

Inside Development

Gates Foundation

Q&A: Bill and Melinda Gates expand on 3 surprises from annual letter

Following the publication of the Gates Foundation's 2019 letter, Devex asked the billionaire co-chairs about their views on the importance of data, human capital, and getting more mobile phones for women.

By [Catherine Cheney](#) // 13 February 2019



Bill and Melinda Gates, co-founders of the Gates Foundation. Photo by: REUTERS / Shannon Stapleton

SAN FRANCISCO — The time is now to ensure women have a stake in their financial future, according to Bill and Melinda Gates. The idea that mobile phones are most powerful in the hands of the poorest women is one of the nine “surprises” the founders of the [Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation](#) detailed in their [annual letter](#) released Tuesday.

Of the surprises they’ve been confronted with along their journey to philanthropy, the Gates write: “Some worry us. Others inspire us. All of

them are prodding us to action. We hope they do the same for you, because that's how the world gets better.”

In an email interview, Devex asked the billionaire co-chairs of the largest private foundation in the world about their views on the importance of data, human capital, and getting more mobile phones in the hands of women.

The exchange has been edited for length and clarity.

You write that you could easily spend your whole annual letter talking about the role that data plays in driving progress for the poor. What else would you highlight about data that did not make it into the letter?

Bill Gates: We are both continuously impressed by how data is being used in new ways in the fight against polio. For example, the [Global Polio Eradication Initiative](#) has cornered the virus to the smallest geographic area in history. It built a comprehensive surveillance system across every continent, reaching even remote areas of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Nigeria, which are the last places where polio is still endemic.

In the last 10 years, GPEI even started sampling sewage to detect the virus before it reaches children. In 2018, there were only [33 cases](#) of wild poliovirus reported in the world. The [Global Fund \[the fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria\]](#) is now applying lessons learned from polio to the fight against malaria, by utilizing more timely data about disease outbreaks, and eventually, genetic information on the mosquitoes and parasites, to better target interventions in different geographies.

Melinda wrote in the margins of the letter about human capital: "Leave it to economists to come up with such a dry term." How might the foundation do more to support human capital and how do you envision the potential for partnership with the World Bank and others?

Melinda Gates: As we wrote in our [Goalkeepers report](#) last year, to continue improving the human condition, we must help create opportunities in Africa's fastest-growing, poorest countries. This means investing in human capital, or the health and education of young people.

This has been and continues to be a core focus of our foundation's work. It encompasses efforts such as immunization for children, maternal and child health care, infectious disease treatment and prevention, and much more. And, in addition to continued support from donor governments and partners, it's critical for countries in sub-Saharan Africa to dedicate more of their own domestic resources to investing in their young people so

they can survive, thrive, and contribute to their countries' economies one day.

We work with the [World Bank](#) and other donors on a range of human capital initiatives, including the [Global Financing Facility](#). The World Bank is an indispensable partner to us when it comes to human capital, investing billions of dollars a year for health and education in low- and lower-middle income countries.

You concluded your annual letter with a section on how “mobile phones are most powerful in the hands of the world’s poorest women.” Can you expand on how the Gates Foundation, in partnership with others, will help more women access mobile technology?

MG: Mobile phones are just one example of how we see technology opening up new economic empowerment opportunities for women. Mobile phones can provide low-cost, easy access to things like digital financial services — which are entry points into the economy for many people, especially those in the poorest communities. Services like mobile money can help people manage their money more easily, weather financial shocks, boost their incomes, and ultimately, climb out of poverty.

“The opportunity for women’s economic empowerment through digital financial services is tremendous.”

— Melinda Gates, co-chair, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

We have found this effect is even greater for women. When women can earn money and decide how it’s spent, their ability to control their own futures and push against the societal norms that hold them back also increases, as do the benefits for their families and communities.

We are working with partners to help women in developing countries access and use mobile money at a larger scale — often through their phones. In Tanzania, Pakistan, and India, for example, our partners are working with governments to digitize social protection programs and ensure funds are directed into women’s accounts. A growing body of evidence shows this is a good way to expand women’s access to financial services. The opportunity for women’s economic empowerment through digital financial services is tremendous, and the time to ensure women have a stake in their financial future is now.

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Catherine Cheney is the Senior Editor for Special Coverage at Devex. She leads the editorial vision of Devex's news events and editorial coverage of key moments on the global development calendar. Catherine joined Devex as a reporter, focusing on technology and innovation in making progress on the Sustainable Development Goals. Prior to joining Devex, Catherine earned her bachelor's and master's degrees from Yale University, and worked as a web producer for POLITICO, a reporter for World Politics Review, and special projects editor at NationSwell. She has reported domestically and internationally for outlets including The Atlantic and the Washington Post. Catherine also works for the Solutions Journalism Network, a non profit organization that supports journalists and news organizations to report on responses to problems.