

Conversation with the Center for Global Development on June 5, 2013

Participants

- Center for Global Development (CGD): Nancy Birdsall, *President*, and Todd Moss, *Vice President for Programs and Senior Fellow*
- Good Ventures: Cari Tuna, *Co-Founder*
- GiveWell: Holden Karnofsky, *Co-Founder and Co-Executive Director*

Summary

The Center for Global Development (CGD) is an independent think tank that conducts research on issues related to global poverty. GiveWell and Good Ventures spoke with CGD to discuss potential policy advocacy opportunities in the U.S. and other countries that could positively impact the global poor.

Note: This set of notes was compiled by GiveWell and gives an overview of the major points made by Nancy Birdsall and Todd Moss in the conversation.

Some potentially worthwhile policy opportunities

Drug policy reform

This could include the decriminalization, regulation, and taxation of narcotics, as well as prevention treatment for addicts. These reforms are an attempt to address the demand side of the drug market, an approach currently being promoted by many Latin American presidents. The approach of the United States, of jailing people for drug crimes, could be shifted to a public health approach. This issue is related to how the U.S. inflicts costs on other countries as well, because the U.S. demand for drugs fuels the market in other countries.

Mental health in developing countries

Mental health is among the largest causes of disability and death in the developing world—more significant than HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis combined in the adult productive years—but receives very little attention in spite of the availability of low-cost, high-impact interventions for many diseases.

Talent exchanges between countries

This issue is in some ways about immigration reform, but also more broadly about creating opportunities in a global labor market, for example, via more companies' employing people in other countries to do work that can be done remotely (like translation).

Carbon tax in the U.S.

This is difficult because it has historically been politically intractable, but the U.S.'s contribution to climate change harms people around the world. It would be

good to invest in building the movement for a carbon tax in a way that represents the interests of all people, including the global poor. A world values survey from between 2005 and 2007 in 48 countries found that 60% of people who were asked about global warming said that they were very concerned. It is important to channel these views into deliberative democracy on the global level to address climate change.

There are other ways that philanthropy could help address climate change. The Center for Global Development is working on a project that pays governments in developing countries that preserve their forests, for example. Another possibility is promoting the development and use of renewable energy sources and zero carbon technology such as community run solar based mini-grids with and through (social) "impact investing", [development impact bonds](#), as well as conventional private financing.

Addressing the lack of legal identification for people in developing countries

Every year, 50 million children are born and not given birth certificates. There is a backlog of about 700 million people who, due to their lack of identification, do not legally "exist." This is a major issue because a lack of identification can preclude someone from accessing services and having legal protections. India is currently undertaking a massive effort to give all citizens a unique ID, and the World Bank is also starting to see this as a serious issue. See link to [recent CGD-hosted speech](#) on the topic.

Empowering citizens in natural resource rich developing countries

Many countries, especially in Africa, are rich in resources but the nations as a whole are staying poor because the resources are badly managed. Citizens often don't know about what money is coming in to the countries and what contracts are being signed, so they cannot be aware and speak out against waste, corruption and poor management. One possible step towards trying to hold governments more accountable is greater engagement of citizens through public dialogue, and support for local think tanks and civil society organizations.

Ending the current mandate on biofuels

The mandate on biofuels in the U.S. distorts the market for certain agricultural commodities. Subsidies cause these crops to compete with food production and food security in developing countries.

Child brides

This is an issue that has been taken up by The Elders, a group of independent global leaders who work together for human rights (<http://theelders.org/>). It seems like a potentially promising area that may be under-invested in.

Reducing smoking

This has been somewhat neglected within policy advocacy because it doesn't quite fit into either public health or development, but it is very important, as more premature deaths in developing countries are due to smoking than due to AIDS, TB,

and malaria combined. Industry has played a role in reducing regulations around smoking in developing countries.

Immigration policy reform

There are great gains to be had by increasing labor mobility. There may be many funders in this space already, but rarely are they advocating on behalf of the global poor. An approach to immigration reform that is promising but not commonly discussed is allowing for more temporary migrants.

U.S. farm subsidies

This is an issue that is often mentioned as a policy that affects developing countries, but it should not be ranked very highly in terms of the welfare gains to be won. Cotton subsidies, which are one of the main crop subsidies in the U.S., are believed to cause a 12% decrease in cotton prices in global markets, which is significant, but given the base farmgate price of cotton, this doesn't represent a huge decrease in income for farmers.

Foreign aid

This is another popular topic for policy advocacy that affects developing countries. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Hewlett Foundation have both done interesting work on reorganizing/coordinating the foreign aid system in the U.S. It is not clear that there is space for another funder to add much value on organization per se. A promising area, however, for all donors, is increased attention to new instruments such as paying governments for "performance" after results are verified (e.g. annually), along the lines of [Cash on Delivery](#) aid, for progress on health, education, reduced deforestation and other outcomes. Approaches along these lines are now being tried by DFID and the World Bank, and deserve third-party assessment. Another is through development impact bonds (referred to above), which apply social impact bonds to development programs.

In picking long-term areas of focus for policy advocacy, tractability is not necessarily an appropriate criterion, because new areas where a philanthropist could make a big difference will often seem intractable at the start.

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