

GiveWell research event, April 29, 2013

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**0:00:00 Speaker 1:** Thanks to everyone for coming. We really appreciate your coming out and being interested in the work that we do. I'm Elie. I'm one of GiveWell's co-founders. This is Holden. He's the other co-founder. That's Alexander Berger, he's an analyst at GiveWell. And then, there's just a few GiveWell board members who are here today that I just want to quickly point out. There's Brigid, Tom, Phil and Tim. So, those are the GiveWell folks who are here right now.

**0:00:28 S1:** The way that this is going to go is there's going to be about an hour of programming where our goal is to, in a few very brief stints, lay out the topics that we can talk about. And then, we're hoping to turn it over to all of you for open Q&A about GiveWell, what we do, or how we do it, any questions you have, things you think we're doing wrong that we could do better. This is really an opportunity for us to openly discuss what's happening at GiveWell. We know that our... We put a lot of information out on our website but it's not always easy for someone to engage productively with it. And so, we really hope these meetings that we hold few times a year, are a way to do that.

**0:01:09 S1:** One quick note consistent with our general approach which aims to share as much as we can about the work that we do, we're recording this meeting, we're planning to post a recording of it, a transcript of it online. There's also a couple of guys here from NPR with a recorder. And so, we and they are happy to cut anything from the recording. If you want to say something but don't want it to be on the record, just say, "Hey, I'd rather this not go into the recording," either before you say it or after you say it. But, please do let us know so we can exclude that from the posted materials.

**0:01:49 S1:** So, GiveWell's main goals right now are three-fold. One, is we're continuing the work that we've been doing for a long time to find proven, cost-effective, global health organizations. And I can talk a lot about the work that we've done there this year and what we're planning to do for the future, but I want to put that out as one of the main things that we're working on right now, for people to feel free to ask about. The second big topic that we are... A second big goal for this year is recruiting. GiveWell is still a very small staff. We're currently seven people. We're trying to scale up to be more. And so, a big goal of ours in 2013, is finding the people who can help us do more of the type of research that we're trying to do.

**0:02:34 S1:** And then the final big area that I think will end up covering the bulk of discussion tonight, is going to be some of the newer areas that we're looking into. Newer areas of philanthropy outside of the proven, cost-effective, global health stuff. Those are things that Holden and Alexander are going to talk about in a little bit. There is this big shift going on at GiveWell where, for a long time, we focused on proven, cost-effective, health charities and now we're looking at these other areas. And I think the question we've gotten a lot is, "Why is this happening? GiveWell has done something that's really great, why move into these other areas?" And there's a couple of reasons we're doing this.

**0:03:12 S1:** One of the major reasons is we just think that these other areas might provide really great giving opportunities for donors that beat, so to speak, in, let's say, dollars per impact, relative

to what our top charities, right now, can offer. What the Against Malaria Foundation or Give Directly or SCI can do and our mission is to find the best giving opportunities and so we want to make sure to look into them. The other reason that we're looking into them is that we frankly feel like we're reaching the point of diminishing returns on the investigation of these global health organizations. One of the big reasons is when we started, we had never looked into these things at all. And now, we've spent five, six years looking for the exact same type of organization.

**0:03:59 S1:** And our bet now is that a bigger reason that we're not finding them is not that we haven't spent the time to reach out to all of them, but that they just don't exist. So, we're obviously maintaining this focus. We are continuing to do updates on our top organizations. We're reaching out to the organizations that we think are the most likely top contenders and we're making it very clear that anyone who thinks they have the type of evidence that could put them in the top tiers, should let us know. But, we're not actively searching in the way that we have in the past for new organizations.

**0:04:32 S1:** I just want to give one quick example of something we worked on recently in this area of global health organizations. We got pretty interested in the cause of clean water or water purification because we came into contact with a couple of organizations that seemed pretty promising in the way that they were doing things. They were transparent, they were open. One organization is called Dispensers For Safe Water. They're affiliated with Innovations for Poverty Action or IPA, that runs the randomized controlled trials out of Yale. And so, this organization grew out of a trial that they had done. Then, there's another organization called Splash that does water filtration systems.

**0:05:14 S1:** And so, we looked into this cause of whether and to what extent clean water is effective. The way that purifying water is supposed to work is, the water has contaminants in it, you clean the water and that prevents children from getting diarrhea. Diarrhea for us is a little bit of a problem. But in the developing world, it's one of the leading causes of death. And when you look at the evidence, it's much less clearer than I would have thought it was when we first came to look at this issue. There's been a lot of randomized controlled trials of clean water. And, collectively, they do find this impact on reducing diarrhea, but many of the studies have a very particular methodological flaw. The diarrhea rates are self-reported and the studies themselves are not blinded.

**0:06:04 S1:** And what this means, is that the people who are in the study and the researchers know who's part of the treatment group, meaning who got the cleaner water, and who's part of the control group, who didn't. And so people may be inclined to give the answer that they're expected to give as opposed to the answer about what really happened. And, in fact, this is, to some extent, borne out by the evidence. The three papers that we found that had the most methodologically rigorous approach, it didn't have the flaw, they didn't find a significant effect on diarrhea rates. Now, that's not to say that... There are issues with those studies as well, so it's not really to say that we know that those programs don't work but when you compare something like clean water to something like bed nets, well, in bed nets you have tons of trials that show that nets reduce malaria, that nets reduce deaths.

**0:06:59 S1:** In the case of clean water, we have very, very limited evidence, if any evidence at all, that it really works to have the impact that you think. And so, that's the type of approach that we generally take, that we've taken in one case this year, to investigate new organizations. And these

are ones that, at this point, though we're still working on the research, it's not published yet, it's the type of approach that doesn't seem promising enough to be warranted getting a spot on the top list. So with that, I guess, I just wanna pause and wanna open up for questions about anything I've said about our past top charities or current plans for more charities or anything else. And then, after questions, we can move on to the other areas of our research. Yeah?

**0:07:40 S?:** You said the problem with the clean water studies was that they weren't blind, but with the bed nets studies, isn't it impossible to make them blind, so if you wanna compare apples to apples, shouldn't you compare not blind studies to not blind studies?

**0:07:51 Speaker 2:** Yeah. So I mean... I'm gonna repeat the question people ask for the sake of the recording. So the question is, are the bed nets... I've mentioned the study of blinding the water studies. What about the bed net studies? I mean one difference is that there are multiple bed nets studies that look at deaths. So death is an objective measure that's not self-reported data where the blinding factor doesn't come into account. There's also... I mean another common measure in malaria study is sort of cases in malaria but that's... It could be measured different ways. It can be self-reported but it can also be reported by the hospitals and by the health systems. So there's big... Yes, it's not blinded but there's big differences in how worried you should be about blinding with those outcomes.

**0:08:29 Speaker 3:** And the third thing is that some of the bed net trials actually randomly allocate the insecticide to whether or not it's on the net. And so, some people actually do use nets and that's not insecticide treated and that might actually be surprisingly comparable effects to the studies that just don't use a net at all. Most of the effects we think is from the...

**0:08:52 S1:** Insecticide.

**0:08:52 S2:** I don't think any of those were actually like blind and like fake insecticide, although I could...

**0:08:56 S3:** No. In case you don't have them, it's the net.

**0:09:02 S1:** Yeah, Tim?

**0:09:03 S?:** So one of the critiques of GiveWell from the academic community is sort of the overall impact, the lack of theory. So the in theoretical sense, of course this happens in the diarrhea thing. So the known sort of channel for diarrhea is water-borne pathogens. So how do you integrate that if the water is clean and there is no water-borne... Where is the diarrhea coming from?

**0:09:30 S1:** So, Tim's question is there's some understanding that there's a mechanism through which pathogens cause diarrhea. If you take out the pathogens, you should prevent the diarrhea. I had a conversation a couple of years ago with a water expert. Unfortunately, when we tried to get the notes published as we tend to do with these calls, we weren't able to. But one of the things that he said is that... And this is where we just don't know enough about the theory to really know, is that there's a certain intensity or volume of pathogen required to cause diarrhea. And so, therefore, his... The leading explanation that he thinks in what causing diarrhea is in amount of fecal material on people's hands.

