal unrest and residual welfare system***

Korea has experienced remarkable economic growth, with GDP per capita increasing tenfold from USD 3,500 (GBP 2,700) in 1987 to USD 35,000 (GBP 27,000) in 2021 (World Bank, 2023). Yet, this compressed growth was achieved at the cost of fierce social competition and a diffuse sense of discontent (Ryu and Choi, 2020). Korea constantly ranks abysmally low in terms of life satisfaction (35th out of 41 countries in 2022), it has the highest among OECD

countries (37.3 cases per 100,000 people in 2010), and it maintains the world record for low fertility (0.81 children per woman in 2022) (KOSTAT, 2022)<sup>1</sup>. Societal discontent affects several groups of people in society: the youth are experiencing higher levels of unemployment in comparison to other age cohorts, the elderly are vulnerable to high poverty rates and low social protection and employment security, working women are subject to career disruptions and gender discrimination at work, and the labour market is rife with a high number of irregular job contracts since the past thirty years as the economy had to liberalise following the 1997 economic crisis (Hong et al., 2023; Hong and Yang, 2022). Economic uncertainty especially looms large on the younger generations of labour market entrants, who oftentimes engage in extremely competitive job application procedures such as civil servant exams for getting hired in comparatively better jobs with decent working hours and fringe benefits. The cut-throat competition to achieve scholastic and working achievement, and the narrow percentage of success has led to the use of viral words such as “Hell Joseon”, a satirical Korean term coined around 2015 to express anger and frustrations about high youth unemployment, economic inequalities, and low social mobility, as in feudal times during the 19<sup>th</sup>-century “Joseon dynasty”. More sarcastic neologisms have gone viral since the early 2010s, such as the “Sam-po” generation, referring to a cohort of people giving up the three fundamental life goals of dating, marriage, and having children – all examples of a young generation of millennials trapped in a sense of hopelessness and despair in a hyper-competitive society.

### ***The Policy Stream: The emergence of universalism in social policy debates***

Amidst the mounting social discontent, the Korean welfare system in the 2000s was still relatively immature and in its developing stage. People’s dissatisfaction and demand for more welfare resulted in a more favourable environment to promote more welfare during the 2010s. A window opportunity for local governments emerged during the public debate on a ‘free (universal)’ lunch for primary students initiated by the local government in Seoul in 2010. Prior to that, students had to pay for their school meals individually, resulting in a social dividend between those youth who could afford school meals and those who did not. Then conservative Mayor of Seoul Se-hoon Oh believed that universal free meals for students were mere populism, and wrongly assumed that all Seoul citizens would align with his views, indicting a regional referendum about the policy in 2011. With a turnout rate of less than 33.3%, the minimum rate for ballot count, the referendum turned out to be invalid and Mayor Oh had to resign, paving the way for the enactment of a free lunch policy for every primary student in Seoul under his successor, the progressive Won-soon Park as the new Mayor of Seoul. The 2011 Seoul referendum somehow triggered a wider debate and fervent policy initiative for more universal social policies.

As the 18<sup>th</sup> presidential elections approached in December 2012, the conservative president-to-be Geun-hye Park pledged to offer universal basic pensions for over 65-year-olds, as she correctly assumed that universal programs were effective to mobilize middle-class and elderly voters as the referendum on the free lunch debate in Seoul demonstrated (Eun, 2013). Indeed, a universal basic pension was adopted in 2014 following the political competition, but

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.rand.org/blog/2022/07/south-koreas-extraordinary-fertility-decline.html>

was later modified to exclude the richest 30% of the elderly. These attempts from central and local administrations to universalism did allow some space for bolder policy experimentation at the local level, amongst these, the Youth Dividend launched by Mayor Lee in the city of Seongnam was a pioneering example in 2015.

### ***The Political Stream: New policy entrepreneurs from the local level***

Initially, the BI agenda was considered radical and naïve, and only discussed by a minority of left-wing policy entrepreneurs, the Green Party, the Justice Party, and the ‘Basic Income Korean Network (BIKN)’ which was organized in 2009 in Korea. It could not get the broad attention of the public and politicians from the right side, who were skeptical of universal policies with the hostility toward universal policies as the legacy of developmentalism. However, with the adoption of the free lunch policy from the local level and the increase in political attention to welfare programs, the public’s attention to the universal policy shifted quickly. Policy entrepreneurs utilized the opportunity and played a key role in “softening” their policy idea to be adaptable for the change (Cairney, 2018).

