

RICH APPETITES: HOW BIG PHILANTHROPY IS SHAPING THE FUTURE OF FOOD IN AFRICA

EPISODE 3: MONEY



A Companion Guide

This guide accompanies Episode 3 of *Rich Appetites: How Big Philanthropy is Shaping the Future of Food in Africa*, a short film series developed by AGRA Watch and the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa (AFSA). The *Rich Appetites* series explains why exporting the US agribusiness model to Africa is a grave mistake, and promotes real, farmer-led solutions.

Learn more and watch all five films at www.richappetitesfilm.com

Companion Guide for Episode 3: Money

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AGRA Watch is a campaign of the Seattle-based Community Alliance for Global Justice that challenges the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's questionable agricultural programs in Africa, including its AGRA initiative, and promotes farmer-led alternatives.



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GATES FOUNDATION DONATIONS ARE NOT CHARITY: **Debunking Common Myths about Billionaire Philanthropy**

Bill Gates is one of the richest people on earth. As of January 2023, his net worth was \$103.4 billion dollars.^[1] Likewise, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has become one of the wealthiest and most powerful private foundations in the world, with an endowment valued at \$50 billion at the start of 2022. This is higher than the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of three-fourths of all countries in Africa. In fact, only 12 African countries have a GDP higher than the Foundation's endowment. With this amount of money, billionaires like Gates have gained enormous influence over international institutions and policy agendas.

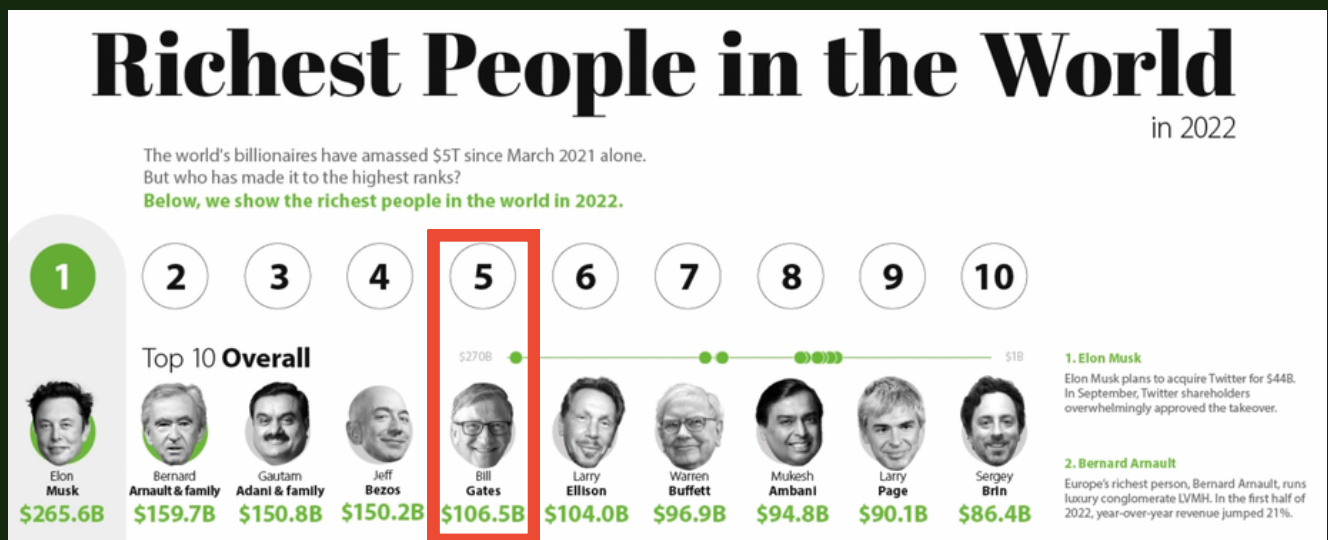
When billionaires like Gates spend money on social causes, they are commonly praised for voluntarily contributing some of their money toward the "common good." However, many donations are far from charitable; in the case of the Gates Foundation, they may actually reinforce inequality and corporate power.



MYTH 1: “The Gates Foundation is doing charitable work.”

