

No End to Poverty

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Summary

This paper provides a critique of Jeffrey Sachs' *The End of Poverty: How we can Make it Happen in our Lifetime*, focusing on four main issues: his definition of poverty, his use of the notion of a ladder of development, his concentration on countries rather than people, and his interpretation of the Enlightenment. Other elements of the critique address his understandings of geography and of history, his lack of attention to social and cultural dimensions of development, the inability of poor countries to absorb the levels of aid that he proposes, and the damage caused by suggesting that it is indeed possible to end poverty.

Key Words

Poverty, Economic Growth, Jeffrey Sachs

1. Introduction

The central purpose of this paper is to provide a critique of the increasingly hegemonic position held within the global development community that proposes that it is possible to eliminate poverty through a particular kind of economic growth. It does so primarily through an examination of Jeffrey Sach's (2005) influential work *The End of Poverty: How we can Make it Happen in our Lifetime*, but in so doing it draws on a wider set of debates and literatures. My essential argument is that

- it is not possible to end poverty,

- attempts to do so through the route advocated by Sachs and his followers will not solve the underlying conditions that cause poverty, and
- we must therefore urgently encourage those charged with enabling the world's poor and marginalised communities to enhance their lives to create and adopt alternatives to this hegemonic model.

I begin by summarising the context within which Sach's work has emerged, paying tribute to the undoubted importance of his practice and his vision. This is followed by an overview of the main strengths of his argument, before I focus on fundamental challenges to his position. In conclusion, I point to some of the implications of my arguments for the wider development community.

1.1 The hegemonic position of economic growth

Since the early 1990s and the collapse of the former Soviet Union, there has been an ever-increasing emphasis amongst donors, the international financial institutions (IFIs), the United Nations, and indeed the governments of many poor countries on two key principles: that poverty can indeed be eliminated, and that economic growth is central to the achievement of this objective.

In 1997, just over six months after its election, the new Labour Government in the UK thus proudly presented its first White Paper on Development, entitled *Eliminating World Poverty: a Challenge for the 21st Century* (DFID, 1997). This emphasised the government's intentions to 'Refocus our international development efforts on the elimination of poverty and encouragement of economic growth' (DFID, 1997, p.8).ⁱ At the turn of the new millennium, the power of economic growth associated with globalization provided the context for leaders of the UN's 191 member governments to sign up to The Millennium Development Goals, which enthusiastically espoused the belief that poverty could indeed be eliminated. Ambitious targets were set for 2015, seeking to make dramatic inroads to poverty through interventions in education, health, gender inequality, environmental sustainability, and the creation of a new global partnership in which the private sector would have a particularly prominent role (<http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/> accessed 20th March 2006). Five years later, the Commission for Africa's (2005)

arguments were likewise fundamentally underlain by a consensus that enhancements in economic growth and governance were essential if poverty in the continent is to be eliminated. Its Executive Summary thus begins with the following words:

African poverty and stagnation is the greatest tragedy of our time. Poverty on such a scale demands a forceful response. And Africa – at country, regional, and continental levels – is creating much stronger foundations for tackling its problems. Recent years have seen improvements in economic growth and in governance. But Africa needs more of both if it is to make serious inroads into poverty (Commission for Africa, 2005, p.11).

Much of the focus on economic growth that has come to dominate the thinking of global institutions concerned with 'development' in recent years originated in experiences gained by economic advisers in Latin America during the 1970s and 1980s. One strand of these culminated in the so-called Washington Consensus, proposed by Williamson (1990; see also Williamson 1993; Kuczynski, P-P. and Williamson, 2003), in which he identified ten policy prescriptions which he thought summarised the dominant ideas held by economic advisers on Latin America at that time, focusing primarily on the need for macro-economic discipline, a market economy and openness to the world. Despite various criticisms of the precise formulation of the Consensus (see for example Naím, 2000; Gore, 2000), the neo-liberal agenda based on the twin rhetorics of the 'free market' and 'liberal democracy' did indeed come to dominate much development thinking in the IFIs and donor governments during the 1990s (see also Stiglitz, 2002). As Gore (2000, p.789) has emphasised, the Consensus not only involved a swing to market oriented policies, but also a shift to 'the partial globalization of development policy analysis, and a shift from historicism to ahistorical performance assessment'.

Sachs, too, cut his teeth in the economic turmoil of Latin America in the mid-1980s, and his arguments likewise lie firmly within a tradition that emphasises the

importance of economic growth. However, his economic mentors are somewhat more eclectic than those adopted by neo-liberal economists. Sachs (2005) thus pays regular tribute in *The End of Poverty* both to the importance of classical economics, as expressed in the work of Adam Smith (Sachs, 2005, pp.34, 37, 48, 53, 58, 146, 151, 187, 192, 327, 348, 351), as well as the key significance of Keynes' macroeconomic insights and prescriptions (pp.3, 32, 44-45, 94-95, 101-2; see also Yergin and Stanislaw, 1998). I have chosen in this paper to focus explicitly on Sachs' arguments, in part because of their strength and popular appeal, but also because of the significant individual role he has played in shaping the UN's development agendas in recent years, particularly through his work as head of the UN Millennium Project, founded in 2002 to create a concrete action plan to reverse global poverty (<http://www.unmillenniumproject.org> accessed 24th March 2006). As Easterley (2005, p.WB05) has commented, 'Over the past two decades, Sachs has simply been the world's greatest economic reformer'. Much of what I argue, nevertheless, also seeks to challenge the wider agenda of those promoting economic growth as a solution to poverty. By focusing on what I believe to be some of the strongest arguments in favour of the growth agenda, I seek to throw into doubt the entire conceptual framework within which Sachs' argument has been formulated.

There have, of course, already been many other attempts to challenge this hegemonic position, not least by radical activists associated with the anti-globalisation lobby (Epstein, 2001; Held and McGrew, 2002; Sen, 2002; for critiques of Sachs, see McGinn, 2005; Easterley, 2005; Ellerman, 2005; Henwood, 2006). More subtly, and as yet insufficiently acknowledged, are those within the post-autistic economics network (<http://www.paecon.net/> accessed 23rd March 2006) who are seeking to inject a new sense of sanity, realism and humanity into contemporary economics. Built on diverse critiques of neo-classical economics, especially its excessive focus on mathematical modelling, and a concern with making economics relevant to the lives of real people, the network is beginning to produce a corpus of material that challenges the foundations of much existing economic authority.ⁱⁱ As yet, little of this literature has focused specifically on broadly defined 'development' agendas (for a listing of relevant publications see

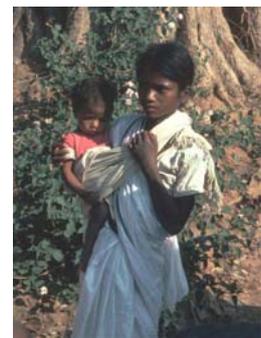
<http://www.paecon.net/PAEReview/development/indexdevelopment.htm> accessed 23rd March 2006), although Sachs has interestingly contributed to one of these papers, addressing the ‘malaria gap’ in Africa (Malaney *et al.*, 2005) in an issue dedicated to a broader forum on economic reform.ⁱⁱⁱ

1.2 Style and status

Sachs’ case is beguiling, lucid and coherent. It is seductive in its simplicity. It paints graphic pictures of poverty across the world. Indeed, there is much to commend it, and it is well-intentioned. Yet it is fundamentally wrong. Part of the strength of his case comes from Sach’s charismatic style and also his status. It is important, therefore, to begin by highlighting the very different context within which my own understandings of poverty have emerged.

Sachs’ analysis of poverty has been framed over many years, from his first travels in India in 1978 to his continuing work with the Millennium Project, recently typified by his short visit to Sauri in Kenya in 2004 (Sachs, 2005, p.227). For much of this time, he has been in the privileged position of acting as an adviser to senior government officials in countries as diverse as Bolivia, Poland, Russia, India, and China. *The End of Poverty* is thus replete with recollections of meetings with leaders such as President Paz Estenssoro of Bolivia (Sachs, 2005, p.98) and Lech Walesa in Poland (Sachs, 2005, p.118), and of the work he has undertaken with people such as Yegor Gaidar in Russia (Sachs, 2005, pp.133-4), and Nirupam Bajpai for Prime Minister Vajpayee in India (Sachs, 2005, pp.181-5). It is scarcely surprising, therefore, that Sachs write primarily about poverty at a national level, dealing with questions about why some countries are poorer than others, and focusing on the decisions that national leaders have to make in trying to address economic growth.

My understanding of poverty comes from an entirely different perspective. Like Sachs, my first encounters with real poverty were in India, but in 1976, two years earlier than he was there. They came from the eyes of a young girl standing under a tree at the edge of a market in Bangaon, South Bihar, holding a baby in





her arms. They were in the voices of a girl and her blind brother, holding out a begging can by the roadside at Hat Gamharia.

They have been through talking with illiterate farmers in northern Portugal in the early 1980s, and with former tractor drivers, now unemployed, in Estonia in the early 1990s. They have been heavily influenced by conversations with children at risk of living and working on the streets of Ethiopia in the early 2000s. I too have been amazed by China, but my interpretations are derived from the lives of stall holders in markets in Gansu in 2005 and in Kunming in 2004, as well the thoughts of teachers in small

towns such as Huining in Lanzhou and Shuang Bai in Yunnan. Most recently, they have been shaped through conversations with young men in a rehabilitation centre in the small town of Cagayan de Oro in the

Philippines in 2006. My view of poverty has thus been constructed primarily from the views of people living in very different conditions to those whom Sachs cites as meeting with in *The End of Poverty*. It is a view shaped by individual poor



people from across the world. It is not a view of nations. It is a view not always acknowledged by politicians and official government advisers.

