Viewpoint: Causing more harm than good? How billionaire donors influence global health priorities

Global wealth, power and privilege are increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few hyper-billionaires. Some, including Microsoft founder Bill Gates, come across as generous philanthropists. But, as investigative journalist Tim Schwab shows in his latest book [The Bill Gates Problem], charitable foundations led by billionaires that direct vast amounts of money towards a narrow range of selective ‘solutions’ might aggravate global health and other societal issues as much as they might alleviate them.

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Throughout its history, the Gates foundation’s emphasis on ‘accelerating’ innovations and ‘scaling up’ technologies, as noted on its website (gatesfoundation.org), obscures real-world uncertainties and complexities, and ignores the costs of lost opportunities. For example, Gates’s aim to eradicate polio is laudable. But pharma-based actions are slow — and can come at the expense of practical solutions for less ‘glamorous’ yet serious scourges, such as dirty water, air pollution or poor housing conditions.

Thus, by promoting interventions associated with the technological processes of extraction, concentration and accumulation that underpinned his own corporate success, Gates helps to tilt the playing field. His foundation tends to neglect strategies built on economic redistribution, institutional reform, cultural change or democratic renewal. Yet in areas such as public health, disaster resilience and education, respect for diverse strategies, multifaceted views, collective action and open accountability could be more effective than the type of technology-intensive, profit-oriented, competitive individualism that Gates favours.

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