Although Bill Gates and the Gates Foundation claim to be using their wealth to “help” poor people, **much of their money ends up in the Global North and in institutions strongly aligned with the private sector.**

The Gates Foundation and other billionaire philanthropies, like the Rockefeller Foundation, Ford Foundation, and Buffett Foundation, are often praised for spending money on social causes like hunger, public health, libraries, and education. This is set in contrast to those billionaires who either contribute comparatively little to philanthropy (including the Waltons of Walmart fame, and, until very recently, Elon Musk)[4] or who donate to far-right institutions (most notably, the Koch Brothers, as well as a range of highly secretive billionaires who back conservative campaigns).[5] However, this opposition overlooks the ways that even “progressive” donations are increasingly channeled toward corporate and for-profit entities.[6]



Source: Visual Capitalist, [The Richest People in the World](#) (29 Mar 2022)

The Gates Foundation Expands Global Capitalism and Monopoly Power

It is not an accident that the Gates Foundation’s funding goes largely to corporate-friendly institutions. These funding choices reflect the Foundation’s priorities and ideologies about how change happens: through the supposed merging of business interests and the public good. Bill Gates has summarized this view as follows:

“Capitalism harnesses self-interest in helpful and sustainable ways, but only on behalf of those who can pay. Philanthropy and government aid channel our caring for those who can't pay, but the resources run out before they meet the need. But to provide rapid improvement for the poor we need a system that draws in innovators and businesses in a far better way than we do today. Such a system would have a twin mission: making profits and also improving lives for those who don't fully benefit from market forces.”[7]

This perspective is heavily influenced by Gates’ experience at Microsoft, and is clearly reflected in the early use of the Foundation to extend the company’s reach.

In the early days of the William S. Gates Foundation (which merged with some other pockets of money to become the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in 2000), many grants directly benefited Microsoft's own bottom line. In the 1990s and early 2000s, the Gates Foundation offered nearly 6000 grants, totalling over \$150 million, to public libraries, tribal schools, and organizations across the US. These grants sought to expand computer use and public access to the internet. [8] But the Gates Foundation's library program was heavily criticized for edging out Microsoft's competitors. While it was technically possible for libraries to install Macintosh computers or computers running on the open-source operating system Linux, there were strong incentives in place that led most grant recipients to install computers running on Microsoft Windows.[9] This also required updating various Microsoft software, through reduced-cost licenses.[10] These efforts also went hand-in-hand with Microsoft's direct donations of its own software to community colleges and other institutions.[11] As Bill Gates stated in his comments on "creative capitalism" in 2008:

"For the past 20 years, Microsoft has used corporate philanthropy as a way to bring technology to people who don't have access. We've donated more than \$3 billion in cash and software to try to bridge the digital divide, and that will continue."[12]

At the same time, Microsoft's "free" distribution of its own internet browser, Internet Explorer, along with purchased software packages and operating systems was part of what compelled the US government to file an antitrust lawsuit against the company in the 1990s. [13] Charity and "free" gifts were part of how Microsoft reached new potential consumer bases and gained a monopoly over the market, enabling Bill Gates to amass the personal wealth he has today.

Now, in regards to agricultural development and other funding, the Foundation may not be engaging in grants that are as directly self-dealing. But grants are still not free gifts. They come with the expectation that the private sector must be involved, and therefore that there must be some way of generating a profit for investors.

The Gates Foundation Opens up African Agricultural Markets for Corporate Profit

For nearly twenty years, the Gates Foundation has invested in agricultural development, claiming to be helping solve hunger in the Global South—especially in Africa. Yet almost half of the Foundation's grants for global agriculture went to four large groups: AGRA (formerly the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa), the African Agricultural Technology Fund (AATF), the Consortium of International Agricultural Research Centers (CGIAR), and multilateral institutions like the United Nations and the World Bank.[14] For reference, Oxfam spends over 80 percent of its funding directly in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, emphasizing local partner organizations as recipients.[15]

Our own analysis of grants specifically focused on agricultural development in Africa confirms very similar results. Over half of these ostensibly Africa-focused grants have gone to institutions based in North America and Europe.[16] Nearly 30 percent of grants have gone to institutions based in the US, which is the single largest recipient at the country level. Of the grants that did end up in Africa, the majority went to three large institutions: 1) AGRA, (\$638.4 million), 2) research institutes that belong to the CGIAR (\$255.2 million), and 3) AATF (\$170.2 million). AGRA and AATF are both institutions created with considerable outside influence by US philanthropic foundations and agribusiness companies. A very small minority of grants have gone toward small, locally-grounded NGOs in Africa.

