



Promoting best buys in development spending

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Ambitious Impact (AIM) exists to enable more effective charities to exist worldwide. We strive to achieve this goal through our extensive research process and Incubator Program. We give talented potential entrepreneurs two months of cost-covered, intensive training designed by founders for founders. Our talented researchers and entrepreneurs identify evidence-based, high-impact interventions and help founders find a co-founder to launch the idea and reach scale.

Note to readers: Our research is geared toward AIM decision-makers and program participants. We attempt to find the best ideas for our incubation programs through these reports. Given our commitment to focusing on recommended ideas, reports on those not recommended for incubation can often be less polished.

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Aid quality advocacy (2024 update) / Summary

Description

This report reconsiders and expands the previously recommended idea of incubating an aid-quality advocacy-focused organization. We consider updates based on expert feedback and analysis of the reasons for the shutdown of the Centre for Effective Aid Advocacy (an AIM-incubated organization). The main substantive update provided is an analysis of plausible theories of change (ToCs) that founders will need to review and adapt to context, with a focus on promoting the use of “best buys”, moving more aid money to least developed countries (LDCs), and increasing the use of evidence.

Counterfactual impact

Cost-effectiveness analysis: Our initial report modeled the cost-effectiveness of this idea at 2.41 USD/DALY for an organization advocating for the German government to adopt cash benchmarking. We model a new organization that could fund trips for civil servants, as Open Philanthropy has done in Japan and South Korea, to visit organizations implementing “best buys” in education and health to encourage them to fund these projects instead of what they otherwise would have. We model a shift in just one grant as we think that this is achievable within just two years. We find a potential cost-effectiveness of around ~44–70 USD/DALY or DALY-equivalent. The cost-effectiveness of this intervention largely depends on the cost-effectiveness of the average grant by the relevant agency before intervention (see [here](#)).

Potential for success

Theory of Change: Our initial report discussed several options and landed on moving more aid money to LDCs as the most promising ToC. We also discuss several options and land on the following three as the most robust and endorsed by experts: promoting the use of “best buys”, moving more aid money to LDCs, and increasing the use of evidence. We think that the choice of ToC will likely depend on the specific policy windows that open, country context, and research done by the organization. Strategies to achieve these goals may include: funding trips for policymakers, targeted advocacy to budget-holders, political party manifesto advocacy, and more (see [here](#)).

Neglectedness

Neglectedness: Despite the existence of actors in this space working on similar interventions, we think that there is space for more organizations to be additional, in particular for the selected countries.

Geographic assessment: Our geographic assessment avoids certain countries that we think are saturated by actors we think are doing good work in this space and focuses on potential large donors. There are at least ten plausible countries for each ToC focus, such as Japan, Spain, Italy, South Korea, and New Zealand, among others (see [here](#)).

Other

Expert views: The experts we spoke to were all supportive of the notion that despite the shut-down of the CEAP, AIM should incubate additional efforts in this space.

Implementation factors: In perhaps the most important update coming from this report, our analysis of the factors that led to the shut-down of CEAP and conversations with experts suggest

that we must prioritize finding people with a network of existing contacts and experience in international development, such as working for aid agencies (see [here](#)).

Idea name / Crucial considerations

Consideration 1 – Long-tailed successes

This seems like a more traditional policy space, compared to something like lead paint advocacy, where we expect that progress will be slow (though we have tried to pick a theory of change where one may be able to get a first win within 2 years). Founders may have to work on this for a long time before seeing success.

Consideration 2 – Talent

Will we be able to find co-founders that fit our talent requirements? I think that this could be possible (though difficult) but we would need to change our approach. Recruitment will need to do more specific headhunting to find people with a network of existing contacts and experience in international development. We will need to hold off on recommending this idea for the Incubation Program until we find these people. That is, we shouldn't recommend it as we would a traditional idea. It would be a conditional recommendation based on finding the right people.

We should also consider whether people (and funders) would be put off starting (and funding) a new charity in this space given the shut down of Center for Effective Aid Policy. This may not be that big of a concern as experts believe that we should incubate a new charity working on improving aid quality.

Consideration 3 – Correlation between neglectedness and tractability

We might expect neglectedness and tractability to be inversely correlated for this intervention. That is, the most tractable countries to work in may be targeted by more effectiveness-focused organizations already.

1 Background

Ambitious Impact (AIM) exists to increase the number and quality of effective non-profits working to improve human and animal wellbeing. AIM connects talented individuals with high-impact ideas. We give potential entrepreneurs intensive training and ongoing support to launch ideas to scale. Our research team focuses on finding impactful opportunities.

As part of our 2024 research agenda, we reviewed past recommendations to understand whether any of them should be re-issued to new founders.¹ In that context, we revisited our recommendation of advocacy to improve the quality of government aid ([Hilton, 2022](#)). This report provides updates to our original report, and is meant to be read as a companion to Hilton ([2022](#)).

Our past recommendation resulted in the incubation of the Center for Effective Aid Policy (CEAP), which has since shut down. However, we believe that it is still worth revisiting this idea as it is fairly hits-based, so the shutdown of CEAP doesn't necessarily mean that future efforts will also struggle ([Bonde, 2024](#)). We have also learned a lot from CEAP and have updated our thinking on the talent requirements for any future work in this space. It seems like existing agency connections and prior experience working in an agency (or a relevant NGO) may be key to the success of work on improving aid quality. We also think that CEAP's shutdown is partially to do with capacity issues (rather than due to issues with the idea) as one co-founder left the organization around a year into operation. This meant that CEAP only had one founder working on it (alongside two part-time employees and a contractor) which made progress slower and more difficult.

We are also encouraged by the progress of other Effective Altruism-aligned organizations—Pour Demain in Switzerland and Germany and Langsikt in Norway—that have managed to gain solid initial traction and early successes. We think that a new organization could learn a lot from these organizations.

