

## **A conversation with Bruce Lowry on November 5, 2014**

### **Participants**

- Bruce Lowry – Director of Policy and Communications, Skoll Global Threats Fund
- Nick Beckstead – Research Analyst, Open Philanthropy Project; Research Fellow, Future of Humanity Institute, Oxford University

**Note:** These notes were compiled by the Open Philanthropy Project and give an overview of the major points made by Mr. Lowry.

### **Summary**

The Open Philanthropy Project spoke with Mr. Lowry of the Skoll Global Threats Fund as part of its investigation into nuclear weapons work. Conversation topics included Skoll Global Threat Fund's work on nuclear weapons, a recent consultancy report on major nuclear security threats, potential philanthropic involvement in nuclear security, and governmental involvement and funding in the area.

### **Nuclear security philanthropy**

Since the end of the Cold War, most people do not view nuclear weapons as a major concern. However, the risk of unauthorized (including terrorist) use of nuclear material has increased since the Cold War. Nine countries own nuclear weapons. Certain countries that have recently possessed or are perceived as trying to possess nuclear weapons, such as Iran and North Korea, pose new geopolitical risks. Any use of a nuclear weapon – either intentionally or accidentally – would have major geopolitical implications.

Because governments control nuclear weapons, most philanthropic work tries to inform or influence government actions and policy regarding nuclear weapons. A big portion of philanthropic money goes into technical and policy research on nuclear issues. Communications gets fairly limited funding (less than \$1 million a year). Advocacy work has slightly more funding.

There is space for more philanthropic work in the communications and advocacy realm. Lack of awareness and political relevancy on nuclear issues are big obstacles impeding progress on nuclear security policy.. It is unlikely that the public will ever care about nonproliferation and disarmament to the extent that it did during the Cold War or that nuclear security can become a broad-based constituency-driven issue. However, a well-run communications and advocacy campaign might develop a public base of support that could be activated when opportunities for action emerge, such as passing the New START treaty or on the Iran nuclear talks. Because clear opportunities for philanthropic engagement on nuclear security issues are not

always available, it is important to invest in longer-term communication and advocacy efforts in order to ensure that, when there are opportunities for action, the necessary political will and infrastructure exists.

The main funders in nuclear security include:

1. The Carnegie Corporation of New York
2. The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation
3. Ploughshares Fund
4. The Skoll Global Threats Fund
5. The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

In 2014, these five funders formed a nuclear innovation collaborative – now called N Square – to work to develop new ideas and bring new players into the nuclear security arena.

The Skoll Global Threats Fund provides \$1-2 million/year on nuclear security issues, with its primary focus a peaceful resolution to the Iran nuclear threat. Its work on nuclear weapons is more focused on advocacy than policy research, and it has been one of the larger institutional funders of Ploughshares.

### **Philanthropic challenges**

Because nuclear weapons are owned and controlled by governments, it can be more difficult to create new ideas and do hands-on work in this area than it is in other philanthropic arenas, such as public health or the environment.

In addition, as for other “wicked” problems, it is hard to envisage a “solution” to the problem of nuclear weapons. While nuclear weapons can, in theory, be eliminated, the knowledge to create them cannot. So, at some level, the best you can aim for is minimizing the risk that nuclear weapons will ever be used. Rather than aiming directly at total disarmament, most philanthropy works to change governmental processes and policies around nuclear weapons to reduce the likelihood of their intentional or accidental use. Funders should be aware that they are unlikely to get obvious wins in this arena and adjust their expectations accordingly. In the best-case scenario, philanthropic work will prevent further proliferation or the use of a nuclear weapon, so it succeeds only by making things **not** happen. It is difficult to prove that one’s actions prevented something from happening, making it challenging to assess the impact of programs.

### **Role for new funders**

Because some foundations have stopped funding nuclear security projects, there would be considerable interest and excitement if a new foundation joined the space. If the Open Philanthropy Project or another foundation were to begin funding nuclear security work, it might be helpful to have a guiding framework. In general,

the advocacy and communications space is less well funded than the research space. N Square, the nuclear innovation collaborative formed by the top five funders, would welcome interest from additional funders.

## **Issues by region**

### **Nuclear weapons in South Asia**

The use of nuclear weapons by India or Pakistan is seen by many in the sector at the most tangible area of short-term concern. An exchange of nuclear weapons between the two countries or an unauthorized or accidental use of weapons in the region would be catastrophic. However, there are limited ways for U.S. philanthropies to influence this situation. Track II diplomatic talks between India and Pakistan already exist, and there is likely limited short-term value in creating additional dialogues.

### **Nuclear weapons in Iran**

The possibility that Iran might obtain a nuclear weapon is also a major area of concern in the sector, not so much in terms of the potential for actual detonation of a weapon (since Iran doesn't currently have a weapon), but because of the geopolitical implications if Iran were to go nuclear. If Iran were to obtain nuclear weapons, it could destabilize the Middle East and incentivize further proliferation. Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates might try to build nuclear capability.

While there is philanthropic funding devoted to the Iran nuclear issue, there is room for additional activity in this space, although the direction of future work will depend on whether the current interim deal between between the P5+1 and Iran is converted into a final agreement. The talks seek to get Iran to roll back its nuclear program in exchange for relief from sanctions. There will be political challenges in implementing a deal in both Iran and the West, particularly the U.S., and civil society can play an important role in providing political space to finalize and implement an agreement. If a deal is not reached, philanthropy could help civil society mitigate the consequences, which might include:

- Congress increasing sanctions against Iran
- Iran speeding up its nuclear program
- Rising tensions between Israel and Iran
- An increased risk of nuclear proliferation across the region

There is a strong consensus that any progress in this area will require policy engagement and diplomatic work. Philanthropies could fund broader public information campaigns to support these efforts or targeted advocacy efforts to

decrease the likelihood of military action, such as bringing in former Israeli military and intelligence commanders who strongly oppose military action on Iran.

### **Nuclear fuel cycle issues**

There are important issues in this area. However, because the U.S. and other governments and civil society players are significantly invested in this area already, it is not clear additional philanthropic investment at the moment could advance the field more rapidly than the important work already being done.

### **Weapons reduction between the U.S. and Russia**

The U.S. and Russia are big players in any discussion of nuclear weapons and have already made significant reductions in nuclear weapons since the Cold War. While continuing to reduce nuclear weapons is desirable, the current political tensions between the U.S. and Russia make another round of reductions unlikely in the short to medium term. Nor do most analysts in the sector see this as the most urgent threat in the nuclear realm, citing both South Asia and Iran as greater risks.

### **Nuclear weapons in North Korea**

North Korea's position on nuclear weapons is hard to assess. There are few clear direct paths for U.S. philanthropy to influence this issue. North Korea's nuclear program is already a concern of the U.S. government. It is believed that North Korean leaders recognize that the use of a nuclear weapon would be a significant threat to the stability of their regime. Intelligence communities monitor North Korea closely.

### **Governmental work on nuclear security**

The Nuclear Security Summits that President Obama launched in 2009 are a large and recent government investment in nonproliferation and nuclear security. The first summit was held in 2010 in Washington. In 2012 the summit was held in Seoul and in 2014 it was held in The Hague. This process has been important in raising the profile of nuclear security and driving political commitments to take steps to protect nuclear materials worldwide.

### **Other People To Talk To**

- **Alexandra Toma** – Executive Director, Peace and Security Funders Group
- **Robert Gallucci** – Former President, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and Dean, Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University

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