

## Notes from Open Philanthropy Project convening on November 10th

### Partial list of participants:

- Frank Baumgartner
- Gara LaMarche
- Susan Sandler
- Mark Schmitt
- Alexis Schuler
- Amanda Shanor
- Steven Teles
- Ben Wikler
- Open Philanthropy Project representatives

**Note:** this set of notes was compiled by the Open Philanthropy Project, and gives an overview of the major points raised in our November 10 meeting, without attributing specific comments to specific people. The participants do not necessarily hold all the views set forth below.

Note also that we provided briefing materials and key questions for each session; these are available at [http://www.givewell.org/files/labs/Issue writeups for Nov. 10 meeting.docx](http://www.givewell.org/files/labs/Issue%20writeups%20for%20Nov.10%20meeting.docx).

### Introductory session

We laid out our basic comparative advantages as a foundation and took questions and comments.

We discussed the basic question of whether to be an "operating foundation" (carrying out a great deal of our work in-house, and treating external partners somewhat as contractors) vs. "active grantmaker" (making grants for specific purposes with specific expectations and conditions) vs. "passive grantmaker" (more hands-off grantmaking). We expressed a preference for "passive grantmaker" to the extent we can find sufficiently aligned grantees/partners.

There were remarks to the effect that foundations tend to emphasize their own angle/strategy on an issue, but they are ultimately defined - and the field is ultimately shaped - by their grantees.

We discussed the tradeoff between "alignment" (how much a given person/organization shares our general values and goals) and "capacity" (how much money a given person/organization can spend productively). Given our somewhat unusual platform, we are likely to face tradeoffs between how much activity we're able to support and how aligned we can expect to be with our grantees. We were encouraged to be open to "strange bedfellows" approaches (working with people who disagree with us on many issues but may have areas of

overlap), but not to take these approaches too far and not to make our biggest commitments along these lines.

### **Session on criminal justice reform**

There was general agreement with our feeling that this issue presents unusual political opportunities.

There was a mixed reaction to the idea, proposed in our writeup, that we should prioritize reducing crime as well as reducing incarceration, because crime may be harder to reduce than incarceration and the link between the crime rate and the politics of incarceration is not completely straightforward. On the other hand, it was remarked that policy reforms seeking to be neutral or positive with respect to public safety could be more durable: a vivid story of a crime would be less likely to lead to retrenchment for these sorts of policies.

We had an extended discussion of prosecutor incentives. People remarked that prosecutors are currently largely judged on how many people they've gotten incarcerated, and we discussed how to introduce other ways of evaluating them, including a focus on prosecuting white-collar crime and a focus on "crimes of wrongful liberty" (prosecuting the wrong person while the real criminal goes free and commits more crimes).

There were generally mixed-to-negative reactions to the idea of focusing on campaigns to reduce mass incarceration, as opposed to other approaches laid out in our briefing materials. We asked how to assess when a campaign is a good idea; responders felt that there's no clear and reliable way to do this, without being "in the thick of things." Political operatives, lobbyists, etc. can often present a misleading picture of how worthwhile a campaign would be.

There was some discussion of framing and terminology, both generally and for this cause. The idea was raised of sourcing ideas for terminology from the people who care most about the issue, *then* testing poll-testing different options for mainstream reaction; this contrasts with the more traditional strategy of *starting* with mainstream-friendly messages and asking the base to adopt them, which can result in the base losing some ability to energize people. There was some thought about how to frame criminal justice reform in positive terms - something like "second chance economy" as opposed to "reducing incarceration."

We also discussed the idea of going "all in in one or two states" with our institution-building grants, as opposed to spreading out our bets geographically. There were generally positive reactions to the idea of going "all in" in a specific location.