2. The strengths of Sach's arguments

Sachs' arguments have enormous appeal, and they have been significant in shaping many of the economic changes that have been witnessed in the countries where he has worked over the last 30 years. It is therefore especially important to identify where his main strengths are, and why his specific economic growth agenda has indeed been so popular. There are eight main areas where his arguments have particular importance and resonance, and which help to explain why they have been so influential.

2.1 Style and context

The importance of Sach's style, both written and in the way in which he presents his case orally, has been very influential in ensuring that his ideas, and those associated with the UN Millennium Project, have been widely accepted in the international community. Ellerman (2005, p.24) has thus described Sachs as 'One of the world's most gifted self-publicists'. As he goes on to say, 'Sachs seems to have made a career of the vocal public advocacy of superficially attractive but deeply flawed ideas first about the transition economies and now about development' (Ellerman, 2005, pp.24-25). This is a somewhat uncharitable commentary, since Sachs is indeed a charismatic speaker who is also persuasive in his written arguments. In part this is because he writes in an easily accessible style; he tends to use short sentences and his key points are made succinctly and clearly. He has a good message, and he tells his story well.



Sachs' arguments have struck a chord with very many people across the world, from political leaders, to development economists, musicians and the wider public. The foreword to *The End of Poverty* is, after all, written by Bono, and in this, he comments that 'Great ideas have a lot in common with a great melody. A certain clarity, inevitability, memorability ... you can't get them out of your head, they nag at you ... The ideas in this book are not exactly sing-a-long but they have a hook you won't forget: the end of poverty. It's a challenge that's hard to ignore' (Bono, 2005m xvi). Herein lies another reason for Sach's success. Not only does he write well, but he also has a simple and important message that most people want to believe in: that it is indeed possible to end poverty. It is thus hard for anyone to argue that we should not try to get rid of poverty; it is almost as though there is an in-built moral code that tells us that this is a 'good' message. For some, this belief that we can make the world a better and fairer place dates back to the Enlightenment, and indeed at the end of his book Sachs draws on the thoughts of four Enlightenment thinkers (Jefferson, Smith, Kant and Condorcet), suggesting that our role is indeed to

take forward this heroic vision. As he comments, 'It is our breathtaking opportunity to be able to advance the Enlightenment vision' (Sachs, 2005, p.351). However, the notion that we should do something about poverty is actually very much older than the Enlightenment. Many of the world's religions thus include a concern with the poor among their fundamental moral principles, offering believers guidance or instructions concerning the ways in which this poverty should be alleviated.

Sachs therefore writes well and he has a message that resonates with the consciences of people from many different social and cultural backgrounds. However, in addition to these, the most important reason why his argument is so appealing, particularly to the rich and powerful, is that he claims to show that we can actually do something about poverty without this having an adverse effect on our own lifestyles and economic success. Sachs goes out of his way to illustrate that we already have the capacity to do something about poverty; all that we need is the will to do so. It is almost as though we really can have our cake and eat it. The necessary financial aid, he thus argues, can be found from the defence budgets of the world's richest countries, especially the USA, and by persuading the richest of the rich to contribute their part as well. In his words, governments in the rich countries should readily be able to persuade their electorates that the 0.7% GNP required in development aid 'won't hurt very much at all, especially if it is funded with two bog wollops. The first will transfer part of an overgrown military budget to the agenda of global security through economic development. The second will call especially on the richest of the rich – whose incomes per year are tens of thousands of times those of the poorest of the poor – to do their special part' (Sachs, 2005, p.346).

Sachs has been so successful because he is telling a story that people really want to hear: it is indeed possible to end poverty, and it is also possible to do it without the rich and powerful really noticing any difference.

2.2 A deep understanding of the role of the economy and political leadership

Sachs has immense experience of working with governments in many different parts of the world as they have sought to address ways in which they can create the conditions for economic growth and stability. Drawing on this experience, he is able to write convincingly and effectively about the critical importance of effective political leadership in intervening in these processes of change. The accounts that he is able to portray, particularly about his roles in Bolivia and Russia thus give very important insights into both the potential and the limits of what it is possible to achieve at the interface between the economy and political action. This applies not only to the political-economic interface within a country, but also to the external interactions that are involved. One of the critical conclusions of the vignettes that he includes within *The End of Poverty* is thus that for effective change to be implemented, it is crucial for those states interacting externally with a country to be fully committed to enabling a beneficial transformation to occur. He is thus highly critical of US involvement in Bolivia and Russia, noting with respect to the former that ‘The U.S. lack of support for Bolivia was appalling’ (Sachs, 2005, p.105), and the latter that ‘The West’s failure to help had very high costs’ (Sachs, 2005, p.143). Sachs’ practical experiences of trying to implement beneficial economic policies in many contrasting parts of the world have convinced him of the necessity for support of such initiatives among the richest countries, and this is perhaps one reason why he argues so passionately in *The End of Poverty* for a shared commitment to ending poverty.

Interestingly, despite the implementation problems associated with some of Sachs’ economic strategies, he remains convinced that these are fundamentally right, and that it is the lack of external support that has limited their efficacy. His comments on Russia are particularly pertinent on this matter:

Looking back, would I have advised Russia differently knowing what I know today? I would have been less optimistic about getting large-scale U.S. aid – especially with Richard Cheney and Paul Wolfowitz in leadership positions, with their visions of Russia as a continuing threat rather than a future trade and foreign policy partner. Knowing that, I would have been less

sanguine about the chances for success. But would the advice have been different? To a large extent, the answer is no (Sachs, 2005, p.146)

I return to these important issues in more detail below (although for a wider critique of Sachs' own role in these interventions, see Henwood, 2006).

2.3 The analysis of the causes of poverty

In *The End of Poverty* Sachs provides graphic descriptions of poverty, and provides a generally useful analysis of many of its causes. Interestingly, and in order to make his points more pertinent at the human scale, he draws close parallels between the economics of households, and the economics of states. Underlying his analysis is the argument that there are eight key factors that tend to make economies stagnate: *poverty itself* is one cause, because there is no income to invest in the future; *physical geography* means that some countries need to make extra investments; a *fiscal trap* means that some governments lack money for infrastructural investments; *governments* often fail to provide suitable conditions for investment, notably peace and security; there are *cultural barriers*, notably concerning women's rights; *geopolitics*, in the form of trade barriers can cause stagnation; there is a *lack of innovation*, especially away from coastal locations; and there is also a *demographic trap* whereby the poorest of the poor still have very fertility rates (Sachs, 2005, pp.56-66). Sachs is convincing in his arguments that these are among the most important challenges that need to be overcome.

Over and above these, though, he also identifies four especially significant factors that have led to the very high levels of poverty currently to be found in Africa. Rejecting single cause explanations, and arguing that political changes, good governance and economic reform are insufficient by themselves to enable growth in Africa, he thus argues that malaria, the location of many of the continent's people in its interior, the reliance of much of Africa's food production on rain fed agriculture, and the high rates of nutrient depletion of many of the soils are critical factors that still need to be overcome if Africa's people are to be liberated from the downward spiral of poverty. These are indeed all important dimensions of African poverty, and

it is valuable to have them highlighted so prominently in international discourses on the subject.

2.4 A critique of past development policy and practice

Sachs writes convincingly and knowingly about the flaws of previous development prescriptions. In particular, he reiterates many of the previous critiques of the 'structural adjustment era' (Sachs, 2005, p.81), commenting that although 'There were some truths in the structural adjustment agenda' (Sachs, 2005, p.81), 'Sadly, there were self-serving and ideological aspects of the structural adjustment era's failures of advice and insufficient help' (Sachs, 2005, p.82). He nevertheless takes these arguments further, and highlights four particular issues that warrant further attention.

First, he regularly asserts the importance of identifying a plurality of possible solutions to development issues, arguing that 'One of the weaknesses of development thinking is the relentless drive for a magic bullet, the one decisive investment that will turn the tide. Alas, it does not exist' (Sachs, 2005, p.255).

Second, he highlights a failure with the contemporary emphasis on Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) (see also Gomes *et al.*, 2002; Ohiorhenuan, 2002; Unwin, 2004; Fraser, 2005; Zack-Williams and Mohan, 2005), which he rightly comments are often insufficiently focused on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). In his words,

the international community's approach remains incoherent in practice. On the one side, it announces bold goals, like the Millennium Development Goals, and even ways that the goals can be achieved, such as the pledge of increased donor assistance made in the Monterrey Consensus. Yet when it comes to real practice, where the rubber hits the road, in the poverty reduction plans, the Millennium Development Goals are expressed only as vague aspirations rather than operational targets (Sachs, 2005, pp.270-271).

Third, Sachs presents powerful evidence to emphasise that democracy and economic growth are not necessarily causally linked. This is extremely important, because it challenges the neo-liberal agenda underlain by the twin pillars of democracy and the free market that has been so dominant in development thinking in recent years. Again, in his words,

‘Democratization, alas, does not readily translate into faster economic growth, at least in the short term. The links from democracy to economic performance are relatively weak, even though democracy is surely a boon for human rights and a barrier against large-scale killing, torture and other abuses by the state. The point is not that Africa will soar economically now that it is democratising, but rather that the charge of authoritarian rule as a basic obstacle to good governance in Africa is passé (Sachs, 2005, p.315).