Directly addressing the malaise of the youth and their struggles to find decent employment, Mayor Jaemyung Lee of the city of Seongnam launched the new policy initiative of the Youth Dividend, publicized as a partial BI at the local level in 2015. The initial plan was to provide 1 million KRW (around GBP 600) per year to 24-year-olds regardless of their income levels or job-seeking activity in line with the principles of basic income (Jung, J.Y., 2016). However, due to the opposition of the central government and the Ministry of Health and Welfare, the amount was cut in half to 500K KRW (around GBP 300) per year, and provided as form of a local currency (voucher), Seongnam Love Gift, in January 2016. Despite the strong opposition of the central government, Mayor Lee pushed ahead with the Youth Dividend. In response, the central government released a statement claiming that this program was an inappropriate populist initiative that wasted taxpayer money, and further argued that the Youth Dividend was not effective for supporting job-seeking activity of the youth (Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2016). Due to the central government’s opposition, Mayor Lee emphasized that the dividend would help promote the local economy since it is provided as the form of local currency.

Inspired by the Seongnam case, still in 2015, the city of Seoul also planned to launch its Youth Allowance program to support young people in their job-seeking efforts. Mayor Won-soon Park described the Youth Allowance as a Korean basic income experiment to address the inequality faced by the young generation (Roh and Ha, 2020). However, this was annulled by the central government, which led to a lawsuit between the Ministry of Health and Welfare and Seoul. The political conflict lasted nearly two years until President Geun-hye Park’s impeachment in March 2017, which actually created a policy window for resuming the Youth Allowance at the local level in April 2017. In both the cases of Seoul and Seongnam, local initiative in introducing new policies was faced with opposition from the central government, which was wary of letting its centralized power go – perhaps as a legacy of the previous developmentalist practices. Despite such hurdles, persistence from local-level policy entrepreneurs and the high level of financial autonomy of Seoul and Seongnam City made the adoption of partial BI possible (Park & Shin, 2019; Shin & Park, 2018).

Considering that the youth dividend policy was first adopted in Seongnam and then expanded to Seoul, Jaemyung Lee, then Mayor of Seongnam City, emerged as a key policy entrepreneur and problem broker driving the basic income discourse forward. Although the BI idea had been floating in the policy primeval soup as a left-wing policy idea for quite some time, being thus just one of the many possible ideas out of the policy universe, the real difference was made by local politicians, who used their bureaucratic resources and autonomy in making the idea more feasible and acceptable. Adopting innovative policy alternatives under the framing of UBI ideas, and attempting to expand such ideas further from local experiences to other regions (aiming to the national level) was not a smooth process at first due to the strong legacy of centralism. For a locally limited context, to ingrain the possible BI solution in the back of people's minds (Kingdon, 1984: 103, 128; Kingdon, 2011: 117), Mayor Lee employed framing as a strategy to highlight how the central government restricts local autonomy, thereby impeding the expansion of social programs. Specifically, Mayor Lee resorted to non-conventional practices to gain visibility and space to maneuver, conducting a hunger strike for 10 days to promote the efficiency and fiscal autonomy of the local governments in 2016 (Kim, J., 2016). Framing serves as a tool utilized by policy entrepreneurs in their role as 'problem brokers', and it aids in manipulating conditions as public problems and presenting a specific solution to address certain issues (Zahariadis, 2003; Knaggård, 2013; Knaggård, 2015: 453-454). The city of Seongnam is far from enjoying a similar level of administrative power and autonomy as Seoul, yet it is close to the SMA area and Mr Lee's personal initiative allowed him sufficient leverage as a local-level politician to play the role of policy entrepreneur by "softening up" the idea of UBI for a targeted population, in a modest entity.

With the hunger strike and the successful implementation of the Youth Dividend policy despite strong opposition from the central government, the hitherto relatively unknown Mayor Lee gained significant attention as a rising politician even at the central government level. Mr Lee can be considered an archetypical case of a policy entrepreneur who shrewdly understood political opportunities while taking care of his personal interests to promote his career up the ladder of the political-institutional hierarchy, from local to central government level by investing the resources wisely for future rewards (Kingdon, 2011: 123; Cairney, 2012: 272). Mayor Lee as a local politician knew how to adapt to his bureaucratic environment to exploit and create windows of opportunity as local policy entrepreneurs can easily move the stream in the subnational government rather than passively waiting for the big waves (Cairney, 2018: 200). His attempt to "soften up" the UBI policy to communities and the public through the adoption of youth allowance increased the public perception of himself as a key advocate of BI, which eventually resulted in him becoming a candidate for the preliminary election for the 19<sup>th</sup> presidential election in 2017 and a governor in Gyeonggi-do (province) in 2018.

