

U.S. Programs: History and Transition

George Soros's work in the United States grew out of his experiences with philanthropy abroad. In the mid-1990s, appalled by the response of the United States and other Western nations to the humanitarian crises in Bosnia and Rwanda, he began to question the strength of open society values in the world's leading democracy. In consultation with a number of scholars and activists, he launched a group of initiatives called U.S. Programs in 1996.

Since its inception, U.S. Programs has made a significant impact in fields as diverse and far-ranging as criminal justice reform, judicial reform, reproductive rights, palliative care, and after-school programming—among others. All are documented in this report.

As U.S. Programs has evolved, so have the concerns and interests of George Soros. Today, Soros is deeply engaged with the challenges of globalization: the transparency and effectiveness of international financial and political institutions, the obligation of wealthy states toward poorer ones, and the need for a multilateral approach to global issues such as human rights, security, development, international justice, and environmental protection. Soros wants his philanthropy to follow in this direction.

Accordingly, in May 2002, Soros announced a significant reorganization of the Open Society Institute and the Soros foundations network. Funding will be reduced in a number of countries where the network operates, specifically eight Central and East European countries that are slated for accession to the European Union. At the same time, the foundation will be looking to make an impact in a number of countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East.

This reorganization will affect every part of the network, including U.S. Programs. Until the end of 2005, spending will not change significantly. But by 2006, U.S. Programs will operate at a much lower level of expenditure. To this end, every commitment, legal and moral, will be honored—but none will be continued in its present form beyond the current term.

Programs that will come to an end in 2003 through 2005 have begun an assessment, consulting with advisers and grantees, to determine the best strategy for use of their remaining funds.

As programs wind down, grantmaking will be restructured in two ways. First, justice will become the primary focus of U.S. funding, including issues now covered by our Criminal Justice Initiative, Program on Law and Society, and drug policy reform work. The program will have an increased focus on civil liberties and human rights in the United States—concerns addressed most recently with a round of emergency grants following September 11.

Second, beginning in 2003 and increasing through 2006, U.S. Programs will maintain a larger flexible general fund. This will make it possible to continue making occasional grants in areas in which we have been involved—such as campaign finance reform, end-of-life care, and community arts—but in which we will no longer maintain ongoing programs. The fund will also be available for crosscutting initiatives and special opportunities.

Even as OSI decreases its grantmaking in the coming years, we will continue to expand our policy presence. The recent expansion of OSI's Washington office is a significant step in this direction. One of its priorities is to build support for a U.S. foreign policy that is multilateral in its approach and more respectful of international law and institutions.

With these changes, the Open Society Institute and George Soros will preserve the capacity to move with the times and to make an impact on the development of open societies for years to come.