This argument has very important implications for global development policy, because it breaks asunder the core assumption that has underlain many of the arguments of donors and international institutions that good governance, in the form of ‘Western’-style liberal democracy, is essential if African countries are to become economically successful. As Sachs points out, there are many countries of the world, not least in the Arabian Peninsula and China, where there has been very rapid growth unaccompanied by traditionally defined democracy. We now therefore need to engage seriously with this rupture, and explore the possibility that other kinds of political institutions, perhaps building in part on African communal traditions, might actually be more relevant to the shaping of sustained patterns of economic activity in the continent.

Fourth, Sachs is relentless in his criticism of rich countries for the hypocrisy of their governments with respect to aid policy. He thus comments that ‘The donors have put great stress on the need for countries to improve their governance, but much too little stress on how donors themselves need to improve their own performance’ (Sach, 2005, p.277). In criticizing donors for failures of their policies

with respect to issues such as magnitude, timing, predictability and harmonization of aid, Sachs undoubtedly points to key areas where practice needs improvement (Unwin, 2004), but it should nevertheless also be emphasised that the Development Assistance Committee has indeed been working cogently over the past decade to improve matters (see OECD, 2002 for example), and many donors are indeed striving for improvements in all these four aspects of their performance.^{iv}

2.5 The critique of US policy

Sachs rightly lays particular blame for the continuing extent of poverty and global inequality at the door of successive US governments. While he also criticizes other rich countries, it is the US as the major world economy and ‘superpower’ that Sachs condemns most vociferously. His comments about the failure of the ‘West’ to take action in support of his policies for economic growth in Russia have already been noted, but it is in his forthright exposure of flawed US policies over the so-called ‘war against terrorism’ that his arguments are most effective. As Sachs (2005, especially chapter 17) points out so lucidly, the US decision to back military action ‘rather than other approaches to international relations’ (Sachs, 2005, p.329) is fundamentally flawed. The most convincing part of Sachs argument is quite simply that if the US were to spend more on supporting economic growth in poor countries it would need to spend less on military expenditure, and that this would therefore be an economically sensible thing to do. Sachs argues that the US decision to support military spending rather than foreign aid assistance is based on three mistaken ideas: that the US is already doing all that it can to help the poor; that the US military can indeed achieve security for its citizens even without a stable world; and that ‘the world is entering a war of cultures’ (Sachs, 2005, p.331). For Sachs (2005, p.331), though, the real ‘problem in the United States has not been public opposition to increased foreign assistance, but a lack of political leadership even to inform the public about its importance, and to ask the public for greater efforts’.

2.6 The importance of geography

One of Sachs greatest contributions to the literature on development economics has been his emphasis on the importance of ‘geography’. As the latter part of this paper

argues, his understanding of this importance is flawed, but for an economist he has nevertheless made remarkable strides in understanding that the world is indeed marvellously diverse and varied. Far too much development policy has been based on economic practices that 'should' work in an ideal world, without understanding the enormous impact that this geographical variation between places will have on the way that they actually work out in reality.

As Sachs (2005, pp.104-5) relates, he first woke up to geography when he was working in Bolivia. His comments in this respect are worth quoting at length:

Of course I knew that Bolivia was landlocked and mountainous. The mountain vistas added immeasurably to Bolivia's charm, the high altitude to my chronic shortness of breath in La Paz, and the landlocked status to Bolivia's lingering suspicions and hard feelings concerning Chile, which had stripped away Bolivia's coastal territory in 1884. Yet I had not reflected on how these conditions were key geographical factors, perhaps the overriding factors, in Bolivia's chronic poverty. In all of my training, the ideas of physical geography and the spatial distribution of economic activity had not ever been mentioned (Sachs, 2005, p,105)

This is indeed a remarkable confession, and it says much about the naivety and inappropriateness of much economic education. If only more economists would wake up to such realisations!

While Sachs notes the significance of geographic factors in China's development, especially the importance of its long coastline as well as its north-south and east-west divides, it is in his comments about geography and poverty in Africa that his arguments seem most apposite:

Africa needs solutions not only for disease control, but also for chronic hunger, rural isolation, and growing environmental degradation, often the result of still-booming populations. As in the case of disease, there are special reasons why Africa is

particularly hard pressed in each of these areas. In other words, geography has conspired with economics to give Africa a particularly weak hand' (Sachs, 2005, pp.207-208).

Among the 'geographical' factors to which Sachs draws attention are thus the continent's lack of navigable rivers giving access to the oceans for trade, the observation that much of the population lives in the interior rather than on the coast, the continuing importance of rain fed crops, and the severely depleted soils. As he concludes, 'The combination of Africa's adverse geography and its extreme poverty creates the worst poverty trap in the world' (Sachs, 2005, p.208).

2.7 The impact of malaria

Another of Sachs' major contributions has been the emphasis that he has placed on malaria. As he has pointed out (Sachs, 2005, pp.196-200) it is quite remarkable that donors have not done more to tackle the devastating problems associated with malaria in Africa, especially since it is a disease that we can actually do something about, through the use of bed nets, household spraying and also through a range of antimalarial medicines. As he comments, 'Malaria is utterly treatable, yet, incredibly, it still claims up to three million lives per year, mostly young children, about 90 percent of whom live in Africa' (Sachs, 2005, p.196).

HIV/AIDS is undoubtedly also a significant problem in Africa, but it is nevertheless remarkable that only 27% of the Global Fund to Fight Aids, Tuberculosis and Malaria's funding after five rounds has been spent on malaria, in contrast to the 57% that has been spent on HIV/AIDS (http://www.theglobalfund.org/en/funds_raised/distribution/ accessed 4th April 2006). Likewise, a simple search on Google (4th April 2006) indicates that there are some 118 million pages on 'HIV/AIDS' in contrast to only some 56.8 million for 'malaria'. Malaria is a devastating killer, it is something we can readily prevent and protect people against, and yet it has not received anything like the attention that it should have done from the global community. Again, in Sachs' (2005, p.200) words, 'I presumed malaria to be an even more urgent issue, a truly life-and-death concern. I fully expected to find that whatever could be done to fight malaria was already being

done', but 'The level of rich-country help to Africa to fight malaria was minimal'... 'Malaria was not on the policy radar screen'.

It is to Sachs' (2002) undoubted credit that his wake-up call on malaria seems at last to have been listened to, and increasing amounts of aid are now indeed being directed towards its eradication. Most recently, the pledge by Bill and Melinda Gates in October 2005 to grant an additional \$258.3 million for malaria control and prevention (<http://abcnews.go.com/Health/GlobalHealth/story?id=1259878> accessed 4th April 2006) is but one indication of the growing emphasis that malaria is now receiving.

2.8 The role of technology

A final area where Sachs' arguments are particularly valuable is in their emphasis on the positive role that technology can play in overcoming poverty. While this is in part because he sees the diffusion of technology as being a key requirement for economic growth, he also placed considerable emphasis on the need for village level technological capacity. Sachs (2005, p.257) thus argues that 'rapid economic development requires that technical capacity suffuses the entire society from bottom up', and that the way to do this is to provide technological training to large numbers of people at the village level. These views are sustained by a firm belief in Condorcet's arguments that science and technology can be a sustained force for social improvement and human betterment (Baker, 2004). However, drawing largely on the Indian experience, he also places particular prominence on the specific role that new information and communication technologies (ICTs) can play in poverty reduction. Sachs (2005, p.15) thus comments that 'The IT revolution is creating jobs that are unknown in Malawi and still largely unthinkable in Bangladesh, but that are becoming the norm for educated young women in India'. For Sachs (2005, p.178) the Internet is 'coming into its own as a revolutionary tool of business as well as education and entertainment'. Moreover, he also rightly asserts the prominence of ICT in ensuring transparency and efficiency in the transaction of public management services: 'If the aid plumbing is going to carry much larger flows of aid each year, we will need better meters, which will mean the use of information technologies –

computers, e-mail, mobile phones – to increase dramatically the amount of information transmitted in the public sector and accessible to all parties' (Sachs, 2005, p.278; for wider discussions of ICT and poverty reduction see Greenberg, 2005; Roy, 2005; World Bank, 2006).

