

Nobel laureates decide that better nutrition is the best way to help the poor.

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Over the past two weeks, I have challenged Slate readers to decide what priority to give competing ways to help the planet. We looked at 10 topics, from biodiversity to water and sanitation. In total, there were nearly 40 investment proposals, each with a cost and its own set of benefits.

For nearly every single investment, the benefits were greater than the costs, meaning that these were almost all investments that would undeniably help the planet. But, with limited funds, we need to start somewhere, and the Copenhagen Consensus 2012 project challenged you to think about where you would—and wouldn't—direct additional funds first.

While Slate readers were considering the research, a team of economists (including four Nobel laureates) did the same in Copenhagen. They, of course, had examined draft versions of the papers and also considered the findings from two additional research papers for every topic. (These were the so-called “perspective papers,” which we use to provide a transparent critique of the original research. All of the perspective papers are now available online.)

The Copenhagen Consensus 2012 “expert panel” had the advantage of being able to interview the authors and to bounce ideas off of one another before coming up with a consensus priority list. (The comments section on Slate allowed us to have our own conversation about the research papers; I've endeavored to answer many of your questions in sidebar articles throughout the series.) And the expert panel also had the opportunity to choose not to prioritize some interventions, or to bundle different priorities together. You can download the panel's 10-page Outcome Document that explains all of the thinking behind each of the priority choices they made; I think it's a must-read that shows us how we could effectively achieve much more in the fight against humanity's biggest challenges.

Let's turn to the Slate reader findings. Here they are:

This is a striking set of priorities. We can see that Slate readers agree with the Nobel laureates (and with the cost-benefit analysis itself) that the bundled micronutrient interventions are of great importance, both in the battle against hunger and in the endeavor to keep more kids in school.

There is agreement, also, on the importance of setting up early warning systems in developing nations to better protect populations from natural disasters. Both groups agree that it is important to expand childhood immunization coverage and to keep making malaria medicines affordable.

But there are some fascinating differences, as well. The concept of “overpopulation” was a very polarizing one in the Slate reader comments, and it was raised in connection with almost every single challenge. We looked at research that focuses on filling the “unmet need”: reaching those women who want to stop having children (or delay their next childbirth) but are not on contraception. This immediately shot to the top of our poll and, despite vigorous voting on other proposals, never slipped from the “top priority” slot.

The Nobel laureates ranked this lower, based on concerns about the feasibility of actually filling all of the “unmet need”; they felt that a better approach would be to first zero-in on the households that were easier to reach.

Tobacco taxation was very popular with Slate readers. The Copenhagen Consensus panel gave this a lower ranking, based on the belief that, while this was undeniably an effective intervention, it was largely a question of political will rather than funds.

And the concept of the “reinvented toilet” was liked by Slate readers, but the expert panel noted that this was a long time away from availability, involving research and development lasting 15 to 20 years followed by marketing, with an unclear pathway to success. While it's a noble goal, attempts to calculate costs and benefits are highly speculative, and the necessary seed money has already been allocated by the Gates Foundation.

Costs and benefits shouldn't drive our decisions, but they are an important consideration to take into account. I hope that this series has helped to challenge your preconceptions about aid and development spending choices. The goal of Copenhagen Consensus is to provide a base of economic evidence on which we can improve our decisions. There is no decision more important than how to best step up the fight against humanity's biggest challenges.