## **Stage 2: from Systemic Agenda to Institutional Agenda (2016-2019)**

During this second transition stage, UBI discourses gained a more prominent position in the ongoing public discourse. This short arc of time was certainly an eventful one, since AI development and presidential elections, respectively, served as a focusing event and a window of opportunity for promoting these ideas further. Additionally, Jaemyung Lee's political career



kept ascending and his upgraded status as governor of the Gyeonggi province granted him even more leverage to promote UBI-inspired ideas for social policy innovation.

***The Problem Stream: AI-driven focusing event and the window of opportunity of Presidential elections***

Two major events helped in increasing the stance of UBI discourses in the public debate. In March 2016, Sedol Lee, a Korean world champion in the popular table game of Go, was defeated in a high-exposure media event by Alpha Go, an AI programme developed by Google. This event was followed live by millions of viewers, and it sent shockwaves throughout Korea, where the game actually took place. This represented a focusing event that helped propelling further discussions on the need for UBI, considering the risks of AI and the future of work, and the effectiveness of the existing social security system founded on the standard work arrangement (Lee, K.S., 2016; Kim, Y.S., 2017).

Perhaps even more importantly, political events opened up an early window of opportunity in the form of anticipated presidential elections. Throughout 2016, mass candle vigil demonstrations took place almost every weekend in central Seoul, Gwanghwamun Square, protesting the corrupted government of President Geun-hye Park. This swirl of events eventually led to Park's conviction of impeachment in December 2016, leaving newly elected centre-left President Jae-in Moon to take action for innovative policies that could represent a shift from the corruption accusations of the previous conservative government. This state of things led many politicians, besides Seongnam Mayor Jaemyung Lee, to pay interest to BI discourses. BI-inspired innovations emerged as practical and specific policy pledges from a handful of candidates running for the primary elections of the Democratic Party ahead of the elections for the 19<sup>th</sup> president in 2017. To be sure, Sang-jung Sim, the candidate from left-wing Justice Party, already advocated the BI as her pledge, however, she could not get credit for it since the issue ownership moved to the Democratic party that got more media spotlight as one of the main political parties (Roh and Ha, 2020). Even within the Democratic Party, views on UBI and its policy articulations differed considerably. Seongnam Mayor Lee from the Democratic Party was the main advocate and policy entrepreneur who insisted on a UBI as his main policy solution. Other politicians from the Democratic Party including President Jae-in Moon, supported BI ideas but only for selected demographic groups, such as preschoolers and infants aged 0 to 5, and the elderly population over 65 years old (Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2019).

The Alpha Go occurrence created a new window of opportunity for further expanding the BI discourse beyond the restricted circles within left-wing parties such as the Justice Party and the Labor Party, where such ideas had been hitherto confined due to the lack of sufficient leverage from these minoritarian parties to gain public attention. This episode prompted major parties, including the centre-left Democratic Party of Korea, and some politicians from the centre-right Republican Party of Korea, to incorporate the BI discourse into their political agendas (Roh and Ha, 2020). The recognition that BI could address the challenges posed by the changing nature of work resonated with both the center-left and center-right, leading to the promotion of BI discourse as a possible policy solution. At this point, more institutional actors got involved in designing BI plans and scenarios.

### *The Policy Stream: A thicker policy primeval soup*

As BI-related research began to be conducted at various national research institutes, the policy primeval soup covering BI discourses at the central government level was further enriched by several more actors, including research institutes, public organisations and local governments. An example of this shift can be seen in the research from Korean National Assembly Research Service (NARS) in April 2016, which argued that it was time for the central government to consider basic income as a policy agenda, considering the anticipated changes in industrial structure and automation by the development of AI.