Other ideas raised included

- Addressing the "school to prison pipeline" via school reform, though this might involve major conflicts with school boards

- Addressing other "root causes" such as lead poisoning, foster care and child welfare. There were mixed reactions to whether this would be a promising approach.
- Asset forfeiture reform
- Focusing on marijuana decriminalization since marijuana usage can be a "gateway crime" and a tool for police to make stops.
- Research on improving policing
- Prosecutors
- Building capacity at the state level

### **Session on labor mobility**

Several people thought this was a good cause for us because of its boldness and unfamiliarity. However, most people in the room were uncomfortable with at least some of the substance of the cause - particularly the idea of focusing on temporary work visas, as they fear that such visas often lead to exploitation of workers.

There was relatively more interest in promoting the long-term vision of large increases in immigration and the cosmopolitan-humanitarian benefits of this. Some commented that younger people may be more cosmopolitan in their interests.

We were warned against making excessively major or long-term commitments to "strange bedfellows," e.g., people who agree with us on wanting to increase labor mobility but disagree with us on many other issues.

Ideas raised included:

- Focusing on policy in Asia rather than in the U.S., though it was acknowledged that this might be impractical at this stage of our development.
- Aiming to reduce the costs of remittances.
- Promulgating the message that America's most prosperous periods have been high-immigration periods.
- Research on what a high-immigration state would look like.

### **Session on macroeconomic stabilization policy**

Several people thought this was one of the best issues to focus on that we had highlighted, noting that it gets fairly little attention from politics-oriented groups and funders currently but has significant potential.

One challenge of this cause is that there aren't major existing organizations that focus specifically on this issue, especially from a more political, rather than academic, perspective. Our grants so far have been project support rather than general operating support. We discussed whether this should be considered problematic, in light of earlier discussion about the value of general support. The

general reaction was that this shouldn't be considered problematic, as long as the grants are allocated to people within organizations who are intrinsically motivated to do particular work and these people are given the freedom to do it as they see fit. Grants like this should be thought of as somewhere between (a) fully general (organization-level) operating support; (b) highly prescriptive, contractual grantmaking.

Ideas raised included:

- (Re-)nationalizing the welfare state to make it more effectively countercyclical
- Creating a "hub" to bring together the work different organizations (such as EPI, Roosevelt, Demos) can do
- Studying up on the history of monetary policy, since it used to draw much more public interest than it does today
- Working with people on both the left and right
- Learning about the Washington Center for Equitable Growth as a model for how to raise the profile of an issue primarily by supporting and drawing on existing work from other organizations
- Focusing on financial regulation as a way of making financial crises less likely; several people were highly positive on this area, feeling it does not get enough attention from nonprofits and funders

### **Session on alcohol policy and land use reform**

The participants were split on the topic of land use reform, with some seeing it as a promising issue and some seeing it as too divorced from the goal of helping the disadvantaged. People also commented that land use reform might be more of concern to younger people than to the middle-aged.

Alcohol policy was said to be an "orphan cause" in the sense that it doesn't have strong thematic links to the rest of our work. We had some discussion of how to tie it into broader themes, such as criminal justice. One participant stated that campaigns on alcohol policy would likely meet strong industry opposition. The general reaction to the idea of working on alcohol policy was negative.

Ideas raised focused in some cases on the general goal of raising the profile of relatively low-profile issues.

- Funding media for general dissemination of arguments to raise the profile of issues like these.
- Funding legal clinics on land use reform
- Postgraduate fellowships for public policy schools and urban planning schools, as a way of build up young expertise and make connections to people who can become advocates

- Support for recent law school graduates who want to work in public service; it was stated that there is an oversupply of interested graduates relative to opportunities.

### **Session on income security**

Participants were supportive of the goal, but less sure about where there is space to fund things that aren't already being funded. Much of the discussion centered around experimenting with new ways of organizing and mobilizing people.

Ideas raised included:

- Funding research re-examining the federal-vs-state breakdown of social welfare programs
- Centralized strategizing on where and when to launch state-level campaigns
- Building the general capacity of relevant groups such as the Center for Popular Democracy
- Experimenting with new ways of organizing people sustainably (an example: coworker.org, which organizes corporate employees)

### **Session on breadth vs. depth**

We discussed how a funder might operate effectively without relying on cause-specific staff.