3. Elements of a critique

Despite the many strengths of Sach's arguments, they are based on a fundamentally problematic analysis of the reality and causes of poverty. Four main themes underlie the critique that I seek to unfold. First, I take issue with Sachs' definition of 'poverty', and the way in which he elides different meanings of the word to conjure up a picture whereby his notions can indeed be seen to provide a solution. In essence, I argue that we will only begin to make a real difference to the causes of poverty if we adopt a relative rather than an absolute definition of the term. Second, I challenge the notion that economic development and growth can indeed be seen as steps on a ladder. Instead, I suggest that we need to see the world as an interlinked whole whereby changes in any one place are intimately connected with changes in another. Put simply, to function effectively the dominant global economic system (capitalism) must produce inequalities and differences between places and people; growth in one place usually requires decline in another. Third, I suggest that Sachs' focus on states rather than on individuals and places means that he is unable truly to address the human suffering associated with poverty, and that his 'prescriptions' are therefore likely to be inappropriate for the world's poor, many of whom do not actually live in poor countries. Fourth, I dispute aspects of Sachs' understanding of the Enlightenment, and suggest instead that we need to explore deeper challenges concerning the very difficult moral case for intervening in the lives of people living in 'other' places. To these four main criticisms, I highlight five other areas of disagreement. While welcoming his emphasis on Geography, I suggest that he has a poor understanding of the real significance of geographical interpretations of development and that he is in danger of falling into spurious arguments associated with environmental determinism. If his geographical arguments are weak, so too is

Sachs' interpretation of history, which is at best simplistic, and at worst conveys a highly selective approach to the subject matter. Taken together, these arguments suggest that Sachs adopts an insufficiently rigorous approach to the historical-geographic context within which poverty has been shaped and created. Other criticisms are the excessive focus that he places on economic criteria rather than social and cultural variables, the lack of evidence that the amounts of aid he is recommending can actually be absorbed by the countries that most need it, and the socio-political tensions that are being created by propagation of the notion that it is indeed possible to eliminate poverty.

3.1 Defining poverty: why relative poverty matters.

There are three intertwined aspects of the way in which Sachs uses the word poverty that need to be challenged: elision in the use of the terms 'poverty' and 'extreme' poverty; his dismissal of arguments suggesting that the poor are poor because the rich are rich; and most importantly of all his emphasis on an absolute, rather than a relative, definition of poverty.

Although Sachs' primary emphasis is on the elimination of 'extreme poverty', he also uses the term 'poverty' by itself. This elision of the terms is highly dangerous, because it implies to the casual reader that his recipe for success will indeed end poverty more generally. In much of his book, Sachs is quite clear that his core focus is on ending 'extreme poverty'. He thus comments that 'the goal is to end *extreme* poverty, not to end all poverty, and still less to equalize world incomes or to close the gap between the rich and the poor' (italics in original; Sachs, 2005, p.289). As he goes on to say, 'This may eventually happen, but if so, the poor will have to get rich on their own effort. The rich can help most by giving the extreme poor some assistance to extricate themselves from the poverty trap that now ensnares them' (Sachs, 2005, p.289). Yet, the book's title is *The End of Poverty*, not *The End of Extreme Poverty*, and the very first line of the introduction begins 'This book is about ending poverty in our time' (Sachs, 2005, p.289). It is unclear whether this elision is deliberate, designed to persuade readers that his recipes will actually have a wider impact than merely reducing 'extreme poverty', or whether it is only

stylistic, simplifying the language to make readers more sympathetic to his cause. The book's title is certainly much more catchy without the word 'extreme' than it would have been had it been included! Either way, though, this issue is problematic. There are also more subtle difficulties with this elision. If, as I argue, the causes of poverty and extreme poverty are inextricably linked, then attempting to eliminate the latter without the former, as Sachs would appear to be wanting to do if he is focusing only on 'extreme poverty', will not actually solve the root causes of the problem. The key question that needs to be asked is whether, even if it were possible to do so, ending extreme poverty would actually help reduce poverty more generally. It is at least plausible that a reduction in extreme poverty could actually increase other measures of poverty. Another complexity is that his definition of extreme poverty is actually rather arbitrary. Sachs adopts the World Bank's definition of income of less than \$1 per person per day, measured at purchasing power parity, as determining those who are extremely poor; he also follows their definition of those whose income is between \$1 and \$2 a day as being moderately poor (Sachs, 2005, p.20, and Map 1). The use of such indicators does indeed give a simplified picture of poverty that is easy to grasp, but their actual calculation is fraught with difficulty. Moreover, the focus on the US \$ as the key indicator of poverty is also problematic. At a very simplistic level, with this definition the easiest way to reduce poverty would simply be to devalue the dollar! However, more subtly, adoption of the US \$ as the key measure of parity, provides an image within the minds of those who hear or use it that somehow the wider model of the US economy is the one that should be adhered to if we are to eliminate poverty. Finally on this issue, even if it were possible to shift everyone in the world's income above the \$1.01 a day line, thereby eliminating extreme poverty, I suggest that this would be an empty victory. We would still have poverty – it would just be a little bit less.

A second highly problematic area of Sachs' argumentation with respect to poverty is the way in which he tries to dismiss the connection between richness and poverty. Sachs (2005, p.31) thus writes,

Let me dispose of one idea right from the start. Many people assume that the rich have gotten rich *because* the poor have

gotten poor. In other words, they assume that Europe and the United States used military force and political strength during and after the era of colonialism to extract wealth from the poorest regions, and thereby to grow rich. This interpretation of events would be plausible if gross world product had remained roughly constant, with a rising share going to the powerful regions and a declining share going to the poorer regions. However, this is not at all what happened’.

Sachs’ logic here is fundamentally flawed. In particular, most of those who argue for a connection between the affluence of Europe and the USA at the expense of poverty in other countries do so based on *economic* grounds rather than simply focusing on military strength and political force (see for example, Harris and Harris, 1979; Wolfgang Sachs, 1992; Escobar, 1995; Hettne, 1995; Fine and Jomo, 2006; Kothari, 2006). To be sure, in his own terms, by redefining the issues purely with respect to global world product, he is able to sustain a coherent argument, but this misses the point of those who argue for a connection between the richness of rich countries, and the poverty of poor ones. He simply fails to engage with the diversity of intellectual debate surrounding these issues, and disposes of them with a wave of the literary hand, and a mere one side of his book (Sachs, 2005, p.31).

Extraordinarily, even within this one page, he also states that ‘This is not to say that the rich are innocent of the charge of having exploited the poor. They surely have, and the poor countries continue to suffer as a result in countless ways’. As is so often the case in *The End of Poverty*, Sachs would appear to want both to have his cake and to eat it. Central to his argument here is the notion that ‘Economic development is not a zero-sum game in which the winnings of some are inevitably mirrored by the losses of others. The game is one that everybody can win’ (Sachs, 2005, p.31). In making this assertion, Sachs misses the fundamental point that even in circumstances where the world’s total level of production is increasing, it is possible for the rich to drive this agenda by enforcing poverty in some parts of the world. Indeed, there is a strong argument that one of the key drivers for increasing total world product is very specifically through the deliberate exploitation of poor

people in many parts of the world, by enforcing low labour rates, by creating unequal terms of trade, and by preventing them from engaging in the commercial economy. ^v

Such arguments lead directly to a consideration of notions of relative and absolute poverty (for contributions to the considerable debate on this, see Sen, 1976; Desai and Shah, 1988; Citro and Michael, 1995; Ravallion, 1997, 2001; Anwar, 1998; Foster, 1998; O’Boyle, 1999; Madden, 2000; Jolliffe, 2001). Sachs, along with most of those advocating economic growth as a solution to poverty (see Unwin, 2004), defines poverty largely in *absolute* terms: the extremely poor are those who earn less than \$1 a day. However, there is another body of literature that advocates an entirely different definition, suggesting instead that poverty is a *relative* notion; the greatest poverty is thus to be found where there are the greatest differences in income levels, or access to resources. In his important and perceptive study, O’Boyle (1999, p.290) has commented that

The controversy between advocates of the “relative standard” and proponents of the “absolute standard” has persisted for more than 30 years because of a mutual failure to recognize the manner in which certain premises have shaped and formed the ways in which they have conceptualized poverty. Students of poverty simply do not begin their work with an explicit recognition of the premises which they hold regarding human nature, how economic affairs are organized differently by competition and cooperation, how each of these two activating principles relate to different human dispositions and depend on affirming different social values, and how all of these differences determine the way in which they define and measure poverty.

To this I would add, that these different conceptualisations also play a fundamental role in determining the solutions to problems of poverty that are advocated. In essence, O’Boyle suggests that the distinction between these different views of poverty lies in the way in which we conceptualise human life. Those adhering to absolute definitions of poverty focus largely on human individuality and competitiveness, whereas those advocating relative poverty emphasise that humans

are social in character and that this gives rise to economic affairs being organised on the principle of cooperation. In his words,

The proponents of the “absolute standard” do not understand that they begin with the premises that humans are individual beings by nature, that human individuality gives rise to organizing economic affairs on the principle of competition, which rests on the social value of individual freedom, and that holding that premise and affirming that social value lead them instinctively to embrace that standard and reject the “relative standard”.

Similarly, the advocates of the “relative standard” do not recognize that their work is based on the premise that humans are social beings by nature, that human sociality gives rise to organizing economic affairs on the principles of cooperation which rests on the social value of teamwork or solidarity, and that holding that premise and affirming that social value lead them instinctively to embrace that standard and reject the “absolute standard” (O’Boyle, 1999, p.290).

The crucial point is that humans are both individual and social, and therefore that visions of poverty viewed from either a purely absolute or a purely relative perspective can only be partial. As the contrasts I described between Sachs’ and my own experiences of poverty at the beginning of this paper emphasised, his world has been viewed primarily from an individual and competitive framework, whereas my understandings of poverty have been derived primarily within a social and co-operative context. The poverty I witnessed on the streets of Jamshedpur in 1976 was thus made all the more significant because of its juxtaposition with the houses and lifestyles of the rich élites living but a stone’s throw away.