Besides, as Table 1 shows, major research institutes produced research on BI focusing on economic feasibility and growth-oriented values in line with developmentalism legacies. Policy alternatives need to meet two main criteria: technical feasibility and value acceptability (Kingdon, 1984: 138). Most reports emphasized technical feasibility over value acceptability, as more importance was attached to budgetary feasibility, fiscal sustainability, and the effects of a UBI policy on work motivation. Similarly, aspects related to value acceptability, such as the impact of BI on individual happiness, well-being, and poverty alleviation, were not a primary concern of the studies. Most studies investigated how BI leads to an increase in taxation and whether the existing social security systems are compatible with BI based on the current tax systems. The emphasis on the investigation of fiscal feasibility and economic values by government agencies and national research institutes shows how the legacy of growth-oriented principles and fiscal conservatism dominated.

Table 1) Examples of research regarding BI from national research institutes

National Research Institutes	Year	Report Title
KIF (Korea Institute of Finance)	2016	Basic Income discussion in the US and Decline in Labor Force Participation Rate
KRIVET (Korea Research Institute for Vocational Education and Training)	2016	The Effectiveness of Basic Income to Labor Market in the 4th Revolution Era
NARS (National Assembly Research Service)	2016	The Discussion and Implication of Basic Income
KLI (Korea Labor Institute)	2017	International Labor Brief: Future of Work and Basic Income
KLI (Korea Labor Institute)	2017	International Labor Brief: Does Basic Income Solve Future Income Security Issues?
KIPF (Korea Institute for Public Finance)	2017	The Experiment of Basic Income and Implication to Korea

KERI (Korea Economic Research Institute)	2017	The Impact of Basic Income on Income Redistribution and Labor Supply
The Bank of Korea	2017	The Trend of Basic Income in Other Countries
The Seoul Institute	2018	The Issue of Basic Income and Policy
The Seoul Institute	2019	Designing an Evidence-based Policy Experiment with the Goal of Verifying the Effectiveness of Basic Income for Youth in Seoul

Along with the many research reports produced in a short span of time, several policy experiments related to BI and universal youth allowance were planned at the local level. For 2018-2019, the Seoul Institute (a Seoul City-sponsored research institute) in collaboration with LAB2050 (an independent think tank) planned to conduct policy experiments with randomized assigned treatment and control groups, offering basic income allowances without any condition (ex. job search activities) for 1 or 2 years (Kim et al., 2019). Whilst policy experiments have the obvious advantage point of providing evidence in the presence of controversial policy proposals, they also require high budgets (Choi et al., 2020). Eventually, the policy experiment proposal in Seoul could not be implemented because of the lack of public understanding and support, which made it difficult for the bureaucrats to push ahead with the experiment. A big source of confusion was the blurred distinction between BI as a policy experiment rather than a full policy implementation, which led to strong objections from the public (Lee, 2019).

### ***The Political Stream: Political Opportunities, Policy Entrepreneurs, and Policy Outputs***

Seongnam Mayor Jaemyung Lee was elected the Governor of Gyeonggi province in the June 2018 local government election. As Gyeonggi province is the most populous and affluent among all provinces in Korea, this administrative promotion was the right opportunity for Mr Lee to keep advocating for BI-inspired policies at upper government levels. Catching political opportunities as promoting the political ladder is also desirable for the politicians and policy entrepreneurs themselves for more administrative powers and resources (Kingdon, 2011: 123). With higher visibility, more resources, and the bureaucratic know-how offered by governing Gyeonggi-do, Jaemyung Lee received more media and political attention. This time, too, he used BI-inspired policy ideas at the provincial level in Gyeonggi-do to gain more political leverage. Armed with his local knowledge and bureaucratic experiences (Kingdon, 2003; Jasanoff and Martello, 2004; cited by Knaggard, 2015), now-Governor Lee strategically framed the policy issues as a problem broker. In 2019, Mr Lee expanded the Youth Dividend policy at the providence level, under the label of ‘Youth Basic Income’. Also, under his initiative, the ‘Korea Basic Income Fair’ was held for the first time at the province level in 2019 (Kim, C.H. 2020). Furthermore, the Gyeonggi province enacted a plan to initiate a Rural Basic Income, i.e. a universal allowance for farmers, accompanied by policy experiments to consider the viability of one such policy (Kim, C.H., 2020).