In spite of claiming to support "innovative" approaches, the Gates Foundation primarily invests in industrial agriculture. A 2020 report analyzing the content and focus of the Gates Foundation's agricultural research investments in Africa found that 85 percent of projects were "limited to supporting industrial agriculture and/or increasing its efficiency via targeted approaches." [17]

Reflecting this, Gates Foundation grants are also skewed in favor of agricultural technologies developed by research centers and corporations in the Global North.[18] For example, Michigan State University received \$13 million to train African policy makers on how to use and promote biotechnology, and AATF received \$32 million to increase awareness of agricultural biotechnology and another \$27 million to fund the approval and commercialization of GMO maize in at least four African countries.

Distribution of Gates Foundation agricultural development grants for Africa, by continent

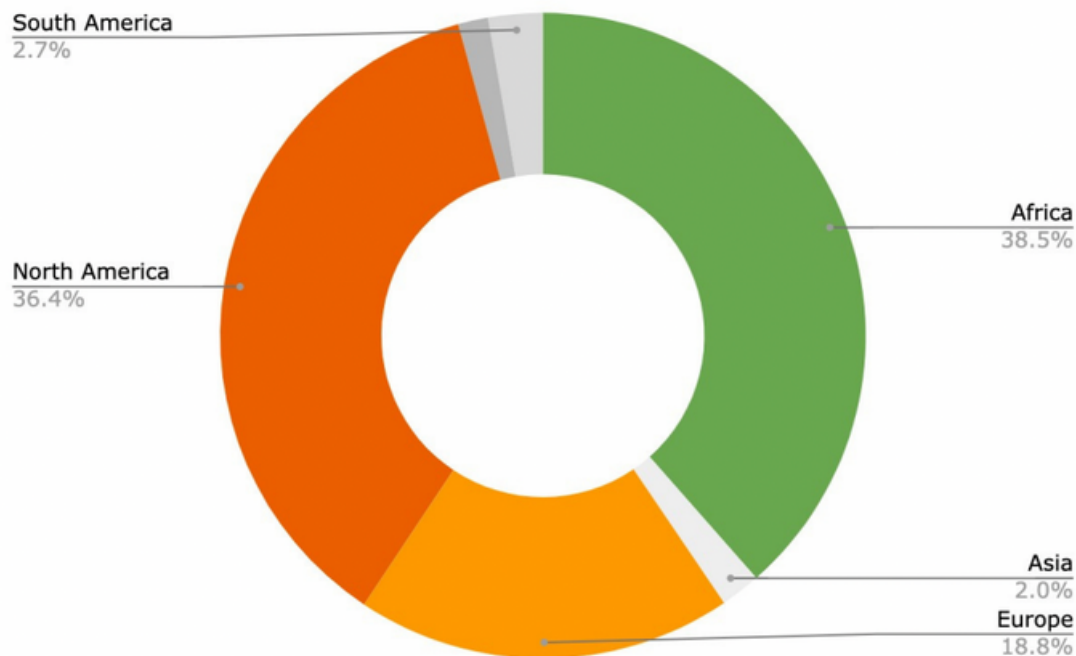


Figure 1: Shares of Gates Foundation Grant Money, by Continent

Source: Community Alliance for Global Justice / AGRA Watch, [African Agricultural Development ... for the US?](#) (2022)

Let's look a little closer at some key recipients of Gates Foundation money, where these biases are clear:

The **African Agricultural Technology Foundation (AATF)** was created in 2001 by the Rockefeller Foundation, in partnership with large agricultural biotechnology companies, the consulting firm Meridian Institute, and well-known African scientists.^[19] It emerged out of ongoing conversations in which big philanthropic organizations, like Rockefeller, convinced agribusiness companies that charitable donations of proprietary technology would be in their interest.^[20] AATF aims to channel corporate-owned and patented agricultural biotechnology to African scientists and then to African farmers.^[21] As such, AATF's projects partner with and rely on donations of genetically-modified germplasm from large agribusiness corporations, such as Monsanto, Arcadia Biosciences, and BASF.

