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INTERNATIONAL

Bill Gates' double-edged influence on global health

By [Stéphanie Tchiombiano](#)

POLITICIAN

The recent publication of a new book by Bill Gates, *How to Prevent the Next Pandemic*, provides an opportunity to examine his considerable influence in shaping international health policy. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation appears emblematic of a philanthrocapitalism that seeks to apply private-sector methods to the fight against poverty and disease. With what consequences?

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The American billionaire has just published a book, *How to Prevent the Next Pandemic*, in which he outlines his plan to "prevent another pandemic from killing millions of people and wiping out the global economy". Not for the first time, the former Microsoft CEO provides advice on epidemics.

He has already shared his thoughts on Ebola and the Covid crisis, but the situation is no less astonishing and revealing of the place occupied by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation in today's global healthcare landscape. What exactly is this place, and what influence does the Gates Foundation have on global health governance? Should it be applauded or feared? How did we get here?



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From Rockefeller to Bill Gates, or the advent of philanthrocapitalism

The involvement of foundations in healthcare began with the Rockefeller Foundation, named after the first American billionaire to build his fortune on oil, and emblematic of the very first philanthropic organizations linked to the Industrial Revolution.

Since then, the number of foundations has grown steadily, especially over the last twenty years, with a particular focus on the healthcare sector. In addition, of course, to those linked to pharmaceutical companies, a number of them (such as the EGPAF Foundation, KFF, the Wellcome Trust in Great Britain, and the Clinton Foundation) are involved in international issues.

Emblematic of what is today known as "philanthrocapitalism", which considers that the pursuit of maximum profit can perfectly well serve the common good, the Gates Foundation occupies a central place in this environment, carrying the idea that it's not just a question of redirecting accumulated profits towards projects to combat inequality, it's also a question of applying private sector methods to the fight against poverty, and turning the pursuit of profit into a driving force for the benefit of all - what Bill Gates himself calls the "common good". "creative capitalism".

The omnipresence of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation in global health

Since its creation in 2000, the Gates Foundation's role has expanded considerably to become a key player in global healthcare.

An important role in health financing

The Gates Foundation's \$4.6 billion commitment to health issues in 2020 represents over 8% of global health aid, surpassing funding from countries considered to be particularly involved in global health, such as Germany, the UK, Japan and France.

Above and beyond the amounts involved, it is the diversity of the players supported by the Gates Foundation that is particularly striking. The Gates Foundation provides financial support to all United Nations agencies involved in health - including the most important of them all, the World Health Organization. The Gates Foundation is the WHO's third largest donor, after the US government and the UK.

It also funds ministries of health (in China and Brazil, for example), development banks (such as the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development), partner foundations (such as the Clinton Foundation), media outlets (such as PBS NewsHour, ABC, *The Guardian* and *Le Monde Afrique*), numerous NGOs and even companies, from pharmaceutical firms (such as Abbott, Bayer, Pfizer and Sanofi) to Vodafone and Mastercard.

A central role in the production of data and new knowledge

Bill Gates' deep-rooted belief in the importance of technology and innovation has led him not only to fund the world of enterprise and start-ups, but also to dedicate part of his fortune to academic research. Not content with funding the world's leading universities (such as Harvard, Columbia, Imperial College and Johns-Hopkins), the Gates Foundation has even created its own research institutes, such as The Institute for Disease Modeling and, above all, The Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation, which competes with the WHO in its role as an observatory of global health issues.

Some of the decisions taken at global level are therefore based on data from an organization funded by a private foundation - whose estimates are based on particularly complex calculation methods that are difficult to "break down".

Supporting the emergence of public-private partnerships on the international stage

The Gates Foundation has also played an important role in the emergence of a new type of international organization: public-private partnerships. Unlike United Nations agencies, which by definition bring together only States (according to the logic of "one country = one vote"), these new initiatives, presented as a response to the cumbersome nature of UN administration, are open to representatives of the private sector in the broadest sense of the term, from companies to associations.

Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, for example, was created with \$750 million in funding from the Gates Foundation in 1999. Many others followed, all supported by the Gates Foundation, such as the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, GFF (Global Financing Facility) for women's, children's and adolescent's health in 2015, or more recently the Coalition for Innovations in Epidemic Preparedness.

A clear influence on the definition of global strategies

The Gates Foundation's influence on the development of international health policies is multi-faceted: its omnipresence in the governance of global health, its seats on the boards of public-private partnerships, its participation in the informal "H8" group, the earmarking of its entire financial contribution to the WHO for specific health issues, and its regular speeches at international conferences, notably the World Health Assembly, since its first speech on smallpox in 2005.

Some believe that the Gates Foundation's influence is such that it endorses every decision taken by the WHO.

An opportunity or a risk for global health?

We could, of course, simply rejoice that one of the richest men on the planet is devoting a large part of his fortune, energy and intelligence to the fight against health inequalities, and give in to the "Bill Chill Effect" (avoid any criticism so as not to compromise tomorrow's investments). Indeed, his financial and personal involvement is impressive, and he has succeeded in instilling a clear dynamic to put global health at the top of the international agenda. But is he, for all that, best placed to define public health priorities? There are several aspects to this question.

First of all, the Foundation's governance is open to criticism. While the list of grants is available on the Foundation's website, it's the way in which decisions are made that is more questionable. In his book, Bill Gates describes the decision-making system he and Melinda set up for urgent requests: "The first one who is informed sends it to the other one, saying, basically, 'That sounds good, do you want us to do it and give your approval?' Then the other sends an e-mail to approve the funding. Decisions, including the most financially onerous, have until now been taken by a particularly closed circle of no more than 4 people: Bill, Melinda, Bill's father (who died in 2020) and American billionaire Warren Buffet (from 2006 to 2021).

It wasn't until January 2022 that a board of trustees including four outsiders in addition to Bill and Melinda Gates was put in place. In fact, the organization was accountable to no one and subject to no independent evaluation, which is particularly questionable when you realize that the Gates Foundation's money can be considered as American taxpayers' money - the donations that fuel the Foundation's funding are subject to tax deductions and represent, in a way, a "share" for the American budget.

The Foundation's approach to global health issues is also open to question. The Gates Foundation's approach is profoundly "technocentric" in the sense that it considers innovations and technology to be the main keys to solving problems (to the detriment of more structural approaches to strengthening healthcare systems, or working on the social, educational, economic or political determinants of health).

It is highly globalized (to the detriment of more localized approaches) and its constant quest for efficiency leads it to systematically prioritize vertical approaches, focused on specific diseases whose progress is easier to document.

The Foundation, which is backed by an investment fund linked to companies such as Coca-Cola, Caterpillar and Abbott, then positioned itself clearly in defense of the interests of the for-profit private sector, systematically defending the intellectual property rights of laboratories (against compulsory licenses and access to generics), helping to give a growing place to consulting firms, and spreading the standards of New Public Management in international organizations such as the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the risk of financial dependence for players, and more specifically global health researchers, is a legitimate fear today. The entire ecosystem held its breath when Bill and Melinda announced their divorce. What would happen if, tomorrow, the American billionaire were to turn his attention to other causes, or decide to close his business?

The issue here is not just the role played by the Gates Foundation, but also the role left to it by governments over the last twenty years. Foundations are part of the global healthcare landscape. They play an important role in the international public arena, and it is not our intention here to call this principle into question, but their influence on the definition of public policy requires safeguards that have yet to be put in place in global health governance.

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