

Preface

Preparing and writing this book has been an exciting and remarkable journey, aided by so many smart, perspicacious, and resourceful people.

For two decades, my think tank, Copenhagen Consensus, and I have been engaged in a global conversation about priorities. Even with the most abundant of budgets, no nation or philanthropist can afford everything. No policy conversation can pay attention to everything. We have to choose to focus on some things and say no to others.

Saying no is uncomfortable, so often, the human response—especially from politicians—is to pretend to say yes to everything. Actual budget allocations reveal the uncomfortable truth because, inevitably, money is spent in one place and not elsewhere. Our attention is directed toward some issues, and we end up neglecting others.

Not discussing priorities doesn't make prioritization go away. It simply makes the selection murkier and less rational. We end up focusing more on issues that easily grab our attention and funding the policies favored by organizations that are good at campaigning. Disappointingly, our public policy conversation rarely talks about which policies will actually deliver the most good per dollar, shilling, or rupee spent.

But the Copenhagen Consensus does. We talk about the benefits and costs of different policies, and we try to get everyone to focus more on the ones that deliver the most benefits. We have been fortunate to work with more than three hundred of the world's top economists and seven Nobel Laureates in economics. Since 2003, we have commissioned, published, and championed benefit-cost research that identifies the most effective priorities at a global, regional, and national level.

We worked with the Interamerican Development Bank and many regional economists to find the best solutions for Latin America and the Caribbean, and with fifty climate economists and three Nobel Laureates to find the best ways to spend extra dollars to address the climate challenge. In countries that include Bangladesh, Haiti, India, Ghana, Denmark, and Malawi, we have worked with local and regional economists, governments, and donors to find the best solutions that suit each nation.

Within each of these projects, we have pointed out—often uncomfortably—that some policies are much better than others. We've not been afraid to tell governments that favored subsidies need to be dropped or to highlight the benefits of actions that reduce opportunities for corruption.

Highlighting the most efficient policies has made it easier for campaigners and policymakers to push through the smartest solutions. We aim to give tailwind to good ideas and headwind to poorer ones.

In Haiti in 2017, our experts found the best investment to be reform of the electricity sector. Unfortunately, that proved too fraught and complex for donors and politicians to take on. The second-best investment we championed was the policy of improving nutrition by fortifying wheat flour with iron and folic acid. This can save hundreds of infants and halve the number of anemic children. The [solution](#) was relatively cheap and incredibly effective, delivering \$24 of benefits for each dollar spent. This achieved political buy-in at the highest levels from the

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Haitian government and from key bilateral donors. Within one year, [almost all wheat flour was being fortified](#).

Ideally, I would love all countries to embrace all the best ideas we've identified, but realistically, I'm excited when we can simply make it easier to do some of them. As we often remind ourselves, the goal is not to make everything right but to make some things slightly less wrong.

Yet, across the world, most policy conversations continue to pretend that it's possible to say yes to everything. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). With 169 sprawling vows and more than 4,000 words, everything has been promised to everyone.

The goals go from 2016 to 2030, meaning that in 2023 the world is at halftime, yet nowhere near halfway. We are failing on most of our promises. That's why we started the project *Halftime for the SDGs*, the foundation for this book.

Building on our previous project for the start of the SDGs, we have investigated more than 100 potentially great policies to find the very best solutions. Now that we're at halftime but nowhere near halfway, we need to focus first on the very best policies. We have to do the *Best Things First*.

This book has only been possible because of the hard work and dedication of many people. I'm happy to be able to express my gratitude.

First, I want to thank my amazing co-workers at Copenhagen Consensus, who hail from across the world. Deep thanks to our executive Vice President Roland Mathiasson, who manages to wrangle all of us and who regularly transforms Excel sheets into order. Thanks to our sharp and indefatigable senior economists Nancy Dubosse, Ralph Nordjo, Saleema Razvi, and Brad Wong for steering through all the research. They are now working with various nations to help prioritize their budgets and plans.

This work is all for naught unless the results are noticed and understood. Thanks to communications manager David Lessmann, this research reaches tens of millions of people via newspapers and media partners globally, while Krisztina Mészáros ensures it reaches a broad digital audience.

Thanks also to our board: Loretta Michaels, Gary Soiseth, and Scott Calahan, who are extremely helpful in guiding our overarching strategies while nudging us on the minutiae of running a non-profit organization.

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It has been exhilarating (and exhausting) to complete this work. Now, I'm excited to see the knowledge make it into the world. It is within reach that humanity could spend just a tiny fraction more and make the world incredibly better. I hope this book will excite you and that your excitement will help spread the word and encourage politicians, donors, philanthropists, and decision-makers to pick many of the world's most efficient policies. I can think of nothing better to do this decade.

Bjorn Lomborg

Malmö, Sweden, May 2023.