**0:10:17 S1:** And therefore, hand washing studies, quantity of water is very effective because it washes off the stuff on people's hands that causes the problem, where the clean water itself is not what's doing it. That's said, like our basic next steps with this... I mean this is kind of like research as it's happening. We're going to finish this page and send it to the people who we think are most likely to have criticisms of it and push back. In addition, obviously, to publishing the page once it's done and so, we'll get as much of this as we can.

**0:10:48 S2:** And I'm a kind of broader critique about being theoretical. I mean I think we're... There's a couple of things you could mean by that. So we don't engage in a formal mathematical theory building the way that some branches of economics do. On the other hand, I think our attention to kind of the story of how something is supposed to work is a lot of higher than you might see from some of the, what might be called, random use does. That does underline a lot of our conclusions that aren't the same as theirs. This water versus bed nets thing is a good example, right?

**0:11:17 S2:** It's not like we're checking boxes. You know, is it blinded, is it this or that? It's the combination in the water case. The combination of the lack of blinding, the self-reported outcomes that don't really have a good check on them, the fact that the trials that had the good blinding didn't have the same outcomes and the fact that we've talked to experts and we see another explanation of what could be going on, that's what makes us really leery of the whole thing. We generally are putting together many pieces like that for any conclusion that we're gonna bet on.

**0:11:44 S?:** Elie, you mentioned a page. Can you talk about what that page is and what we can expect to see on it?

**0:11:53 S1:** Yeah. So if anyone is really interested to see the draft version of the page, I'm happy to send it to you. It's like pretty close to done. I mean, it's similar to what we call these intervention reports that we've done for many programs in the past, where what we do is look at the evidence. So we look at the Cochrane Collaboration which does high quality literature reviews of evidence. We then go out and try to find evidence ourselves. We look at all the trials we can find that seem potentially relevant and just write up what we think and why.

**0:12:25 S?:** So if I know someone who's really excited about water charities, is this a resource I could direct that person to?

**0:12:33 S1:** So this is a general... And you definitely can. Though it's a general issue with... Our main priority now, and it has been for a long time, is doing research and then being transparent about what we find, rather than making it particularly accessible to the average donor, let's say. And so many... You should take a look at the page, and see whether you think it's something that you're... The person you know would find helpful. But the other factors, there's a lot of different types of water charities out there. There's the ones that dig wells and there's the ones that do the clean water, and this is specifically focused on the water purification approach, like putting a chlorine tablet in the water or filtration system rather than trying to dig wells.

**0:13:14 S3:** And just for a little perspective, I mean, this water thing is something that we have done this year. It's an example of the kind of work we're doing, on traditional GiveWell to the extent we're doing it, but it's not... This isn't the main thing that's going on at GiveWell right now, and it's probably good to keep that in mind.

**0:13:30 S2:** Yep. That's it. One more question. What's IPA's perspective on that? And I've read a little bit about that United States measure to the use of chlorine, putting tablets by the well, it's maybe more effective than if you said this treatment is actually coming out of your research. What's different in there?

**0:13:50 S1:** Yes. So the question is what... This charity came out of research done by Innovations for Poverty Action, what's their take? So I actually had a chance to visit this organization when I was in Kenya last fall visiting GiveDirectly. They had a much more positive view on the effects of chlorine than we did, and one of the first people that we're going to, like, send this page to once it's completed, the GiveWell process, is them, and say like, "Do you disagree?" That's it, I think that my guess is that their real focus is on the program and its impact. There's no question that... I mean the randomized controlled trial they ran, increases chlorination use. And if you take as an assumption that chlorine works, then this is a great program. And it would not be unreasonable to rely on the view of the Cochrane Collaborations report, which is a generally positive one about the impacts of chlorination. But anyway, we will ask and we will get the answer to that.

[pause]

**0:14:53 S2:** Cool? Alright. I'm gonna go. Okay. So I am going to talk about some of the stuff we're doing on GiveWell Labs. And basically, what I'm personally focused on... There's a few different things we're doing to explore other causes. So Alexander will talk about kind of the efforts he's been leading, that where we have a long list of causes and we're trying to investigate them at kind of a shallow level detail and some of the deeper level detail. I'm doing something different, which is I'm basically trying to understand the two areas of philanthropy that I would say we know the least about right now.

**0:15:24 S2:** So I would say that when you look at what foundations do and what they've historically done well, and this is something we've written about, most of it falls into three categories. There's kind of direct aid, which is, for example, paying for the delivery of interventions to the very poor. And then there's two other things that are very common in philanthropy that we know very little about, which are funding scientific research and funding political advocacy.

**0:15:51 S2:** And so what I've been trying to do is basically just as fast as I can, immerse myself in these two areas and get a good enough feel for what the critical questions are and what the key questions are that we can move forward with starting to investigate them. And it's kind of, in some sense, it's a very broad assignment, but what I'm trying to do is just get a set of good questions that will lead to more productive investigations. So I'm gonna quickly run through what I've done on those two fronts and where I see us going.

**0:16:20 S2:** Political advocacy is something I know we've got some pushback for saying that we're even interested in it, and I think one of the prevailing views of political advocacy out there among our fans, and it is the same as the view I held a couple years ago, is that you don't want to get involved in political advocacy as kind of a rational altruist, because for any issue that you might get involved in, it's usually these issues that you see have a lot of really intelligent, really effective, really well-meaning people going against each other. And so why would you want to enter into that kind of tug-of-war, and what value add are you going to have, and how are you going to be sure that you're right?

**0:16:55 S2:** And actually, from kind of what I've been doing over the last year is just reading whatever I can, talking to people who were close to or are close to that world, and kind of trying to understand the thinking here. And I actually have a very different picture of what good political philanthropy looks like, which is that a lot of politics comes down to what you might call represented concentrated interest versus unrepresented or diffused interest. And so just a good way to visualize this is to think about something like the farm bill or farm subsidies, where, basically, you have a powerful agricultural lobby that says, "We want these subsidies. These subsidies are really, really important to us."

**0:17:35 S2:** And then you kind of have the rest of the country, which is kind of... You could argue about whether these subsidies are really essential for Americans as a whole, and my impression is that they're not and this is something that we could look into more. But let's assume for the moment that they're not, and what you have is a lot of people who are affected in a very small way, and who aren't organized in the same way as the farm lobby. And so that, I think, is like a good framework for thinking about these things that in a lot of cases... Oh, and some of the people affected by subsidies as well, are people overseas, are the poorest of the poor but they don't have any lobby, and they're not agitating for anything in the US, in the US policy world.

**0:18:12 S2:** And so, one way to think about the role philanthropy can play in policy is you find an issue where kind of the side... There's one side that's in the best interest of humanity, you might say. 'Cause our focus is humanitarian but that side is not particularly well organized or not particularly concentrated. And you can come in to represent and give it a stronger voice, provide that analysis and provide the lobbying, and provide the grass roots organization and make something happen. So, that's a general framework that to a lot of people is just common sense, but I think also to some of our fans is not how they think of politics. And actually, it's the right way to think of, at least the parts that we would consider getting involved in.

**0:18:56 S2:** Another thing, I think I've sort of picked up that has really influenced how I wanna go about attacking this cause is that I actually believe, it's conventional wisdom, and I believe it's true that a lot of... As a philanthropist, a lot of what you can do in a policy world is build capacity for the unpredictable day when you get your opportunity. And so, it might be tempting to look at today's political world and say, "Well, this is what's in the news today. This is what might change today." And then, here are a bunch of things that people don't care about, or the public opinion is against, or they'll never pass because we've got this party in control." And I think that would be a bad way to choose issues.

