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These are the charities where your money will do the most good

Updated by Dylan Matthews on December 1, 2015, 11:00 a.m. ET

[@dylanmatt](#) [✉ dylan@vox.com](mailto:dylan@vox.com)



Two kids in Kenya show they've swallowed their deworming pills.

Good Ventures / Innovations for Poverty Action

Happy Giving Tuesday! After Black Friday and Cyber Monday, it's officially time for the fake holiday that emphasizes

philanthropy rather than consumer spending. And even for families who don't participate in Giving Tuesday, December is a biggest month of the year for philanthropy. According to the [Blackbaud Charitable Giving Report](#) (<https://www.blackbaudhq.com/corpmar/cgr/how-nonprofit-fundraising-performed-in-2014.pdf>), fully 17.4 percent of giving in 2014 happened in December, nearly double the 9 percent that happened in June, the second-highest month.

Giving to charity is great — not just for the recipients but for the givers (<http://www.vox.com/2014/11/3/6078101/giving-money-away-makes-us-happy>), too. But it can be intimidating to know how to pick the best charity, especially when there are thousands of worthy causes to choose from. Here are a few simple tips that can help.

1) Check in with charity recommenders

It's of course possible to research charity options yourself, but it's probably better to outsource that labor to a careful, methodologically rigorous charity recommender like [GiveWell](#) (<http://blog.givewell.org/2015/11/18/our-updated-top-charities-for-giving-season-2015/>). GiveWell currently lists four top charities:

- 1** [Against Malaria Foundation](http://www.givewell.org/international/top-charities/amf/donate) (<http://www.givewell.org/international/top-charities/amf/donate>), which buys and distributes insecticidal bed nets in Malawi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and a variety of other developing countries in Africa, Latin America, and Asia

- 2 Schistosomiasis Control Initiative (<http://www.givewell.org/international/top-charities/schistosomiasis-control-initiative/donate>) and
- 3 Deworm the World (<http://www.givewell.org/international/top-charities/deworm-world-initiative/donate>), which both work with governments to combat parasitic worm infections. SCI works in a number of countries in sub-Saharan Africa, while Deworm the World is mainly active in Kenya and India, with plans to expand more broadly.
- 4 GiveDirectly (<http://www.givewell.org/international/charities/give-directly/donate>), which directly distributes donations to poor people in Kenya and Uganda, to spend as they see fit

GiveWell ranked those four charities in order of how much good additional donations would do, not necessarily how good the groups are overall; these are organizations that can put new funding to use, rather than sitting on it. GiveWell takes that factor seriously. In 2013, it revoked its recommendation (<http://blog.givewell.org/2013/11/26/change-in-against-malaria-foundation-recommendation-status-room-for-more-funding-related/>) of Against Malaria on the grounds that the charity had not spent enough of the money it already raised. Last year, GiveWell judged that Against Malaria once again has room for more funding, and put it on the recommendation list again. So you can expect Against Malaria, and the other three recommended charities, to spend anything you donate effectively and reasonably promptly.

If forced to pick, GiveWell recommends donors give to Against Malaria. Personally, I give a little less than 60 percent of my donations to Against Malaria and the rest to GiveDirectly.

Related

[You have \\$8 billion. You want to do as much good as possible. What do you do? \(http://www.vox.com/2015/4/24/8457895/givewell-open-philanthropy-charity\)](http://www.vox.com/2015/4/24/8457895/givewell-open-philanthropy-charity)

2) Pick charities with research-based strategies

GiveWell's recommendations rely heavily on both evaluations done by charitable organizations and existing research literature on the kind of intervention they're trying to conduct.

For example, its recommendations of SCI and Deworm the World are based on [research \(http://blog.givewell.org/2015/07/24/new-deworming-reanalyses-and-cochrane-review/\)](http://blog.givewell.org/2015/07/24/new-deworming-reanalyses-and-cochrane-review/) suggesting that providing children with deworming treatments improves [educational \(http://blog.givewell.org/2014/10/03/a-promising-study-on-the-long-term-effects-of-deworming/\)](http://blog.givewell.org/2014/10/03/a-promising-study-on-the-long-term-effects-of-deworming/), [economic, and other outcomes \(http://www.givewell.org/international/technical/programs/deworming#Whatarethebenefitsofmassdeworming\)](http://www.givewell.org/international/technical/programs/deworming#Whatarethebenefitsofmassdeworming). A [randomized evaluation of GiveDirectly \(http://www.princeton.edu/~joha/publications/Haushofer_Shapiro_Policy_Brief_2013.pdf\)](http://www.princeton.edu/~joha/publications/Haushofer_Shapiro_Policy_Brief_2013.pdf) released last year found that recipients ate more and experienced less hunger, invested in expensive but worthwhile assets like iron roofs and farm animals, and reported higher psychological well-being. Research from the Poverty Action Lab at MIT suggests that [giving away insecticidal bed nets for free \(](#)

