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Green Jobs Guarantee, Coronavirus, and Public Sanitation

In recent years, the idea of the Government as an “employer of last resort” (ELR) has gained traction, both in the academic and general public spheres. While the origins of this idea can be traced through several economists, one of the most prominent conceptions of the policy comes from L. Randall Wray in his 1998 book *Understanding Modern Money*. In this piece, Wray outlines a policy whereby the government would offer meaningful employment to essentially anyone willing and able to work. The purpose would be to effectively solve the problem of involuntary unemployment. By putting this group of people to work, the policy would support full employment and boost the economy by achieving its full productive capacity, while also controlling inflation and reducing inequality.

Recently, this policy has been slightly shifted towards a more specific goal – promoting not only full employment, but environmental and ecological sustainability at the same time. This particular manifestation of the ELR concept was outlined by Mathew Forstater in his 2004 articles *Green Jobs: Addressing the Critical Issues Surrounding the Environment, Workplace, and Employment*. In a general sense, the goals of full employment and environmental sustainability have historically been viewed as being at odds with one another, and Forstater’s proposal is meant

to illustrate one means of reconciling this conflict (2004). This “Green Job Guarantee” has made particular headway in recent times, actually making its way clear to Capitol Hill. The policy plays a key role is the “Green New Deal”, a series of policy plans introduced in 2019 by Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York and Massachusetts Senator Ed Markey. The plan aims to greatly reduce U.S. carbon emissions and fossil-fuel dependence, while ensuring “...a job with a family-sustaining wage, adequate family and medical leave, paid vacations, and retirement security to all people of the United States (Hess, 2019).” Whether or not this is passed into law, the mere proposal shows how Forstater’s original concept is moving closer to the mainstream discourse. In light of this increased popularity, and in response to the current global health situation, this paper aims to show how a Green Jobs Guarantee program could help achieve environmental, social, and economic goals while promoting public health, using the Coronavirus Pandemic situation as a potential case-study application.

What is the Green Job Guarantee?

First, it is necessary to describe exactly how the Green Job Guarantee is intended to work, at least in a general sense. To do so, it may be most helpful to first understand the intent of a general Jobs Guarantee/ELR proposal. In general, a Federal Jobs Guarantee program could be defined as:

“...a public option for jobs. It is a permanent, federally funded, and locally administered program that supplies voluntary employment opportunities on demand for all who are ready and willing to work at a living wage. While it is first and foremost a jobs program, it has the potential to be transformative by advancing the public purpose and improving working conditions, people’s everyday lives, and the economy as a whole (Tcherneva, 2018).”

The general idea is that these types of jobs would generally be lower-skilled and require little training, which helps to both widen access to individuals of all skill levels and allow for people to be quickly put to work within the program. The main goal of the program is, of course, to solve the problem of less-than-full employment. Doing so would provide a boost to the economy by stimulating effective demand, and assisting in evening out the downturns of the business cycle. It is a counter-cyclical policy, very much in the Keynesian vein of thought.

In addition to the practical economic goal of full employment, the policy has other expected benefits, including the establishment of a “labor standard” for the economy, inflation stabilization, a living income, and improved income distribution (Tcherneva, 2018). These benefits extend beyond the economic to improve social and general well-being among those employed by the policy and society at large. Whereas a general Job Guarantee addresses mainly the social and economic aspect of life, a Green Job Guarantee incorporates a third dimension – the ecological. In a very general sense, the Green Job Guarantee program is merely a Job Guarantee program that is specifically designed with the promotion of environmental sustainability in mind.

There are two key ways in which a program can be designed to achieve this goal. First, since these jobs are provided by the public sector, they are not designed to make a profit; therefore, they do not have to be set up to maximize cost-related efficiencies in the same way that a private, profit-driven firm (Forstater, 2004). Cost concerns are typically the reason that environmental impact is not a chief concern of many private firms – regulations on things such as emissions or processing of waste materials impose a burden on a company that essentially eat into profits. Combined with the classic “tragedy of the commons” property problems, it is difficult to set up market incentives for private companies to promote environmental improvement. However, since profit is not a concern in the Green Job program, environmental goals can be place first and

foremost. This means that the program can utilize more “green” production processes and focus on using fewer natural resources, even if the costs of doing so are greater. Forstater noted that this fact means that “Even if the activities performed no positive environmental tasks, the outcome will be more sustainable than if the private sector were stimulated to full employment (2004).” However, the second way in which the program can improve the environment is just this – these jobs given can be specifically designated to perform environmental services. For example, Godin briefly discusses the construction of energy efficient, “green” buildings, which yields natural resource and air quality benefits (2012). Forstater provides the example of widespread recycling programs (2004). Such jobs clearly support economic, social, and environmental improvement. In any case, there are a multitude of potential employment opportunities that tackle environmental problems which could be addressed by a Green Job Guarantee. The ongoing Coronavirus Pandemic provides a specific and timely context in which to contextualize how a Green Jobs program could be utilized to help support our three key goal areas (economic, social, environmental/ecological) in a time in which these areas are particularly affected.

