ABOUT US

History

The Open Society Foundations began in 1979 when George Soros decided he had enough money. His great success as a hedge fund manager allowed him to pursue his ambition of establishing open societies in place of authoritarian forms of government. “Open society is based on the recognition that our understanding of the world is inherently imperfect,” Soros said. “What is imperfect can be improved.” He started by supporting scholarships for black students at the University of Cape Town in South Africa and for Eastern European dissidents to study abroad.

Soros set up his first non-U.S. foundation in Hungary in 1984. His signature move was to distribute photocopiers to universities, libraries, and civil society groups, breaking the communist party’s grip on information. By the fall of the Berlin Wall, Soros had established two more foundations, in Poland and Russia. As communism collapsed, Soros moved quickly to seize the revolutionary moment and create foundations in countries throughout Eastern Europe and Central Asia. His work contributed to the emergence of democratic governments and substantially more open societies in most countries of the former Soviet empire.

To help train a new generation of political and economic leaders, Soros founded the Central European University in 1991 as a center of research and policy analysis that promotes the principles of open, democratic societies. Support for education programs, from early childhood to university, accounted for as much as half of the Open Society Foundations’ annual program expenditures.

Beginning in 1993, the Foundations provided tens of millions of dollars for humanitarian aid and relief efforts during the wars in the countries of the former Yugoslavia, especially in besieged Sarajevo where construction crews braved sniper fire and artillery shells to connect residents to gas lines, electricity, and drinking water.

Aryeh Neier joined the Open Society Foundations in 1993 as president after leading Human Rights Watch and the American Civil Liberties Union. By the following year annual expenditures had reached $300 million, compared to less than $3 million in 1985, and the Foundations became known for the ability to respond rapidly with innovative programs to changing conditions.

Neier began to make the Open Society Foundations into a truly international organization. We provided support for Burmese refugees and dissidents suffering under the repressive military regime in that country; for the construction of low-cost housing and legal, economic, and
political reforms in South Africa to help the fledgling majority-black government; and for regional initiatives in Africa and Central Asia.

In 1996, with the launch of our programs in the United States, we made an effort to address some of the flaws of an open society. Early programs focused on improving end-of-life care, reforming drug policies, changing the punitive criminal justice system, and challenging harsh immigration laws and practices. Baltimore was selected for a comprehensive approach to the root causes of poverty and injustice. The Foundations supported projects in Baltimore that helped boost reading and math test scores for public school students, expand after-school programs, double the number of people receiving drug treatment, and increase the state’s parole grant rate.

Our geographical reach continued to expand in the first decade of the new millennium. By 2010 we played a role in every region of the world. In a substantial number of countries where we are active, the Foundations are a leading supporter—and sometimes the lone supporter—of efforts to promote democratic governance, respect for the rule of law, protection of the rights of minorities, and civil and political liberties.

In the worldwide struggle for open society, we are in the forefront of many significant global campaigns, including the following:

- **Development of international tribunals holding accountable government officials and leaders of antigovernment forces responsible for war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide.** In 2002, the establishment of the International Criminal Court, long supported by the Open Society Foundations, became a reality. The Foundations assisted and promoted efforts to try leaders for war crimes in tribunals for the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, and Cambodia as well as at the ICC.

- **Transparency and accountability for the revenues that governments derive from the exploitation of natural resources.** In 2001, to curb corruption and ensure that citizens benefit from their nation’s natural wealth, we began promoting a campaign for revenue and budget transparency in resource-rich countries. We funded pioneering organizations in this field and established the Revenue Watch Institute in 2006.

- **Implementation of national freedom of information laws.** At the end of the 1980s, only some 13 countries worldwide had freedom of information laws. By 2010, there were more than 80 countries with such laws and regulations. The Open Society Foundations has been instrumental in the passage and implementation of freedom of information laws.

In 2004, eight Eastern European countries that we helped transform into democracies were accepted into the European Union, with two more joining three years later. With our support, other countries are seeking to become EU candidates.
We have recorded successes on issues such as minority rights, access to health care, and women’s rights. From the start, the Open Society Foundations emphasized protecting the rights of minorities and promoting opportunities for them to participate fully in society. We have addressed the problems faced by, among others, drug users, sexual minorities, people living with HIV, people with mental disabilities, Muslims in the United States and Europe, and Roma in Europe.

In 2005, together with the World Bank, we launched the Decade of Roma Inclusion, 2005–2015. Since the early 1990s, we have provided support for an unprecedented effort to improve the lives and advance the human rights of the Roma, Europe’s largest and most marginalized ethnic minority.

To curb the spread of HIV and other infections among injecting drug users, the Foundations have worked to switch the focus from criminal penalties to human rights and health services, leading a global movement in support of needle exchange, substation therapy, and demand reduction. Another public health problem that we tackled is the exclusion of people with mental disabilities from education and employment opportunities.

In 2009, in response to the rape of thousands of women by soldiers during the conflicts in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Open Society Foundations established a mobile court for gender crimes that traveled to remote, war-torn regions bringing justice to women. In a major victory in early 2011, a mobile court sentenced a colonel, three junior officers, and five soldiers to sentences ranging from 10 to 20 years for carrying out the rapes of dozens of women, men, and children.

Even as we continued to work on all these issues, we increased our expenditures to provide humanitarian aid in response to the global economic crisis and recent natural disasters. In 2009 we committed hundreds of millions of dollars to help the people hardest hit by the economic downturn in Europe and the United States. In 2010 we committed millions to help alleviate the human suffering caused by flooding in Pakistan and an earthquake in Haiti. The Foundations’ expenditures in 2010 amounted to $820 million.

In 2011, among other efforts to strengthen justice and public health, the Open Society Foundations worked to eliminate discrimination and prejudice against Europe’s Muslims, many of whom have lived in countries such as France and the United Kingdom for generations; to stop torture in health care, including forced sterilization, denial of pain relief, and detention as treatment; and to improve the situation of young black males in the United States with, among other support, a $30 million grant for educational, employment, and mentoring programs for black and Latino young men in New York City.

Christopher Stone assumed the presidency of the Open Society Foundations in July 2012, replacing founding president Aryeh Neier who stepped down after leading the Foundations for
19 years. Stone, a member of the Open Society Justice Initiative board, was previously the Guggenheim Professor of the Practice of Criminal Justice at Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy School of Government and director of the Vera Institute of Justice.

With Chris Stone as president, the Open Society Foundations remain committed to the global struggle for open society and to responding quickly to the challenges and opportunities of the future. As George Soros has said, “Our understanding of the world is inherently imperfect. What is imperfect can be improved.”