<http://www.povertyactionlab.org/scale-ups/free-insecticidal-bednets>) — as the Against Malaria Foundation does — is vastly more effective than charging even small amounts for them.

3) Give abroad



Women in Dedza, Malawi carry antimalarial bed nets. ([Against Malaria Foundation \(https://www.againstmalaria.com/NewsItem.aspx?newsitem=Mid-distribution-weekly-reports-for-Dedza-distribution-Malawi\)](https://www.againstmalaria.com/NewsItem.aspx?newsitem=Mid-distribution-weekly-reports-for-Dedza-distribution-Malawi))

It's really hard to adequately express how much richer developed nations like the US are than developing ones like Kenya, Uganda, and other countries targeted by GiveWell's most effective charities. We still have extreme poverty (<http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/up-front/posts/2014/08/25-american-poverty-chandy-smith>), in the living-on-\$2-a-day sense, but it's pretty rare and hard to target effectively. The poorest Americans also have access to health care and education systems that are far superior to those of

developing countries. Giving to charities domestically is admirable, of course, but if you want to get the most bang for your buck in terms of saving lives, reducing illness, or improving overall well-being, you're going to want to give abroad.

GiveWell actually looked into a number of US charities, like the [Nurse-Family Partnership \(http://www.givewell.org/united-states/charities/nfp\)](http://www.givewell.org/united-states/charities/nfp) program for infants, the [KIPP chain of charter schools \(http://www.givewell.org/united-states/charities/kipp\)](http://www.givewell.org/united-states/charities/kipp), and the [HOPE job-training program \(http://www.givewell.org/united-states/charities/HOPE-Program\)](http://www.givewell.org/united-states/charities/HOPE-Program). It found that all were highly effective but were far more cost-intensive than the best foreign charities. KIPP and the Nurse-Family Partnership cost more than \$10,000 per child served (<http://www.givewell.org/giving101/Your-dollar-goes-further-overseas>), while deworming programs like SCI's and Deworm the World's generally cost about 50 cents per child treated. If you want to give, give abroad.

Alternatively, you could consider giving to non-humans. Animal charities, particularly those engaged in corporate pressure campaigns to better the treatment of farm animals, chickens in particular, can be effective in improving animal welfare. The charity evaluations in this area are much younger and probably less robust than GiveWell's, but [Animal Charity Evaluators \(http://www.animalcharityevaluators.org/recommendations/top-charities/\)](http://www.animalcharityevaluators.org/recommendations/top-charities/) has named three animal groups that may be effective causes for donations.

4) Consider meta-charities

Another option is giving to groups like GiveWell, [Innovations for Poverty Action](http://www.innovationsforpoverty.org/) (<http://www.poverty-action.org/>), [the Life You Can Save](http://www.thelifeyoucansave.org/Causes) (<http://www.thelifeyoucansave.org/Causes>), [Giving What We Can](https://www.givingwhatwecan.org/) (<https://www.givingwhatwecan.org/>), and [80,000 Hours](https://80000hours.org/) (<https://80000hours.org/>) that evaluate development approaches/charities and encourage effective giving. Suppose that every dollar given to Giving What We Can — which encourages people to pledge to donate at least 10 percent of their income until retirement — results in \$1.20 in donations to the Against Malaria Foundation. If that's the case, then you should give to Giving What We Can until the marginal effect on donations to AMF hits \$1 or lower.

"If they can turn a dollar of donations into substantially more than a dollar of increased donations (<http://www.jefftk.com/p/metacharities>) to effective charities, isn't that the best use of my money?" asks Jeff Kaufman, a software developer who with his wife, Julia Wise, gives about half his income to effective charities and meta-charities (<http://www.jefftk.com/p/giving-half>).

