



RESEARCH INSIGHTS

GENERAL EDITION

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Impact Insights Special Feature

Rethink Priorities (RP) creates impact by helping others to be more effective. Beyond conducting research and publishing reports, staff share their findings with funders, advocates, policymakers, academics, journalists, and others. Much of RP's efforts are incremental, with projects building on previous work. Project outcomes often only become visible in the medium term, as the research starts to influence decision makers. As such, this Impact Insights Special Feature will primarily highlight the results of past projects.

For more information on RP's recently published work, visit the [research database](#), subscribe to the public [newsletter](#), and follow the organization on [social media](#).

***Note:** Please do not share this document as it contains confidential information. If you have a colleague or know someone who you think should receive it, please contact [Janique Behman](#).*

Highlights



Unlocking potential: Unrestricted funding enabled Rethink Priorities to lay the groundwork for future impact, improve **cause prioritization**, and provide operational support to new initiatives.



Creating change: Research conducted by the **Worldview Investigations Team** and the **Surveys and Data Analysis Team** provided stakeholders with research and tools to make informed decisions.



Improving outcomes: The growing **Global Health and Development Department** has shifted hundreds of millions of dollars in funding toward more effective areas and recently launched several new partnerships.

Unlocking potential: Unrestricted funding drives impact

Laying the groundwork

Rethink Priorities self-funded much of its early work, which enabled the organization to gain the experience and credibility necessary to secure grants for future research.

Animal welfare

An independent investigation into the effectiveness of [corporate campaigns](#) to improve the treatment of hens led to research grants from animal welfare funders. Developing these partnerships enabled the researchers to raise funds for a self-initiated project into the neglected area of [invertebrate sentience](#). This research inspired the [Moral Weight Project](#), which grew into the [Worldview Investigations Team](#).

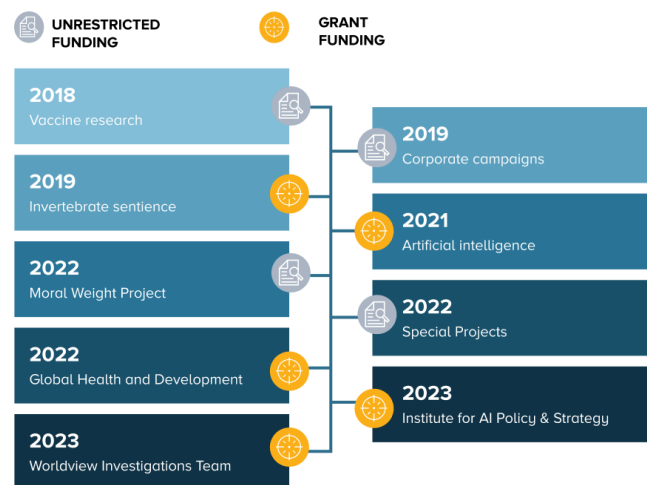
>> [Read more](#)

Global health and development

The organization's early work also included self-funded research on [vaccines](#), which ultimately led to the formation of the [Global Health and Development Department](#). Today, this team primarily functions as a consultancy, which has influenced hundreds of millions of dollars that likely averted tens of thousands of preventable child deaths. Unrestricted funding continues to be necessary for disseminating the team's findings and pursuing independent research.

>> [Read more](#)

Timeline: RP project highlights



Artificial intelligence

RP's early research enabled the leadership team to build relationships with funders who later supported the organization's work on artificial intelligence. This work evolved into the [Institute for AI Policy and Strategy](#) (IAPS), a think tank that provides policymakers with key insights to secure the benefits of AI while minimizing risks.

>> [Read more](#)

Shaping the field

Beyond developing its own work, the unrestricted fund has enabled Rethink Priorities to support the advancement of the fields in which the organization works.

Research: Making the philosophical practical

Should you allocate resources to humans or other animals? If animals, which ones? To answer these questions, donors need a way to compare different species' ability to feel pleasure or pain (i.e. welfare capacity).

The unrestricted fund provided RP with the resources to develop such methodologies. This [Moral Weight Project](#) resulted in a welfare range table and a series of [influential](#) research posts.

"Never, in the fifty years in which I have been writing about ethics and animals, have I seen a project as philosophically and empirically daring as [Rethink Priorities'] attempt to develop a method for comparing welfare across species."

— Peter Singer (Moral philosopher)

The Moral Weight Project's success enabled RP to raise funds for an entire group of researchers to focus on investigating decision-relevant philosophical questions. This [Worldview Investigations Team](#) has already developed several [tools](#) to help donors make informed choices. None of this impact would have occurred without the initial unrestricted funding.