The AATF also created the **Open Forum for Agricultural Biotechnology (OFAB)**, which works to promote biosafety laws that open up African countries for crop biotechnology research, development, and production. OFAB receives funding from the Gates Foundation, AfricaBio (which also receives Gates Foundation funding), the Program for Biosafety Systems, the United Kingdom Department for International Development (UKAID), the US Agency for International Development (USAID), and the US Department of Agriculture (USDA).

AGRA was created in 2006 by the Gates Foundation and Rockefeller Foundation. Although it claims to be “African-led,” it reflects the priorities and interests of investors, philanthropists, governments, and corporations based in the Global North (see Figure 2). In spite of this, it has become a kind of one-stop shop for governmental and philanthropic donations committed to supporting African agriculture, drowning out and undermining other African civil society organizations and voices.

One of the offshoots of AGRA is the **African Fertilizer and Agribusiness Partnership (AFAP)**. AFAP was created by AGRA in 2012 in order to incorporate global commercial inputs like fertilizers into African agricultural value chains through public-private partnerships. AFAP receives funding from AGRA and other donors, including the Open Society Institute.

The Gates Foundation also created and funds the **Alliance for Science** (formerly the Cornell Alliance for Science, CAS). Founded in 2014 by Dr. Sarah Evanega with a \$5.6 million dollar grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation,[22] CAS aims to increase access to biotechnology in Africa, mainly through research and communications targeted towards legislators.[23] In addition to the Gates Foundation, which remains CAS’ largest funder, CAS receives funding from the USDA, individuals, and small foundations, including the Cornell Sathguru Foundation for Development, which lists Bayer as a partner.[24] CAS also partners with OFAB. From 2006-2016, CAS and OFAB held joint trainings in Nigeria and Ghana, among other countries.[25]

Our 2020 analysis of CAS found throughout their work, they uncritically and vehemently promote biotechnology.[26] Any criticism of their work is consequentially labeled as “anti-science.” Through their fellowship program, CAS is training young African scholars to repeat, circulate, and promote these views ad nauseam. [27]

It’s also important to understand what kinds of organizations and projects the Gates Foundation is not funding. The foundation provides zero funding to support farmer seed systems, which supply between 80 and 90 percent of all seeds used in Africa.[28] Instead, as discussed in the [previous film and companion guide](#), the foundation provides significant funding to initiatives that erode these systems. [29]

The Gates Foundation's Funding Priorities Deepen its Own Global Influence

Philanthropies and the billionaires backing them—like Bill Gates—have come to have inordinate political influence over US and international politics, as well as over the policies and priorities of intergovernmental forums like the United Nations and World Health Organization. The Gates Foundation also spends a lot of money on journalism, likely contributing to the positive and often noncritical portrayals of its own work and of Bill Gates himself. For example, Politifact and USA Today (both of which have received funds from the Gates Foundation) have used their fact-checking platforms to defend Gates from

“misinformation” like the idea that the foundation has financial investments in companies developing COVID vaccines and therapies.



Figure 2: Word cloud of AGRA board members’ bios (as of 2021)

Source: AGRA Watch (2021)

In fact, the foundation's website and recent tax forms clearly show investments in such companies, including Gilead and CureVac (although this does not substantiate other far-fetched conspiracy theories about Gates' role in the pandemic).[30] The Gates Foundation has provided more than \$250 million in funding to media outlets (BBC, NBC, Al Jazeera, ProPublica, National Journal, The Guardian, Univision, Medium, the Financial Times, The Atlantic, the Texas Tribune, Gannett, Washington Monthly, Le Monde, and the Center for Investigative Reporting), charitable organizations affiliated with news outlets, media companies, journalistic organizations, and a variety of other groups creating news content or working on journalism.[31] Some journalists at Gates-funded outlets have argued that this "philanthro-journalism" stymies public criticism of the Foundation, encouraging reporters to cover development aid "success stories" rather than failures[32], although the actual impacts on coverage remain unclear. [33]

MYTH 2: "At least Gates is doing *something* with his money...certainly that's better than doing *nothing!*"

Spending huge amounts of money on the wrong things can in fact be worse than doing nothing, because it **sways international and regional agendas** and **diverts support from other solutions**.

