Overview: rich get richer – and what could be done with just a little of their money

The richest people in the world became nearly 10% richer in 2010. This was not as good for them as 2009, when their wealth increased by nearly 20%. They have now fully recovered from the crisis, owning assets worth $42.7 trillion – 5% more than in 2007. This is more than all the government debt in the world.

All this vast wealth is owned by less 11 million people – about 0.15% of the world’s population. The rich try very hard to pay as little tax as possible, helped by their accountants and advisers. If instead they paid a little more tax on their fortunes, it could make a dramatic difference to countries in crisis.

- If the wealthy individuals of Europe paid a one-off tax of 24%, they could reduce the government debt of all 27 countries to an average level of 60%, the EU’s arbitrary target
- If they volunteered a one-off tax of just 14% they could pay off the entire national debt of Greece, and Portugal, and Iceland, and Spain
- An annual tax of just 5% on these wealthy Europeans would reduce all the deficits in Europe to the EU’s target level of 3% of GDP
- An annual wealth tax of only 1% on the wealthy individuals of North America would be enough to eliminate all the budget deficits of every state in the USA

Chart A. The wealth of the richest people in the world (trillions of US dollars)

Note: HNWI= ‘High net worth individuals’ defined as people with over $1 million to invest, excluding the value of people’s homes.
Sources:
- 2011 World Wealth Report, Cap Gemini/MerrillLynch