

A conversation with Andy Ko on November 20, 2013

Participants

- Andy Ko — Campaign Manager, Campaign for a New Drug Policy, Open Society Foundations
- Cari Tuna — Co-Founder, Good Ventures
- Holden Karnofsky — Co-Founder, GiveWell

Note: This set of notes was compiled by GiveWell and gives an overview of the major points made by Andy Ko.

Summary

GiveWell and Good Ventures spoke with Andy Ko of the Open Society Foundations as part of an investigation of drug policy reform. Conversation topics included Open Society grantees, including the Drug Policy Alliance (DPA), Open Society's strategy for funding in the drug policy reform space in the United States, and other organizations in the drug policy reform movement.

Open Society's drug policy reform funding strategy

The Open Society Foundations has been a primary supporter of the Drug Policy Alliance since that organization was founded in 2000. Open Society contributes approximately \$4 million annually for DPA's national and state advocacy and approximately \$1 million for redistribution through DPA's own grants program.

Separate from its support for DPA, the foundation's 2013 annual budget for U.S. domestic drug policy grants was \$2.8 million. This was down from about \$4 million the previous year. The 2014 grantmaking budget will remain essentially the same as the 2013 budget.

Open Society's Campaign for a New Drug Policy focuses its grantmaking to:

- Sustain a small number of **essential organizations** working to advance drug policy reform in the United States.
- Establish a **health centered drug policy** that addresses the needs of drug users through health care reform and harm reduction programs.
- Support **community level alternatives to the War on Drugs** that more effectively address the harms of drug use and drug markets, while protecting civil rights and meeting individual human needs.

Open Society's focus on drug user health – particularly implementation of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) and the mainstreaming of health services for drug users – and the intersection of health and drug policy reform is unique among major foundations. Ko believes that prioritizing harm reduction over unrealistic zero tolerance approaches is an essential element of effective and principled drug policy.

Generally, Open Society does not directly fund marijuana reform projects in the United States. Most of the foundation's support for marijuana reform involves general support grants to DPA and other major drug policy reform organizations. The foundation acknowledges the importance of reforming American marijuana policy, but it is conscious of its role as one of the very few funders of other critically important, less popular and often highly complex areas of drug policy reform.

For similar reasons, Open Society's domestic drug policy program is able to provide only limited and very targeted support for drug policy research. However, it has funded some research in the past and is currently funding Professor Harry Levine's investigation of racial disparities in marijuana arrests.

Funding for other organizations in the drug policy reform movement

DPA anchors the American drug policy reform movement. However, without a diversity of voices and perspectives, reform efforts are unlikely to succeed in the long-run. There should be more funding for other important organizations, programs, and advocates, such as the Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion (LEAD) program first developed in Seattle, the Harm Reduction Coalition, Students for Sensible Drug Policy, the Institute of the Black World 21st Century, Law Enforcement Against Prohibition, and the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference, among others.

Open Society provides funding to organizations it considers essential to the reform movement as a whole, such as DPA and the Harm Reduction Coalition, but equally prioritizes work that will produce the individual building blocks of drug policy reform. An example of one essential element for reform is represented by Seattle's LEAD program. LEAD is addressing local needs by (1) transforming the way that law enforcement engages with drug users and subsistence-level dealers, (2) ensuring the effective delivery of relevant services that directly affect how drug involved people function and interact within their communities, and (3) eliminating ill-conceived reliance on "zero-tolerance" approaches that, far from eliminating drug use, have greatly increased harm to individuals, their families and broader society.

Ko again stressed that there are many important drug policy reform organizations that the foundation is not able to fund, due to his program's budget limitations and its specific funding strategy. For example, Open Society does not fund the Marijuana Policy Project or the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws, which he says play important roles in the field, but must rely on other funders for support. Similarly, the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies and its founding Director, Rick Doblin, do good work, but nevertheless remain outside of the Open Society Foundations' funding strategy.

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