Interestingly, although Sachs adheres primarily to absolute conceptualisations of poverty, he seems also to aspire to a world that is actually more co-operative, in which rich countries will truly help to make a difference to the lives of people living within poor countries. This in part reflects a duality in his argument, on the one hand

portraying the world as it is (positive), while on the other seeking to suggest how it should be (normative). His analysis would have been very much stronger if he had incorporated some of the social values that he appears to aspire to within his interpretation of the reasons for the existence of poverty in the first place. The critical point, though, is that by concentrating primarily on absolute poverty, Sachs' solutions can likewise only be partial. If we define poverty in absolute ways, it can indeed make sense to argue, as do Sachs and many in the global development community,^{vi} that we can eliminate poverty through economic growth unleashing the competitive individual side of humanity. However, if we interpret poverty primarily from a relative stance, our emphasis becomes much more focused on creating the collective social contexts within which any increasing prosperity can be shared more equitably. A challenge for those involved in implementing development practice is whether there is any way to make these two visions compatible. At the heart of my position is that for too long the hegemonic development practice has concentrated on an absolute definition of poverty, and has failed to pay attention to the increasing social and economic inequalities that have invariably resulted. Sachs, by focusing largely on absolute poverty and growth, fails sufficiently to address the need to accompany such growth with a practically based understanding of these inequalities and policies that will seek to minimise them.

Only if we define poverty in an absolute, and rather simplistic sense, can we like Sachs dare to say that it can actually be eliminated. If we define poverty primarily as a relative phenomenon, the sum of the differences between people in any society at any given scale, then poverty will always be with us. It is for this reason that I suggest there is *no end to poverty*. Our challenge is not to give people the false hope that we can end poverty, but rather to find ways of minimising the extent of the poverty that will remain with us for ever.

3.2 No ladders to escape from poverty

Throughout his account, Sachs uses the metaphor of a ladder, arguing that if poor people and states are able to grasp on to the bottom rung, they will then be able to climb up out of poverty. In his introductory section entitled 'Ascending the ladder of

economic development', Sachs (2005, p.19) thus comments that 'The greatest tragedy of our time is that one sixth of humanity is not even on the development ladder'. Central to his argument is that if the rich countries can help to lift such people onto the bottom rung of the ladder through a massive injection of aid they will then be able to climb the ladder of growth themselves, and thereby ascend out of poverty.

Such a vision of economic growth, based on the notion that it is possible for all states to follow a broadly similar pattern of 'development', has many similarities with neo-classical theories of economic development that emerged in the wake of Rostow's (1960) conceptualisation of stages of economic growth in the 1960s. It is likewise susceptible to the numerous critiques of such theories that have emerged over the last forty years. Given the wide condemnation of such visions of economic development, it is indeed surprising that Sachs should still use this metaphor and logic in his account. Perhaps, though, the similarities between Sachs' and Rostow's logics are not altogether unconnected, and one key in interpreting them may lie in the sub-title of Rostow's book, '*A non-Communist manifesto*'. Much of Sachs' work in the 1990s was undertaken in former Communist states, at a time when rampant capitalism did indeed seem to offer a positive future for their inhabitants. Sachs' understanding of development has thus been significantly shaped by attempts specifically to implement a post-Communist manifesto, in ways that Rostow could only have dreamt about in the 1950s. Easterley (2005, p.BW03), in a similar vein, has commented as follows on the similarities between Sachs' approach and that adopted by development economists in the 1950s and 1960s:

Sachs pays surprisingly little attention to the history of aid approaches and results. He seems unaware that his Big Plan is strikingly similar to the early ideas that inspired foreign aid in the 1950s and '60s. Just like Sachs, development planners then identified countries caught in a "poverty trap," did an assessment of how much they would need to make a "big push" out of poverty and into growth, and called upon foreign aid to fill

the "financing gap" between countries' own resources and needs.

Sachs' notion of a ladder of development is also therefore subject to the well-known critiques of Rostow's work as well as that of others espousing a modernist approach, that such accounts tend to be a-historical (Griffin, 1969), that in practice development has not been linear (Frank, 1969), that low levels of development are themselves dependent on poor countries' reliance on more economically developed ones (Cardoso and Faletto, 1979), that the earth is unable to sustain levels of consumption for the masses that are currently enjoyed by the few, and that people furthest up the ladder of growth construct the world in their own image. While dependency theory has fallen out of favour since the 1980s, many of its arguments can still be applied directly to Sachs' work, and at the very least they suggest that his interpretation of the historical context of contemporary development issues requires some reconsideration. Two criticisms of Sachs' account are particularly telling.

First, despite trying to argue that it is important to have a differential diagnosis of the development needs of specific countries, and to create appropriate treatment regimes (Sachs, 2005, p.81), he still retains an overall emphasis on linear notions of development. Poor people and countries are still expected to climb the ladder. Gore's (2000, p.794) account of development strategies between the 1950s and 1970s could equally be a description of Sachs' model of economic growth: 'All countries were expected to go through such patterns of development, and development agencies sought to ensure or accelerate the arrival of a better future for whole societies through interventions in these long-term processes of historical transformation'.

A second issue that he fails sufficiently to acknowledge is the way in which many governments and corporations based in rich countries have deliberately kicked away various rungs in his ladder. It is not merely an accident of geography that African countries are poor. At critical times in the past, it has benefited the rich and powerful for there to be poor people who will work for low wages, thus fuelling what

Marx (1976) once termed the reserve army of labour. It may well be that a global consensus can indeed be achieved that will enable the bottom rung of the ladder to be repaired, but the evidence of history is that economic self-interest, competitiveness and individual greed will ensure that a rung somewhere higher up the ladder will surreptitiously be removed in compensation. As McGinn (2005, p.24) has commented specifically about education: 'In sum, policies proven in the developed countries often have little fit with current conditions and actual problems in poor countries. Prescriptions based on a "universal" theory of education often have generated more dependency and negative outcomes. Research on aid dependency assigns its prime cause to the origin of policies and projects outside the recipient countries'.

3.3 Poor states and poor people

Along with most other analysts who concentrate their attention on the economic growth agenda, the overall thrust of Sachs' arguments tends to be about poor and rich *countries* rather than about poor and rich *people*. To be sure, he again covers himself by drawing analogies between households and economies, and by accounts of some of the individual human misery associated with poverty that he has encountered. Nevertheless the vast bulk of his analysis, the graphs he uses and the tables he presents, is based on the country, or state, as the fundamental unit of analysis; Chapter 3 is entitled 'Why some countries fail to thrive', and there are, for example, separate chapters on the individual countries of Bolivia, Poland, Russia, China and India. Just as Sachs seeks to help poor countries get on the ladder of economic growth, so too he expects rich countries to provide aid: 'poor countries must demand their due' (Sachs, 2005, p.106), 'What, after all, is in it for the rich countries?' (Sachs, 2005, p.328). At the heart of his argument is the notion that 'Ending global poverty by 2025 will require concerted actions by the rich countries as well as the poor, beginning with a "global compact" between the rich and poor countries' (Sachs, 2005, p.267).

By focusing on rich and poor *countries*, Sachs fails to pay sufficient attention to the enormous divides that exist *within* countries, not only between the rich and the

poor, but also between those living in urban and rural areas, between the educated and the uneducated, and between the political elites and the unrepresented. The huge numbers of extremely poor people living in middle-income countries, for example, tend to be forgotten when attention is focused primarily on poor countries.^{vii} My argument here is closely allied to the comments above about relative and absolute poverty. There are thus enormous differences *within* countries, as well as *between* countries. Programmes that only address poverty in certain countries miss the fundamental, underlying contradictions that help to shape poverty throughout the world.

The unit of analysis that he chooses to concentrate on, the country, also serves to shape the key actors that he identifies as being necessary to implement change. This again largely reflects his own personal experiences as an advisor to national governments, and now to the United Nations. Sachs's key actors are thus politicians and policy makers in rich and poor countries alike, they are the international bodies such as the United Nations (consisting of national representatives), and they are institutions such as the G8, the IMF and the World Bank. Very significantly, in the final chapter where he lays out the nine steps that will help achieve his goals (Sachs, 2005, pp.364-368), it is these actors who are the dominant players. Remarkably, he scarcely focuses at all here on the role of the private sector (except in the context of the need to harness global science), nor on civil society organisations. Although on the penultimate page he does indeed assert that 'In the end, however, it comes back to us as individuals' (Sachs, 2005, p.367), the overarching emphasis of his argument is that it is up to the leaders and governments of countries and international organisations to deliver on poverty elimination. Governments and international organisations by themselves do not have the power to implement such changes. Only with the active commitment of the private sector, civil society organisations, faith groups, and a diversity of small local organisations will there be any hope of reducing the diverse inequalities that constitute poverty. The annual profits of the largest global corporations are in practice much higher than the budgets of many poor countries. Indeed, the key role of governments may not so much be in encouraging economic growth, but rather in

ensuring that the benefits of such growth are distributed as fairly as possible within countries.

3.4 Moral cases for intervention

One of the remarkable things about Sachs' arguments is that he never makes explicit the very moral emphasis that seems to underlie his case. Indeed the words 'morals' or 'ethics' feature not at all in the index to *The End of Poverty*. This may well be because his training as an economist has led him to perceive the world primarily in terms of economics rather than morality. However, this distinction also closely mirrors O'Boyle's (1999) account of the differences between those who hold to an absolute rather than a relative definition of poverty. It touches on the very essence of the ways in which we seek to understand humanity.