The COVID-19 Crisis

The current global Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic presents a challenge unprecedented in modern times. The complexity of preventing the disease, treating the infected, and taking necessary precautionary measures as a society have combined to create an incredibly complex and multidimensional problem. Discovering a solution presents major challenges on several issues – public health, the global economy, and the institutional structure of our modern world itself. This situation is ongoing, and testing is not yet available on a full-scale, making the accuracy of current statistics difficult to determine. However, the following statistics help to paint a picture of the

magnitude of the impact in the United States. The below public health numbers come from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and are current as of April 24th, 2020:

Total Cases: 895,766

Total Deaths: 50,439

Total Jurisdictions: 55

The jurisdictions measure indicates the U.S areas in which cases of the virus have been documented; it includes all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. The numbers indicate a massive negative impact on global health, even with the preventative steps that have been taken. The economic impact is even harder to quantify. Naturally, the fact that the situation is so new means that there has not been time to accurately measure economic data that would portray the true impact. It is likely that the true magnitude of effect on the economy will not be known for some time. One measure that does give some early indication as to the possible implications is the number of jobless claims that have occurred in the US since the virus containment measures have been put in place. As of April 23rd, jobless claims in the previous 5 weeks in the U.S. totaled over 26 million, a number that is historically unparalleled (Cox, 2020). Though some large portion of these claims are likely due to temporary layoffs imposed by mandated closings, even these temporary job losses are sure to have some level of economic impact. Though difficult to quantify at this point, it is clear the pandemic has resulted in serious detrimental impact to U.S public health and economic well-being.

Application of the Green Job Guarantee

This is where a Green Job Guarantee program comes in. This program could provide stable employment for the many unemployed while also helping to fight the spread of the disease itself. The specific proposal is this: a job opportunity that involving sanitation of public places as a way to help improve public health and slow the spread of the Coronavirus. The pandemic has brought tremendous attention to the importance of cleaning in preventing the spread of disease, from simple tasks such as adequate handwashing to larger scale efforts such as the sanitation of factories and workspaces. Under the proposal here, the Government would employ all who are willing and able to go and perform cleaning and sanitation in a variety of settings. This could include restrooms and other facilities at public parks, or in buildings for essential government services that must remain open during the pandemic, such as unemployment offices. The program could also be expanded, and perhaps the Government could provide sanitation services to private firms and facilities that request the support.

In a social sense, the benefits could be tremendous. Improved sanitation and cleaner working environments could help to prevent the spread of Coronavirus, but also generally improve the health and safety of these sanitized facilities. In an economic sense, the benefit is clearly large. The guarantee of meaningful employment helps to bolster the economy and help to solve the rapid spike in unemployment that the virus has caused. Not only does this help return individuals to employment in the short-term, but the improved sanitation practices could have some effect on the duration of the closings and economic “lockdown” that has necessarily been put in place to contain the spread of the virus. Effectively, by improving the safety of public and workspaces, perhaps the program could help so that the economy can be “re-opened” sooner. This type of employment is a great fit for the profile of typical Job Guarantee tasks, as it requires little training and would

certainly support a fair wage in light of the importance of the task. To meet ecological ends, the program could mandate the use of environmentally safe cleaning chemicals and recyclable products to the maximum extent possible. This would help ensure that public health and economic improvements do not come at the expense of the environment.

Challenges and Concluding Remarks

Certainly, there are potential challenges to implementing such a program. Cost is at the forefront of many arguments against a Green Job Guarantee, and this specific job proposal would likely not be an exception. However, the counterarguments laid out by Wray (1998) and others in support of a job guarantee would apply as well.

A specific concern of this proposal would be the potential risk that those who perform these sanitation duties could be exposed to. Individuals who took these jobs would likely be exposed to more people as a result of going out into the public, and this (in combination with their exposure to whatever bacteria they are cleaning) could place them at higher risk for disease transmission. To address this, the Government would need to supply all workers with the proper personal protective equipment (PPE) as recommended by health professionals, including gloves, masks, etc. (“COVID-19...”, 2020). Further, it could be mandated that facilities be cleared of all personnel when workers are performing sanitation, minimizing contact with other humans. Lastly, this could potentially be addressed by including greater healthcare and insurance provisions for those who take higher-risk jobs under the Green Jobs Guarantee program, ensuring that workers are guaranteed medical coverage in the event that their work exposes them to disease.

The Green Jobs Guarantee program can yield a variety of benefits and be aimed at a variety of goals, as outlined in this paper. The Coronavirus pandemic illustrates just one situation in which such a program could make a positive impact in multiple facets of life. In an economic sense, the proposal given here assists in abetting unemployment, boosting effective demand, and perhaps minimizing the time of economic downturn caused by counter-viral policy. In a social sense, the proposal could improve the health and well-being of the general public by ensuring cleaner places to work and live. Finally, environmental protection is ensured by the mandated use of ecologically friendly cleaning chemicals and practices. Though the program does face challenges, and certain questions must be answered in terms of cost and worker protection, our current global health crisis gives but one potential example as to how a Green Job Guarantee could be of great utility – even during the most trying of times.

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