

Growing problems for US philanthropy

LETTERS

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The potentially undesirable effects you hint at of the philanthro-merger of Bill Gates and Warren Buffett have already emerged in the US (Super-rich donations are just a drop in the ocean, *Society*, July 5). You suggest that the public sector might privatise and offload some public obligations to private philanthropy, given the huge amounts of money in foundations such as the Gates Foundation - which, with the Buffett donation, will be larger than the next nine largest US foundations combined (including Ford and Rockefeller).

In President Bush's proposed budget for the fiscal year 2007, the administration justified proposed cuts in its small schools programme by citing the availability of funds for the same purpose from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. That made a foundation programme, where the decisions are made by a few administrators and the foundation's two trustees, a potential substitute for a federal government action. The foundation programme was not delivered uniformly nationwide, and unlike the education department programme, there are no mechanisms for complaint or administrative review.

This happens regularly in the US. In the administration's 2006 budget, the White House proposed terminating programmes to educate children about the dangers of obesity due to the availability of projects sponsored by Disney and the Nickelodeon channel, again substituting charity for governmental obligations - and not questioning the balance of pro- and anti-obesity messages on US commercial television.

The Gates Foundation has acknowledged the problem of government turning to the even more gargantuan foundation to offload public obligations and pledged to remain firm in resisting these ploys. But this is a serious problem for US philanthropy.

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