**0:19:32 S1:** I think it's much more intelligent to look at... Instead of looking at where an issue is today, look at where it is structurally, look at, who are the interest groups who are gonna care about these this thing for the next decade or two. And think about what the landscape looks like from that perspective and realize that in politics, things can change very fast and for reasons that are hard to see coming. And so, I think, actually, a lot of the stuff going on today in the policy world is a good testament to this. I think immigration was considered a really... An issue that wasn't going anywhere anytime soon. And then, we have this Gang of 8 thing, the gun control control thing, I think, gained a lot of momentum from a big media event.

**0:20:09 S2:** So, you don't know when these things are gonna happen necessarily. And when you look at a lot of the big impacts philanthropy has had, I believe those impacts are there, I believe philanthropy has had an impact. I'm not sure about this. This is part of why we wanna do more work

on history of philanthropy, but I think, it often follows that pattern. So, with that framework in mind, I think the basic plan that I'm contemplating right now is to go issue by issue, because with any given political issue, it's pretty easy to find experts who know a lot about it and who know a lot about the players involved, and the relevant issues. And I think, we have a list of issues that we think are pretty important for the humanitarian perspective, and the question is how tractable are they? Who's lined up on each side? What are the relevant interest groups? And what's the value added of more philanthropy coming in?

**0:20:58 S2:** And so, that's the direction that I think we should be going is you wanna explore... You wanna basically talk to experts who specialize in a lot of different issues, say who are the players, and look ideally for places where the side you wanna help is not very well organized, doesn't have a lot of philanthropic presence but it could. And where the side that you're going up against isn't completely insurmountable, or where there could be conceivably room to make something happen. But that's not the same as saying something is gonna happen in the next year. It could be a much longer timeline than that.

**0:21:27 S2:** And I think this contrasts with the way a lot of people go about political advocacy because the way that I've seen things and what I've read about is that people will decide, "This is the issue that matters to me and the most important lever is policy." So now, I'm involved in policy fight. And maybe you're involved in an impossible policy fight, and I think what we're trying to do is multiply the humanitarian importance by the tractability and by the marginal room for more philanthropy and see what we can get that way. So, that's kinda of the tentative plan we have. We still wanna talk to a few more people before we go down the issue by issue path. But that's where I see us likely going.

**0:22:00 S2:** And then, on the science front, the scientific research front, this is something where we made less progress. I mean, it's been more time on politics. And I think, with scientific research, I think a couple other reasons I've made, one, it's an area that is just really hard to get anywhere on without good scientific advisers. And certainly, in any area of philanthropy and all, you wanna work with subject matter experts, you wanna consult with them, you wanna have them explain things to you, you don't wanna be trying to do all the work yourself from primary sources, you'll miss a lot of subtle things.

**0:22:31 S2:** But I think, in scientific research, it's a different level. I think it's very hard to even understand a claim, or to even evaluate a single idea without having a lot of context that could take years to build up, that you want your scientific advisers help with. And so a lot of the questions I'm asking is who should be our scientific advisers and how are we gonna find them? Because we need people who are on board with the kind of broad humanitarian mission of GiveWell and who are also good scientist, and who can also translate between those two worlds.

**0:23:00 S2:** One thing that I... One preliminary feeling I have about biomedical research, which is where I'm focusing for the moment, it's huge, it's like half of all of the public research funding in the US, which is a good chunk of the world research funding goes to biomedical research. And my intuition is that there's a lot of smart funders, there's a lot of people who basically have humanitarian goals, and if you find a blind spot of the existing funders, and you find an area that really is better to invest in than it's structurally given credit for, you may be able to get the existing funders to go there.



**0:23:36 S2:** And so, in some ways, my early intuition, which I'm not claiming, I'm not going to reverse is that a lot of what you wanna be doing is diagnosing. It's kind of a meta-research type project. You ought to be diagnosing the ways in which today's scientific community isn't finding all the best opportunities and kind of getting that information out there, instead of necessarily just picking your field, and funding the best stuff you can. I feel like the first one is probably more leveraged. And so, somewhat consistent with that, I think in the early idea we had for investigating scientific research was to do stuff like what we've done with meta-research to work with people in the research community and, say, have them interview their peers about the ways in which the current system, the NIH system and all that is not funding the highest efficiency stuff, is not promoting the best humanitarian practices such as data sharing.

**0:24:30 S2:** And a close friend of mine who's been a GiveWell fan for a long time, Dario Amodè, has kind of taken it on himself to do a project that's very similar to that description. He calls it Vannevar, has a website at [vannevargroup.org](http://vannevargroup.org) and so, part of what we've been doing is just watching them, advising them, working informally with them, attending their meetings and just watching what they come up with for, "Here are the things that should be happening in science," but they're just structurally not because of the way the various bureaucracies are set up. And there's lots of hypothesis there that I don't have time to get into, but that's the two areas that I've been thinking about the most and so I'm happy to take questions about those now. Yeah.

**0:25:09 S?:** Yeah. Just about this last point. I guess my initial reaction to that is that I wonder if... Even if research and scientific funding was allocated perfectly efficiently under the current system, wouldn't we expect that the interests of the rich world are moving vastly over-represented in that field, and into some poor world vastly under-represented, so even if we increase the efficiency of how it's done...

**0:25:41 S2:** Right.

**0:25:42 S?:** End result you got only for the developed world.

**0:25:44 S2:** Yeah, I think there's definitely something to that. A couple of caveats that I'll give to it are, one, a lot of what is done in the public sector is basic research where it's very hard to tell what the applications are actually going to be. And so a lot of it is just understanding how to understand the human body and how to measure it and how to intervene in it. And so there's a large degree to which what you want is to advance our general understanding and it's not all focused that way.

**0:26:13 S2:** Later stage research I think is more... I mean there's some extent to which this apply to basic too. But I think later stage research is where this really comes in. More like, you have some promising leads on a drug that affects rich people versus poor people, while the pharma companies will work on the one that affects rich people and maybe no one to work on the one that affects poor people. I think that's the real dynamic. I think that is also one of the very biggest things that the Gates Foundation is working on, and so my kind of feeling is I think this is an area that if you wanted to support it, you would more or less want to follow along with the Gates Foundation. And that's something that, to some extent, we've tried to do. We've talk to them about this a bunch. We've tried to get a feel for how promising this is, what their returns have been, what they've gotten out of it, but it's something where, I think there is, the biggest player in philanthropy is very much interested in this and he's making really large dollar bets on it. So that's something to keep in mind. Yep.

**0:27:12 S?:** I wanted to hear core examples of areas in the political arena where you think that, even though you really have some research, where just as you're reading up, you thought, maybe, oh, that is an area that, maybe either historically or in the future, GiveWell may be interested in.

**0:27:30 S2:** Yeah. Absolutely. Yeah. So areas in the political world where we've thought there's potential for us to enter and make a difference in, that we might be interested in. There's a bunch. I guess I'll put out three right now and I think, two are kind of more simple. One is foreign aid. I think there is... There is a presence, there is a lobby in favor of foreign aid, but I don't know that it's the strongest one that it could be and I think it's possible that more dollars could make a really big difference. That's obviously kind of a contentious question whether you want more government money going to foreign aid and that's something that I think we'd have to analyze on the merits as well as on the political tractability before we actually get involved, but my intuition is that it would be a very good thing.

**0:28:16 S2:** There's funding for scientific research itself where I also perceived. I mean, I think there's groups that lobby for more funding for their cancer or their disease, but funding for scientific research as a whole, my impression is that, that isn't the most powerful lobby pushing for that and that's another area that I think potentially has really huge returns. Then the third area is one that Alexander is gonna talk about, and that would be immigration or foreign. I think, I'll just let him handle that when we get to his slot.

**0:28:43 S1:** One thing Holden mentioned off-handedly before is this project that we wanna get more involved in with the history of philanthropy. And one of the things that we most want to do is to be able to answer this question much better. Which is, if you look at the last 30 years, what are the, I don't know, the 20 cases where you can say, not because there's a story but because you really analyzed what happened as carefully as you could, that philanthropic funding made a difference. And what difference did it make, and how well did it go, and what does that say about philanthropy's future opportunities to improve the world through policy advocacy?