The Gates Foundation is best-known for its enormous investments in the global public health arena, with a budget larger than the entire World Health Organization (WHO). [34] The Foundation has by and large invested in large, high-profile diseases, like AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria. And while these investments have saved many lives, they have cost others. Namely, focusing on these diseases has often emphasized massive long-term projects aimed at eradication (in the case of malaria), and has required well-trained, specialized clinicians, which has at times diverted money from basic health care and more accessible and immediate needs. [35]

The Gates Foundation's approach to public health does not address poverty or weak health systems as a whole, and has in some cases pushed national governments and international institutions onto paths that are misaligned with the actual health burdens poor countries face, including, for example, diarrheal diseases. [36] In other words: "poverty is hard and malaria is easy." [37]

These priorities wouldn't necessarily be bad in a more dynamic and robust global public health environment. However, the Gates Foundation is one of WHO's largest funders, and the major funders of certain public health initiatives, like GAVI (formerly, the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization). The priorities of these institutions, whose existence and operations rely on Gates Foundation funding, are also increasingly shaped and influenced by the Foundation, in ways that impact the entire field of public health. As Sonia Shah states: "The foundation—not public authorities—sets the agenda in antimalaria research." [38] And its authority can in some cases eclipse the authority of WHO's own scientific recommendations, including around medical treatments and longer-term campaigns, like malaria eradication (widely considered to be a deeply flawed proposal).[39]

In agriculture, similar processes are occurring. As demonstrated in our first film and companion guide, Gates' money funds unproven agricultural development efforts in Africa that actively harm small farmers. However, Gates' reach is also gaining undue influence over international and national frameworks, key institutions (e.g. the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, the World Bank, and USAID), and priorities (e.g. around climate change adaptation). For example, USAID—a governmental and taxpayer-funded agency—has increasingly taken the lead from the Gates Foundation, from sharing executives to funding each others' projects to adopting the Gates Foundation's agricultural development rhetoric. [40] And many of the "African" institutions set up by the

Gates Foundation (like AGRA), which other governmental and private funders have come to support, are not actually reflective of African movements and organizations at all. With ample financial resources from the Foundation and other donors, these organizations are able to have more of a role in influencing national governments than home-grown organizations composed of citizens of those countries themselves.

It's also important to remember that the money Gates gives away is a tiny fraction of what he (and the Foundation) actually make through questionable investments. By law, philanthropic foundations are only required to give away five percent of their endowment per year. In fact, the Foundation has made more money through its investments than it has spent.^[41] And the Foundation's investments—and those of Gates himself—tell a different picture than its grant-making strategy of "helping" people.

Historically, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation Trust, which manages the Foundation's endowment, was invested in Monsanto^[42] and fossil fuel companies, until public pressure forced them to divest.^[43] However, the Trust still has more than \$100 million invested in stocks and bonds of oil and gas companies, and over a billion dollars invested in mutual funds that may indirectly hold stocks in fossil fuel companies. Even as Gates moves away from fossil fuel companies, his own investments and the Trust's investments continue to support firms whose existence relies on them, including private jet companies, cement manufacturers, and automobile manufacturers. For example, he currently owns approximately 19 percent of Signature Aviation, the world's largest operator of private jet bases. In January, Gates's Cascade Investment LLC bid to buy Signature for \$4.7 billion.^[44]

Additionally, while land is one of the most serious constraints to local people's food production around the world, Bill Gates and his Foundation profit off of land seizure and land consolidation in the US and abroad. Through Cascade Investment, Bill Gates is the largest single private landowner in the US, including nearly 98,000 hectares (242,000 acres) of farmland valued at nearly \$700 million (see Figure 3).^[45] Overseas, the Foundation's Trust is invested in private equity firms, such as Kuramo Africa Capital, that are involved in large-scale land acquisitions for oil palm plantations in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.^[46] These investments are deeply at odds with supposed commitments to addressing hunger.