Sachs' argument is constructed almost exclusively around economic principles. One of the reasons, for example, why he suggests that the US should engage in non-military interventions in the world is that by investing in poverty reduction this will actually reduce the amount that they will have to spend on the military in a more peaceful world. His account in Chapter 17 of why we should act to save the poor is not, as one might expect, based on moral principles, but instead focuses on US military expenditure, on US security and global poverty, and on international foreign policy since 9/11, including sections on the Marshall Plan, on the Jubilee 2000 Drop the Debt Campaign and on the Emergency Plan for AIDS.

The nearest Sachs gets to approaching moral arguments is the way in which he enlists aspects of the Enlightenment project in support of his case for technologically based economic growth as the solution to world poverty. As he asserts, 'We can realistically envision a world without extreme poverty by the year 2025 because technological progress enables us to meet basic human needs on a global scale and to achieve a margin above basic needs unprecedented in history' (Sachs, 2005, p.347). This is indeed a curious argument. What Sachs suggests is that *because* technological progress can enable us to meet human needs, we can

imagine a world without poverty. What he does not say is *why* we should actually do this. If, as I assert, the contemporary global economic system depends on the existence of relative poverty for its growth, then a case can readily be made that it would actually be highly illogical for leaders of the major corporations to seek to reduce poverty purely on economic grounds. If we are going to make a fundamental change to the existing order of things, as Sachs seems to want, we need to make the argument on other grounds.

Sachs' fascination with the Enlightenment seems to stem primarily from his interest in reason (Sachs, 2005, p.353) rather than with any moral argument about poverty. This is interestingly closely connected with his adoption of an absolute definition of poverty. The fact that there are 'absolutely poor people' is thus something that logical and rational application of science appears to be able change; it is possible to apply logical economic models and technical solutions, for example to provide fertilizer for poor quality soils, to help lift people out of their poverty. Relative poverty is in contrast fundamentally a moral issue, and much more difficult to handle. There is no easy technical fix to the fact that inequalities are a fundamental aspect of contemporary human society. How we decide what to do about these differences is in the end a moral issue.

Sachs' (2005, pp.348-349) account of the Enlightenment's inheritance is based essentially on a heroic vision: Jefferson (of course an American), but also Locke and Hume, emphasised that political institutions should serve human needs; Adam Smith believed that economic systems could likewise be shaped to human needs; Kant called for a global system of governance to eradicate war; and Condorcet showed how science and technology could be used for human betterment. However, just because this 'can' be done, does not mean it should be done. One of Sachs' weak points is that he does not sufficiently make this connection. It is here that his arguments would benefit greatly from a wider engagement with development ethics (see for example, O'Neill, 1986; Crocker, 1991; Gaspar, 1996; Corbridge, 1998). Corbridge (1998) in particular highlights the diverse challenges to what he terms mainstream development studies presented by

both the New Right and the post-Left. Thus, there are arguments from the New Right that it is inappropriate for money to be taken from poor people in rich countries to be given as foreign aid to rich people in poor countries, whereas some of those on the post-Left, forced to re-evaluate their beliefs in scientific Marxism after the collapse of the Soviet Union, chose to advocate a postdevelopmentalism that decried the very notion of any kind of ‘development’ at all. What Corbridge (1998, p.49) advocates ‘instead is a development ethics which refuses to allow all aspects of an earlier liberal humanism (or internationalism) to be buried by the competing claims of the Right and the post-Left’. What he seeks to propose ‘is a development ethics which is attentive to the needs and rights of distant strangers in a (slowly) globalizing world economy, and which is attentive also to the need to specify plausible policies to foster these and other “first-order” development ambitions’ (Corbridge, 2005, p.49). Such arguments are critically important because we need to articulate clearly why we, whether we be individuals, civil society organisations, donors or IFIs, are engaged at all in development practice. Interfering in other people’s lives is a dangerous business. We must be sure of the grounds for so doing. As I argue towards the end of this paper, the grounds for doing something about our own lives might actually be much stronger than they are for trying to change the lives of distant strangers. It is no coincidence that the subtitle of Sachs’ book is ‘How we can make it happen in our lifetime’ rather than *Why* we should do so.

3.5 Contextualising poverty

The above four arguments are those that I believe undermine Sachs’ position most comprehensively. However there are other more minor difficulties with *The End of Poverty*, and it is to these that I now turn my attention, albeit rather briefly. In essence, they all relate to the context within which Sachs shapes his analysis of poverty, and difficulties with his proposed implementation strategy.

3.5.1 The dangers of geographical determinism

The welcome importance that Sachs gives to ‘Geography’ in his analysis of poverty has already been noted. However, his interpretations of its significance could

usefully have been more nuanced. While Sachs does indeed note the dangers associated with simplistic accounts based purely on geographical determinism, he is nevertheless in danger of adopting a somewhat deterministic approach himself (for wider discussions of environmental determinism and the society-nature interface see Sayer, 1979; Smith, 1984; Peet 1985). Sachs (2005, pp.58-59) argues forcefully that 'It is time to banish the bogeyman of geographical determinism, the false accusation that claims about geographical disadvantage are also claims that geography single-handedly and irrevocably determines the economic outcome of nations. The point is only that these adversities require countries to undertake additional investments that other, more fortunate, countries did not have to make'. In essence, Sachs argues that the lack of long coastlines, being landlocked, aridity, ecological conditions that favour killer diseases, and depleted soils all adversely affect development (see also Sachs, 2005, pp.86-87). As he says, 'adverse geography raised the costs of solving the problems of farming, transport, and health, and thereby makes it much more likely that a country will be caught in a poverty trap' (Sachs, 2005, p.59).

Sachs solution to poverty is based on his assertion that the extreme poor lack six major kinds of capital: human capital, business, capital, infrastructure, natural capital, public institutional capital and knowledge capital. Within this framework, his definition of geography therefore comes into play especially in terms of infrastructure and natural capital. Foreign aid, he argues, needs to be used to overcome these capital shortages, by for example providing roads and infrastructure to minimise the impact of a state's isolation from international trade, and supporting healthy soils and well-functioning ecosystems (Sachs, 2005, p.244). Few would dispute the significance that these physical attributes have for daily life in parts of Africa, but at the same time it is the interactions of human societies within these physical environments over many centuries that have shaped them as they are. In explaining why African countries have on average grown 3% less rapidly than other developing countries in the period 1980-2000, Sachs (2005, p.314) is thus too simplistic in asserting that 'This slower growth is caused, in my opinion, mainly by Africa's adverse geography and deficient infrastructure'. Sub-Saharan Africa has immense mineral wealth, from the hydrocarbon resources in Nigeria, Angola and Gabon, to

Zambia's copper, gold, zinc and gemstones, and South Africa's gold, platinum, manganese, vanadium and chromium. Likewise, not all Africa's soils are depleted, and there is much rich agricultural land across the continent that could be used to support flourishing agricultural enterprises. The key issue is not so much how physical geography has conspired to make Africa poor, but rather why it is that complex social, political, cultural and economic interactions in these particular environments have shaped the places of Africa in the way that they have. This is a much more complex notion of 'geography' than that espoused by Sachs (see Unwin, 1992, 1994). We would be wise to recall Lucien Febvre's (1925, p.236) famous aphorism in criticising environmental determinism, that 'There are no necessities but everywhere possibilities; and man as master of possibilities is the judge of their use'. The long association of environmental determinism with justifications of racism and imperialism in the 19th and early 20th centuries has indeed meant that many geographers have more recently shied away from a rigorous analysis of the interplay between the physical and human dimensions of development in Africa, and by bringing these issues to the fore Sachs has undoubtedly done a service. However, we need much more careful analysis of these issues than he is able to provide in *The End of Poverty*, if we are truly to avoid the charge of being crudely deterministic in our arguments.

3.5.2 Interpretations of history

As with Sachs' overly simplistic account of 'geography', so too is his account of history somewhat partial. To be sure, in the limited confines of a book the size of *The End of Poverty* it is not easy to do full justice to the influence of past structures on contemporary change, but this failing is important since it leads him to be more optimistic about the potential beneficial impacts of technology and science in eliminating poverty than seems warranted.

Sachs's summary of Britain's success is a useful indication of his approach, bringing together as it does both geography and history. In essence, he argues that Britain's success in the 18th and 19th centuries was the result of six main factors: its open and individualistic society; 'its strengthening institutions of political liberty'; its

role as ‘one of the leading centers of Europe’s scientific revolution’ (Sachs, 2005, p.33); ‘its geographical advantages’ (island economy, navigable rivers, good environment for agriculture, proximity to north America) (Sachs, 2005, p.34); its sovereign status; and its coal. The relevance of these factors to Sachs’ wider thoughts about what it is that is necessary to eliminate poverty should not go unnoticed here, but the key point I want to emphasise is that many of these attributes were established in the centuries well before 1750. In particular, Britain’s political, social and cultural identity was forged not only through the collapse of feudalism in the 15th and 16th centuries, but also in the centuries that preceded this.

