

A conversation with Strobe Talbott and Kimberly Churches on May 21, 2013

Participants

- Strobe Talbott – President, The Brookings Institution
- Kimberly Churches – Vice President for Development, The Brookings Institution
- 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 Strobe Talbott and Kimberly Churches.

Summary

GiveWell spoke with Strobe Talbott as part of our ongoing investigation into philanthropic advocacy opportunities. The main subjects of discussion were The Brookings Institution’s approach to policy research, and issue areas in which there is a significant discrepancy between expert opinion and existing policy.

Advocacy and philanthropy

Relationship between foundations and organizations

Strobe Talbott and Kimberly Churches gave an overview of the Brookings Institution, a think tank in Washington D.C. whose mission is to conduct high-quality independent research and, based on that, to provide practical recommendations on public policy. Brookings is not an “advocacy” organization as many would understand the term. As an institution, it does not take, or advocate for, particular policy positions. Instead, individual scholars formulate policy recommendations based on their research and advocate for those ideas on an individual basis.

Strobe and Kim remarked that philanthropists used to more consistently find good causes and institutions, and then give them relatively unrestricted funds to prosper and do good work. Today, more and more philanthropists want to be engaged in the strategies for their donations. For Brookings, there has to be a balance between a think-tank version of academic freedom—allowing scholars to engage in independent, fact-based research—and being able to use the resources that the generosity of donors affords.

Organizations' collaboration

There has been an unambiguously positive trend away from “stovepiping” within organizations, and turf competition among organizations. There will always be some competition for finite resources like funding dollars, but there has been an ongoing trend toward more collaboration. For example, Brookings's work on domestic governance draws on the work of scholars and organizations from across the political spectrum. There is also a high degree of research collaboration on global issues, notably including poverty, climate change, and nuclear proliferation.

Brookings's approach

Brookings's four clusters of priorities are:

- Promoting sustainable economic growth for the good of the country and the world
- Opportunity and well-being (education, health, upward mobility)
- Energy and climate
- Managing global order

Open minded advocacy

Brookings approaches problems without the predetermined agenda that an advocacy organization would have. Instead, Brookings tries to encourage good governance of communities at every level. That does not just mean promoting good governance by elected officials and formal representatives, but also through the private sector, universities, etc. Brookings fosters an environment in which experts are encouraged to come up with fresh, independent ideas, and if they come up with a good idea, they are encouraged to advocate for it as well.

Connecting with experts

All Brookings's research is accessible through its website (www.brookings.edu). When asked for advice on whom to talk to about a particular issue, Brookings said it was happy to recommend experts in various policy fields, including people with relevant expertise outside of Brookings. Brookings occasionally hosts round-table discussions among in-house experts and philanthropists.

Policy areas with need for more research attention

Water supply: This is the first century in which more people live in urban areas than rural ones, and given the pressures of climate change, major water crises have the potential to become geo-political, geo-economic, and humanitarian disasters. There is more research and advocacy work that can be done in this issue area.

Education: Domestic primary education is a significant challenge and is receiving a lot of attention. Brookings has a dedicated research center on universal education. A lot of development work today is traditional aid that focuses on giving people things rather than teaching them how to help themselves. Brookings is looking at undernourishment, literacy, education, and affordability of services. This is a huge field with not enough boots on the ground. Nike is one organization that is focused on this area.

Technology: There are a few under-researched aspects:

- Understanding the social, economic, and political consequences of new technology
- Anticipating the social and private consequences of new technology. Anticipating alternative uses, rather than simply designing new devices or processes.
- Establishing goals for technology policy, and designing policy that encourages the best use of new technology.
- The use of drones, both domestically and as a military asset, is an example of an area in which public policy is chasing the technology.

Climate change: While climate change as a whole has received a fair amount of funding, the concept of trans-generational responsibility is woefully under-attended.

Immigration: There is plenty of room to do valuable advocacy, grounded in research, for pragmatic, fact-based immigration reform.

Criminal Justice: The MacArthur Foundation is looking at this area carefully.

Science policy and funding: Brookings's Engelberg Center for Healthcare Reform is working on this area.

Immeasurable benefits

Not all valuable work can be measured, and not all measurable work is valuable. The new generation of philanthropy is good at holding measurable deeds accountable, but needs to also know when to trust their instincts and invest in specific people. An example of valuable work that's hard to measure is "Track 2" strategies in diplomacy; working in an unofficial capacity (even if explicitly encouraged to do so by governments) with counterparts in another country to find solutions in a politically difficult climate.

All GiveWell conversations are available at <http://www.givewell.org/conversations>