

Cause Area Guide: Global Priorities Research

Introduction

Global priorities research is dedicated to rank the comparative importance and cost-effectiveness of different causes and cause-areas. This idea of methodically and rigorously scrutinizing causes and interventions using critical thinking and scientific methods against the benchmark of clearly articulated values is what underlies and distinguishes the EA movement from other organizations aiming to do good. All in all Global Priorities Research is a promising field of study, that may, with relatively low-cost, lead to significant changes in how efforts are directed that may have hugely beneficial consequences. According to the 80,000 Hours problem assessment framework, global priorities research is [estimated](#) to be among the top three most promising causes.

It is uncommon to compare good causes, and doing so well requires expert knowledge in many fields. This **neglect** is a shame, because efforts in some cause areas are [estimated](#) to be many times more effective, in some cases hundreds of times more effective, which makes global priorities research a **high impact cause**.

Until recently there existed no serious concerted efforts to find pressing cause areas. EA organisations were among the first to do systematic comparative research in this space, and are the leading organizations doing this form of research today. 80,000 Hours [estimates](#) that about 5 - 10 million dollars are spent on research of this type every year, and the lion's share of the research is done by EA institutions.

There is good reason to believe that **progress** can, and is being made in this area. On the empirical side, research is similar to other forms of social science, with a bent towards the far future, existential risk, development and welfare. On the conceptual side there is more uncertainty, although there is a [strong case](#) to be made that there is substantial progress here also. There is no reason to think that the problem of prioritization is solved, or is beginning to yield diminishing returns. Due to Pareto's law, **the bottleneck for progress in this area is high quality research, and motivated and competent researchers to do it.**

The efforts of research institutes dedicated to **global priorities has already resulted in [billions of dollars being directed to more effective cause areas](#)**, with benefits dwarfing the investment costs funding research.

Sources to learn more

| Introductory | Intermediate | Advanced |
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| <p>Video: Peter Singer on ethics and EA (Ted, Peter Singer, 10 min.) Gives the basic argument for priority.</p> | <p>Podcast: Michelle Hutchinson on global priorities research (80,000, Michelle Hutchinson, 55 min) Interview about prioritization, the Global Priorities Institute and the impact of academic research.</p> | <p>Article: A research agenda for the Global Priorities Institute (GPI, 65pp) The Global Priorities Institute research agenda, segmenting the problem of prioritization into a host of smaller problems, referencing existing research and suggesting ways to address the issues going forward.</p> |
| <p>Article: Global Priorities Research Summary (80,000 Hours, Roman Duda, 10pp) 80,000 Hours problem profile on the effectiveness of global priority research.</p> | <p>Article: Cause-Priorization Research Overview (80,000 Hours, Katja Grace, 23pp) The full report on cause-prioritization conducted by the 80,000 Hours team on the basis of 8 interviews and independent research.</p> | <p>Podcast: Will MacAskill on moral philosophy (80,000, Will MacAskill, 110min) Interview about prioritization with a focus on the conceptual side of research, especially concerning questions of value and epistemology.</p> |
| <p>Video/Article: Prospecting for Gold (Owen Cotton Barratt, 53 min/10pp) Short article and video arguing the case for prioritization using an intuitive analogy.</p> | <p>Book: The Most Good You Can Do (Peter Singer, 232pp) Authoritative book-length treatment of the ethics of prioritization. Gives a compelling argument for prioritization and rebuts common objections.</p> | <p>Article: The Case for Strong Longtermism (Hilary Greaves and William MacAskill, 35pp) Academic paper arguing the case for prioritizing causes whose effects propagate into the long-term future.</p> |
| <p>Article: Cause Selection in Open Philanthropy (OP, 1-2pp) Brief introduction to Open Phil's process for prioritizing and selecting causes.</p> | <p>Article: The Moral Imperative toward Cost-Effectiveness in Global Health (Toby Ord, 11pp) Accessible article arguing the case for prioritizing cost-effective causes in global health.</p> | <p>Podcast: Hilary Greaves on moral philosophy, existential risk and global priorities (80,000 Hours, Hilary Greaves, 170min) Interview about prioritization covering many central issues in detail.</p> |

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| <p>Article: What are the most pressing problems to work on? (80,000 Hours, 1-2pp) Very short introduction to the idea of global priorities.</p> | <p>Podcast: Holden Karnofsky on Philanthropy (OP) Interview about Open Phil's decision procedure for prioritization, and the history of philanthropy.</p> | <p>Article: The Case for Cause Prioritization as the Best Cause (Paul Christiano, 13pp) Essay arguing why prioritization might be the best cause to work on.</p> |
| <p>Article: Effective Altruism (Will MacAskill, 9pp) Short accessible introduction to the EA framework for thinking about prioritization.</p> | <p>Article: One approach to comparing global problems in terms of expected impact (Rob Wiblin, 80,000 Hours, 150min) Explains how 80,000 Hours assess and prioritize causes and cause areas.</p> | <p>Podcast: Toby Ord on Longtermism (80,000 Hours, Toby Ord, 130min) In depth interview about the case to be made for prioritizing causes whose effects are felt in the long-term future.</p> |
| <p>Article: Famine, Affluence, and Morality (Peter Singer, 15pp) Influential article arguing that the well-off ought to prioritize the suffering of the worst-off.</p> | <p>Book: Doing Good Better (William MacAskill, 336pp) Book length treatment of EA concepts and introduction to the best current thinking about prioritization.</p> | <p>Article: Consequentialism and Cluelessness (James Lenman, 28pp) Critical essay giving an argument against the efficacy of prioritization.</p> |
| | <p>Podcast: Tyler Cowen on the case for prioritizing economic growth (Tyler Cowen, 80,000 Hours, 150min) Interview with influential economist about the case for prioritizing economic growth.</p> | <p>Collection: Utilitarianism and Beyond (eds. Amartya Sen, Bernard Williams, 280pp) Legendary artikkelsamling om utilitarisme med de beste moralfilosofene fra forrige generasjon. Utgangspunktet for mange av nåtidens debatter.</p> |