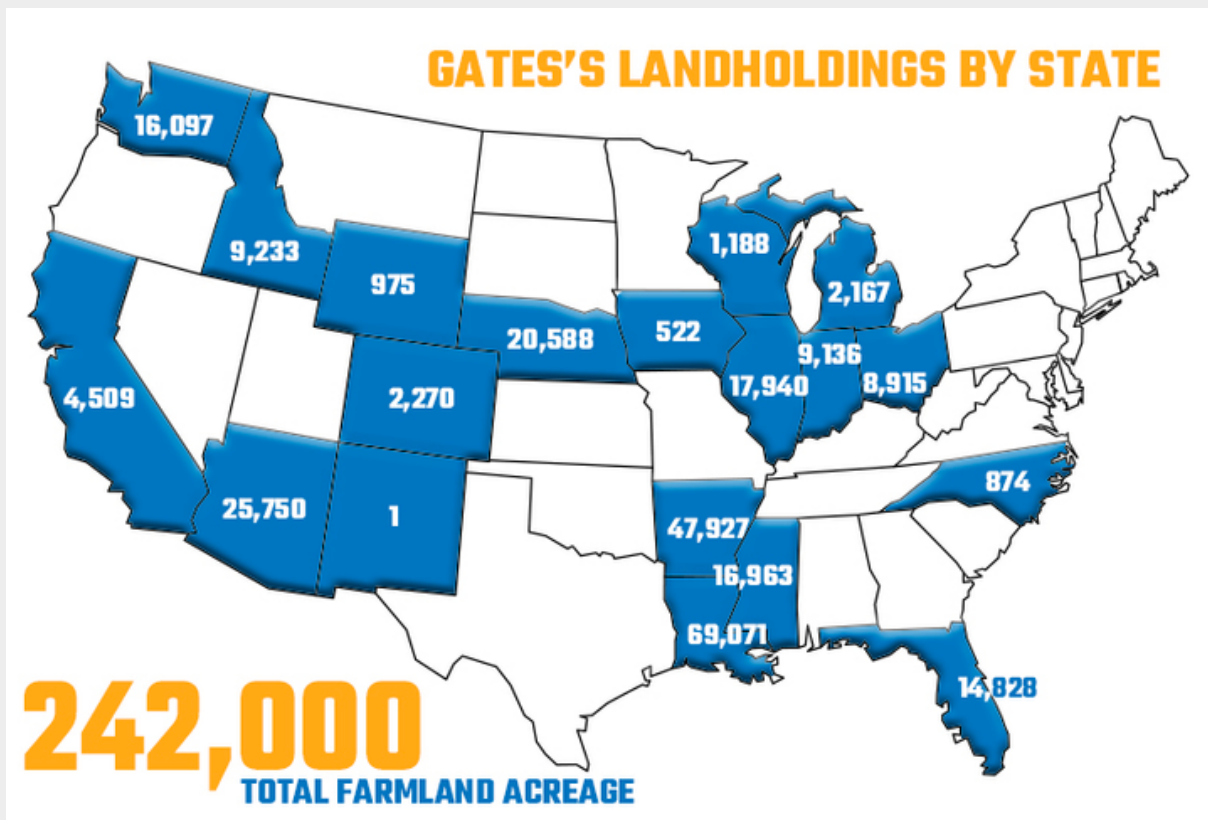


Figure 3: Bill Gates' Farmland Ownership, by State

Source: Farm Action, [Bill Gates: Naïve Farmland Investor or Power-Hungry Megalomaniac?](#) (14 Sept 2022)

MYTH 3: “Billionaires like Bill Gates should be able to do whatever they want with their money”

It is highly misleading to think of billionaires’ money as exclusively their own. There are two reasons for this. First, factor costs (such as for labor, education, resources, and transportation) that are critical to corporate success are subsidized by governments and taxpayers. Yet corporations and billionaires **do not sufficiently reinvest in these infrastructures via taxes, wages, and local investments.** Second, and relatedly, US laws allow billionaires to voluntarily invest in philanthropic foundations as a way of **sheltering money from taxation.**

To begin with, billionaires’ companies are only able to function because of public goods and investments. As an example, Amazon relies on publicly-funded roads and highways.^[47] Yet tax rates for wealthy individuals and corporations have progressively decreased. This means that while these companies and individuals benefit from and rely on public road networks, public education (of workers, for example), and other publicly-funded goods and services, they pay proportionally less into supporting or maintaining those systems.^[48]