2 Theories of change

Our initial report discussed several different theories of change and landed on moving more aid money to LDCs as the most promising ToC.

¹ To rea

We reconsider many of the ToCs from our previous analysis alongside a few new ToCs recommended to us by experts working in the field. Overall we think that it would be promising for a new organization to work on improving aid quality by promoting the use of "best buys", moving more aid money to LDCs (as recommended in our initial report), and increasing the use of evidence.

Although we think that these are the most promising asks, we think that it would be a mistake for founders to blindly advocate only for these. There are different country contexts that are harder to pick up from desk research, and so it may be the case that these asks are intractable in a certain country for whatever reason, and there might also be promising lower-hanging fruit that you can advocate for that we were unable to identify.

We think that founders should be aware of these limitations of desk research and be willing to experiment based on country context and jump on opportunities that come up.

2.1 Quality vs quantity

We focus on interventions that improve the quality of aid, rather than the quantity. We think this will be more tractable as the quantity of aid is likely to be more political and will have a higher cost given the competition for government funds. There is also a recent precedent for budget cuts on government aid, so we think it may be particularly difficult to push in the other direction currently.

However, it is worth noting that we have seen some success in increasing the quantity of aid. For example, Pour Demain ran a successful ballot initiative in Zurich, Switzerland which increased Zurich's development cooperation budget from ~\$3 million to ~\$8 million per year ([Vollmer, 2020](#)).

2.2 Increasing contributions to the best global health funds

Scope

A new organization would push for more funding to go through the best global health and development funds. Based on our conversations with experts and informed by [CGD's QuODA index](#), we think that the most cost-effective global health funds are:

- [The Global Fund](#)
- [Gavi](#)
- [The International Vaccine Institute](#)
- [Medicines for Malaria Ventures](#)
- [The Global Health Innovation Technology Fund](#)

Experts generally believe that increasing the proportion of funding going to these funds could generally increase aid effectiveness as they think that these funds make better, more evidence-based decisions than the average aid agency.

Moreover, looking at [CGD's QuODA index](#), we can also see that the top 5 agencies ranked for their prioritization of the world's poorest are all multilateral agencies, rather than bilateral government agencies.

As well as pushing for more funding to go through these funds, it could also be promising to focus on this during a time of cuts to push the government to keep the same amount of funds going here (i.e., not cutting the part of the budget going to the Global Fund or similar).

Case studies

- Open Philanthropy funded a Tokyo-based PR firm, Platinum, to take journalists and activists to visit Global Fund recipients in India with the aim to “preserve or grow Japan’s commitment to prioritizing global health initiatives” by showing people the impacts of foreign aid ([Budiman, 2024](#)). They have also funded similar trips for Japanese and Korean lawmakers to Zambia and Ethiopia. Experts believe that these trips led South Korea to

increase its (pledged) contributions to the Global Fund ([The Global Fund, 2024](#)).

- Open Philanthropy has also funded a lot of other work in Japan (e.g., [Fund for the Global Fund](#)) and Korea (e.g., [Korean Advocates for Global Health](#)), which likely also contributed to success there.
- Results Canada claims that its advocacy work increased the proportion of Canada's aid budget going to the Global Fund by 15.7% from ~CAD\$804M to CAD \$930.4M in 2019 and by 30% from CAD\$930.4 million to CAD\$1.21 billion in 2022 ([Results Canada, n.d.](#)). Results Canada also reports successes in getting the Canadian government to donate to other promising funding bodies like Gavi ([Results Canada, n.d.](#)).
 - It also seems like ONE Canada was involved in this work in 2019 and 2022 ([ONE Campaign, n.d.a](#); [ONE Campaign, n.d.b](#)).
 - The ONE Campaign also reports success in a number of other countries (e.g., the UK and France) in increasing their contributions to both the Global Fund in 2019 and 2022 ([ONE Campaign, n.d.a](#); [ONE Campaign, n.d.b](#)), and to Gavi in 2014 and 2020 ([ONE Campaign, n.d.c](#); [ONE Campaign, n.d.d](#)).
 - Results also report having similar victories on spending on the Global Fund and Gavi in its other target countries (UK, US, Japan, and Australia).
- Save the Children and its partners claim to have increased USAID's funding of Gavi in 2018 and the UK's funding in 2020 ([Consolmagno, 2024](#)).

Expert views

Experts generally thought that this approach was promising as the Global Fund and Gavi are much more effective than the average aid spend of any country. Experts highlighted that this was not neglected in many countries, but that it would be promising to push for this in a country where no other organizations are doing so.

If working in this space, one needs to consider why a given country has settled on its current donation amount and what reasons there are to expect that one can move that figure.

Neglectedness

- Friends of the Global Fund works to increase government aid contributions to The Global Fund across Europe (France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, Belgium, Spain, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Finland), Australia, the US, and Japan ([Friends of the Global Fund, n.d.](#)).
- ONE Campaign does quite a bit of work to increase the amount of money going to the Global Fund and GAVI. They currently have an ongoing campaign pushing for an increase in funding to GAVI in the countries they work in (Canada, France, Belgium, Netherlands, Germany, Italy, Ireland, the US, and the UK). It also seems like you can still sign their petition to “world leaders” even if you are outside of these countries.
- Save the Children (working globally) mostly seems concerned with the size of aid budgets (quantity of aid rather than quality), though they have previously worked on increasing funding for GAVI in the US and UK ([Consolmagno, 2024](#)), so this might still be in their scope.
- Results (working in Canada, the UK, the US, Japan, and Australia) pushing for an increase in the proportion of aid going to the Global Fund and other strong health and development funds (e.g., GAVI).
- There is considerable advocacy in both Japan and South Korea for increasing aid to health and development funds.
 - Better World Story’s work in Japan to increase funding for NTDs may be in scope here.
 - Governmental Relations Group has been working on increasing cooperation between Japan and South Korea on aid and on getting more money to the Global Fund, GAVI, and WHO’s NTD Program.
 - Korean Advocates for Global Health advocate for South Korea to give more money to the Global Fund.
 - Malaria No More has advocated in Japan and South Korea for more money to go to the Global Fund.
- Joep Lange working in the Netherlands and Switzerland is working to get more aid money to multilateral aid institutions (which could include the Global Fund as one of the most promising funds but I am uncertain if they are explicitly pushing for this).