Mr Lee’s promotion from Mayor to Provincial Governor is an explicit example of how institutional hierarchies can be used to promote policy ideas to gain leverage, visibility, and feasibility. Notably, local politicians as policy entrepreneurs are more easily able to exploit key

opportunities as they are able to make bigger waves in small subsystems of their own local districts (Cairney, 2018). Using the hierarchical central government-local government structure, local policy entrepreneurs can further promote their political power to make bigger waves in larger systems.

### **Stage 3: Institutional Agenda to Decision Agenda (2020 - )**

The third transition stage consisted in Mr Lee's final bid to bring UBI ideas at the central government level as the main presidential candidate in 2022. This bid did not work due to internal strife within his own party as well as the opposition front. Yet, by this time, the targeted vs. universal policy approach was high in the political debate, as the many discussions and reforms of the Disaster Relief Allowance post-COVID-19 demonstrate.

#### ***The Problem Stream: COVID-19***

When COVID-19 broke out in Korea in February 2020, the existing welfare system was still woefully unprepared to protect its citizens (Choi et al., 2022). Yet, this was yet another window of opportunity to further increase the already lively discussions on the importance of UBI ideas. At that time, various policies were introduced for protecting public health, and to stabilize employment and income via unemployment benefits and employment maintenance subsidies. But the real novelty was represented by the centre-left central government's enactment of new public safety nets in the form of disaster relief funds to make up for the shortcomings of the existing system due to strict social distancing.

The disaster relief payment was firstly conceived when President Moon defined the economic situation struck by the novel coronavirus infection as an "emergency economic state" on February 18<sup>th</sup>, 2020. He noted that "This is a time when extraordinary measures are absolutely necessary, using all the means the government can take." (Lee, 2020a). At that time, a prominent business entrepreneur, Mr Jaewoong Lee, proposed introducing a 'Disaster Basic Income' that pays 500,000 KRW (around 300 GBP) to all citizens through a petition bulletin board at the Blue House on 29<sup>th</sup> February. These developments, undoubtedly propelled by previous discussions inspired by Governor Jaemyung Lee's ideas, opened up a new public debate on whether to provide disaster relief allowances universally or selectively, which was an extension of the pre-existing basic income debate.

#### ***The Policy Stream: Emergency Disaster Relief Allowance as a welfare politics debate***

Korea experienced no lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic, yet it did resort to prolonged and mandatory social distancing. When social distancing was first implemented on March 22, 2020, there was no social disagreement about the introduction of disaster relief payments, but there was still intensive debate over who to give them to, i.e., targeted versus universal. Disagreements also existed within the presidential office, and politicians also expressed different opinions. It is interesting to note that the existing discussion of UBI existed before COVID-19 and the discussion of disaster relief payments was combined. In particular, Governor Jaemyung Lee, now one of the leading presidential hopefuls ahead of the 2022

elections, kept strongly advocating for UBI, arguing that disaster relief payments should be paid to all citizens (Seong, 2020). Eventually, on April 3, 2020, through a joint government briefing, it was announced that the target would be quasi-universal, addressing citizens at the bottom 70% of income based on the March 2020 health insurance premium (Joint Ministries, 2020).

However, even after the government's decision, the targeted vs. universal debate continued. It was pointed out that the selection criteria were not clear and that this was reverse discrimination against affluent taxpayers. Following the 21st parliamentary election on 15<sup>th</sup> April 2020, on 22<sup>nd</sup> April, the government stepped in and reached an agreement with the Ministry of Finance and the ruling party, which had a disagreement over the scope of payment, in the direction of payment to all citizens. On 30<sup>th</sup> April, as the second supplementary budget of 12.2 trillion KRW (about 7 billion GBP) was decided at the plenary session of the National Assembly, emergency disaster relief funds were provided to all citizens from May 2020. Citizens generally expressed their support for the disaster relief payment and showed a favorable stance on universal payment. On 27<sup>th</sup> April 2020, one broadcasting company (Kim, 2020) reported that 65.5% of the respondents answered 'yes' and 30.1% answered 'disagree' to the payment of emergency disaster subsidies to all citizens.

Yet, as the universal Disaster Relief Allowance was implemented, it was met with more opposition from policymakers and scholars. The UBI debate became a constant on TV, in the press, and in academic journals. Despite belonging to the same Democratic Party as Mr Jaemyung Lee, Mr Won-soon Park, Seoul Metropolitan Mayor, became a vocal critic of UBI, arguing that it does not do better than the unemployment benefit. Indeed, the more Mr Lee paved his way as the main candidate for the Democratic Party's next presidential election, the more critics of UBI appeared within the Party and in the opposition front. Along with this change, support for universal disaster relief payments had also waned. As social distancing was strengthened again in 2021 due to COVID-19, the universal allowance debate was reignited. Although 69% of the respondents answered that 'the state should pay disaster subsidies' in July 2021 (Hankook Research, 2021), only 44% of the respondents said that payment should be made to everyone.