**0:29:18 S1:** And so like one of the reasons we're like moving forward on the front of sort of this, understanding how policy works and thinking about where philanthropy fits in. And then we're also trying to say, if we look back historically, what has happened? What can you say about the success stories, also the failures of philanthropically-funded policy change? And I think that... Those two things together will put us in a better position to know the types of things that we can accomplish. Yeah.

**0:29:47 S?:** Your political advocacy examples seemed to be drawn from the US federal government...

**0:29:54 S1:** Yeah.

**0:29:55 S?:** To what extent have you thought about other governments in the United States or other governments in the world?

**0:30:02 S2:** Yeah, the question... I think this is really a good question, this is, the political advocacy comments were based on the US Federal Government. Have we thought about other countries and other levels? The answer is like, I've thought about it a lot. We're trying to start with something that

makes sense to start with. It's kind of trying to bite off something we can chew and this probably sounds like more than we can chew anyway, although I think we will get somewhere on it. This has been I think the easiest, most practical way for me to start thinking about policies that are highly leveraged, that are a really huge deal, that I still have the connections and the literature to start getting up-to-speed on relatively quickly. So I think I basically wanna do... I wanna look at US for a while to just get a feel for what it looks like to evaluate policy.

**0:30:48 S2:** But actually yeah, I mean, we've discussed this a lot, this idea that, for example, if what you want is for more people to be able to immigrate to developed countries, it doesn't matter that much what country you do that advocacy in. You could also argue that other countries are kind of gonna be a more important part of the future than they are now and that if you could... There may be more room to influence policy in those countries. So I think this is a huge deal. I think there's a lot to it. I think for the time being I think it makes sense to investigate things the way we are but to definitely have that looking at other countries and other levels of government on the agenda. Other levels of government are interesting 'cause I think there's a lot less money and it's a lot less crowded if you start talking about a particular state's policy or a particular city's policy. Obviously, the implications are less leveraged as well. But that's another reason I think it's really interesting.

[background conversation]

**0:32:14 S2:** So the question is what do we envision our research on political advocacy looking like? What do we envision our recommendations looking like? Are we gonna be able to quantify them the way that we quantify bed nets with every X dollars saves a life. I think that we are... On one hand, I don't wanna promise to start giving cost per life saved figures for everything we do. Because I think a lot of times, it's just not gonna be doable in a way that has narrow enough error guards to really be meaningful. But I do think that we're always gonna have an eye toward cost effectiveness. And so an example of how I can imagine making the case for political advocacy is like this is how much we think it's gonna cost to put together a really good effort.

**0:33:00 S2:** If that effort results in like this kind of change then this is the humanitarian impact. And the humanitarian impact could be in terms of, for example, people who are allowed... Who are able to immigrate to a developed country, and then separately we have an estimate of what that means for their income, and for their quality of life. And several different cases. If we get this result that's what it looks like, if we get that result that's what it looks like. And you can kind of look at that and look at how much we're gonna spend and then look at how likely we think it is to succeed, which is also gonna be a very subjective call. But we're also gonna lay out all the evidence we have.

**0:33:35 S2:** So that I think is actually pretty consistent with the approach we've always had, which is to say, we're gonna take all the relevant parameters, we're gonna give you all the evidence we have for each of them. A lot of them are kind of guess work and are kind of judgment calls. And even with our direct aid, I think that's become more and more the case where it's very clear, your opinion on deworming and bed nets has a lot to do with some judgment calls you're making and some values that you have. So I don't think we're trying to get rid of that. We're not trying to boil all that down to one number. We're trying to boil it down to many numbers to help people understand the case and help them make informed decision on what they prefer.

**0:34:09 S1:** Yeah, I mean that said, like this shift from just doing quantifiable direct aid to these new areas is a giant shift and it's one that...

**0:34:17 S2:** Right.

**0:34:17 S1:** I think we probably were first talking about how we would make this shift a couple of years ago. And this is a big challenge for us because the type of work that the Against Malaria Foundation does, well, it's based on evidence but they're also out in the field measuring or they're getting data on malaria case rates and if the bed nets don't get used, they're going to know 'cause they're surveying the people. If people start getting... Malaria cases don't fall, they're going to see that. And so ultimately, our recommendations are being held accountable to data that comes in after the fact. And that accountability mechanism is unique about the type of work that we do relative to the philanthropy that's come before and now like what we're saying is, there are these other areas we wanna look into.

**0:35:02 S1:** That accountability mechanism doesn't exist in the same way. And we think we have to do this. It's the right call because those opportunities could be even better than bed nets. We have to look into it. At the same time, we're very cognizant of the fact that this is very different. It's very challenging and I think as internally, we are worried about how we'll hold ourselves accountable to this. But I think it's also like we want you all to hold us accountable to not getting lazy and getting soft on how critical we are about these less quantifiable opportunities.

**0:35:37 S2:** And that said, I think that going into the less quantifiable stuff is really good for proving the things that we really care about. Because at our core, GiveWell is not about quantifying and proving everything. GiveWell is more about transparency and openness and criticality, self-criticality of analysis. And so I think something we run into a lot these days is, of course, you guys can publish all the details of your analysis and have open conversations about it and hold yourselves accountable because you're doing the easiest stuff. And it's the most quantifiable, it's the most measurable and we just think that's not valid. I mean we think that you can analyze anything. You can analyze things that are very hard to look at and then have a lot of judgment calls and you can still do it in a way that is self-critical, that's open, that's empirical, that's looking for all the facts that are relevant instead of the way that I see it being done now.

**0:36:28 S?:** So, I was interested in this research relationship with Good Ventures, and in particular, which strike me as plausible or possible sort of activities you could do in terms political advocacy, might be very different, if you're an individual donor compared to a billion dollar fund.

**0:36:50 S2:** Yeah.

**0:36:50 S?:** And if that were the case then how would you, later in time investment focus on sort of things that could be donated to by individual donors versus the sort of things that maybe that are only possible for billion dollar funds like Good Ventures?

**0:37:07 S2:** Yeah. So, the question is and this is a question that I think is an important one and that we've definitely struggled with is there are... Sometimes there is a qualitative difference between what a big donor can do and what a smaller donor can do. If you have a billion dollars, you can create a new institute, you can create a new field. If you have a \$1,000 you really can't and I think when we started at GiveWell, we were really looking for things that would scale with each like \$1,000 or something and that's really where we're focused and that's a lot of what led us to this direct delivery model. And that imposed a lot of limitations on us and I think we have to get away

from that.

**0:37:41 S2:** I think for the foreseeable future the basic thinking is gonna be to look at all the money moved that we project being possible. Money moved means money that people give to where we would recommend it because we recommended it, and think about that as the pot of money that's available. And let's say that with \$5 million you can do something really great but with a 1,000 you couldn't do anything. Well, that's still possible for lots of \$1,000 donors to pull their donations. So, that's still gonna be the pitch. It's like, "This is how much can be done with this much," and we may setup mechanism we're not sure that allow people to participate in that way without having to let go of their money if it doesn't workout, if it doesn't add up to the right number.

**0:38:22 S2:** So, that's something I think for the foreseeable future we're mostly looking, I think we're mostly looking for things that makes sense with the overall path that we project. And we'll find a way to let individuals in on that with the caveat that we... One of the reasons we continue to maintain our traditional work is because that's the stuff that scales with the \$1,000. And so, I think like really if you want something that scales to a \$1,000 that's gonna be your best bet for quite sometime and as long as we maintain that, I don't think people are gonna be stuck with the pulley model, but it will be open to them.

**0:38:55 S1:** Yeah, Tom?

**0:38:57 S?:** So, I wanna respect your point, I'm the board member and this may be obvious but I think that reasons for getting interested in political advocacy are both obvious and I think the risks are obvious as well. There's potentially a significant reception issue by GiveWell's audience or potential audience in stereotyping or sort of generalizing GiveWell's activity as being representative of a particular political view point or particular interest group. And I think it's something that we need to be vigilant about. I think our process in general, that what Holden were talking about before concerning transparency and critical thought and openness are really important especially in the context of this area of inquiry.