Rethink Priorities has allocated over a million dollars into self-generated project ideas, which have resulted in some of the greatest impact. The organization is well-placed to keep exploring new avenues as long as it has flexible [support](#) to quickly seize opportunities.

Operations: Launching new projects

There are ambitious people who have the content knowledge and leadership skills to start a high-impact project, but building the operations capacity to launch a new organization can take substantial time.

The unrestricted fund enabled RP to hire staff to provide this support. Through the [Special Projects Program](#), RP provides initiatives with operations support and fiscal sponsorship.

"The support from the Special Projects Team has been instrumental for the development of Epoch AI. We could not have managed our recent hiring rounds without it, and you have freed hundreds of hours of work."

— Jaime Sevilla (Epoch AI)

Leveraging the organization's own experience, RP has helped almost a dozen early-stage projects, like [Epoch AI](#), to launch and grow. This support ensures that founders can focus on solving pressing global problems. As the Special Projects Program has developed, RP has been able to sustainably hire additional staff with funding from the projects themselves.

Creating change: improving decision-making across cause areas

Broadening our moral circles

A key motivation for launching the [Moral Weight Project](#) was the recognition that people tended to prioritize helping humans or other animals based on *intuitions* rather than *evidence*.

Using a multidisciplinary approach, **the project team found the estimated welfare capacities of the species they examined to be relatively similar to one another.** By acknowledging the challenges inherent to such comparisons, the researchers sought to provide a transparent foundation for prioritization. RP also produced [graphics](#) to make the findings more accessible.

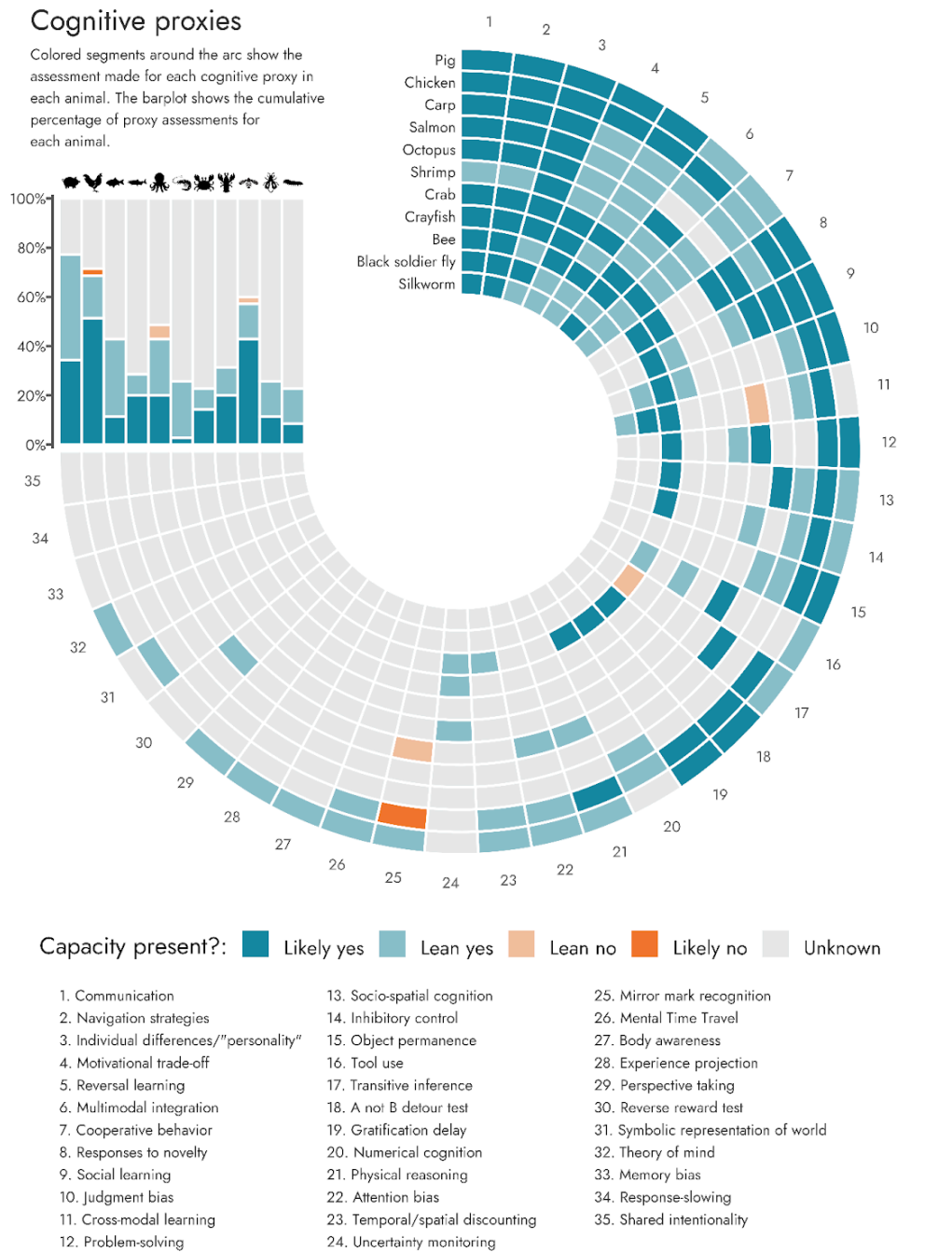
Thanks in part to staff outreach, **the project's findings gained attention among animal advocates and generated discussions** within the field at-large.

