Understanding the Changing Landscape for Global Philanthropy through Panel Data Analysis

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# Abstract (please do not exceed 250 words)

The philanthropic sector has been rapidly evolving in recent years, with new players entering the market and new forms of giving emerging. While much of the research on philanthropy has focused on individual donors or single-year snapshots of giving, there is a growing recognition of the need to understand the broader trends and patterns in the sector at a global level. This project uses a fixed-effect panel data analysis to examine potential connections between national giving levels and factors of the political, economic, and philanthropic environments of the respective countries. The giving data come from the Global Philanthropy Tracker, while the Global Philanthropy Environment Index, the World Bank World Governance Indicators, and the Heritage Foundation’s Index of Economic Freedom provide the measures for the different environment factors. The data covers the years 2020, 2018, and 2014. The results show limited support for connections between international giving patterns and political, economic, and philanthropic environment factors, although limitations in the data warrant further research on the topic.

# Introduction

The philanthropic sector plays a critical role in addressing societal issues and promoting the general welfare of communities. Encompassing a wide range of organizations, including non-profits, foundations, and charities, the philanthropic sector uses its resources to support initiatives in areas such as education, healthcare, poverty reduction, and environmental conservation. However, the growth of the philanthropic sector is influenced by various social, economic, and political factors that affect the level of resources available, the incentives for giving, and the regulatory environment governing philanthropy. For example, according to the 2022 Bilanz des Helfens, giving in Germany to refugees increased significantly from February to April 2022 in in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine (GfK Charity Panel, 2022). However, this trend is countered by both declining giving in all other areas, plus a drop in the overall number of individual donors. Understanding how these factors interact with the philanthropic sector and developing appropriate policies is crucial to unlocking the sector’s full potential.

Recent studies have begun using new research conducted through projects, such as the Global Philanthropy Environment Index, to define how certain factors affect the philanthropic sector. However, most of new studies have only recently published their inaugural report. This means that while these studies are informative, it is only a snapshot of the situation at that time. In this paper, I will build off these studies in order to expand the understanding of factors that influence the philanthropic sector and giving trends by examining their development over time. To accomplish this, I will employ fixed-effect panel data analysis on the levels of giving reflected in the data from the IU Lilly School of Philanthropy’s Global Philanthropy Tracker compared to indexes that measure factors of the political, economic, and philanthropic environments of the respective countries. The goal of this project is to better understand how factors of the enabling environment for philanthropy influence philanthropic activity at the country and individual level.

# Literature Review

## Philanthropic environment

One point that should be mentioned in this section is the current connotation with the word “philanthropy”. This can evoke images of rich men, often white, from more Western and industrialized countries giving parts of their immense wealth to causes they deem fit (Wiepking, 2021, pp. 198–199). This can cause problems with trying to discuss philanthropy on a global scale because it can limit what is considered philanthropy, even if charitable activity is common in a certain place or region. This particularly can affect discussions looking at formal vs. informal philanthropy. Informal philanthropy involves giving methods such as directly offering people money or time, outside of organizations, while formal philanthropy focuses on charitable activity done through more established channels. For this thesis, my main focus will continue to be leaning to the formal side of philanthropy, as that is what currently informs policy and what usable data currently exists. However, future studies will need to examine how these methods of giving can be brought into the discussion as different countries have varying levels of both forms.

A key assumption in the discourse on philanthropic environment is that it is made up of a number of conditions that result in the ability to freely participate in charitable activity. This assumption also supposes that these conditions can be changed through government policies. For example, Lee (2010) found in a study of international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) across 126 countries that democracies supported growth for INGOs, as such governments tend to support freedom of expression and association. The study also noted that high-income countries not only had more resources to facilitate INGO growth, but that citizens of these countries were more inclined to participate in INGO activities.

However, more recently, there have been discussions about how to best measure growth in the nonprofit sector. In their 2019 study, Pennerstorfer and Rutherford (2019) explain how even with their two-country comparison between Austria and Scotland, correlations between indicators were very low, and each indicator used could tell a very different story about the sector. For example, in Scotland, while income concentration and total funds concentration showed steady growth, current asset concentration showed constant decline (Pennerstorfer & Rutherford, 2019, p. 451).