**0:39:48 S?:** And I think it's really important that people, like the people in this room, call us out on things that are potentially charged one way or another because I think, it's very easy to say, if you're gonna criticize for example agricultural aid, there may be a lot of people who are in favor of agricultural aid but might not be willing to listen to GiveWell's message because of their political view. So, I think that there's a risk of that happening in a lot of different way and I think we need to be, as board members and as management employees of GiveWell, to be sort of aware of that. That being said, I think given the opportunity to give the amount of dollars that are involved in political aid, it will be kind of a major oversight to not engage in it. I think given that we're... The track record that the organization has, I think there is especially good work to be done but I just sort of wanna to get out in the open and this is something that we're... It's not loss on us, it's a significant risk.

**0:40:53 S2:** Yeah.

**0:40:54 S?:** And if you guys wanna address that too it's fine. One of the things that I wanna actually ask you about was if you're beginning to see a lot of political issues or a lot of political flaws in the system or sort of kind of at peace with each other, namely you've got concentrated well-organized interests going up against diffused less-organized interests. Why wouldn't you focus on the process

element of political advocacy as opposed to specific causes?

**0:41:25 S2:** So, the question is if you see systematic issues in political process, why not focus on fixing the process rather than just on going after the issues? And the answers, I think to that question basically come subject to the same set of questions that any other political issue does. So, there are people who say that the issue that tops all the other issues is money and politics and we need to get that one right. And my response would be, "Okay, what are the possible policy changes that are somewhat realistic? What would the likely impact of those changes be and how organized are the various sides and are we gonna hit insurmountable opposition? And is the forces that we would support, are they already organized?"

**0:42:05 S2:** I think, all those same questions apply and, frankly, I'm giving you a lot of intuitions that I have now that I'm not in any way saying these are what I've determined or what I know or what I'm going to stick to, but you know, at this point I would say that that battle is, maybe, tougher to a degree that I don't think is unreasonable to go after the issues instead of the process. And there's a pretty consistent thing at GiveWell is that, we don't really have a view on root causes versus symptoms, sometimes one is better to go after, sometimes the other is better to go after.

**0:42:37 S1:** Yeah, one interesting thing we've reflected on in the last few months as we've been working on the newer area is what we have with our current top charities is the result of five years of consistent work developing the process and evolving from something that was very, you know, much less well formed, obviously, in 2007, 2008, when we started. And so I think the stage we're at now with this politics stuff is somewhere like where we were in the middle of 2008. It's like, we don't really know what we're going to find yet and we're just at the stage of sharing our intuitions, our basic process, in getting feedback. And I think that, a year from now, we'll be somewhere better, and two years from now, we'll be somewhere better. I do think it's worth just pausing the questions and so Alexander can talk a little bit more concretely about some of the specific things we've been looking into.

[background conversation]

**0:43:37 S3:** So, I've been working on some of the same stuff that Holden's been working on but from a little bit of a different perspective and sort of trying to figure out, as we are, doing a sort of a really really big picture investigation of like, how do politics and how do research look and work? What are some actual issue areas that we can focus on? And how do we do research in those areas in an effective way when we're sort of time constrained? Like there's 50 or a 100 causes that we think might be sort of promising and you wanna look at those and go through all of them. And that's a time consuming process. And so I've been trying to execute on a few of those so that we can kind of figure out how does this research process work, what do you learn, what are the best questions to ask?

**0:44:16 S3:** The three sort of big questions that we're approaching these with are the questions Holden already mentioned, but it's like how big is the problem? How bad is it? What can you actually do? How tractable is it? And who else is already working on it? Does it already have a lot of money, relative to some standard for how bad the problem is? And in particular the issues that I've been working sort of the most in this field is what we call meta-research, which is how can you improve the efficacy of biomedical research, deliver more humanitarian value?

**0:44:44 S3:** One of the things that gets in the news sometimes but I still think really shocking, is how low the reproducibility rates for bio-studies are, and it varies across all kinds from like lab research, epidemiological research, so like all the nutrition studies that you would read, to even randomized controlled trials which are actually much better, but still have surprisingly low replication rates. And so we have this problem where like the studies that are published in medical literature aren't necessarily true, and that both wastes effort, as people try to build on that research and it doesn't work, and it also leads to actually bad clinical outcomes.

**0:45:18 S3:** We got interested in this because of our own practices as users of research, where we were trying to find what does the evidence say about bed nets or these other inventions. And all too often there was just not enough information out there to really make good decisions, and there's really biases in the literature. And so in particular, we sort of followed the work of the Cochrane Collaboration we've mentioned a few times here before. They do these sort of systematic literature of use and meta-analyses of trials to figure out how effective different kinds of medical treatments are. And last year we made them \$100,000 quick grant. It's on our blog you can read more about it if you're interested.

**0:45:53 S3:** So what I've been doing for the last couple months is talking to a bunch of different people in this field. I've talked to like 25 or so, and just trying to get a sense of what are people doing and what are the problems that they face, and how do they think about what this is as a field so that we can try and get a sense of what are the actual giving opportunities you would have if you decided to enter this field, what kinds of returns might you expect, and whose already in it? Are you competing with other funders for giving opportunities? You know, I think it looks promising but we're still sort of at an early stage and it's the only one that we've done in this test yet.

**0:46:25 S3:** And so the main thing we need to see when look at this is like, it looks promising, it looks like it's a big problem, and not too many other people are working on it yet. But there's a community of people who would love to work on it if they could get money. But that said, we just don't have a sense of how it would stack up against other particular giving opportunities that we might find in other areas. And so, we don't feel at all like we're ready to sort of pull the trigger on it, really far from that actually. And so the, I think we're gonna continue to pursue that as like an interest, at sort of like, you know, a low boil, and there's some conferences that we'll go to that are related to it where you can get sort of a high amplitude of exposure to people and a low, sort of a low research investment. But I think we're gonna continue to try and do this kind of research on other areas so that we get up to this baseline so we can make better comparisons to move forward with in the longer run.

**0:47:09 S3:** So that's the one... We call it medium depth. It's not years of work, but it's been like a couple months of work that we've put into that so far, really sort of trying to get up-to-speed in that field and what it looks like. The next stage down, I don't know, you might call it like medium shallow or something. For two causes that I think we've heard people refer to as, sort of colloquially over the years that we've run GiveWell as things that might be considered sort of like the biggest problems or the biggest issues in the world. And so not surprisingly, climate change is on this list, and the other one Holden mentioned is immigration, where I think there's... Some economists think that it's like really the biggest problem. And that if you could get this, everything else would sort of fall with it.

**0:47:45 S3:** And so we've done different levels of research in these two different areas. A lot of our

work on climate change focused on reading and summarizing the in text from the IPCC's 2007 report, trying to answer the question like how bad is this if it happens? And then, also, one of the things we'd still like to do but I think before we sort of move forward with climate change is to do more to answer a question like, "Really, what could you do?" Looking at the track record of philanthropic spending in climate change, trying to figure out if you entered this deal, what would be a good estimate of your... The tractability or likelihood of making a difference? On immigration... Oh, and on climate change we also did some basic work on how much money already goes into it. I think it's sort of in between, it's hard to say. It's probably several 100 million dollars a year of philanthropic funding in the US go to climate change.

**0:48:34 S2:** We've published this, right?

**0:48:35 S3:** No. It's a few days away, so that will go up soon. And then, the immigration, we also haven't published but had sort of done less work than climate change but more than the other things I'll mention in a second that are super shallow. And this is something we had five conversations with, with various different kinds of experts. Holden laid out their basic texture of this case already. What you see is that there's a potential group of people who'd benefit a lot, potential migrants. Their interests are extremely diffuse and unorganized. Then, the people who... It's not a problem that's considered especially tractable, it's really unpopular throughout the developed world, and so it's not clear how these things would stack up. And we haven't done, actually, I think there's a couple questions you'd wanna ask about how good is it actually and we haven't really asked them yet. And so, I don't think this is something, we're far from trying to make a bet on it or anything. But it is one of the really few issues where you see economists in so much agreement. And, in so much agreement, that's a big deal.