- I would assume that these multilateral funds (and their recipient organizations like Malaria No More as mentioned above) also have incentives to increase funding through them and are likely doing some of their own work here.

Tractability

Expected tractability is high. These funds are likely already on governments' radars and they are likely already contributing some amount to The Global Fund, so it would be more a question of whether we can increase the proportion of government aid going here. Experts also mentioned that funds like the Global Fund and Gavi are attractive and uncontroversial for both sides of the political spectrum which could make this work more tractable.

Key uncertainties

1. What proportion of funding should go through these funds?
 - a. An expert from our old report noted that governments should not scale up 100% of their spending of some type (e.g., education) to be given through these channels (e.g., Prevail Fund) as it is useful for governments to maintain some level of in-house expertise in order to hold these funds/institutions to account.
 - b. The Global Fund, for example, only gives to AIDS, TB, and malaria and there are many more important health issues out there.
2. To what extent is increased funding to the Global Fund or GAVI by one government offset by other governments feeling less pressure to fund them?
 - a. In our previous analysis we found that, at the macro level, global aid effectiveness does not appear to have shown much improvement over time despite individual campaigns' success: "The expert pointed to the lack of success in hitting targets set at OECD meetings (e.g., in Rome, Paris, Accra, and Busan). Furthermore, results from CGD's QuODA suggest that, although some aspects have improved, on many metrics of effectiveness governments are not getting better at

spending development assistance effectively over time." ([Hilton, 2022](#); [Mitchell, Hughes & Calleja, 2021](#))

- i. The reasons for this are unclear, but it suggests that there may be some strong countervailing effects. This is a relevant concern here, where it might be that one donor giving more effectively might lead to other donors giving less effectively. That is, one government giving more funding to the Global Fund or GAVI may lead to another government giving less.

Conclusion

We would be excited for a new organization to promote funding the Global Fund and Gavi, but only in countries where no one is currently working on this. We think that there are many existing organizations working in this space so this is unlikely to be a top ask in most relevant countries.

2.3 Promoting the use of "best buys"

Scope

Pushing for more funding to go to "best buy" interventions, such as those identified by the World Bank in education. This is somewhat related to the above idea as, for example, the Global Fund and Gavi support best buys as their core business.

The idea here is to get agencies to use these "best buys" as defaults in each aid category and if civil servants want to do something different then they must show why they expect it to work better/be more cost-effective than this default.

Case studies

- The UK's aid agency – the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) – has worked with the World Bank since 2020 to deliver its "smart buys" in education based on their [2020](#) and [2023](#) cost-effectiveness reports. FCDO actually funded and helped launch the initial 2020 report as part of their review to find "best buys" in education ([FCDO and Sugg, 2020](#)).

- FCDO has also done a similar “what works” investigation for default “best buy” interventions to reduce violence against women and girls ([FCDO, 2022](#)).
- In October 2024, USAID released a [cost-effectiveness position paper](#) that outlined its aims for further prioritizing cost-effectiveness. One way it identified to do this was by identifying “best buy” defaults and using these as a default starting point. It will also compare the cost-effectiveness of all new programs against these defaults.
 - This position paper is largely regarded by the experts we spoke with to reflect the opinion of Dean Karlan as the chief economist and is largely being pushed by him. Although he is an important figure, this does not mean that the whole of USAID will now suddenly change to using default “best buys”. This is a promising first step but the political imperative and bureaucracy will slow everything down massively. The results of the US election may also affect things here.

Expert views

- Mathias Kirk Bonde (Center for Effective Aid Policy) also agrees that this could be the most promising ask to push for, but would like to see a new AIM-incubated charity be more innovative in its approach here. For example, instead of relying on the World Bank’s “best buys” in education, perhaps a new organization could present “global health best buys in Northern Nigeria” which contains bespoke recommendations based on that organization's experience working in Northern Nigeria for a few months to scope out the space. This would be more of a niche and obvious value add for a new organization which Mathias thinks is very important to consider as a new actor in a fairly crowded space. Moreover, when working on “best buys” for a specific country there could also be the option to advocate directly to country/field offices who sometimes have decision-making ability and could be more tractable than advocating to the aid agency at large.
 - One could also consider funding trips, much like Open Philanthropy did for policymakers in Japan and South Korea, so that civil servants can see some of the organizations working on the proposed “best

buys". Mathias is generally more excited about a new organization trying to be more creative in its approach like this, rather than just doing traditional policy lobbying. It needs to set itself apart from other organizations so that aid agencies will be more interested in listening to them and working with them.

- This work could also have another arm where the organization works with governments in, for example, Northern Nigeria and advises them to prioritize the problems/projects the organization has identified as your "best buys".

Neglectedness

- Unlock Aid has previously pushed for USAID to use "smart buys" but it is unclear whether they are still advocating for this.
- Mathias (Center for Effective Aid Policy) said that he would be shocked if organizations like the World Bank haven't advocated for their own "best buys" in education, so this might be less neglected than "best buys" in health. However, Mathias noted that it could still be a value-add for a new organization to be solely focused on promoting the World Bank's "best buys" as the World Bank is likely not spending that many resources on this approach (less than a new charity would be) as it is one of many things that the World Bank does. That is, it is not their key focus where it could be a new charity's key focus.

Tractability

Expected tractability is high. The fact that other aid agencies are already doing this is a good sign, and I think there will be a strong precedent if USAID actually implements default best buys.