These changes become more important as cross-border philanthropy becomes not only more popular, but more convenient, as the environment in both the sending and receiving country plays into how donations must be managed. However, the rules around such donations often differ greatly from other forms of philanthropy. A key issue discussed in the literature (Wiepking, 2021) is that not only are international sources on philanthropy limited, they often either rely on outdated information or are very costly to produce. This has led to a need to create new sources that more accurately display the philanthropic situation in countries of the Global South. While some regional studies have emerged, such as the Doing Good Index from the Center for Asian Philanthropy Studies, and Philanthropy in the Arab Region from Philanthropy for Social Justice and Peace, only the Doing Good Index has released multiple editions. These regional studies also do not put these countries in a broader global giving context.

Starting in 2006, the Hudson Institute tried to address this lack of up-to-date information on international giving by launching the Index of Global Philanthropy and Remittances. In 2015, to expand the focus to the overall environment towards philanthropy, the Hudson Institute released the Index of Philanthropic Freedom. This study was intended to contribute to policy discussions on improving the operating environment for the nonprofit sector. In 2016, the Hudson Institute decided to transfer ownership of the projects to the Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy, which relaunched the reports as the Global Philanthropy Environment Index (formerly the Index of Philanthropic Freedom) and the Global Philanthropy Tracker (formerly the Index of Global Philanthropy and Remittances).

Additionally, the Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy conducted an analysis of the first edition of the Global Philanthropy Environment Index and compared the index’s scores for certain factors against scores from other indexes. They found that there was direct and statistically significant relationship between positive giving behavior and the Global Philanthropy Environment Index’s scores, in particular with tax incentives and a positive socio-cultural environment (Garcia et al., 2019, p. 22). Therefore, I hypothesize that increased levels of charitable activity are positively related to improved conditions in the philanthropic environment (H1).

## Political environment

Looking at the conditions that make up the environment for philanthropy, scholars in the field have examined the connection between philanthropy and the ability to act freely, whether as an individual or an organization (Anheier, 2014, 2017; Thindaw et al., 2003). For example, Payton (1987) showed that pluralism was vital to the development of philanthropy. As he pointed out, the representation within power structures as well the decentralization of political power that was vital to a pluralistic society also provided ample space in public discourse for civil society to grow.

As Lee (2010) pointed out, democratic systems tend to inherently provide this space for philanthropy. On the other hand, in countries with less established democratic traditions, such freedoms are much more subject to attack, straining the philanthropic sector and making it hard to work effectively. However, the way and extent to which more restrictive philanthropic environments arise depends on a number of factors. Young (2006) argues that one factor that affects this relationship is the government’s desire to control how society operates. As many developed countries do not often struggle with this impulse from administrations, the theoretical frameworks used to explain their situations may not apply as well as to situations in certain developing countries. He also points out that poor regulatory conditions can hamper the ability of the nonprofit sector to grow, even if the society sees a need for it to address issues that governments cannot solve.

Latin America has experienced this sort of regime in multiple countries, which has been described as “the sway of demagogic leaders who have accrued executive power, weakened pluralism and undermined effective institutional checks and balances” (S. M. Appe & Layton, 2016, pp. 117–118). This has also required nonprofits and civil society to find ways to cope with their local governments, including at formal, semi-formal, and informal levels. In Ecuador, all three forms of philanthropic activity were forced to the actions of the Correa administration, and their responses ranged from creating a nonprofit collective in order to establish unity within the sector, to establishing diffuse, informal social movements to continue their work (S. Appe et al., 2019). The authors argue that this case provides examples of how countries in both the Global North and Global South can address the threat of authoritarian and populist regimes.

More recent additions to the literature have questioned this stability in developed democratic countries, in light of the rise of populist movements in the developed world. In their study, Anheier et al. (2019) discusses that within G20 countries, experts note that erosion of the philanthropic sector in more consolidated democracies has not necessarily created an adversarial environment as discussed in Young’s research, but at least an indifferent one. This can cause policies to have unintended consequences on civil society, such as anti-terrorist legislation that can limit nonprofits’ ability to send and receive cross-border donations. The experts also bring up so-called “pendulum policies”, which expose more pronounced differences between when center-left and center-right governments are in power and the impact those administrations have on the philanthropic sector (Anheier et al., 2019, p. 7). Furthermore, in contrast to less developed countries where a lack of regulation can be a stumbling block, the issue in developed countries is often that the bureaucracy becomes too cumbersome. These inconsistences and roadblocks also make necessary reforms to stem the erosion difficult.