- Some noted that this might involve making a relatively small number of grants, and focusing on general support of organizations rather than on funding very specific project-oriented work, since it can be more tractable as a non-cause-expert to keep up with organizations at the "board member" level than to try to track the details of specific work.
- We discussed the idea of funding fellowships in a variety of causes, since the goal of "getting more people to work on an issue" doesn't necessarily require expertise on that issue. In addition to fellowships for people to work at public service organizations, we also discussed the idea of fellowships for people to work on Congressional staffs, along the model of the AAAS Science & Technology Policy Fellowships.

We discussed how we might approach promoting a broad political platform and approach, as opposed to just working on specific issues. Some emphasized the importance of networking broadly; at the same time, several commented that we'll be in better position to promote a broad platform - in terms of our knowhow and credibility - if there are specific issues and/or organizations we're concretely and strongly committed to (as opposed to focusing only on promoting a platform).

We discussed the danger of "churn" and the importance of having - and showing - credible, long-term commitments to particular areas, to prevent a situation in which we're asking organizations and people to change very long-term plans and then

going back on our involvement. We raised the idea of making 3-year commitments to specific area to start; some felt a 3-year commitment is too short, while others noted that foundations regularly change priorities and that starting off in this way wouldn't necessarily be unusual.

### **Wrapup session**

The idea of fellowships came up again, and more than one participant endorsed sponsoring fellowships as a way of generally improving our network and our ability to spot good opportunities.

There were suggestions to cultivate a mix between "low-alignment, high-capacity work" (funding people and organizations to do good specific work, often on an experimental basis, even if we aren't perfectly aligned with these people/organizations); "high-alignment, low-capacity work" (finding and supporting a smaller number of people/organizations we feel generally highly aligned with) and "surge capacity" (the ability to take advantage of sudden opportunities).

We went around the room and asked each person for their thoughts on which cause they would work on. Many attempted to tie several of our causes into an overarching theme, such as combining macroeconomic stabilization and income security (and perhaps immigration policy) under a broad theme having to do with an "economy that values workers." In general, multiple people favored macroeconomic stabilization and income security; there were split views on criminal justice reform, since it does seem like an unusual window of opportunity (and is a particularly ripe area for better research and evidence), but is also attracting major ramp-up from other funders. There was less enthusiasm for other causes.

We then asked for people to name other high-potential causes we hadn't discussed in the meeting. Ideas raised included:

- Public provision of child care
- Police reform - reforming asset forfeiture practices (currently an interest of Institute for Justice), body cameras, "demilitarization of police."
- Examining the global supply chain and how to identify/work against abuses such as child slavery in cocoa production.
- Voting rights, redistricting, and other structural reforms to democracy
- Lead poisoning reduction
- Foster care
- Working toward long-term shifts in political coalitions; for example, making durable long-term commitments to mobilizing evangelicals who share some of our values. Faith in Public Life was named as a possible partner on this front.

- Student activism and media as general approaches to policy influence that can get relatively strong results for the money
- Advocacy regarding regulation, as a generally under-exploited approach to influencing policy

Other suggestions we received:

- Identify organizations that we perceive as generally highly effective and get to know them in great depth.
- Don't make deep, long-term commitments to people/organizations we don't feel highly aligned with.
- "Communicate in English" rather than in the sort of jargon that is sometimes common for foundations.
- Seek diversity in who leads partner organizations.
- Try to connect with affected communities, and encourage grantees to do so as well.
- When considering possible focus areas, consider the lens of how they affect human empowerment, both for better and for worse. For example, labor mobility progress might make it much easier for migrant workers to live and work in the US; but without the right strategy, it may also lead to significant harms for migrant workers, such as multi-year separation of children and parents and increasing the scale of routine rape.
- Pay careful attention to the problem of scaling "proven" interventions (such as the HOPE "swift and certain" program piloted in Hawaii), and ensuring that replications are sufficiently similar to the original proven programs.