In essence, my argument is that Sach’s vision of history is too short, and that this leads him to concentrate on technological and economic explanations of poverty and its elimination that may well not succeed. This is typified in his assertion, for example, that ‘Our generation is heir to two and a half centuries of economic progress’ (Sachs, 2005, p.347). My point is that the changes that took place through the European Enlightenment and the industrial revolution were predicated on very significant underlying social, political and cultural changes in the preceding centuries, that lay the foundation for the subsequent successes of industrial capitalism. Moreover, I am less sanguine about the deep impact that colonialism had, and that traces of imperialism still have, on poverty in many parts of the world today. Throughout Sachs’ work, there seems to be an insufficient recognition of the historical and geographical contingency of the particular processes that he writes about. This is exemplified in his assertion that ‘the basic underlying forces that propelled the Industrial Revolution could be and were replicated elsewhere’ (Sachs, 2005, p.39). What he fails sufficiently to emphasise, though, is that this was done under very unequal conditions of power, which have had lasting implications for subsequent ‘progress’, particularly in Africa. The form of industrialisation that occurred in Britain, was thus very different to that which was imposed on India and central Africa. Africa today suffers from continuing inequalities in global power relations, both economic and political, and until these are changed there is unlikely to be a fundamental solution to the continent’s economic poverty.

3.5.3 Lack of attention to the social and cultural dimensions of poverty and its reduction

Closely linked to my disquiet about the lack of geographical and historical contingency in his work, are concerns about his failure sufficiently to address the social and cultural dimensions of poverty. Sachs is caught up in the enthusiasm for progress that lies at the heart of the Enlightenment adventure, but he does not really acknowledge that this is only one view of the world, and that it is derived from an essentially European cultural context. Although he is highly critical of US policy, Sachs vision of progress is largely embedded in his own social and intellectual background in the USA.

Sachs does indeed comment briefly on social and cultural dimensions of poverty, but this is set against an overwhelmingly economic analysis, and is undertaken from a distinctly US cultural position. His comments on women's rights and cultural barriers applying to religious and ethnic minorities (Sachs, p.2005, p.60) are so attenuated that they seem little more than instances of him playing to a 'politically correct' audience. Likewise, towards the end of the book, the justification of his assertion that 'Culturally-based predictions of social change are fragile and often incorrect' (Sachs, 2005, p.317) is particularly weak. He suggests that there are two main problems with cultural arguments. The first is that 'cultures change with economic times and circumstances' (Sachs, 2005, p.317). However, he fails to recognise that economic practices also evolve as a result of cultural change. There is no simple one way chain of cause and effect. According to Sachs (2005, p.317), 'The second main problem with cultural interpretations is that they are usually made on the basis of prejudice rather than measurable evidence', but he fails in any way to substantiate this with detailed argumentation. As an economist, sustained primarily by a need for quantifiable empirical evidence, he fails to see the value of the countless anthropological studies of development based on qualitative approaches that belie his assertion (see for example de Sardan, 1995).

This failure to understand socio-cultural dimensions of poverty by focusing excessively on economic explanations also has deep significance for his proposed solutions, because they lack socio-cultural specificity. One of the reasons why so many well-intentioned development initiatives have failed in the past is that they have been imposed from the outside, with insufficient sensitivity to local contexts. While cultural elements are certainly included as one of the seven parts of the diagnosis in his 'clinical economics', it is highly significant that they are seen as 'cultural barriers to economic development' (Sachs, 2005, p.87). Culture, for Sachs, is therefore a barrier rather than an exciting and empowering dimension of human life. This is because he too wishes to impose an alien cultural construct, his vision of how to make the world less poor, on those living in poor countries across the world. I return to this issue in my conclusion, offering the suggestion that we should listen more to the culturally diverse voices of poor people if we are to help them achieve their aspirations.

3.5.4 The potential for poor countries to absorb substantially increased amounts of aid

The geographical, historical and socio-cultural context within which poverty is continually being reproduced has fundamental implications for the ability of leaders in poor countries actually to be able to use aid effectively in delivering poverty reducing policies. Most sub-Saharan African countries are now poorer than they were fifty years ago at the time of their independence, despite the huge sums of aid that have been disbursed across the continent. As Ellerman (2005, p.26) has thus commented, 'The message cannot be "heard" that over a half-century of official development assistance has been largely a failure'. Given this heritage, there is therefore little evidence that governments in Africa have the capacity, even if they have the will, to deliver effectively the proposed benefits of the very considerably increased levels of aid that Sachs proposes. In 2002, 'total gross foreign aid from all donors to all developing countries... was \$76 billion' (Sachs, 2005, p.298), and yet Sachs is advocating doubling this to some \$135 to \$195 billion a year between 2005 and 2015.

Sachs is confident that this level of aid can indeed be co-ordinated and used effectively in Africa, and he is highly critical of those who argue otherwise. He thus comments that 'Pessimism about African's ability to utilize aid is very deep, reflecting an amazing reservoir of deep prejudices' (Sachs, 2005, p.310). These prejudices he suggests are based on three main arguments: that 'corruption is the culprit' (Sachs, 2005, p.311); that there is a 'democracy deficit' (Sachs, 2005, p.315); and that there is a 'lack of modern values' (Sachs, 2005, p.315). My argument, though, is on none of these grounds, but is rather, much more simply, that in the short term there is actually insufficient human capacity within many African countries to be able to utilize these levels of aid effectively in delivering the infrastructural, educational, environmental and economic agendas that Sachs recommends. To take but one example, the net secondary enrolment rate in Mozambique in 2000 was only 9.5% (<http://devdata.worldbank.org/external/CPProfile.asp?CCODE=MOZ&PTYPE=CP> accessed 6th April 2006). One basic effect of this is that there are insufficient people with secondary education, let alone university degrees, to work effectively in the government ministries with responsibility for delivering these programmes. There are many immensely able people in these ministries in Mozambique, and likewise across Africa, but many of them are doing several different jobs as they seek to move their countries forward, as well as maintaining a reasonable living standard of their own. Overall in Sub-Saharan Africa the Gross Enrolment Rate in secondary education was only 28% in 2002 (UNESCO, 2006). We need to have dramatic increases in this figure if Africa has any chance at all of really benefiting from proposals such as those that Sachs and his colleagues are promoting. One thing we know for certain is that delivering on enhancements in learning is not something that can be achieved overnight. There is an immense danger in simply increasing the amounts of aid available to African countries if there is not the human capacity there to be able to deliver it appropriately and sustainably in the interests of poor people.

3.5.5 Propagating the notion that it is possible to end poverty

A final area of real concern is the danger that lies in propagating the notion that it is indeed possible to end poverty, even if by this Sachs only means ending 'extreme' poverty. As outlined earlier in this paper, most human cultures have included within

them the moral imperative that it is indeed 'good' to provide some assistance to the poor. By offering the world community the hope that it is indeed possible to end poverty, as the book's title suggests, Sachs is therefore building on a resonance that lies deep in our culture. He is able to do this by focusing primarily on an absolute definition of poverty. If, as I argue, we should also see poverty as being a relative phenomenon, huge levels of poverty and inequality would remain even if his recipe for eliminating extreme poverty were to be successful. There is thus truly no end to poverty. Sachs offers people a chimera of hope, but in so doing he treads a dangerous path that will lead to disillusionment. As Easterley (2005, p.BW03) has neatly summarised,

The danger is that when the utopian dreams fail (as they will again), the rich-country public will get even more disillusioned about foreign aid. Sachs rightly notes that we need not worry whether the pathetic amount of current U.S. foreign aid -- little more than a 10th of a penny for every dollar of U.S. income -- is wasted. Foreign aid's prospects will brighten only if aid agencies become more accountable for results, and demonstrate to the public that some piecemeal interventions improve the lives of desperate people.

This is worrying, though, not only because of the disillusionment that it will generate in the rich countries, but all the more so because of the devastating influence it will have among the world's poor. Contrary to Sachs' aspiration that eliminating poverty will actually lead to a more peaceful world, where swords can truly be beaten into ploughshares and military expenditure replaced by increased aid contributions, the failure of his project to deliver on the root causes of a wider understanding of poverty may well actually cause increased social and political tension in poor communities across the world.

4. Conclusions and alternative futures

Writing at the start of this millennium, Naím (2000, p.97) commented that

The 1990s began with the widespread expectation that achieving sound, market-oriented, macroeconomic fundamentals was the ticket to the prosperity that had long eluded poor countries. The decade has ended with the more frustrating but also more realistic understanding that sound macroeconomics is not a goal but just a precondition. It is also clearer that the recipe for prosperity has many ingredients and that their exact quantities, mix, and sequencing are not well known.

Jeffrey Sachs in his long career advising governments and more recently the United Nations did much to shape the macro-economic vision of the 1990s, and he has subsequently continued to push forward in his advocacy of solutions that he thinks will indeed end poverty by identifying precisely the right ingredients for different countries. As this paper has argued, though, there is no end to poverty if we interpret it primarily in the relative sense of the word. Rather than rushing headlong into policies that promote prosperity, as emphasised by Naím, we could usefully begin to explore further the tempering effect that considerations of difference and inequality may have on the economic growth mantra so beloved of the development community. As Naím (2000, p.99) has again emphasised ‘Although poverty continues to be a focus of political attention, it now has to share the stage with income inequality... The heightened awareness of an increasingly acute problem is bound to pressure governments to take swift actions against inequality and show tangible results in reducing gaps’.

The prime purpose of this paper has been to highlight problems with Sachs’ formulation of *The End of Poverty*, and to suggest areas where his arguments require fundamental revision. Nevertheless, in so doing, I have alluded to several dimensions of an alternative vision for helping to reduce poverty across the world,

and it is to these that I wish to return in conclusion. Six points seem particularly worthy of note.