The issue of policy implementation in regard to the nonprofit sector can cause problems, even when these policies are properly enforced and friendly to the sector. Philips and Blumberg (2017) argue that it also depends on the overall philosophy that the government accepts about what the relationship between it and the nonprofit sector should entail. This determines then, in part, how the government decides to regulate, monitor, and support philanthropic organizations. The authors indicate that most such “meta-policies” are not predicated on mutual agreement, and that this philosophy affects certain parts of the sector more than others. Looking back at the Ecuador example for S. Appe et al. (2019), Correa targeted indigenous and environmental rights groups, which he saw as directly opposed to his administration.

Given this background, I hypothesize that an increase in philanthropic activity is directly related to improvements of its political environment, including political stability, rule of law, and regulatory quality (H2).

## Economic Environment

A country’s economic environment can be defined in part by how government policies intervene in the economy. These policies, along with the level of economic freedom that results, are two key indicators for philanthropy as they can influence private social investment. Economic freedom is measured by the presence of the stable legal framework for entering contracts and protecting private property, and the level of government intervention in the economy through ownership, regulation, and taxes (Berggren, 2003). As Pritchard (2017) argues, charitable giving increases with increased economic freedom since this increases the resources available to the private sector.

In addition to private social investment, economic climate and freedom can affect foreign direct investment, as countries with more conducive environments may benefit more from these flows. For example, a study by Feldmann (2017) looked at data specifically on human capital investment from 109 countries over almost 40 years and found that levels of investment were affected by the level of economic freedom in the recipient country. Specifically, he found that protections for property rights and economic agents, an existing but not overbearing regulatory structure, and facilitation of credit markets most affected the human capital investment in these countries. This finding has also been supported by other researchers studying this relationship in other regions of the world, such as Bengoa and Sanchez-Robles (2003) in Latin America or Imtiaz and Bashir (2017) in South Asia. However, more recent studies have started examining the causal links between these factors, and which direction the casualty flows (Ciftci & Durusu-Ciftci, 2022) and if this effect can vary by region (Singh & Gal, 2020). For most of these studies, the researchers employed a panel data analysis comparing FDI levels to a measure of economic freedom, often the Heritage Foundation’s Index of Economic Freedom.

While these two factors have been the focus of a lot of research, other economic factors have been used to explain increases in philanthropic activity. Frumkin (1995) pointed to personal wealth accumulation and an increased propensity to donate and assist those in need, while others pointed to household wealth, along with GDP growth, as promoting higher income and therefore giving households both more money to donate and the opportunity to support more causes (Havens & Schervish, 2014).

This connection between a stable economic environment and increased philanthropic activity leads to the final hypothesis for this section: Increased economic freedom and well-established economic regulation, as well as traditional measures such as GDP and GNI, are positively related to increased levels of philanthropic activity (H3).

# Methodology

The first section of this study will deal with the analysis of the macro level of giving. The analysis will be dealing with a comparison of environmental factors for the philanthropic sectors, along with examining the relationship between these factors and the levels of private philanthropy observed at the national level. To conduct this examination, I will use a fixed-effect panel data analysis research design. The analysis will be run using the plm and pglm packages in R.

The equation for the fixed effects is seen below:

$$GPT\_{it}= β\_{1} IND\_{it}+ α\_{i}+ μ\_{it} $$

Where: GPT = Dependent var (giving amount);

$β\_{1}$ = Regression coefficient;

IND = Independent var (factor in index);

$α$ = country fixed effects;

$μ$ = error term;

i = 1, …, n; and

t = 1,…, t

This version of panel data analysis was chosen because it addresses variation within the “individuals” being measured, in this case the countries, which allows for better isolation of the effect of policy on changes in philanthropic activity. It also allows for easy control of variables such as income level and region. For the political and economic factors, two-way fixed effects will be employed to better address both individual and time-related factors. The error term for this equation will use clustered standard errors to address heteroskedasticity within the country error terms over time.