- The research has been published in academic venues, such as [Science](#), [Ethics](#), and [Oxford University Press](#). It has been [lauded](#) by the renowned philosopher [Peter Singer](#).
- Senior Researcher [Bob Fischer](#) presented the work to the [Humane and Sustainable Food Lab](#) at Stanford University, to the [Shrimp Welfare Project](#), and others.
- Bob discussed the project on podcasts, such as [80,000 Hours](#) and [How I Learned to Love Shrimp](#).
- Other guests on each of these podcasts, including [Jeff Sebo](#) (NYU Mind, Ethics, and Policy Program) and [Amanda Hungerford](#) (Open Philanthropy), also cited the project. The latter attributed the research with changing their views on insect welfare.
- The Moral Weight Project has started to result in concrete shifts in funders' resource allocation prioritizations. For example, Animal Charity Evaluators are now integrating elements of the work into their evaluation criteria. They plan to further revise their approach in consultation with RP researchers.
- Broader audiences, such as government agencies in the United States and the Netherlands are exploring how the research might improve their decision-making.

"I think the big animal-related view I've changed my mind on fairly recently is insects. I very much used to view them as these kind of unfeeling automatons, did not give them a second thought, was very happy to not worry about their wellbeing. But after seeing some of the Moral Weight Work that Rethink Priorities has put out, I now feel worried about the insects."

— Amanda Hungerford (Open Philanthropy)

The Moral Weight Project: cognitive proxies welfare range table



>> [See all the welfare range tables.](#)

Building better models

The Moral Weight Project's outcomes showed that there is demand for work that makes philosophical, methodological, and empirical problems manageable, modelable, and actionable. With this goal in mind, RP established the [Worldview Investigations Team](#). To date, the team has developed three open-source tools to spur more transparent deliberations.

How can donors compare the cost-effectiveness of projects across cause areas?

The [cross-cause cost-effectiveness model](#) allows users to model their philosophical assumptions and preferences and see the concrete range of outcomes of donation choices. This project also considered alternatives to expected value maximization.

"The fund managers were highly impressed by the ambitious scope of [the cross-cause cost-effectiveness model]. Despite the effective altruism (EA) movement existing for over a decade, there were no other publicly available cross-cause models with comparable breadth and an EA-informed perspective."

Linchuan Zhang (EA Infrastructure Fund)

How might empirical assumptions and risk attitudes impact your donations?

The [giving portfolio builder](#) evaluates the cost-effectiveness of different cause areas using data-driven estimates and simplified models of costs. The tool can:

1. Suggest an optimal mix of donations based on user-selected criteria.
2. Evaluate donation strategies under different decision-making approaches.

The portfolio builder aims to help users explore different ways to divide their donations that could maximize their impact.

How should you allocate philanthropic resources in the face of moral uncertainty?

By using the [moral parliament simulation](#), users can model different worldviews as delegates, with each representing a set of ethical beliefs and values. Users can:

1. Input their confidence in various worldviews.
2. Explore methods for reaching decisions about charitable giving.

The moral parliament shows the impact of different philosophies and decision-making approaches in philanthropy.

Given that the portfolio builder and moral parliament simulation were just released, it is difficult to fully assess their impact. Thus far, the team's talks on how to use the tools have been well-attended, with participants raising in-depth questions about practical applications.

Enabling data-driven decision making

Organizations across cause areas rely on data to maximize their impact. Maintaining specialized in-house researchers with the expertise to quickly gather and analyze survey data can be resource-intensive, especially for small nonprofits with limited budgets whose needs may arise on an ad-hoc basis.

Rethink Priorities' [Surveys and Data Analysis Team](#) fills this need.

The research team supports the broader field, offering both paid services and pro-bono work depending on their client's budget and scope of the project. Maintaining a fast turnaround (sometimes a few days) allows RP to help organizations respond more quickly to emerging opportunities or pressing issues.