First, most of us involved in 'development practice' could usefully benefit from a much greater dose of the reality of poverty than that to be encountered in our smart air-conditioned offices in capital cities across the world. More specifically, we need to listen more closely to the voices of the poor, to their dreams and aspirations, and take it upon ourselves to help deliver them. To achieve this, we need to find ways of giving platforms to those without voices, and to bypassing the usual systems of consultation and debate that have invariably left them unrepresented. It may well be that some of the recent advances in the use of ICTs can be used effectively to enable the poor and the marginalised to give expression to their opinions.



Second, it is then important that those in positions of power in the development community, most notably the personnel of donor organisations, the IFIs, and other international agencies, actually act on what they see and learn from poor people about poverty. All too readily, donors pass on the accepted intellectual mantra of the day, be it PRSPs, budget support or even Sachs' clinical economics, and focus their attention more on the successful delivery of their own targets than they do on any actual reduction of poverty (Unwin, 2004). In particular, this requires us to reconsider how best to deliver support to poor people and communities in ways other than through financial assistance to national governments. Many of the poorest in the world remain poor because the existing systems of donor support quite simply exclude them from the equation; they do not live in poor countries.

Third, we need to temper the arguments of those advocating economic growth as the optimal means of reducing poverty with a realistic assessment of ways in which such growth can be accompanied by a more equitable distribution of its

benefits. Given the dominance in the global development community of economists, as against sociologists, anthropologists, or even geographers, it is unrealistic to assume that the economic growth agenda will disappear overnight, but I do hope that the arguments presented here will have at least added a few more dents to the supposedly secure body armour of the accepted hegemonic position. At the very least we need to move away from arguments that seek to maximise prosperity, and instead shift to those that seek to minimise inequality and poverty. This will require us to pay as much attention to social and cultural factors in our shared proposals for reducing poverty as we do to economic ones.

Turning to the moral arguments alluded to above, there needs to be a much wider international debate about the morality of aid (although see Von Pischke, 1999; Miller, 2004). There are thus strong arguments that it is more appropriate for people in richer countries to seek to intervene in institutions in which they already find themselves than it is for them to continue meddling in other sovereign states. One outcome of such logic would be to suggest that those living in the rich countries who are concerned with global poverty should actually spend much more effort in seeking to change the organisations of which they are a part, such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) or the European Union, rather than simply expanding the amount of aid given to the poor countries of the world. Sachs (2005, pp.281-282) does indeed touch on these issues, but we need a much more comprehensive debate and analysis of the potential influence of such reorganisation on the lives of poor people across the world. Mike Moore (2003), former Director General of the WTO (1999-2002) thus argues cogently that reorganisation of that institution could benefit poor countries by very much more than the present total amount given to them in aid by donor countries. The bottom line here, though is that we have a moral responsibility to get our own houses in order before we start preaching to others about faults we perceive in their governance structures and economic systems.

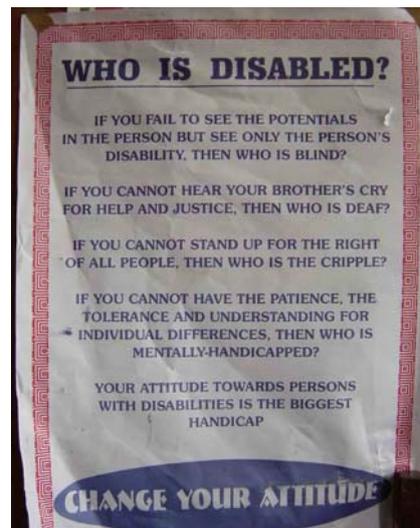
Given the difficulties faced by the governments of poor countries in absorbing increased amounts of aid, the fundamental problems associated with budget support mechanisms (Unwin, 2004), and the argument that we should be directing our efforts

to poor people rather than poor countries, there is a strong case for there to be a fundamental shift in the allocation of aid away from ‘countries’ and towards global initiatives that will directly benefit the poor wherever they may be found. For



example, global initiatives to restrict the incidence of diseases such as malaria and tuberculosis among poor people, to reduce the costs of adaptive technologies that will enhance the lives of people with disabilities, to make high

quality and appropriate learning resources available to children at risk of living and working on the streets, and to provide relevant and sustainable fertilizers and irrigation systems for agriculture at low cost may well in the end be far more effective in reducing poverty across the world than simply providing large transfers of money into the Ministries of Finance or Treasuries in a selected few ‘poor’ countries. By reducing the amounts of aid to specific countries, and increasing



them to such global initiatives we can begin to make globalisation really work for the poor. Indeed, in speaking with African leaders in recent years, it is clear that there is a growing awareness among them of the dangers of ‘aid-reliance’, and an increased determination to develop their own internal solutions to many of the difficulties that their countries face. Moreover, we cannot rely forever on the munificence of a few rich individuals or private foundations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (<http://www.gatesfoundation.org/GlobalHealth> accessed 7th April 2006) to continue to provide funding for such global initiatives. Reducing the costs of medicines and providing high quality learning resources for poor people and marginalised communities are global responsibilities, and it is time for national governments in rich countries fundamentally to rethink their all too readily taken for granted assumptions about the value of aid modalities such as budget support in enhancing the lives of the world’s poor people.^{viii}

Finally, let me share a conclusion with Jeffrey Sachs. He is absolutely right that 'In the end ... it comes back to us, as individuals' (Sachs, 2005, p.367). Each of one of us needs to act about poverty. Where I differ with him, is that I believe that this means that we will each have to make sacrifices. Sachs' implication that we can somehow eliminate extreme poverty without it having a significant impact on our own lives is fundamentally wrong. We have to make a commitment to change, and that in itself is a difference. Simply increasing the amount of our own national budgets that are allocated to aid is quite simply not enough. There is so much more that we need to do. We need to begin really to listen to poor people. We need to act in their interests rather than our own. We need to focus on minimising inequalities more than we do on maximising profits. Only then will we find our true humanity.

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ⁱ The continuing dominance of economists within DFID is noteworthy. On the recruitment page of the DFID web-site (<http://www.dfid.gov.uk/recruitment/> accessed 24th March 2006) there are thus three bullet point mentioned under DFID roles: “Economist role and economist FAQ; note for economists fast stream applicants; and technical fast stream”. No other discipline is mentioned here, although DFID clearly employs specialists from many other disciplines. This dominance of people trained as economists is noteworthy across the employment structures of many other donors, yet there is nothing to suggest that economists actually know more about ‘development’ than anyone else!

ⁱⁱ The following three quotations from the network’s web-site highlight some of their main concerns: ‘economics has become increasingly an arcane branch of mathematics rather than dealing with real economic problems’ (Milton Friedman); ‘Modern economics is sick. Economics has increasingly become an intellectual game played for its own sake and not for its practical consequences for understanding the economic world. Economists have converted the subject into a sort of social mathematics in which analytical rigour is everything and practical relevance is nothing’ (Mark Blaug); ‘page after page of professional economic journals are filled with mathematical formulas [...] Year after year economic theorists continue to produce scores of mathematical models and to explore in great detail

their formal properties; and the econometricians fit algebraic functions of all possible shapes to essentially the same sets of data' (Wassily Leontief)

(<http://www.paecon.net> accessed 23rd March 2006)

ⁱⁱⁱ This forum was introduced by the banner heading: 'In recent decades the alliance of neoclassical economic and neoliberalism has hijacked the term "economic reform". By presenting political choices as market necessities, they have subverted public debate about what economic policy changes are possible and are or are not desirable. This venue promotes discussion of economic reform that is not limited to the one ideological point of view' (Malaney *et al.*, 2005)

^{iv} See for example DFID's commitment in this respect as expressed in its annual reports (<http://www.dfid.gov.uk> accessed 7th April 2006)

^v Interestingly in this context, Sachs (2005, p.49) notes that two of the key effects of modern economic growth have been higher living standards and greater gaps between rich and poor. What he studiously fails to do, though, is to see these as causally linked. He cannot admit that higher overall living standards may have been enabled by the creation of greater gaps between rich and poor.

^{vi} I use this term as a short way of referring to the hegemonic position adopted by most donors, IFIs, international agencies and indeed governments of many poor countries, who have adopted the economic growth model as the solution to poverty. In so doing, I recognise that this is by no means a uniform group, and that a diversity of opinions is held by entities within it.

^{vii} This is now being seen in a very practical way whereby many donor governments are concentrating most of their efforts on a limited number of poor countries, rather than on reducing poverty more widely in the world. DFID's Public Service Agreement targets for 2003-6 thus explicitly stated that in Sub-Saharan Africa it would achieve progress towards the MDGs in 16 key countries, and in Asia in 4 countries (DFID, 2004, p.182).

^{viii} It is extremely difficult to tell precisely how much of any donor's assistance is actually directed to individual countries as against international commitments, not least because much 'pooled' financial assistance is itself then directed to individual countries. Nevertheless, an indication of the scale of bias towards individual countries in DFID's expenditure can be glimpsed from the observation that the estimated outturn for 2004/5 for its country and regional programmes was £1,761 million, in contrast to £297 million given to the IFIs, £177 million to knowledge and communication and £150 million to knowledge and communication (<http://www.dfid.gov.uk/pubs/files/departmental-report/2005/Annexes-bcov.pdf> accessed 7th April 2006).