To obtain giving levels for each country in the study, I will use data from the Global Philanthropy Tracker and its predecessor, the Index of Global Philanthropy and Remittances. This reports measures four flows that contribute to cross-border philanthropy: Remittances, Official Development Assistance, Private Capital Investment, and Private Philanthropy. The total sum of all four flows will be used as the dependent variable for the analysis since the log-transformed data passes the Shapiro-Wilks test for standard distribution. Standard distribution is one of the key assumptions in panel data; however, both the original and log-transformed data will be assessed for comparison. Using both reports allows this analysis to cover three time periods (T=3). However, while the Global Philanthropy Tracker cover 47 countries, the final edition of the Index of Global Philanthropy and Remittances only cover 40. Therefore, the panel analysis will use an unbalanced panel in order to have the maximum number of countries represented in the data.

The relationship between philanthropic environment and national giving trends will be measured with the Global Philanthropy Environment Index, or GPEI (IU Lilly Family School of Philanthropy, 2022). This study of the global environment currently encompasses 91 countries and compares their respective philanthropic environments based on legal, political, economic, and social-cultural factors. For this analysis, both of the available editions of the index will be used, released in 2018 and 2022. To avoid any correlation between the political and economic scores in the GPEI, these will not be included in the analysis. The analysis will focus on the remaining four factors: Ease of Operating, Tax Incentives, Cross-Border Giving, and Socio-Cultural Environment.

Looking at the political factors for this study, the indicators used to compare with the GPEI will come from the World Bank Governance Indicators. These indicators capture three aspects of the political environment that are key for philanthropy: regulatory quality, rule of law, and political stability. When a country has high regulatory quality, the policies implemented by the government are more robust and better implemented, which provides clear guidance for private sector development. Rule of law, in addition to capturing the extent citizens abide by societal rules and norms, also reflects the ability to enforce contracts and property rights, as well as the effectiveness of the court system for redress. Finally, political stability allows philanthropic organizations to make plans for their operations, knowing that regime change or political violence are unlikely if their focus is not necessarily a popular one.

The economic factors will be assessed according to three aspects: freedom, quality, and growth. The Heritage Foundation’s Index of Economic Freedom will represent economic freedom, illustrating concepts such as open markets and ease of trade across borders. As the World Governance Indicators cover the aspects of Rule of Law and Regulatory Quality, any of the subfactors that fall into these will be excluded from the analysis. This leaves the indicators for Market Openness: Trade Freedom, Financial Freedom, and Investment Freedom. Lastly, economic growth will be measured by measures of GDP and GNI. A note on this section is that although the second edition of the GPEI also includes an indicator for economic environment, the first edition did not. Therefore, when comparing the scores, only the factors that appear in both editions will be included.

# Results

## Philanthropic Environment

Beginning with the factors of the philanthropic environment measured in the GPEI, no statistically significant results arise. However, as seen in Table 1, the values for Tax Incentives, Cross-Border Flows and Socio-Cultural Environment are negative, implying a negative correlation between these scores and giving amounts for global philanthropy. This also seems to contradict the expectations of most of the findings the literature provides related to these topics.

Table 1: Philanthropic Environment (Untransformed Giving Data)

|  |
| --- |
|  |
|  | Total 4 Flows |
|  |
| Overall Score | 1,270.27 |
|  | (2,449.19) |
| Ease of Operating | 751.62 |
|  | (1,613.12) |
| Tax Incentives | -1,200.24 |
|  | (995.57) |
| Cross-Border Flows | -737.36 |
|  | (882.56) |
| Socio-Cultural Environment | -2,090.78 |
|  | (2,476.37) |
| N | 87 |
|  |
| Note: | \*\*\*p < .01; \*\*p < .05; \*p < .1 |

However, when looking at the results for the log-transformed data shown in Table 2, we see somewhat different results. While the direction of the relationships remains constant, a key change is that tax incentives now have a correlation that is significant at the 0.05 level. However, the practical meaning of this is that for every one unit increase in the tax incentives score, international giving will drop by 50 percent. This result, like the results in Table 1, go against the findings in much of the literature. However, certain limitations of this model may explain this finding and will be discussed in the following section.

