

A Conversation with Sally O'Brien on August 14, 2013

Participants:

- Sally O'Brien — Senior Vice President of Philanthropic Partnerships, Pew Charitable Trusts
- Cari Tuna — Co-Founder, Good Ventures
- Sean Conley — Research Analyst, GiveWell

Note: This set of notes gives an overview of the major points made by Sally O'Brien.

Summary

Good Ventures and GiveWell spoke with Sally O'Brien about the work of the Pew Charitable Trusts. Topics included the structure of the organization, how it thinks about choosing and evaluating projects, and discussion of some of the specific areas that Pew works in.

The Pew Charitable Trusts

The Pew Charitable Trusts is a non-partisan public charity with a focus on policy advocacy, both in the U.S. and internationally. While Pew was originally organized as a private foundation, it became a non-profit organization in 2004. This new status enabled Pew to run its own programs and play a more active role in the policy arena.

Pew is the sole beneficiary of seven trusts established by the four children of J.N. Pew, and in addition receives funding through philanthropic support from individuals and foundations.

Pew's niche is to bring about transformational change through policy initiatives, and it has built capacity in a number of areas in that regard. Some areas of domestic policy work include providing technical assistance to states on a range of issues such as pension reform, children's access to dental care, food safety, medical device, and drug safety. Pew not only works on securing policy change, but also is concerned with ensuring proper implementation of new policy. Internationally, the primary focus of work is on the environment, both terrestrial and marine. It has worked to protect huge areas of land (the boreal forest of Canada and the Australian Outback for example), to create large no take marine reserves (the Chagos Marine Reserve in the Indian Ocean for example), shark sanctuaries and to address illegal fishing.

As a public charity Pew can lobby and does so both at the congressional and state level in a strictly non-partisan fashion. It uses a variety of tools such as campaign communications, staff, ad campaigns, and grassroots campaigns.

The Pew Research Center

The Pew Research Center is a wholly owned subsidiary of the Pew Charitable Trusts. Although it receives most of its funding from the Trusts, it makes its decisions independently. The Research Center operates with a focus on facts, both domestically and internationally, combining global demographic data with public polling data. The team is largely made up of social scientists and journalists.

Choosing areas to fund

Projects are chosen in a variety of ways. Pew often has significant expertise in an area; therefore, the staff may initiate an idea for a project. Other times issues arise in the public sphere and in the media. Pew has done a good job at anticipating which issues are important early on. For example, Pew's state pension work was started in 2007 before the issue became widely covered in the press.

At the first stage of the process, the Pew board approves the initial research, which typically includes a report that details the possible project work, how it relates to Pew's strengths, and what is currently being done in the field. The findings are presented to the board, which can then approve a longer term project.

Pew looks for gaps where it can make a difference, and avoids areas where others are already doing good work. It also looks for projects with measurable return on investment, and sets a measurable endpoint when beginning the project, normally three to five years away. Projects often last longer, but they must allow for evaluation along the way.

Evaluating projects

It is important to evaluate projects while they are in process so that corrections can be made and strategies changed if necessary. For instance, Pew recently launched a ten-year global campaign to end illegal fishing which has measurable targets to evaluate in the first three years.

Pew uses a scorecard with defined deliverables to evaluate projects. Every year the Planning and Evaluation unit works with each project to measure its advancement towards its goals. The progress of each project is then presented to the board.

Thoughts on subject areas

Good Ventures inquired about specific fields related to its ongoing research.

Political advocacy

Pew has a breadth of topic areas in political advocacy, and could give advice on specific examples from the portfolio. The Pew Research Center has recently entered a funding partnership with the Hewlett and MacArthur Foundations to do a survey on political polarization. Pew sometimes avoids getting into projects if a complex political landscape is likely to prevent progress.

Climate

Pew changed its strategy with regard to climate after the failure of the Kyoto Protocol, when it realized that it would be difficult to get traction on climate issues in the depth of the economic crisis. It switched its climate work into narrowly focused areas related to energy because clean energy and more efficient use of carbon fuel are both beneficial to slowing global warming and, given the current policy environment, may be the best ways to make a difference. Pew's recent successes in this area include working to get Congress and the Obama Administration to increase fuel economy levels, with new standards recently set. It also succeeded last spring in preserving

energy research funding for the Department of Defense, an especially notable accomplishment given the sequester. Other priorities include promoting hybrids and helping to create a more coherent voice from manufacturing businesses to promote policies that will lead to a cleaner economy.

Criminal justice

Pew has been involved in a variety of projects, including Hawaii's Opportunity Probation with Enforcement (HOPE) program; an effort to help Texas reduce costs while holding offenders accountable and protecting public safety; and the creation of a tool to evaluate the effectiveness of state spending on corrections. It has found that the best results come from using a pragmatic approach and focusing on reducing recidivism and promoting more cost-effective spending—two goals everyone agrees on—rather than treating it as a rights issue, as opinions on that front vary significantly. Pew is also in the early stages of looking at juvenile justice, in particular at the local level.

Immigration and labor mobility

Pew has a research project on federal and state immigration policy, and work from the Pew Research Center informs the national immigration debate. Should legislation pass, Pew would be likely to assist with implementation at the state level, as state governments already are familiar with Pew as a technical resource.

The Pew Charitable Trusts has not looked into global immigration policy, although the Pew Research Center has done some work combining global immigration and demographic data. Aging populations with reduced birth rates in the developed world and youthful populations in developing countries make this an interesting topic.

Biomedical research

The Pew Scholars Program in the Biomedical Sciences gives untethered support to researchers for four years. All of the scholars attend a weeklong meeting every year where they have the opportunity to share ideas in a creative and cross functional way. Three Nobel Prize winners and three Lasker Awardees have been Pew Scholars. Craig Mello, a former Pew Scholar who won a Nobel Prize for the discovery of RNAi, is the chair of the selection committee which is composed of respected biomedical scientists and former scholars.

A similar program is aimed at research fellows from Latin America, who are first funded to do research at U.S. institutions and then given funding upon their return to Latin America so that they can start their own labs, as funding for supplies and equipment there is often lacking. Around 80% of the scholars choose to return.

Antibiotic resistance

Pew is involved in a campaign to prevent the overuse of antibiotics in confined animal feeding operations, due to the dangers of antibiotic resistance.

Other people to talk to:

- Adam Gelb – Director of Pew's criminal justice program
- Susan Urahn – an Executive Vice President at Pew, would be a good person to talk to with a broad view across issue areas
- Joshua S. Reichert – an Executive Vice President at Pew, directs Pew's environment work and would be a good person to talk to with a broad view across issue areas

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