**0:49:36 S3:** And then, the three... Two other things that we've actually done the shallowest level of and actually published so you can find it on our website already. There were places where we just wanted to start because we already knew something about them or were just ready to write it up to get the practice in doing these kinds of investigations. One was the risk due to asteroids striking earth. A few weeks ago, there was a day where an asteroid hit Russia. And then, there was another fly by. And so, that was in the news and it was just a fun, short investigation to do but I don't think it's gonna be our main focus area going forward but you never know. We'll see how other things stack up.

**0:50:10 S3:** And then, the other one that's a pretty interesting one is domestic migration seasonally within the developing world. You might hear a lot about urbanization in the developing world but seasonal migration is actually pretty common in a lot of places. There's this one super extreme randomized controlled trial that found that giving people basically insurance that if they didn't get a job where they migrated, they'd get their bus fare paid for, really, really increased the rates of migration and people actually did get jobs and made pretty significant financial returns from getting that sort of the insurance against loss. And these are people who like make less than a \$1 a day in Bangladesh.

**0:50:48 S3:** And so, it was an interesting group where it seemed as if you get a high financial return from enabling people to go in search of jobs in an urban area during a seasonal famine. And so, we just basically wrote up the study and said, "It's interesting, here's a few more questions if you want to prioritize this going forward, learned a little about the context by talking to the guy who ran the study." So, that's really the level of investigation that we're doing for something that's really



shallow. That's kind what we did for asteroids and domestic migration and for other things it ranges up to, I don't know, 20 or 30 conversations so far. I think, in the long run, if we really want to go deep on something that would mean talking to hundreds of people.

**0:51:22 S1:** So, those last two are both public on the website, domestic migration and asteroids. If you're wondering how to follow when these things come out, there's a couple different ways but you can sign up for e-mails where you're gonna learn that every single time they come out, there's an RSS feed for Twitter and you can stay up-to-date on all the new stuff that gets published as it gets published. So, when climate change comes out, the water thing I mentioned comes out, that'll all go through there.

**0:51:46 S3:** We haven't logged this stuff yet cause we still feel like it's the first ones we've done, we're not totally confident whether it's the method we're gonna use going forward. And so, we didn't wanna max out transparency. I think we will publish on climate change. We'll publish a blog post about it within a short amount of time after we've published it, for those interested.

**0:52:02 S2:** We did put up the pages, just not blogs. It's a matter of how we highlight them. One more note about the underlying context here is I think one of the things that's evolved in our approach over the last year maybe is just coming to see the cause as the most important unit of analysis. So, the kind of picture that I have now is you wanna pick the best causes and then it's gonna take a really long time and a good deal of commitment to find the giving opportunities and to be able to assess them. And I think that's not necessarily how we were always approaching things but that's now the framework we're in and I think it's probably the right framework.

**0:52:38 S3:** And I think one of the things that we've learned as we've done these investigations is that it's actually surprisingly easy to find people giving you specific giving opportunities once you express an interest in a field. Some of those people say, "Oh yeah, I've been wanting to find something for this for years but I didn't think any funders were interested," and those were to see something. Or other times, "Oh yeah, six proposals were rejected in the past five years, you wanna see 'em?" So, we actually felt like finding or sourcing giving opportunities was gonna be hard, that's been surprisingly easy. But we don't feel at all in a position to judge between these giving opportunities cause they require all this context-dependent knowledge about what the field looks like and what would be successful.

**0:53:14 S1:** Alright, so let's open it up to questions. It can be on anything, whether it's the stuff Alexander said or Holden or traditional GiveWell, no holds barred. Yeah?

**0:53:26 S?:** My question is how are you... I'm wondering if you can say any more about how you're picking causes for different levels of investigation right now and how are you deciding which of these to go into? Can say more about that? More than what you've already said on the website.

**0:53:43 S3:** Definitely. So...

**0:53:44 S?:** Repeat that question.

**0:53:45 S3:** Oh yeah. So, the question was how do we pick causes for different levels of investigation. It's a good question. So, the way I put it is meta research is something that we have a theory-driven approach to it, like it was something we were interested in, we didn't see any funders

working on it and sort of like the really quick level investigation. And it's something we felt like we actually had a value added as a funder potentially because it's a need we had felt. And so that's what got us initially interested in that and we continued to do this for 20-conversation level because we continued to sort of learn interesting stuff and to keep going there.

**0:54:20 S3:** Climate change and immigration, as I said, these are issues that people point to like a lot of really smart public intellectual types, are saying like, "These are the biggest issues", so that's what drove our attention there. Asteroids and domestic migration are two of a 100 things on a list that we have and they're not the... It's not on well-prioritized list. But they are particularly tractable easy ones to start with. And part of the reason we chose them is 'cause it's a little harder to know if you're gonna do a... We call them like 10 or 20-hour investigations where they're like, you read a couple of papers, you talk to a couple of the experts in the field and you write it up.

**0:54:51 S3:** It's pretty hard to know how to do that for some giant field that has a huge literature and has been... Billions of dollars has been spent on it recently. I always think about roads in the developing world. That's actually much harder in some ways than things that have one paper and one study where you can talk to the guy who did the study. And so, we're still sort of getting started in trying to figure out how will this methodology scale to much bigger issues.

**0:55:14 S?:** Sorry, what was that in the developing world?

**0:55:16 S3:** Roads, sorry.

**0:55:18 S1:** Right. So there's this giant challenge. When we started to GiveWell and we're like, "We're just going to look for things that are proven and cost-effective." That very quickly narrows the world sufficiently where there's only so many things that you have to look at. And then to say, "Now we wanna be open to many things," it's a big challenge to figure out how to prioritize what to look at. If you relied too heavily obviously on initial intuition about something you can go very wrong. And so one of the main things that I think we're struggling with, is how do we develop the right process to come up with good results a year from now in investigations we've done. And I think one of the many things we have to do is very obvious, which is, increase the capacity with which we can do the 20-hour level of investigation to have something more than that initial intuition about how good something is and the 20 hours filter into the three month, and the three month filter into the two year and hopefully that's our leading hypothesis of how we'll go about doing this work but we're severely understaffed to do that type of work really quickly right now.

**0:56:25 S2:** On the bright side, I would describe what we've done since the beginning as, we always look into stuff for some combination of it being important and in being easy to look into. Sometimes we get criticized for this and sometimes we get confusion for this that people start to think, "Well, GiveWell is all about stuff that's proven." Well, we looked at proven stuff 'cause it is easy to look into. But in the process, we gain information about how to run the process in general. So a lot of what we're doing right now, it's not that we pick... We didn't pick Asteroids first 'cause we thought it was the best issue but we picked it because we thought we'd be able to look into it and learn something about how to look into stuff in general.

**0:56:59 S2:** And actually I think we're making quite a bit of traction on that. I think there was a time when we were trying things and they just weren't generating interesting information and just nothing came of it and we had to bump into a few walls. Now I think we have a process to... It

produces these write-ups. These write-ups are somewhat informative. They help us think about what to do next. I think we're moving toward having focused causes and a lot of the problem now becomes capacity but now we can look for people who can do this work. We know what the work is that we're looking for people to do. So that's the methodology here.

**0:57:33 S?:** Alright. So, with regards to political advocacy, you mentioned, and I'm glad to hear that tractability is very important variable.

**0:57:39 S1:** Right.

**0:57:42 S?:** And sounds like you're also aware that the level of confidence you have with that variable is much lower than what you've been dealing with. What does the tractability estimate for political advocacy look like?