Table 2: Philanthropic Environment (Log-transformed Giving Data)

|  |
| --- |
|  |
|  | log(Total 4 Flows) |
|  |
| Overall Score | 0.18 |
|  | (0.39) |
| Ease of Operating | 0.23 |
|  | (0.24) |
| Tax Incentives | -0.50\*\* |
|  | (0.20) |
| Cross-Border Flows | -0.09 |
|  | (0.16) |
| Socio-Cultural Environment | -0.18 |
|  | (0.18) |
| N | 87 |
|  |
| Note: | \*\*\*p < .01; \*\*p < .05; \*p < .1 |

## Political Environment

The political environment factors, captured by the World Bank’s Governance Indicators, tell a similar story to the scores above. Looking at Political Stability, Regulatory Quality, and Rule of Law, the numbers do not provide any statistically significant results related to giving to global philanthropy (see Table 3). However, there are two key aspects that are worth consideration. First, the Political Stability score is negative, reflecting another result that goes against previous findings in the literature. Second, when looking at the p-values, although not statistically significant, the values for both Political Stability (0.16) and Rule of Law (0.20) are far lower than the value for Regulatory Quality (0.86).

The results with the log-transformed data paint a slightly different picture. First, both Regulatory Quality and Rule of Law show statistically significant results in this analysis. However, a key change is that Regulatory Quality now has a negative relationship with global philanthropy. The findings, shown in Table 4, suggest that for every point increase in Rule of Law, giving increases by 8 percent, while giving would decrease by 6 percent for every point in Regulatory Quality.

Table 3: Political Environment (Untransformed Giving Data)

|  |
| --- |
|  |
|  | Total 4 Flows |
|  |
| Political Stability | -224.05 |
|  | (151.33) |
| Regulatory Quality | 52.70 |
|  | (244.46) |
| Rule of Law | 454.19 |
|  | (309.96) |
| N | 133 |
|  |
| Note: | \*\*\*p < .01; \*\*p < .05; \*p < .1 |

Table 4: Political Environment (Log-transformed Giving Data)

|  |
| --- |
|  |
|  | log(Total 4 Flows) |
|  |
| Political Stability | -0.01 |
|  | (0.01) |
| Regulatory Quality | -0.06\*\*\* |
|  | (0.02) |
| Rule of Law | 0.08\*\*\* |
|  | (0.03) |
| N | 132 |
|  |
| Note: | \*\*\*p < .01; \*\*p < .05; \*p < .1 |

## Economic Environment

Lastly, the economic factors measured in the Heritage Foundation’s Index of Economic Freedom offer some interesting changes to the trends seen in the first two sections of the analysis. Looking at the raw data in Table 5, only the and the subfactor for financial freedom have positive relationships with philanthropic giving levels. However, both the log of GDP and Financial Freedom are significant at the 10 percent level, the only factor to show any level of significance when compared to the untransformed data.

Table 5: Economic Environment (Untransformed Giving Data)

|  |
| --- |
|  |
|  | Total 4 Flows |
|  |
| log(GDP) | -7,645.27 |
|  | (5,885.14) |
| Overall Score | 62.11 |
|  | (261.64) |
| Property Rights | -1.81 |
|  | (120.35) |
| Investment Freedom | -57.02 |
|  | (313.05) |
| Business Freedom | -161.67 |
|  | (101.05) |
| Financial Freedom | 727.67\* |
|  | (415.38) |
| N | 133 |
|  |
| Note: | \*\*\*p < .01; \*\*p < .05; \*p < .1 |

Despite financial freedom showing some level of significance in the first analysis, it does not carry over to the log-transformed data, as seen in Table 6. Instead, the log of GDP and the score for Investment Freedom show statistical significance. In practice, this means that for Investment Freedom, a point increase would lead to a 3 percent decrease in international giving. Meanwhile, in terms of GDP, if GDP were to increase one percent, this would cause a 1.17 percent decrease in international giving. Both of these cases follow the trend shown above of going against the expected outcomes from past literature.