If we were to take a more innovative approach as proposed by Mathias (Center for Effective Aid Policy) – for example, promoting a bespoke "global health best buys for Northern Nigeria" – then the key challenge here would be whether decisionmakers find these trustworthy and credible. If the "best buys" come from

time spent in the recipient country, that could be quite strong but this is as yet untested.

Key uncertainties

1. Are there enough existing lists of “best buys” that we would want to promote?
2. What lists of “best buys” would we want to promote?
 - a. Ideally, we would be able to promote best buys in every major thematic field, but we have to work through it sequentially as we cannot do everything from the start.
3. As above, what proportion of funding should go to these “best buys”?
 - a. We note that as, generally, a much lower percentage of aid spending goes towards “best buys” than towards the Global Fund, for example, this is less of a concern in this case.
4. Can a new charity create its own “best buys”? Will agencies find these trustworthy and credible?
 - a. Alternatively, we could defer to existing lists from organizations that are already deemed to be trustworthy and credible.
 - b. Co-financing could provide additional leverage when promoting any “best buy”.

Conclusion

We think that this is the most promising theory of change for a new organization to pursue.

2.4 Increasing the use of evidence by agencies

Scope

There are many potential ways to increase aid agencies' use of evidence. Some promising options include introducing mandatory evidence checks before starting a new project, introducing mandatory cost-benefit analyses before starting a new project, requiring evidence summaries in project outlines, or encouraging the use of evidence chatbots.

Case studies

- In October 2024, USAID released a [cost-effectiveness position paper](#) that outlined its aims and approach for further prioritizing cost-effectiveness.

Expert views

Expert views were mixed as the impact of this intervention largely depends on the quality of execution by the agencies.

Neglectedness

- Diakonia in Sweden is working to increase the aid budget, increase the proportion of money going to LDCs, and increase the use of evidence ("prioritize project effectiveness in its decision-making" ([Open Philanthropy, 2023](#))).

Tractability

Expected tractability is medium-low. This only works if the agency actually has the time/resources to do this which may not always be possible. There are also many ways that the agency could implement this poorly. The worst possible version of this is that there are no changes to programming but now civil servants waste their time writing and approving evidence reports, cost-benefit analyses, and so on as it just becomes a hoop to jump through when starting a new project.

Now could be a particularly promising time to work on this theory of change as USAID's recent focus on cost-effectiveness could potentially be used as a precedent for other governments.

We think that previous development agency experience is particularly important for this theory of change. You will have a sense of what is achievable to ask for from agencies in terms of evidence checks, which will be an important component of tractability.

Key uncertainties

1. Will agencies be able to implement this well?

- a. The impact of this will almost entirely depend on the quality of implementation.

Conclusion

We think that this is a promising theory of change for a new organization to pursue in the right circumstances. We see many ways that this could go wrong or not be implemented very well so would suggest a focus on this only if you can work closely with the agencies as they are implementing it. Overall we do not think that this is the top choice for a new organization and shouldn't be the only thing that you are advocating for.

2.5 Increasing the proportion of aid money going to the Least Developed Countries

Scope

It is more cost-effective to provide support in less-developed countries as the citizens of these countries have fewer resources and so can often be helped more at a lower cost. As such, development aid can be significantly more effective if given to the world's poorest and this is an easily implementable policy for agencies.

This was listed as the top priority way to improve the quality of aid in our old report ([Hilton, 2022](#)).

Expert views

It is a widely held view across the development sector that it is more cost-effective to provide support in less-developed countries.

This theory of change was mentioned in lists of promising asks but was not mentioned as any expert's top pick.

Neglectedness

- CONCORD Europe is working on this across all of the EU's 27 countries and at the EU level. They have a number of aims for the EU and its member states' development budgets, including ensuring that they meet their 0.7% of GNI targets, but most relevant for us is their aim to "Ensure that all decisions on where ODA is spent help maximise ODA's potential to reduce poverty and inequalities, including by allocating between 0.15% and 0.2% of GNI to LDCs" ([CONCORD Europe, 2024](#)).
- Bond in the UK also seems concerned with the proportion of aid that goes to LDCs and LICs, though their main campaign seems to be on advocating for a return to 0.7% of GNI to spend on UK aid ([bond, n.d.](#)).
- Diakonia in Sweden is working to increase the aid budget, increase the proportion of money going to LDCs, and increase the use of evidence ("prioritize project effectiveness in its decision-making" ([Open Philanthropy, 2023](#))).

Tractability

Tractability is expected to be medium-low. We think that changing the beneficiary country will be more challenging than changing the types of interventions getting funding, as country decisions seem likely to be more political. It is our impression that beneficiary countries are largely chosen based on political reasons rather than for poverty reduction/poverty prevention reasons.

It is also worth noting that this might be the least "sticky" quality of aid intervention as the politicization of country choice might be a partisan issue. For example, if a left-wing party has pushed for a higher proportion of aid to go to LDCs then we might not expect this to "stick" when a right-wing party comes into power as right-wing parties are more likely to pick recipient countries for aid based on political reasons (such as who might be a beneficial trading partner) rather than poverty alleviation reasons ([Crawford, Dissanayake, and Käppeli, 2024](#)).

Key uncertainties

1. Should we focus exclusively on LDCs or just reduce the proportion of money that goes to UMICs and shift that to LMICs, LICs, and LDCs?
2. How effective is the average charity working in LDCs?
 - a. For example, we might expect some work in India (like Fortify Health or Suvita) to be more promising than the work of an average charity in an LDC like Gambia
3. How much money is there to be moved through this approach?
 - a. Mathias has the sense that the split between spending on LDCs/non-LDCs doesn't actually look that bad once you remove "unallocated" aid. As an illustrative example, a country might only fund one project in Turkey which might not be for a lot of money, and they also might not be willing to move this money if Turkey was chosen as a recipient for political reasons.