5) Saving lives isn't everything

Two *Schistosoma mansoni*, one of the parasites that causes schistosomiasis (which SCI combats). Schistosomiasis is not usually lethal, but it can permanently harm children's development and growth. ([Stephen Davies/Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences](http://www.usuhs.edu/faculty/stephendavies-mic.html) (<http://www.usuhs.edu/faculty/stephendavies-mic.html>))

If you only care about reducing early mortality and giving people more years to live, then you should give all your donations to the Against Malaria Foundation. Malaria is a frequently fatal disease, and cost-effective interventions to reduce malaria infection are a great way to save lives.

But the rest of the charities GiveWell recommends don't mainly focus on reducing mortality. Quality of life matters, too. Parasitic infections hamper children's development and education, which can have negative consequences lasting

decades. Having increased access to cash may not extend the life of a GiveDirectly recipient, but it does make life considerably more pleasant.

6) Don't give to a big charity

You'll notice that all of the charities GiveWell recommends are reasonably small, and some big names are absent. That's not an accident. In general, charity effectiveness evaluators are skeptical of large relief organizations (<http://blog.givewell.org/2011/12/28/mega-charities/>), for a number of reasons.

Large organizations tend to be less transparent about where their money goes and also likelier to direct money to disaster relief efforts, which are usually less cost-effective, in general, than public health programs (<http://www.givewell.org/international/disaster-relief>). "Overall, our impression is that your donation to these organizations is very hard to trace (<http://blog.givewell.org/2011/12/28/mega-charities/>), but will likely supplement an agenda of extremely diverse programming, driven largely by governments and other very large funders," writes GiveWell cofounder Holden Karnofsky.

7) Maybe just give money directly to poor people

[GiveDirectly \(https://www.givedirectly.org/\)](https://www.givedirectly.org/)

GiveDirectly uses the M-PESA system for mobile cash transfers. ([GiveDirectly \(https://www.givedirectly.org/\)](https://www.givedirectly.org/))

One of the main charities I support is GiveDirectly, which is the only non-public health charity to get GiveWell's top rating and, to my knowledge, the only charity devoted to unconditional cash transfers. That's partly because there's a large body of research on the [benefits of cash transfers \(http://www.givewell.org/international/technical/programs /cash-transfers\)](http://www.givewell.org/international/technical/programs/cash-transfers), GiveDirectly's [preliminary evaluation was very promising \(http://www.princeton.edu/~joha/publications /Haushofer_Shapiro_Policy_Brief_2013.pdf\)](http://www.princeton.edu/~joha/publications/Haushofer_Shapiro_Policy_Brief_2013.pdf), and GiveWell

has found that cash rivals the best health programs as far as cost-effectiveness is concerned.

But it's mostly because I don't trust myself to know what the world's poorest people need most. I've been profoundly lucky to never experience the kind of extreme poverty that billions of people worldwide have to endure. I have *no idea* what I would spend a cash transfer from GiveDirectly on if I were living on less than \$2 a day in Uganda. Would I buy a bed net? Maybe! Or maybe I'd buy an iron roof. Or school tuition for loved ones. Or cattle.

But you know who *does* have a good sense of the needs of poor people in Uganda? Poor people in Uganda. They have a *very good* idea of what they need. Do they sometimes misjudge their spending priorities? Certainly; so do we all. And bed nets and deworming treatments appear to be underpurchased relative to the actual need for them. But generally, you should only give something other than cash if you are confident you know the recipients' needs better than they do (<http://www.vox.com/2014/6/5/5783086/more-evidence-that-giving-poor-people-money-is-a-great-cure-for>). With the exception of bed nets — which really *do* seem underprovided when they're just put up for sale rather than given away for free — I'm not confident of that. So I give cash.

As the World Bank's Jishnu Das once put it (<http://blogs.worldbank.org/futuredevelopment/new-york-times-ethicist-better-economist-economist>), "Does giving cash work well' is a well-defined question only if you are willing

to say that 'well' is something that WE, the donors, want to define for families whom we have never met and whose living circumstances we have probably never spent a day, let alone a lifetime, in." If you're not willing to say that, then you should strongly consider giving cash.

VIDEO: There's a simple solution to poverty

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