Philanthropy in the changing world: changing attitude to giving?

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The topic of philanthropy has been receiving attention internationally for several decades. Like other areas of non-profit studies, charitable giving and volunteering are attracting more and more attention from researchers in a wide variety of disciplines including economics. Even though philanthropy tends to be considered a sociological theme rather than an economic one, it poses a lot of questions that challenge economists too. Among others we chose those two:

How can economists contribute to the theories related to philanthropy?

Can we consider voluntary giving a demonstration of generosity rather than market-based solutions?

Firstly, we intend to examine the terms that are used in the theory of public economics and to use them to look at the issues of philanthropy. They are e.g. the Samaritan’s Dilemma; the Prisoner’s Dilemma; or the Free-rider Problem, which we consider being interesting and inspiring (Stone 2008).

Next, we try to answer the second question by means of sociological theory. The economists who investigate philanthropy are repeatedly faced with the obvious fact that it does not involve any buying and selling; it is not a marketplace operation. We have to look for, and identify, social values of donors and volunteers rather than economic values because the economists are not fully able to explain empathy, altruism and helping behaviour through economic principles (Rutherford 2008).

The theoretical frame should be filled by relevant empirical data. There is, however, a lack of both theoretical and empirical work in this area in the Czech Republic. At the moment, we don’t have relevant information about trends or people’s motivations. We can only guess at people’s behaviour from some ad hoc research or a one-off survey that was made eighteen years ago.

That is why we intend to carry out a new representative survey in the Czech Republic. Before starting the big survey, we decided to do smaller pre-research probes into people’s attitudes to altruism, philanthropy and giving. A small questionnaire of fifteen questions testing people’s attitudes to giving was used in the survey, which was implemented in two waves with the help of students from the Department of Public Economics of Masaryk University.

Even though our sample was not fully representative, the answers from respondents that we collected have generated interesting findings about people’s views and attitudes. The data were collected between February and April 2009; the second wave is just being started and it will be finished between February and April 2010.

After that, we will thus able to answer such questions as the following from the questionnaire: How do people value giving in contemporary society? Do they think that fund-raising organisations are transparent? Who should support charities – individuals or government? Do people trust nonprofit organisations? Do people consider giving a moral obligation?

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