Conclusion

We think that this is a promising theory of change for a new organization to pursue.

2.6 Right-wing advocacy

Scope

Traditionally, right-wing governments have cut aid budgets and do not prioritize development assistance ([Crawford, Dissanayake, and Käppeli, 2024](#)). Advocacy specifically focused on the right might prevent future cuts, improve targeting for remaining aid budgets, and also raise a neglected topic within these parties.

Mathias (Center for Effective Aid Policy) thinks that, if you are focused on traditional policy lobbying, this ToC would most differentiate you from other actors in the space.

Of course, it is not necessarily the case that right-wing governments do bad and are harder to work with and left-wing governments do good and are easier to work with. For example, it might be difficult to get left-wing governments to give more

aid money to global health as they may be more likely to prioritize climate change, as we have seen with the left-wing government in Denmark.

Case studies

Part of the appeal of this ToC is that it is currently quite neglected. As such, I am unaware of any case studies to mention here.

Expert views

Experts were generally concerned about targeting right-wing parties as this could make aid quality a partisan issue and (further) politicize development assistance and cost-effectiveness. Advocating this way could associate cost-effectiveness and similar terminology with right-wing politics, which could make leftists dislike the ideas and might make it harder for other politically neutral organizations such as CGD to get their points about cost-effectiveness across.

Since the vast majority of people working with international development assistance are leftists, you risk alienating most people who are deeply involved, to win over people who may be less likely to prioritize aid effectiveness and target aid for poverty reduction reasons rather than political reasons.

Neglectedness

There is a gap in specifically targeting right-wing parties. Most people working within international development assistance are typically leftists. However, some nascent work is being done in this space. Open Philanthropy has funded Civita, a right-wing think tank in Norway, to do advocacy to increase aid effectiveness. Bjorn Lomborg of the Copenhagen Consensus Center may also be considered a relevant actor here for his personal advocacy in Denmark.

Tractability

Arguments could be made in both directions here. On the one hand, right-wing governments are typically the governments that cut aid budgets and so we may be fighting a losing battle in parties that do not care much, though note that we are focused on quality rather than quantity which should be an easier sell. Right-wing

governments are also more likely to choose recipient countries based on political reasons, rather than poverty alleviation reasons, so the scope of how we can improve aid might be more narrow (e.g., might not be able to advocate for more money to go to LDCs). On the other hand, budget cuts could start conversations on efficiency for the remaining budget which might make these asks easier.

Work in this space would be more tractable if one co-founder has worked in party politics and/or is right-wing themselves.

Key uncertainties

1. Are right-wing parties willing to have conversations about government aid?
2. How likely are right-wing parties to prioritize what is cost-effective over other important vote-winning aims like migration reduction and ensuring their own country's interests abroad?
3. How much does this politicize development aid and cost-effectiveness?

Conclusion

Leaning no on this specific ask due to its risks in politicizing development assistance and cost-effectiveness. However, we think that founders could consider focusing their lobbying for the other discussed theories of change on the center-right as a way to differentiate themselves from other actors in the space.

2.7 Cash benchmarking

Scope

Cash benchmarking creates a standard of cost-effectiveness that all programs should be compared to. It essentially asks agencies to compare all aid projects against simply giving the recipients unconditional cash transfers of the same size instead. Civil servants would need to compare every new project against the benchmark of giving out cash transfers, and if cash transfers look more cost-effective, then the new project shouldn't be funded (and/or cash transfers should be given instead). GiveWell benchmarks all of its considered funding opportunities against unconditional cash transfers delivered by GiveDirectly.

Case studies

- USAID has tried to implement cash benchmarking for several of its programs since 2015, but it is unclear whether this has actually changed its funding decisions. Note that this has always been done on a program-by-program basis, rather than making cash benchmarking the norm across the whole of USAID.
 - For example, an evaluation of cash transfers vs. an integrated nutrition and WASH program called Gikuriro implemented in Rwanda found that “Overall, neither Gikuriro nor the cost-equivalent cash transfer had an impact on any of the primary outcomes (child growth, household dietary diversity, maternal or child anemia, household consumption, or wealth) within the period of the study. Gikuriro did have a positive impact on savings among eligibles, a secondary outcome, and cost-equivalent cash had a positive impact on productive assets and consumption assets, also secondary outcomes. The much larger cash transfer led to improvements in consumption, dietary diversity, height-for-age, child mortality, savings, assets and house values.” ([McIntosh and Zeitlin, 2018](#)) In this example, it seems like cash transfers outperformed the nutrition and WASH program, but it seems like Gikuriro was funded by USAID up to 2020 ([YWCA Rwanda, 2019](#)), though this may be because the amount of funding and/or years of support was already pre-committed.

Expert views

Experts generally think that cash benchmarking is too difficult for agencies to do in practice. There are limits to the use of cash benchmarks. Cash benchmarks are most applicable when evaluating the promise of programs/interventions that seek to affect household- or individual-level outcomes (like health status, school attendance, or nutrition status) ([Rose and Glassman, 2018](#)), but they are much more difficult to use when evaluating other programs like the benefits of a music festival in Mali or a monitoring program to ensure a fair election in Senegal ([Bonde, 2024](#)). This means that cash benchmarking is not really implementable in practice.

Neglectedness

It seems like organizations have largely moved away from asking for this due to its difficulty in implementing.

Tractability

Expected tractability is low as cash benchmarking is very difficult to implement in practice. The impact of this would rely on how well it is implemented and it is very likely to fail given its difficulty. The worst possible version of this is that cash benchmarking is only used for projects where cash benchmarking is easier and this leads to funding moving away from broadly cost-effective programs that can be benchmarked against cash but don't meet the bar to broadly ineffective programs that cannot be benchmarked against cash ([Bonde, 2024](#)).

Key uncertainties

1. Is cash benchmarking implementable in practice?
2. Will agencies actually drop programs that do not meet the cash benchmark?

