

It's More than Money: How Ultra-Wealthy Philanthropy Creates a “Guise of Betterment”

As the second largest World Health Organization (WHO) donor, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation gives around \$700 million annually. The Foundation has always prioritized global health, clearly stating its goals to “[create a world where every person has the opportunity to live a healthy, productive life](#)” and fight “[the greatest inequalities in the world.](#)” While these claims sound world-changing, the foundations of the ultra-wealthy repeat them as global inequality worsens, with [40% of the world’s population holding less than 1% of the world’s wealth](#) in 2024. Yet, the ultra-wealthy’s donations, dominating the philanthropic space, are [commonly regarded as doing substantial good](#). This success of backing claims primarily with large sums of money represents a larger philanthropic issue called the “guise of betterment.”

The “guise of betterment” is a mechanism through which ultra-wealthy private entities validate their dominant presence in solving global and domestic issues. Theoretically, the betterment need not be a guise. The ultra-wealthy have the money to solve global problems, so they should put money towards these solutions. However, [their donations come with strings attached](#). They serve as expressions of power through public perception and how issues are approached. When this power goes unchecked, elites exert uncontested influence on the philanthropic sphere, using betterment as a guise to push their agendas.

Public support for large elite donations comes in part from the media. These donations garner significant publicity, placing large sums in headlines and praising the donations in the coverage. In coverage for the Forbes 400 Lifetime Achievement Award for Philanthropy, awarded to Bill and Melinda Gates, headlines deemed “[Bill and Melinda Gates the Most Generous Humans Ever](#).” Monetarily, this may be true, but what these media outlets miss are the processes that allow for that to be the case. The Gates’ have amassed around \$108.9bn in wealth through [systems of self-interest and injustice](#). By excluding the tension between wealth accumulation and so-called generosity, the media pushes the narrative of an altruistic, benevolent class, leading the public to hold that belief.

The deep entrenchment of business and privatization in philanthropy creates a significant power imbalance in the philanthropic sphere. Language regarding large donations often includes “[investments,](#)” “[social returns,](#)” and, directly from the Gates Foundation, “[creating market incentives for lifesaving products.](#)” When this language comes from those regarded as the best

equipped to solve issues, it is no wonder that the public supports these market-based philanthropic initiatives. Yet, by turning philanthropy into a new market, its ability to grapple with social issues falters. Ultra-wealthy foundations like the Gates Foundation focus on innovation and prioritize risk-taking due to their private nature, but do not work to change the conditions that led to their needing assistance in the first place. In this way, the ultra-wealthy turn philanthropy into further dependency, using their wealth to assist those in need, but not enough to bring them out of their position.

Despite how the “guise of betterment” allows relatively unchecked power, some may argue that giving is still good, regardless of how it reinforces power structures. What these arguments miss is that donations from the ultra-wealthy can have some good benefits but still provide them with an obscene amount of power. Regardless of the motives, hundreds of millions are going towards projects aimed at causes that advance human rights. That is objectively good. The issue, however, is that these hundreds of millions come from the pockets of those who, in part, produced the global structural injustices they now aim to solve. The ultra-wealthy believe they can solve them while upholding their causes. Yet, money put into market-based approaches cannot solve everything. More must be spent on projects that bring about social and structural change, addressing issues in context rather than their present state. Betterment comes from true change, not change that maintains the wealth of the ultra-wealthy. No amount of money can eradicate complex problems without care.

Ultra-wealthy philanthropy is more than just money. Each donation expresses power, enhancing image through media and reinforcing market-based approaches that uphold unjust global structures. Under the guise of betterment, elites frame themselves as the pinnacle of generosity. Generous or not, they intentionally create this image to convince the public of widespread change while upholding the structures that further their wealth. True change does not require unattainably advanced innovation; it requires looking at the root of injustice and addressing it with those negatively affected. Only then will betterment go beyond its guise.