

Criticisms of philanthropy

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The philanthropy of great fortunes attracts criticism, in Switzerland as elsewhere. Some see in it a way for the wealthiest to escape taxation while deciding for themselves how to allocate sums that could have gone to the community. Others point to the power that philanthropy confers on individuals over public policy, in particular in global health, where a handful of foundations weigh on the priorities of the international organisations.¹ Others again observe that the origin of certain philanthropic fortunes is questionable, and that generosity can serve to rehabilitate a reputation.

These criticisms are not new. Part B recalled that Calvinist Geneva conceived of wealth as a stewardship for which the rich had to render account, and that the institutions of assistance combined private contributions with public responsibility. The contemporary debate sets the freedom of the donor against the legitimacy of the community in the same way. It invites practitioners to reflect on the origin of funds, on the governance of foundations and on the transparency of commitments.

For the Geneva financial centre, philanthropy is a reputational asset, provided that it is sincere, transparent and well governed. Foundations that publish their accounts, evaluate their effects and involve beneficiaries in their decisions strengthen the credibility of the whole. Those that serve private interests, or that shelter funds of doubtful origin, weaken it.

1 Notes

1. Swissinfo, “Bill Gates a-t-il trop d’influence sur l’OMS ?” (Does Bill Gates have too much influence over the WHO?) (11 May 2021, updated 24 January 2024): the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is the WHO’s second-largest donor after the United States government, with around 10 per cent of the budget; only 23 per cent of the budget comes from the member states’ assessed contributions; criticisms by Lawrence Gostin and Linsey McGoey concerning the setting of global health priorities. ↩

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