Jeffrey Sachs: An Achievable End to Poverty?

Sachs, Jeffrey. 2006. *The End of Poverty: Economic Possibilities for Out Time*. Penguin: New York

As an economist who has become something of a social justice celebrity in recent years, Jeffrey Sachs plays his cards predictably in *The End of Poverty*, a piece that proposes an ambitious and resolutely political stance on the need and means to end global extreme poverty. Although the discussion of his basic point is rather lengthy, the crux of it is this: a program of concerted global investment in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and their principles, combined with rigorous plans to monitor and evaluate the returns on that investment, has the power to end extreme poverty by 2025. In principled form, Sachs' argument is convincing, seems morally appropriate, and shows mutual benefit for all the world's citizens; the rhetoric is impeccable, and the call to action motivational. Critics of Sachs' work will, however, have some questions about the reality of his ideals. Will the world collectively have the ability or willingness to operationalize Sachs' prescriptions (as he would like them to be called, having completed his differential diagnosis)? Moreover, some economists criticize the very credibility of Sachs' ideas on a macroeconomic level, critique to which he does not speak in the book.

Occasionally, Sachs' writing style and rhetoric leaves something to be desired. Although it is indeed inspirational in nature, it is also at times simplistic and mildly self-congratulatory. Moreover, a well-informed reader will see much of his stated truths as self-evident, and his periodic tendency to summarize himself in point form can seem trite.

However, over the length of the book, Sachs' style ceases to grate so much on a cynical reader and gives way to a more rigorous and believable analysis. Regardless of its simplicity, Sachs' description of the global problem of poverty is accurate and considerate; for an uninitiated reader, one could not ask for much better. The reasoning behind his unwavering support for the MDGs is obvious given his professional ties to the United Nations, and his analysis of their integrity and chance for success suffered from some lack of critical assessment as a result. Aside from this, the book lays out a series of concrete, mostly measurable policy prescriptions, which is more than you can say for several similar texts.

Apart from those truths that hold to be self-evident and whose mention may be unnecessary, Sachs hits on several important, if not unknown, realizations. It is especially important that these points be made publicly in a book with as wide a reach as *The End of Poverty*. Although his treatment of various aspects of the development equation is complete, the particular aspect of economic development that Sachs mentions quite often is the issue of geography and natural capital. He often notes that geographical barriers or resource differentials are key markers of differential development experience among countries. It is geographical distress, particularly that associated with poor agricultural climate or land endowment and transport isolation, that he cites regularly as the most fundamental reason why economic growth has not occurred in various locations.

By Sachs' description, it is rural Africa that has suffered the most from underdevelopment, and it is mainly the region's isolation from infrastructure and trade nodes that has perpetuated this state. More simply, "geography has conspired with economics to give Africa a particularly weak hand" (208). According to him, the rising tide of economic growth cannot lift all boats, as it doesn't reach "the mountaintops of the Andes or the interior of Asia and Africa. Market forces, as powerful as they are, have identifiable limitations, including those posed by adverse geography" (326). Perhaps such insight is expected in this case, given that Sachs was trained as a geographer.

Overall, Sachs' general principles and even most of his policy suggestions are well-stated and relatively feasible. The main question is whether or not they are actually possible given the international political climate and the international community's capacity for coordination. In the description of his proposed MDGscommon aid plan, he states plainly that many diverse organizations (among them the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), UN specialized agencies, and the regional development banks) will have to coordinate all of their efforts on virtually the entire world's aid programs into one under the leadership of the UN Development Program. It would be a noble and incredible feat if such cooperation could be achieved, but one wonders whether such immense coordination is beyond our political capacity in a sovereign world.

It is evident that Sachs himself harbours serious discontent with respect to many international development institutions, particularly the IMF. It is with some derision that he remarks how "the main IMF prescription has been budgetary belt-tightening for patients much too poor to own belts" and that the IMF has a tendency to "study problems to death while an economy collapses" (77). He also takes repeated aim at his own government, accusing it of being insufficiently thorough, making promises it does not keep, and ignoring the extremely deprived worldwide — all claims that many others might corroborate. In the end, however idealistic its prescriptions may be, *The End of Poverty* is an honest and courageous stab at many of the world's most pressing issues.