Changes to tax law from the late 19th to mid-20th century created exemptions for philanthropic foundations, under the assumption that they act in the public good and are by definition nonprofit organizations. Not only is the money set aside in private charitable foundations untaxed, but in some periods, the government has allowed individual income tax deductions for charitable contributions.^[49] Most early philanthropies were founded by the same monopoly capitalists and industrialists who aggressively exploited workers and engaged in political corruption. Unlike earlier voluntary associations these philanthropic foundations typically relied on one source of wealth being centered around a particular industrialist and that industrialist’s family. As Andrew Carnegie articulated, the wealthy should reinvest some of their money, but toward causes that they themselves determine worthy: “trust funds, which he is called upon to administer, and strictly bound as a matter of duty to administer in the manner which, in his judgment, is best calculated to produce the most beneficial results for the community.”^[50] By emphasizing voluntarism over compulsory and progressive taxation, the tax structure empowers the wealthiest individuals and their non-democratic foundations to make decisions for the rest of us.

This has only gotten worse with subsequent changes to tax policy. Corporate tax rates and taxes on the wealthy have decreased since the 1950s, with dramatic declines under neoliberalism from the 1980s onward (see Figures 4 & 5).^[51] And while some billionaires, like Warren Buffett (and Gates himself), have suggested that the wealthy should pay higher taxes, Gates has pushed back against actual proposals to do this—most notably, Senator Elizabeth Warren’s 2019 progressive wealth taxation proposal.^[52] It is therefore important to remember that billionaires’ money is not simply “their own,” over which the public should have no say. They have earned this money at least in part due to reliance on public infrastructures and services, and through neoliberal policies that have decreased corporate and wealthy tax burdens, while keeping workers’ wages and salaries stagnant. And through tax laws, these billionaires have been granted the privilege of voluntarily contributing to charity (in exchange for further tax write-offs and exemptions), rather than being compelled to pay more into public systems that benefit all of us and that are, in theory, governed through public and democratic processes.