Table 6: Economic Environment (Log-transformed Giving Data)

|  |
| --- |
|  |
|  | log(Total 4 Flows) |
|  |
| log(GDP) | -1.17\* |
|  | (0.71) |
| Overall Score | 0.02 |
|  | (0.03) |
| Property Rights | 0.002 |
|  | (0.01) |
| Investment Freedom | -0.03\*\* |
|  | (0.01) |
| Business Freedom | -0.001 |
|  | (0.01) |
| Financial Freedom | 0.03 |
|  | (0.02) |
| N | 132 |
|  |
| Note: | \*\*\*p < .01; \*\*p < .05; \*p < .1 |

# Discussion

Looking at factors in the philanthropic environment, I offered the following hypothesis: increased levels of charitable activity are positively related to improved conditions in the philanthropic environment (H1). However, the data from the Global Philanthropy Environment Index paints a different picture. Not only were tax incentives the only relevant factor in the analysis, but the majority of the factors showed a negative relationship to the total giving flows. In addition, the level to which tax incentives would be predicted to lower philanthropic giving is quite high.

For the political environment, my hypothesis was as follows: an increase in philanthropic activity is directly related to improvements of its political environment, including political stability, rule of law, and regulatory quality (H2). This hypothesis saw more support than the first, albeit in a limited capacity. Rule of Law did show a positive relationship with international giving levels, but Regulatory Quality, while significant, displayed a negative relationship to giving amounts.

Lastly, my theory for economic factors posited that increased economic freedom and well-established economic regulation, as well as traditional measures such as GDP and GNI, are positively related to increased levels of philanthropic activity (H3). This hypothesis, like H1, was unsupported by the analysis. Log of GDP and Investment Freedom showed a negative correlation to international giving levels at a significant level.

This initial analysis goes against both my own expectations of potential outcomes, as well as the likely outcomes presented by the bodies of literature on these factors. However, some considerations must be taken into account when discussing this data and its ability to represent the true situation for international giving. First, there is the potential for collinearity between some of these factors. While this wasn’t an issue with earlier studies using these studies, such as Garcia et al (2019), this can cause problems with regression analysis. Therefore, I retested the significant variables from the initial models. Table 7 shows the results. In this version, most of the variables maintain their level of significance. Both the log of GDP and Tax Incentives present a larger coefficient, while Investment Freedom loses its significance entirely. Additionally, the R-squared indicates that these factors could potentially explain around 48 percent of the variance within the total giving amounts.

Table 7: Analysis of Previous Significant Factors

|  |
| --- |
|  |
|  | log(Total 4 Flows) |
|  |
| Tax Incentives | -0.56\*\*\* |
|  | (0.21) |
| Regulatory Quality | -0.08\*\*\* |
|  | (0.02) |
| Rule of Law | 0.06\*\*\* |
|  | (0.02) |
| log(GDP) | -1.71\*\*\* |
|  | (0.55) |
| Investment Freedom | -0.01 |
|  | (0.01) |
| N | 87 |
| R2 | 0.48 |
|  |
| Note: | \*\*\*p < .01; \*\*p < .05; \*p < .1 |

However, the question still remains as to why so many of the factors continue to demonstrate a negative relationship to the data. Currently, I can offer two potential ideas as to why this may be the case. One may be related to the literature review done for this study, and there are potentially more cases where these factors are seen to have other effects that were not included. The second option, which is more likely, is that the limited sample available through the Global Philanthropy Tracker and through the lack of available usable data in general may provide an unbalanced picture of the levels of international giving across the world.

Looking forward, I plan to reevaluate this data in two ways. First, a reorganization of the data by type of factor rather than the study itself may prevent some unseen collinearity from affecting the results. Second, instead of using the full total for giving presented in the Global Philanthropy Tracker, I would repeat the analysis with the 4 flows that make up the total, particularly the private philanthropy flow. This may lead to a result more in line with the findings in the literature. Beyond this study, important considerations for future research would include expanding this analysis from international giving to total philanthropic giving and increasing both the number of countries included and the number of time periods in the analysis.

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