

International Day of Charity: Can we really measure the impact of charity?

Ashley Campbell – Director

What is International Day of Charity?

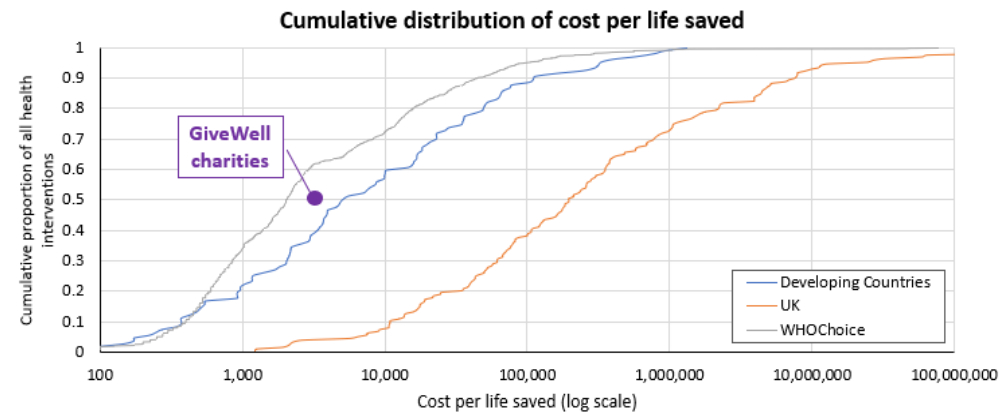
The International day of Charity was established by the UN in 2012 to raise awareness and encourage charitable giving and volunteerism worldwide.

The problem

Every year, people worldwide give around £600 billion in donations and nearly as much again in volunteer time.¹ In the UK, the average person donates £268 per year.¹ Yet for all this generosity, few participants actually know how many people they have saved, educated, fed, or clothed.

Organisations and analysts use tools like cost-effectiveness analysis, outcome metrics, and social return on investment (SROI) to estimate how much “good” each pound can achieve.

In the UK, NICE applies a threshold of up to £30,000 per QALY, and with a conservative multiplier of 25 this implies a median cost of around £750k per life saved, but this assumes that every intervention sits at the upper threshold. Using data from 200 real NICE-approved interventions, the median cost is closer to **£200,000 per life saved**.²



Our analysis compares the distribution of costs per life saved across the UK and developing countries. The results are striking, with a median cost of **£5,000 per life saved** for developing country health programmes, demonstrating that the typical cost of saving a life is dramatically lower compared to the UK.

GiveWell estimates that its top charities can **save a life for around £3,000–£5,000**. The **WHO-CHOICE** project, which analyses the cost-effectiveness of health interventions worldwide, also finds vast differences in value for money across countries and conditions, and shows a median cost of just **£2,000 per life saved**.³

This gap highlights the potential multiplier effect of evidence-based giving. Choosing where to donate is not just an act of generosity but a decision that can mean the difference between saving one life or saving dozens. On this International Day of Charity, the message is simple: if we care about impact, then following the evidence allows each pound we give to go further, do more, and change more lives.

References

1. Global Giving Generosity and the Economics of Philanthropy (url: https://www.citiwarrants.com/home/upload/citi_research/rsch_pdf_30283829.pdf)
2. Owen, L. et al. “The Cost-Effectiveness Of Public Health Interventions”. Journal Of Public Health, vol 34, no. 1, 2011, pp. 37-45., <https://doi.org/10.1093/pubmed/fdr075>
3. WHO-CHOICE data (url: <https://web.archive.org/web/20190702022810/https://www.who.int/choice/results/afre/en/>)