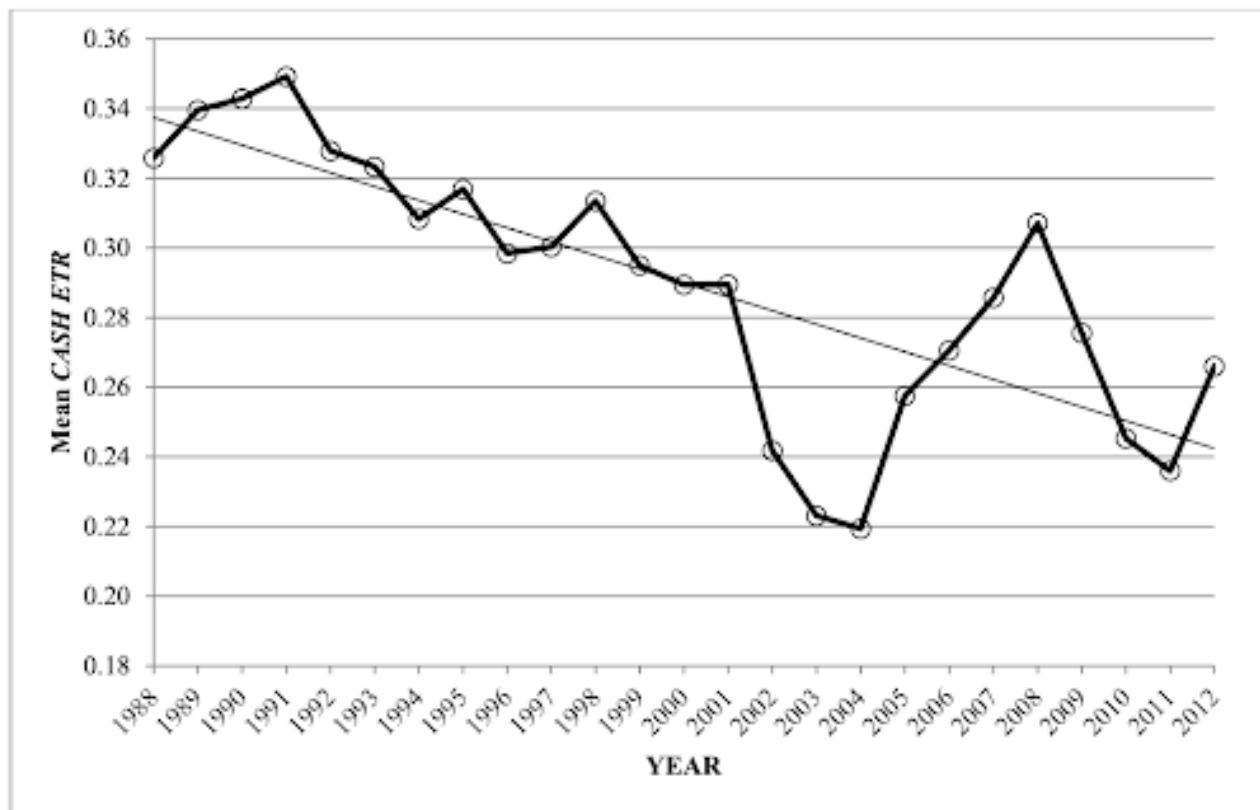


Fig. 2. Mean annual *CASH ETR* over the sample period. This figure plots the annual mean *CASH ETR* over the sample period, 1988-2012. *CASH ETR* is the ratio of current-year cash taxes paid to current year pretax income. All observations are subject to the criteria described in Table 1.

Figure 4: Declines in Effective Corporate Tax Rate since 1988

Source: Scott Dyreng et al. (2016, forthcoming), [Changes in Corporate Effective Tax Rates Over the Past Twenty-Five Years](#), in *Journal of Financial Economics*

29 Corporations Paying No Income Tax in 2015							
Company (\$-millions)	2015 Profit	2015 Tax	2015 Rate	Company (\$-millions)	2015 Profit	2015 Tax	2015 Rate
Netflix	97	-28	-28.7%	Exxon Mobil	159	-2	-1.0%
Andersons	34	-4	-12.7%	Dominion Resources	2,746	-26	-1.0%
Devon Energy	1,861	-236	-12.7%	Pepco Holdings	435	-3	-0.7%
PG&E Corp.	850	-89	-10.5%	State Street Corp.	1,025	-6	-0.6%
Wisconsin Energy	962	-97	-10.1%	DTE Energy	954	-3	-0.3%
Constellation Brands	599	-57	-9.6%	Reinsurance Group of America	493	-1	-0.3%
International Business Machines	5,787	-321	-5.5%	Ameren	946	-2	-0.2%
Qualcomm	2,993	-166	-5.5%	Eversource Energy	1,382	-2	-0.1%
Consolidated Edison	1,760	-86	-4.9%	Atmos Energy	504	—	—
Southern	3,662	-177	-4.8%	CMS Energy	772	—	—
Sempra Energy	1,135	-49	-4.3%	Duke Energy	3,840	—	—
PPL	943	-26	-2.8%	Nisource	334	—	—
Harris	1,091	-27	-2.5%	Spectra Energy	359	—	—
Xcel Energy	1,525	-36	-2.4%	Williams	87	—	—
AGL Resources	556	-11	-2.0%	TOTAL	\$37,891	\$-1,456	-3.8%

Figure 5: Profitable Corporations Paying No Income Tax in 2015

Source: Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy (2017), [The 35 Percent Corporate Tax Myth](#)

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- [51] There is some debate about the economic effect of decreasing corporate tax rates and tax evasion. Some, like Elizabeth Warren and progressive think tanks, highlight the economic cost of lower effective tax rates and of loopholes that allow some of the most profitable corporations in the US (including tech companies, energy companies, and oil and gas companies) to pay zero taxes, often year after year (see, e.g. Elizabeth Warren, 11 Apr 2019, [I'm proposing a big new idea: the Real Corporate Profits Tax](#), in Medium, and the Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy (2017), [The 35 Percent Corporate Tax Myth](#). By contrast, right-wing and tax-avoidant institutions like the Cato Institute suggest that while corporate tax rates have in fact decreased, [corporate tax revenues have actually increased](#), because of a higher percentage of companies listed as S-corporations or pass-through entities (rather than C-corporations).
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