On 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2021, after a series of tug-of-war discussions, the ruling party and the government agreed to pay only the bottom 88% of the income bracket, and this was passed by the National Assembly early the next day (Kim, 2021). Payments were made individually, rather than per household, which has been controversial in the past. High-income earners were excluded from disaster subsidy payments and selected based on annual income by household. Since then, articles poured out on the Internet expressing dissatisfaction with how they were in the top 12% of the income bracket. In the end, some local governments paid 12% of those who did not receive disaster relief payments with their own resources. Gyeonggi Province Governor Jaemyung Lee also announced, on 13<sup>th</sup> August, that it would provide disaster assistance to all Gyeonggi-do residents, including the top 12% of income earners excluded from payment.

### ***The Political Stream: Presidential Election and Two BI Policy Experiments***

Governor Jaemyung Lee concluded his ascendant political career via his election as the Democratic Party's presidential candidate in October 2021, ahead of the presidential election

scheduled in May 2022. During his race for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination, Lee received persistent questions and criticism from his opponents about how to implement basic income and what the financial plan was. After his election, he continued this debate with the opposition party candidate (and current President) Mr Seok-yeol Yoon, who attacked UBI plans by presenting a plan to help the vulnerable more efficiently. Mr Lee made an election pledge to pay 1 million KRW (in 600 GBP) a year as basic income to all citizens within his term. As a result, if Mr Lee were elected, Korea could become the first country in the world to officially introduce UBI. However, on 9th March 2023, candidate Yoon from the right-wing People's Power Party recorded 48.56% of the vote, ahead of Democratic Party candidate Jaemyung Lee (47.83%) (National Assembly Research Service, 2022). Candidate Lee lost by a difference of 250,000 votes, and the introduction of UBI in Korea was halted from the public debate.

Still, the basic income debate left its legacies. First, a Rural Basic Income experiment was launched while Mr Lee was still governor of the Gyeonggi province. The second example is a Safe Income experiment started by Mr Se-hoon Oh, who became the Mayor of Seoul in 2021. The rural basic income experiment is a five-year policy experiment in which 150,000 KRW (in 90 GBP) per month of rural basic income is paid to 4,000 individuals living in Cheongsan-myeon, Gyeonggi-do, from May 2022 (Lee, 2023). The population in this area is predicted to disappear as residents moved to bigger cities. All residents of Cheongsan-myeon are the experimental group, and residents of the other area similar to this area are set as the control group to compare what changes occur over 5 years. It is paid in local currency (voucher) and, in principle, can be used only at businesses with annual sales of 1 billion KRW (in 600K GBP) or less located in Cheongsan-myeon and neighboring areas. The purpose is to find out whether people in this rural area become more active and happier, and simultaneously whether UBI makes community building better.

In Seoul, the Safe Income policy experiment began in 2022. "Safe Income" is a modified form of Milton Friedman's negative income tax, and it is a new income security system that provides more support when the income becomes low by filling a certain percentage of the household income that is insufficient compared to the standard income (Seoul Metropolitan Government, 2023). This policy experiment from 2022 to 2024 was devised to prove the effectiveness of Safety Income, implicitly aiming to compare with UBI. The support group receives 50% of the amount of household income below the standard median assessed income of 85% as a monthly benefit. Currently, to receive public assistance living expenses, citizens must earn 30% or less of the median assessed income.

Findings from these experiments are expected to be released shortly before the next presidential election in 2027. In addition to these two experiments, the new Gyeonggi-do Governor, Mr Dong-yeon Kim preceded by Mr Lee, introduced an 'opportunity income', which is very similar to Atkinson's participation income (Atkinson, 1996), and it targets artists, delivery workers, and the disabled. These experiments and policies could influence the next presidential candidate's new election pledges. At the same time, they could spark a debate about which alternative income security is a better option for the future amid accelerating digitization. Since Mr Lee is still the party leader of the Democratic Party and a main candidate for the next presidential election, basic income and alternatives including participation income and a

negative income tax will continue to float in the policy primeval soup, aiming to enter the government's decision agenda.