**0:57:54 S1:** Right.

**0:57:54 S?:** Do you have a vision for how you're gonna... But describe the answer to that question.

**0:57:58 S2:** Yeah. So the question is, what does it look like to estimate the tractability of a political issue? I think the answer is basically that it's comparative so we want to look a lot of issues and say, "Okay, this is one of the most tractable issues and also one of the most important so within politics, that is one of the best ones to work on." Now if you're trying to actually estimate a probability that you're gonna have an impact, I mean, this becomes very fraught because again, we could be talking about a 10-year time-rise and a longer time-rise and the kind of impact you have is very unpredictable. You don't know exactly what you're gonna get. And that's why I'm not sure exactly what we're gonna do yet. I wouldn't even rule out that we would just say, "If you think this basic political advocacy approach is good, here's what we think the best issues are." That's what we have to say. We may not be able to give them the best guidance on that versus other causes.

**0:58:49 S2:** I'm optimistic that we will be able to do more than that. Like what I said, be able to do the case analysis. If you think we have this much of a chance of getting this size change, then here's how that shakes out as compared to something else. Actually, weirdly, I think an even harder, much harder area to do return on investment analysis for scientific research. I think that one is really... You can start talking about the progress we've made on heart disease and cancer and the progress we hopefully will make but a lot of the highest returns to biomedic  
I research are stuff that's just like really hard to even describe before it happens or...

**0:59:22 S2:** Especially because the lag between discovery and actual application can be decades. So that's gonna be a tough one. But I think the basic approach is just, get all the facts we can, we do all the analysis that we think is grounded enough to have some meeting, and there may be points at which we say, "Look, you have to decide on this parameter. We can only give so much guidance. We can give our intuition and we can give what it means to have other intuitions."

**0:59:46 S1:** Yeah. Also just, this is something that people study. There's people who focus on different political issues and what role different factors played in a particular policy going the way that the people wanted, whether it's money or how big a deal it is in the media, or whether the White House got involved, or whatever. This is a field of study. And so I... You know, we're not venturing out on our own, in terms of whether this question has been asked before. Yeah, Jess?

**1:00:14 S?:** So, I'm a big fan of this idea about looking at the history of philanthropy, cases where success or failure for political advocacy do you guys have a historical case in mind? 'Cause the gun debate one, right, versus everybody working for years on this, there was this huge issue, put a bunch of resources into it, and nothing good have come of it, right? So is there one that was successful that you guys think about?

**1:00:42 S2:** So the question is, are there successful political advocacy cases that we have in mind? We're collecting a list of these cases. We're gonna vet them at some point. Actually, there's a lot of successes. I think the environmentalist movement has had a lot of impact. And I think philanthropy has played a role in it. One example that I'll give of just like... I think it's just a good example of how to think about political advocacy in today's environment, is something that I got from an essay by Steven Teles, that's contrasting financial reform with healthcare. So with healthcare... Both of these are things where there was a big moment in the last five years or so, a big, somewhat unexpected moment.

**1:01:18 S2:** And so with financial reform, what happened was, there was this giant financial crisis, and everyone was interested in financial reform, but there just wasn't a lot there in the way of groups that had concrete proposals that had been vetted, that had been carefully developed. There weren't highly developed financial reform lobbies; they were really tiny compared to the banks. And it didn't... Well, I guess, according to the person writing this, it was a very unsatisfying outcome. And again, this is more me describing a hypothesis, than something I've looked into. And then a good contrast is healthcare reform, where there was Atlantic Philanthropies put something like \$100 million into this cause, building up this organization, Healthcare for America Now, and I think some other organizations, there was a failed attempt, a big failed attempt.

**1:02:07 S2:** But even failed attempts can sort of help to build the capacity of organizations, and help to figure out what's not gonna work next time, what is gonna work. And, you know, healthcare reform had a big moment, and there were a lot of policies, and a lot of ideas ready to go. There were a lot of coalitions that had already been put together. And so this hypothesis is that both these things had this big, unexpected moment, but there was much bigger progress than one that was directly traceable to the work that they had put in, building capacity over the previous many years. I wanna emphasize, these are not... This is an example that I think is helpful to think about what the hypothesis looks like. These aren't cases where I necessarily agree with the claims about what policy should've been, or anything like that. Or that I agree with the things about how it went that way.

**1:02:53 S1:** Yeah, one of our first priorities for this history of philanthropy project is putting together that list of cases to vet. Because you wouldn't even know until you put the time into vetting them, like, what were the drivers? So hopefully we'll have that, and that should be happening. But that still just a nascent project. Yeah?

**1:03:14 S?:** So I guess your aim is really for individual donors, and it's all based on how much money you give, and I guess when you're looking at things like Global Health, people are very often looking to donate a few dollars here and there, so to be able to build something like that makes a lot of sense. When you're looking at something like political advocacy, very often people are interested in getting involved in ways that are not necessarily financial, so like people lobby, or call, or even through social media, people are involved in these things that aren't just really by spending money. I

was wondering of your recommendations what would extend beyond, "If you give this much money here, the chances are it can have that an effect," but also extend to, you know, "if you have this many people calling your congressmen about this, it might have a chance of doing this."

**1:03:55 S3:** Right. Yeah, the question is whether we're... Once we get into stuff like political advocacy, whether we're going to be making recommendations about things other than money. Like, what petitions to get involved in, or what calls to make. I think our mission is pretty focused on how to give well, that's our name, [laughter] and so I think that's where we're gonna be. I think that our research might be interesting to people who are interested in other things, especially now that we have more of a cause orientation; identifying the best causes, you could certainly imagine certain implications for what you wanna get involved in as a volunteer or as an employee. But we're gonna let others mostly draw those conclusions. I think that we're gonna focus on the dollars.

**1:04:32 S1:** In the back?

**1:04:34 S?:** Speaking of which, have you thought much, and maybe the answer is yes, about how to get people to give more? And I think in this case more is definitely better, but the website and... The websites are full of information, but zero marketing.

**1:04:56 S2:** I wouldn't say zero.

**1:04:58 S?:** Well, no, not zero.

**1:04:59 S2:** One.

[laughter]

[background conversation]

**1:05:05 S?:** I'm just curious. You talk about better research in asteroids and so...

**1:05:08 S1:** Yeah. So it's a good question. So this question is, we've talked solely about research. You go to the website, it is obvious that we prioritize research over marketing. Well, what about marketing? One of GiveWell's key goals, the way that one of the key inputs into how we assess ourselves is, how much money goes to our top charities as a result of our research? And so there's this... Outreach is a key component of whether we're successful at what we're trying to do. What we have done historically is taken only the outreach or marketing opportunities that seem to be the most likely to have high return on investment. And so that means we've done some marketing. I mean, we've been in the media. We use Google AdWords to spread the word. We hold a events when we can to try and get the word out to a greater extent.

**1:06:03 S1:** But we're certainly like heavily prioritizing research over marketing. And there's really like a few big reasons for it. One, is like, even though we have a big vision for what GiveWell eventually will be and we're not there yet, we're very happy with the growth we've had thus far. You know, we've roughly doubled every year that we've been in existence with our money moved. So if you like look at that impact page, our money moved is growing. And the other fact is that research itself has always been our best approach to marketing. I mentioned this earlier in our board meeting but, you know, just...

**1:06:37 S1:** Peter Singer, the philosopher at Princeton who talks all about giving, has been by far our best marketer, and the only reason he's our marketer is because our research is really great, not because our marketing was great. You know, he looked at our stuff. He said, "This is great. This is different than anything else out there," and then he spreads the word. And then the final... The final thing that I'll add on that is I think for the... You know, right now, for the organization, if two years from now, we had this meeting again and we could only share the same level of information about politics or research or whatever cause, I think that would be like frankly a disaster for GiveWell as an organization.

**1:07:12 S2:** Even if it was a lot slicker the way we presented it. [laughter]

**1:07:14 S1:** But it wasn't looking good, but that's not acceptable. But if our money move sort of slows for a couple of years, like that's by no means the end of the... Like we wouldn't like it. We love the growth, that's important but we could deal with it. And I think like longer term, we need to have that research in place where someone says, "How do you estimate tractability of research?" or "How do you estimate cost effectiveness of scientific research?" or "How did you pick these random three causes out of a 100 to look into?" that we have a really good answer to give them that's not just, "Hey, we got started on this other area three months ago." 'Cause like if I were a donor thinking about the best place to give my money, I would... I mean I'm not satisfied personally with that answer, I wouldn't be satisfied with that answer and so that's why we feel like we have to prioritize the research.