Conclusion

Cash benchmarking does not seem promising for a new organization to focus on as it is too difficult for governments to implement in practice.

2.8 Recommendation

We are most excited about a new organization working to improve the quality of aid by taking the following approaches (listed in rank order from most promising to less promising, though still likely worth pursuing):

1. Promoting the use of "best buys" (which could include giving to the Global Fund or other promising multi-laterals, if not too crowded)
 - a. We think one neglected and particularly promising "best buy" could be lead elimination
2. More aid money going to LDCs
3. Increasing the use of evidence by agencies

- a. We also think it could be promising to increase the use of evidence by agencies but we see ways that this could go wrong so we do not think this should be your top choice or the only thing you advocate for.

We are particularly excited about promoting the use of “best buys” as there is some room for innovation in the “best buys” that are recommended and the approaches taken to promote funding of these best buys that we would be excited for a new organization to explore. A new organization could recommend its own “best buys” instead of deferring to the World Bank on education, for example. These “best buys” could include the promotion of lead elimination which currently seems neglected, or could involve the new organization visiting different recipient countries and recommending the “best buys” for these countries based on their visit and research. Innovative approaches include co-financing on “best buys”, funding trips for civil servants and policymakers to visit organizations implementing “best buys” as Open Philanthropy has done in Japan and South Korea for Global Fund recipients, or offering aid agencies funding to contract a research organization to identify “best buys” within a given domain.

We think that founders could consider focusing these lobbying efforts on the center-right as a way to differentiate themselves from other actors in the space, but they should acknowledge the potential downsides of doing this (e.g., politicizing cost-effectiveness).

3. Geographic assessment

We updated our old geographic assessment using a new template and more up-to-date data on total aid budgets, scores on the CGD's Commitment to Development Index, and tractability indicators. We also include new factors in this new geographic assessment. Most importantly, we perform a stakeholder mapping to understand where existing organizations are working and on what theories of changes. We also include new factors in our geographic assessment model such as scores on Overseas Development Institute's Principled Aid Index, new tractability indicators, and whether the county itself is a recipient of aid. Overall the recommended target countries for our top theories of change are:

- *Promoting the use of best buys: Japan, Spain, Italy, South Korea, New Zealand, Slovenia, Australia, Greece, Poland, and France.*
- *More to LDCs: Japan, South Korea, Spain, New Zealand, United States of America, Australia, Italy, Canada, Israel, and China.*
- *Increasing the use of evidence: Japan, Spain, Italy, South Korea, New Zealand, Slovenia, Australia, Greece, Poland, and France.*

3.1 Where existing organizations work

In the table below, we outline where existing organizations are working and what they are working on where this information is easy to find.

Please note that these are organizations explicitly working on improving the quantity, quality, and cost-effectiveness of aid. This stakeholder mapping does not cover all of the organizations that are trying to influence what aid budgets fund. For every one of the organizations in this table that are trying to improve the cost-effectiveness of aid, there are many other organizations dedicated to pushing competing priorities for aid. We expect that these organizations are largely asking for funding for their own specific projects, but they might also be pushing for increased funding for their cause area of interest such as climate change. There are many actors fighting for each country's aid budget, and only a handful of these are trying to improve the overall effectiveness of this aid. There is likely no other government budget with as many entities fighting over as small a budget.

Table 1: Stakeholder mapping

Organization	Where it's working	What it's working on
RESULTS	The UK, the US, Canada, Japan, and Australia.	Increasing the proportion of aid going to the Global Fund and other strong health and development funds (e.g., GAVI).
Friends of the Global Fund	France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, Belgium, Spain, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Finland), Australia, the US, and	Increasing the proportion of aid going to the Global Fund.

Organization	Where it's working	What it's working on
	Japan.	
Sudan Aid Project	Sudan (as a recipient country)	Targeting international aid organizations like the UN's World Food Program and getting them to increase their support of Sudan.
Unlock Aid	The US	Seems to be pushing against "project-based" development aid and towards more locally-led long-term action. They have previously advocated for USAID to use "smart buys" (Unlock Aid, n.d.a) and to improve its transparency (Unlock Aid, n.d.b), but it is unclear if they are still advocating for this.
ONE Campaign	Canada, France, Belgium, Netherlands, Germany, Italy, Ireland, the US, and the UK. They also work in Nigeria, Senegal, Mali, Kenya, and Ethiopia as recipient countries.	The ONE Campaign seems to work across many different issues but most relevant is their work to increase the amount of money going to the Global Fund and other strong health and development funds (e.g., GAVI). They currently have an ongoing campaign pushing for an increase in funding to GAVI (ONE Campaign, n.d.e)
Concord Europe	Working at the EU level and in all 27 EU member states.	Pushing to increase the % of development aid that goes to LDCs (among other less relevant asks).
Global Policy Research Group	Saudi Arabia	They are new so I am unsure what exactly they are currently working on.
Bond	UK	Largely seems focused on increasing the aid budget back to 0.7% of GNI but does also seem concerned with the proportion going to LDCs (Cohrs, 2024).
Better World Story	Japan (and East Asia more broadly?)	This is a new project that is first focused on raising awareness about NTDs to increase the amount of aid money going towards the prevention and treatment of NTDs (potentially through the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation?). Increasing funding to the Global Fund would also be in scope here but I am uncertain if they are actually advocating for this.
Civita	Norway	Right-wing advocacy to increase aid