Main actors

Currently, these are the organizations and institutions most relevant for EAs interested in this cause area. They are sorted by the generality of their focus.

Broad

- [Global Priorities Institute](#)
Interdisciplinary research centre doing foundational research on how to do the most good.

Specialized

- [Give Well](#)
Org doing research to find the charities that save or improve lives most cost-effectively.
- [Future of Humanity Institute](#)

- [Open Philanthropy](#)

Philanthropic organization with the dual-aim of researching what cause areas are most effective and giving to promising actors in those areas.

- [80,000 Hours](#)

Org dedicated to finding out what careers have the most impact, and helping young talented people make the best of their career.

- [Copenhagen Consensus](#)

Think-tank doing research aggregating evidence for comparisons between broad interventions or causes

- [Center on Long-Term Risk](#)

Research institute investigating how best to reduce the suffering of sentient beings in the long term-future.

Research centre with a focus on existential risk.

- [Centre for the Study of Existential Risk](#)

Research centre at Cambridge focusing on existential risk.

- [Global Catastrophic Risk Institute](#)

Research Institute focusing on existential risk.

- [Alliance to Feed the Earth in Disasters](#)

Research Institute focusing on food security risks caused by x-risk.

General career advice

80,000 Hours [estimates](#) that the most effective way to contribute to this cause area is as a researcher, although other high impact roles are academic project managers and operations staff at research institutes with a prioritization focus.

One research route goes through **academia, where there is some focus on prioritization in economics and philosophy**. Another route goes by **non-academic research institutes, think-tanks and philanthropic organizations with a strong evidence-driven focus**. Both routes presupposes a robust grounding in **analytical thinking and familiarity with the social sciences**.

Some institutions doing prioritization narrow their focus to one or a small set of promising fields for comparative assessment of fields, or interventions within a field. To assess whether a career in any of these institutions could be relevant, check them out individually, since the relevant competence and subject of study will vary from institution to institution.

Some institutions have a very broad focus, aiming to reach reasoned judgments about the comparative case between all relevant causes and interventions. To make valuable contributions as a researcher in one of these institutions, it is imperative to have **range**, and be comfortable with **quantitative analysis** and **abstract thinking**. It is very useful to be knowledgeable about the cutting edge theory in the [social sciences and analytic philosophy](#).

The fields of development economics, value theory, epistemology and statistics are especially relevant.

To seriously assess whether a career along this path is something that suits your interests and skill-set, a good idea is to jump into it! A good way to do this is to **go through [GPI's research agenda](#)** and read up on one of the potential research projects they have a profile on. Once familiar with the literature (often 5-15 papers), try to write a summary, or write up a document as a blog post or article if you have any good ideas that are overlooked (which is not uncommon in unexplored conceptual territory, which is what GPI focus on). If you find this exercise interesting or otherwise rewarding, and think that you might be able to make valuable contributions to the field, then a career in global prioritization might be something for you. However, it should be noted that these discussions are often very abstract and hard to get your head around, so don't be discouraged if the literature is incomprehensible to you. It takes some effort and careful thought to get into, but the efforts are usually rewarding, and understanding rises exponentially whence the core concepts are grasped.

80,000 Hours also offer a [service](#) to help interested people get into global priorities research. They do direct counseling, and also has a newsletter with updates about relevant jobs. In their assessment of the field, there is [room for new hires](#) (as of July 2018). **The bottleneck is competent people that can make a substantial contribution.**

In Norway the only institutions doing some work on prioritization are the philosophy and economics departments of the state Universities. To contribute at one of these institutions, the best bet would be to **familiarize yourself with the faculty at these departments and find the people that have a prioritization focus**. They are often economists working on development economics and moral philosophers with a consequentialist leaning. Get in touch with these researchers and ask them for guidance on how to do prioritization work within Norwegian research institutions, they would possess the best up-to-date local knowledge.

Some relevant moral philosophers are Ole Martin Moen and Alejandra Mancilla at UiO, Einar Duenger Bøhn at UiS, Espen Gamlund and Jesse Tomalty at UiB, and Ivar Labukt at UiT. These will all be familiar with EA ideas, and can help you develop a research strategy for doing work on global priorities research.

It is also possible to contribute in other ways. High impact roles are competent academic project managers and operations staff. Good people in these roles can make a [huge difference](#) in the effectiveness of these institutions.