**1:07:57 S?:** So that's good. That's not quite what I was getting at. Have you looked into the research about how to give? I mean if your focus is on research...

**1:08:05 S2:** Right.

**1:08:05 S?:** Have you looked into how to get people to give more?

**1:08:08 S2:** So the question is...

**1:08:08 S?:** Not necessarily you, but you know...

**1:08:11 S2:** Right. The question is what's in the research and how to get people to give more so I think what you're thinking about is like a general intervention to raise charitable giving. Not so much us marketing ourselves.

**1:08:21 S?:** That's fine, yeah.

**1:08:22 S2:** So we haven't... I mean, I don't know that the research has... Like I think basically there's an industry that is like pretty interested in this that I think just thinks about it a lot better and does it a lot better than we do. I think in a lot of ways, it's just not our comparative advantage. It's not something that we're very good at thinking about so it's not something that we've really focused on. You know, I think it's possible that it should be a shallow... On the list of many causes for shallow investigation like, does this researcher... Do organizations like this have high returns? But I think it's not something that stood out to us. It's something that would be a really logical place for us to go.

**1:09:03 S?:** I think that, based just on what you're saying, 'cause I don't really know your organization very well but just listening to you talk through those criticisms of the scientific issues that you looked at because of the biases that limited their findings and I just... My concern hearing you talk is that there is bias in the way that you're going about finding your causes...

**1:09:24 S2:** Right.

**1:09:25 S?:** And it's built more and more on that initial catchment of what to look into as you become more and more powerful to influence giving, it could really start pushing things in directions... I mean, they all seem like extremely worthy causes but I feel like maybe a little more curiosity looking inward into where are we getting our ideas, who are we getting them from? Maybe these political figures of big important and smart people have things that are pushing them to value certain types of charities...

**1:09:55 S2:** Right.

**1:09:55 S?:** Over each other and when you present them on a website, it just said top charities, it doesn't say top charities based on the fact that it started in these areas, you know what I'm saying? I don't want to criticize. It seems like you are doing great work but I think as you get bigger, the potential for the biases to direct you off in the wrong direction is greater too.

**1:10:15 S2:** Right, so the comment raised is a concern about potential bias in where we're getting our information, how we choose our causes. Obviously, there's a lot of subjectivity in giving. I think one of the things that actually sets GiveWell apart from other charity valuers is that we don't pretend otherwise. Our actual goal is to really put our biases out there and let people examine them and let people discuss them, and in general I think we do that more than anyone else, and so I think a lot of people want quantitative formulas for what charities are the best and you divide their expenses by their overhead, or that's not exactly what you do but...

[overlapping conversation]

**1:10:52 S2:** Yeah. I think that's something that actually I think that sets us apart a lot and I think we write a great deal about our world view, our values, where we're getting our ideas. Certainly don't want anyone to have the impression that because a lot of smart people think immigration is important, therefore we've decided it is. But it is something that gets under our radar screen and we're totally upfront about that and we're upfront about the other things that get under our radar screen. So I don't think, I don't think we're aiming for no bias. I don't think that's really possible in philanthropy but I think we're doing more than anyone else to put our biases out there and to make them part of an open discussion and I think that's a lot of the core of what we're trying to do.

**1:11:28 S3:** I would just add that in whatever it is that we end up producing, it will be very clear what we did and didn't do to get there. So like this list of 100 things, who knows how many will actually get through before we ever make a recommendation, but certainly the list of things we looked at and then how we decided to move forward... And I think we'll have a hard time saying how we got to the things on the list 'cause it is like a lot of heuristics and biases that we have and share. But we try to be really expansive about that list and we'll make it public.

**1:11:57 S1:** Right, so like if you... We're all gonna answer this one. If you go on the website right now, I mean you can see a recent blog post Holden wrote about the values underlying our research. These are not facts that are true, they are the values that a lot of us share that guide the things that we look into. Also, if you look back at the research that we have completed, that is public, you see not only the things we recommend, but all of the steps we took to find them.

**1:12:25 S1:** And everything that we considered, but either decided not to recommend or even decided not to spend time on. So, you can... We want to put that all out there because we are with you, that this is a big problem, this fact that we're making judgments that are leading to the recommendations that we have and we wanna put people like you who care enough to think about it, and share your thoughts to know what's happened. So, you can both weigh whether it fits what you're looking for, but also, criticize us if you think we're doing something wrong. I mean, that's why we're doing this. That's what we appreciate.

**1:12:59 S2:** There's one more piece of that I wanna get to... Sorry. Well, we didn't address the top charities thing and, I just wanna say that, you know, our top charities... I think top charities is exactly the right word. They're charities that we personally give to. Like I honestly believe they're like the best giving opportunities I know of today are the top charities on our website. So, I just think that's accurate and it's top charities from certain people with certain opinions. But, I think that's how they're perceived.

**1:13:24 S1:** We take one more question and then we'll wrap up. Not... Okay, Tim. Fine.

**1:13:30 S?:** I have other opportunities to ask questions.

**1:13:34 S1:** Okay.

**1:13:35 S2:** Oh, Tim gives his spot up.

**1:13:35 S1:** Tim yields.

**1:13:36 S2:** You should go for it.

**1:13:39 S1:** Okay, shoot.

**1:13:42 S?:** I actually have two questions for you.

[laughter]

**1:13:44 S1:** You have to rank them and...

**1:13:46 S2:** Do you want to pick, or do you want us to pick?

[laughter]

**1:13:48 S2:** Pick the good one.

**1:13:48 S?:** The second one might be on the website, so that might just be answered. My first is, in



terms of meta research, I can certainly see why that, by the things you mentioned, are a problem, but it's harder for me to imagine what an intervention that an individual donor could fund would look like. I wondered if you have any ideas in mind? The second question was regards migration is have you considered the effects of brain drain in that map. Maybe that's already on the website or coming soon.

**1:14:18 S3:** So, on the first question was about meta research, and it was like, what could an individual donor actually fund? I think it's a pretty good question. I think one of the things that actually interestingly makes this field most promising from our perspective is that, there's not a lot of organizations that are sitting around, waiting for you to donate to them. Like, it's a pretty young, immature field, and so, it's not clear... There's this people who are already doing something, and just waiting for more money. A lot of the people who are talking about it are academics who work on grants.

**1:14:45 S3:** And so, sort of the thing Holden mentioned earlier about, if we ended it up, like really focusing on this field, we need to figure out a way to pool money from individual donors to be able to make grants in some sort of smart way, I think. You know, we're really far from this, so we don't know exactly what that would look like. But, I think that would be the plan for how it would work. How much do you want to know about what the intervention might be?

**1:15:09 S1:** Well, in one the... If you are in to... We will publish what some of these interventions are, but Alexander mentioned he had these 20 conversations or so with experts. They're all in the conversations page of our website and, in every conversation, we ask, like, "What is a giving opportunity here?" And people will explain the project that they're supporting.

**1:15:25 S2:** And we'll eventually be doing a summary too, so you don't have to read all of them.

**1:15:28 S3:** But you can. And then, on the second question, which was about brain drain, like no, we haven't looked into it too much. It's definitely on the agenda. I think it's one of the... From the a humanitarian perspective, probably the main thing they people point to as an objection.

**1:15:41 S1:** Yup. Alright, we're gonna wrap up. Holden, Alexander and I are going to stick around as long as folks want to stick around and just chat informally. We really appreciate you all coming out to this, to the, I don't know, anti Charity Gala or something.

[laughter]

**1:15:57 S?:** In both senses, nicely done.

**1:16:03 S1:** You know, we know that this is not the normal, conventional, cool way to do charity, but we really appreciate people who are interested enough in our work to ask questions, to criticize us, to engage intellectually with it because that's really what we need to be successful. So, thank you all for coming.

**1:16:17 S2:** And grab some pizza.

[applause]