Organization	Where it's working	What it's working on
		effectiveness.
Clinton Health Access Initiative (CHAI)	Recipient countries in Africa, Asia, and the Americas (CHAI, n.d.)	Improving the cost-effectiveness of programs in recipient countries, improving priority setting in recipient countries (for what to do with aid once received), and improving GAVI's vaccine strategy optimization.
Cooperation Canada	Canada	Increase Canada's aid budget and improve transparency on where the aid budget is being spent.
Cordaid	Netherlands	Preventing aid cuts/increasing the aid budget
Diakonia	Sweden	Advocacy to increase the aid budget, increase the proportion of money going to LDCs, and increase the use of evidence.
Government Relations Group	Japan and South Korea	Increasing cooperation between Japan and South Korea on aid and more money to the Global Fund, GAVI, and WHO's NTD Program.
Joep Lange	Netherlands and Switzerland	More aid money to multilateral aid institutions (which could include more promising options like the Global Fund).
Korean Advocates for Global Health	South Korea	More money to the Global Fund
Malaria No More	UK, Japan, and South Korea	More money to the Global Fund (this is kind of an example of an organization fighting for aid money to go to their own project)
Norwegian Church Aid	Norway	Maintaining 1% GNI for aid in Norway and influencing where this aid goes.
Pandemic Action Network	EU	Increasing the aid budget and increasing where it goes (towards pandemic preparedness)
PoliPoli	Japan	More aid money to global health and incubating organizations that will also advocate on this issue.
Danish Alliance for Global Health	Denmark	More aid money for global health
Save the Children	Global	Save the Children seems mostly concerned with the size of aid budgets (quantity of aid rather than quality), though it has previously worked on

Organization	Where it's working	What it's working on
		increasing funding for GAVI in the US and UK (Consolmagno, 2024).
Center for Global Development (CGD)	The UK and the US	CGD carries out high-quality analysis into how development assistance can be more effective. They mostly provide a research and advisory function and do not actively campaign for policy change beyond writing papers and engaging with policymakers.
Other think tanks and research groups: Overseas Development Institute (ODI), IDInsight, J-PAL, Copenhagen Consensus Center (CCC), and Brookings	Global	Like CGD these organizations carry out high-quality analysis into how development assistance can be more effective. They mostly provide a research and advisory function and do not actively campaign for policy change beyond writing papers and engaging with policymakers. My sense is that these organizations are smaller names in the space than CGD.

3.2 Geographic assessment

Our new geographic assessment is an update of the model created for our 2022 analysis using our new template and updated data where relevant. We consider scale (27.5% of the weight), neglectedness (45% of the weight), and tractability (27.5% of the weight) which are made up of the following factors:

- Scale
 - Total ODA budget in \$US millions
 - ODA as a percentage of GNI
- Neglectedness
 - Are other organizations working on this theory of change in a given country/is a trusted organization working in this country?²
 - Total funding by country from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to organizations working to improve where development aid is spent

² The "trusted organizations" we refer to here are Pour Demain working in Switzerland and Germany and Langsikt working in Norway. We do not think it would be promising to start a new organization working in these countries even if these existing organizations are not working on the exact theory of change we are interested in as we trust these organizations to generally be doing the most promising thing.

and what it is spent on. This is a proxy for how much is currently spent on lobbying the aid budget in any given country.

- Overall ranking from CGD's Quality of Development Assistance (QuODA) tool. We also separately consider the ranking on its "prioritization" factor as we think that this is the best proxy for the existing quality of aid, given that it monitors which countries "focus on those with the greatest need" ([Center for Global Development, 2021](#)).
- Overall ranking on CGD's Commitment to Development Index. We also separately consider the overall score on its "aid quality" factor.
- Overall score on Overseas Development Institute's Principled Aid Index
- Tractability
 - Fragile States Index (2023)
 - Corruption Perceptions Index (2023)
 - World Justice Project's Rule of Law Index (2023)
 - Freedom in the World (2024)

We rule out countries without aid budgets, countries that are recipients of aid themselves,³ and countries where trusted organizations³ are working (Germany, Switzerland, and Norway).

3.3 Results

Based on this new geographic assessment, a new charity working to improve aid quality could prioritize one of the following countries:

- Promoting the use of best buys: Japan, Spain, Italy, South Korea, New Zealand, Slovenia, Australia, Greece, Poland, and France.
- More to LDCs: Japan, South Korea, Spain, New Zealand, United States of America, Australia, Italy, Canada, Israel, and China.
- Increasing the use of evidence: Japan, Spain, Italy, South Korea, New Zealand, Slovenia, Australia, Greece, Poland, and France.

³ We think that if a country is a recipient of aid itself this could make it less likely that the government would prioritize development aid given the existing issues in its own country.

South Korea could be a particularly promising target country. Although it currently has a relatively small aid budget (which is what penalizes it in our geographic assessment), it is one of the few countries that is increasing its aid spending so now could be a uniquely good time to influence this. Moreover, South Korea's aid agency (KOICA) allocates more than \$10M per staff member per year ([Anschell, 2024](#)). Given that only a fraction of these staff members are in decision-making roles, it seems like there is a potential for individuals in government to have influence over large amounts of aid.

5 Cost-effectiveness analysis

We completely re-did our cost-effectiveness analysis using our new template and modelling a different theory of change than our old analysis. Our old analysis modeled the impact of advocating for the German government to adopt cash benchmarking and our new analysis models the impact of funding trips for civil servants to encourage them to fund "best buys". In both models this intervention looks cost-effective. The old model estimates that advocacy for cash benchmarking could be very cost-effective averting a DALY for every \$2.41 spent, and the new model estimates that funding "best buy" trips could avert a DALY for every ~\$44-231 spent. The cost-effectiveness of the "best buy" approach largely depends on the cost-effectiveness of the average existing grant made by each agency and health "best buys" generally look more cost-effective than education "best buys".

5.1 New cost-effectiveness model

[Our new cost-effectiveness analysis](#) models what we believe could be possible for a new organization to achieve within its first two years of advocacy within New Zealand, Sweden, and Australia. We modeled these countries as they were the top countries from our geographic assessment that had grant-level information on their official development assistance widely available. We imagine that a new organization could fund trips for civil servants, as Open Philanthropy has done in Japan and South Korea, to visit organizations implementing "best buys" in education and health to encourage them to fund these projects instead of what they otherwise would have. We model a shift in just one grant as we think that this

is achievable within just two years. We model the counterfactual impact of this new “best buy” grant compared to an average grant of a similar size that the targeted aid agency has already given.⁴ We also model the counterfactual impact of shifting funding from an average health grant to just giving out cash (without the trips component).