Data propels impact

Knowing what specific groups of people (e.g. students, voters, etc.) think about an issue helps organizations to develop proposals that will have the greatest likelihood of success. For example, understanding opinions regarding animal welfare can help advocates to **create effective corporate campaigns or improve legislative asks**.

Understanding the nuanced opinions that various groups hold also allows organizations to create optimal messaging and communications strategies to **effectively rally the support necessary to solve the world's problems**.

Beyond researching opinions, RP's survey research also examines behaviors.

Planning for the future by understanding the present

The continued development of large language models (LLMs) will open the door to both benefits and risks. **What might be the real-world outcomes of future systems built from LLMs?** Answering this question requires understanding how people are *currently* using LLMs—a question that RP is researching with a [grant](#) from Open Philanthropy.

This work entails interviewing and surveying:

- Power users (people who frequently use LLMs for advanced purposes)
- Workers in relevant industries
- The general public

While this project is still in progress, the team expects their research to help inform future work led by the client and others looking to understand **how this emerging technology could transform our world**.

Improving outcomes: shifting funding to more cost-effective options

Traditionally, foundations fund projects based on preferences toward a particular region or type of intervention (i.e. local optimizers). In contrast, Rethink Priorities' [Global Health and Development Department](#) helps funders in this field to allocate resources based on cost-effectiveness (i.e. global optimizers). See the department's [theory of change](#).

Recent Global Health and Development Department outcomes

- A client shared the team's research findings with an individual philanthropist who subsequently redirected tens of millions of dollars in funding to a more impactful field.
- RP's investigations into health risks from lead exposure influenced an \$8M grant toward an intervention to prevent and reduce the effects of lead exposure, which the team believes is highly cost effective.
- The team produced a commissioned report, which increased GiveWell's confidence in their top charities. This project examined whether GiveWell's top charities were saving fewer lives than estimated because some interventions may save the same individual's life multiple times. Through a review of evidence, including RP's research, GiveWell [concluded](#) that they are likely only overstating the total lives their programs save by 10%.
- CEO [Marcus Davis](#) presented RP's research on the value of global optimizers at a private event. A major foundation that advises individual donors requested additional information, and shared that this presentation sparked internal discussions about their advising and a nine-figure grantmaking fund.

Forging new partnerships with diverse clientele



[Lafiya Nigeria](#) trains female health workers to provide family planning counseling and distribute injectable contraceptives to women in remote parts of northern Nigeria. RP's research team estimated that each unintended pregnancy averted cost \$19 at the beginning of 2024 and will fall to \$5 by the end of 2025 when calibrating for current and planned intervention scaling.

"RP completed a cost-effectiveness analysis of our organization. We hope it becomes customary for charities to undergo an external evaluation of their impact and effectiveness, particularly as it relates to scalability. While we had put together our own cost-effectiveness assessment, RP's model was more thorough and comprehensive than ours, and accounted for far more variables than we had the time or expertise to take into account."

—Céline Kamsteeg (Co-Executive Director, Lafiya Nigeria)

New partnerships (continued)

✦ **Charity Navigator** The research team studied the feasibility of creating an impact-ranking database to score over 230,000 charities listed on [Charity Navigator](#). They detailed uncertainties with an automated approach, as well as other ways to incorporate impact and cost-effectiveness in charity ratings and guide donations towards more effective organizations.



As part of [J-PAL's King Climate Action Initiative](#), Senior Researcher [Greer Gosnell](#) is working with a team on a green technology project—a “smart” plug that can transform how people use any basic appliance. The plug aims to support the integration of intermittent renewable resources like wind and solar, reducing reliance on fossil fuels. The intent is to deploy the product primarily in India.

Recent research

Commissioned by GiveWell:

- Mosquito nets landscaping
- [Impact of mosquito nets on fisheries](#)
- Iron fortification and supplementation
- Technical assistance learning agenda
- Vaccines landscaping
- Family impact planning calculations

Commissioned by Open Philanthropy:

- Malaria in pregnancy

Looking forward

RP's updated strategy for global health and development work includes diversifying its clientele. The team's own [research](#) suggests that influencing traditional foundations, national and international bodies, and individual donors to incorporate more global optimization may be even more impactful than their current work helping funders who are already focused on impact to maximize their cost-effectiveness.

The organization also seeks to grow its presence in the climate philanthropy and policy spaces.



As a part of the [team's growth](#), RP recently hired [John Firth](#) (pictured on the left) as the first Director of Global Health and Development.

[Tom Vargas](#) (pictured on the right) also joined as a Senior Researcher.



Rethink Priorities has room for more funding across all of our cause areas. For information regarding current budgetary needs, please contact Senior Development Manager [Janique Behman](#).