## Conclusion

This paper explains why and how UBI has evolved in Korean politics and society from one negligible possibility amongst infinite choices of the agenda-universe to a concrete proposal close to the decision-agenda, i.e. on the verge of nationwide implementation. Only about a decade ago, UBI was considered an unlikely possibility for the future and received little attention except from a few academics and radical politicians. However, persistent inequality and declining social mobility, the advent of rapid digitalisation, and an underdeveloped social security system, favoured the development of a rich “policy primeval soup”, among which the possibility of UBI has quickly gained momentum due to the initiative of a skilled politician who brought the UBI discourse with him throughout his rise in the political institutional hierarchy. As these problem streams and policy streams converged with the political stream, a policy entrepreneur and the institutional environment surrounding him played a decisive role in the UBI debate.

Starting as a local politician, Mr Jaemyung Lee was the main policy entrepreneur utilising UBI as his core strategy. His ascendant career through the institutional political ranks is a useful example of how policy entrepreneurs can carry their policy ideas with them, using them opportunistically at the right timing (Zahariadis, 2014). More importantly, this case sheds light on how policy entrepreneurs might exploit the power structure by increasing their political leverage and becoming influential actors and policy implementers (Béland, 2005; Zohlnhöfer et al., 2016; Lu et al., 2020). Mr Lee can be considered an archetypical policy entrepreneur for the following reasons.

- He acted as a problem broker highlighting the urgency and significance of the problems such as inequality and digitalisation to create a sense of UBI policy demand and for policymakers to accept the BI-related policy solutions. He was quite apt in gaining attention, and his hunger strikes in 2016 to increase visibility and leverage of local governments are an early example of this.
- He worked his way up the ladder from mayor to governor of Gyeonggi Province in 2018 and the ruling party's candidate in the presidential election in 2022, while actively leveraging the UBI agenda. In particular, he campaigned for UBI as one of the most important election pledges in 2022. Although he lost the presidential election by a very narrow margin, he was seen to grow with UBI, demonstrating that local elections can be a fertile ground for innovative policy ideas, and that the path to becoming a national politician.
- By increasing his political ranking at the local political level, he was able to extend his influence by confronting the central government's resistance to welfare universalism, therefore challenging the centralist legacy of Korean developmentalism.
- He was able to build coalitions in support of UBI. Besides him, many academics and think-tanks played roles as knowledge brokers to provide relevant information, research, and expertise to policymakers and to bridge the gap between research and policy by producing robust evidence.
- By increasingly adopting UBI-inspired universal social policy schemes at the city-level (Seongnam) first, and the provincial level (Gyeonggi) after that, he offers a working

example of gradual introductions of a radical policy change (Mintrom & Norman, 2009; Jordan, 2012; Cairney & Zahariadis, 2016; Zohlnhoefer et al., 2016).

- He left a UBI-imbued public discourse where several other actors are willing to participate and innovate, making use of an already thick policy primeval soup.

Although UBI was not implemented in Korea, the popularity of this idea and several policy initiatives inspired by it were made possible through Mr Lee's actions in terms of policy framing, problem broker, building and supporting coalitions, leading by example through partial introductions of policy change, as described in public policy literature (Mintrom & Norman, 2009; Carstensen, 2011; Mintrom, 2013; Cairney & Zahariadis, 2016; Zohlnhoefer et al., 2016). What made his efforts even more conspicuous was the fact that he exploited the institutional change taking place in Korea in the aftermath of developmentalism, as he took advantage of the changed legislative framework granting more power to local governments (Bae, 2023). Although higher political prowess was already possible on paper, Mr Lee's ascendance to political power through UBI ideas set an example of how to do this in practice.

In sum, this study makes use of Kingdon's ideas on MSA and policy entrepreneurs to explain the rise of new agendas, and in doing so, it also argues for the need to emphasise the institutional context that makes policy coupling possible. We wish that this case study could inspire future MSA-based studies to engage in a more nuanced understanding of how policy ideas advance through different stages of agenda-setting (Birkland, 2017), and of how policy entrepreneurs exploit existing structures of power at the institutional level in their policy-making strategies (Béland, 2005; Zahariadis, 2007; Kingdon, 2011; Zohlnhoefer et al., 2016).



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