The cost-effectiveness of this intervention largely depends on the cost-effectiveness of the average grant made by the targeted aid agency. The more cost-effective the average existing grant made by the targeted agency, the less cost-effective a new organization advocating for “best buys”. Based on the modelling of three countries (New Zealand, Sweden, and Australia) in our cost-effectiveness analysis, it seems that a country’s ranking on CGD’s 2021 QuODA index is a good proxy for how cost-effective the average grant is from a given aid agency. We illustrate this point in Table 2. Therefore we expect that it would be more cost-effective to work in countries that have a lower ranking on the QuODA index.

Table 2: Cost-effectiveness estimates by country and its ranking on the 2021 QuODA

Country	Cost-effectiveness (\$/DALY)		QuODA 2021 rank ⁵
	Education	Health	
Sweden	231.18	140.75	1
New Zealand	73.65	70.06	13
Australia	59.65	44.35	11

Shifting education and health funding to “best buys” is expected to be very cost-effective (in countries where aid effectiveness is currently poor), whereas shifting funding to cash is not expected to be very cost-effective (though it still looks more promising than the impact of an average health grant of a similar size).

⁴ We model the impact of an average grant by the relevant aid agency by choosing at random a previously funded project of a similar size to the average grant in a given sector.

⁵ Rank of all bilateral aid agencies (excluding multilateral agencies like the Global Fund). The higher the rank, the more effective we expect the average grant from this aid agency to be.

5.2 Comparison to previous cost-effectiveness analysis

Our new cost-effectiveness analysis model and [our previous cost-effectiveness analysis model](#) are very different as they model two different theories of change. Our previous cost-effectiveness analysis modeled a new organization advocating for cash benchmarking in Germany, whereas our current model is focused on funding trips for civil servants from New Zealand, Sweden, and Australia in an effort to persuade them to fund education and health “best buys”. The cost-effectiveness of both of these theories of change are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Cost-effectiveness estimates

Intervention	Cost-effectiveness (\$/DALY)			
	Germany	New Zealand	Sweden	Australia
Old model - Advocating for the German aid agency to adopt cash benchmarking	\$2.41	Not modeled	Not modeled	Not modeled
Shifting funding from an average education intervention to a “best buy” intervention	Not modeled	73.65	231.18	59.65
Shifting funding from an average health intervention to a “best buy” intervention	Not modeled	70.06	140.75	44.35
Shifting funding from an average health intervention to unconditional cash transfers ⁶	Not modeled	1,561.84	Not modeled	Not modeled

Another significant difference between the two models is the length of time that the intervention is modeled for. In our old model the impacts last for 50 years, but in our new model we only model the first two years of operation. We made this decision to model a much shorter timeframe as Mathias advised that we should try

⁶ This uses GiveWell’s pre-2024 update of their cost-effectiveness analysis for GiveDirectly.

and find an intervention that could be cost-effective within its first two years such that we don't fall for the 1% fallacy where we model small changes in a large number over a long period of time as this will almost always look cost-effective (as our old model does). Having a cost-effective win in the first two years could also help with founder motivation and funder interest.

6 Implementation

6.1 Talent

One of the biggest updates from the shutdown of the Center for Effective Aid Policy is that a charity working in this space should not be run by two

generalists. At least one co-founder should have existing connections with the agency they are advocating and have previously worked at that agency or worked at a relevant NGO (though agency experience is preferred as you will have a better sense of what is feasible to ask for and can more easily relate to those you are trying to change the mind of which may improve tractability). As progress in this space is likely to be quite slow, we also think it is important that the founders are passionate about working within international development.⁷ Co-founders will also need to be comfortable with policy work – i.e., a focus on building (and leveraging existing) connections and influencing, an acceptance of a significant risk of failure yet higher payoff, and long feedback loops.

Experts also largely believe that the success of advocacy in this space largely depends on you being perceived as an “insider”. Mathias thinks that it is preferable to only have one co-founder with previous agency experience and one co-founder who is newer to this space such that they can look at the space with a new pair of eyes as he believes that innovation is important and this will make innovation easier. Two co-founders with experience may be more likely to take the traditional policy lobbying route and he thinks that this would be a shame as this is what every other organization is doing (though he thinks this could still be promising and may be a promising approach if you have existing connections).

⁷ This is one of the reasons why CEAP shut down as Mathias got burnt out by the slow progress that was being made as well as a general disinterest in the aid advocacy space more broadly.

6.2 Tractability

The general trend in development aid is quite a negative one as many governments around the world are cutting aid budgets and generally see the 0.7% GNI target from the UN as a ceiling rather than a floor. However, as we are focused on the quality of aid rather than the quantity, this general trend might not be so worrying. In fact, it might be the case that the budget cuts could start conversations on the efficiency of the remaining budget which could make these asks easier. Though, of course, we do not want these efficiency arguments to excuse these budget cuts and this is something we will need to be mindful of.

Another common concern regarding aid is the stickiness of the policy. That is, whether the policy changes made by one party will remain once a new party comes into power. Intuitively, I think that our focus on aid quality makes this less of a concern as the quality of aid is less political and less partisan than the quantity of aid. However, this still might be a concern when thinking about what countries are the recipients of aid. For example, if a left-wing party has pushed for a higher proportion of aid to go to LDCs then we might not expect this to "stick" when a right-wing party comes into power as right-wing parties are more likely to pick recipient countries for aid based on political reasons (such as who might be a beneficial trading partner) rather than poverty alleviation reasons ([Crawford, Dissanayake, and Käppeli, 2024](#)).

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