



Can the US change its spots?

Jeffery Sachs is feted by Bono, mixes with Nelson Mandela, Bill Clinton and Kofi Annan. Now, the world's most radical economic reformer has one crusade - to rid the world of poverty. And he has Public Enemy Number One in his sights ...

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Sunday March 27, 2005

Observer

The walls of Jeffrey Sachs's office at Columbia University are filled with photos. Here is Sachs with the Pope, with U2's lead singer Bono, with Nelson Mandela, Vaclav Havel, Bill Clinton, Kofi Annan; there is Sachs with Glenn Close, Richard Gere, Julia Ormond ... Really, you think as you glance around the room, Zelig should be so lucky. But Sachs is something of a celebrity in his own right. He is the man who has worked out a way to save the world.

The foremost economic reformer of our time, Sachs is universally acknowledged as a brilliant mind. Now 50 years old, he became a tenured professor at Harvard at the age of 28, and two years later he put an end to Bolivia's hyperinflation in the space of a week. Since then, whenever a country has been in crisis - Brazil, Peru, Poland, Russia - Sachs has been called to the rescue. He is special adviser to the United Nations and has launched the Global Fund to Fight Aids, Tuberculosis and malaria. Sachs's latest ambition is this: to eliminate world poverty by 2025.

One commentator has dubbed him an 'economist as rock star'. According to Bono, the actual rock star who became his student and wrote the foreword to Sachs's new book *The End of Poverty*, 'His passion is operatic.' 'He does have star power,' says Sebastian Mallaby, Washington Post columnist and author of *The World's Banker*, a history of recent development thinking at the World Bank. 'He brings to the table these extraordinary academic credentials, and he's so energetic that he's got a personal network of African leaders, as well as access to Western leaders. So he can show up to see the Treasury Secretary, and say, "Well, I saw the president of Kenya last week and he made the argument that ... "'

A few days ago, Sachs was in Senegal, personally distributing 3,000 anti-malarial bed nets around villages, managing to do in a single day over six times more than a major US aid organisation had done in three years. He is a capeless crusader, an economist without borders, and routinely touted as a future Nobel laureate. How does he do it? 'I have often said,' he tells me amiably, 'that a constant level of exhaustion is a good solution to jet lag.'

Sachs is an unlikely looking superhero. Wearing a nondescript navy suit and brown tie, he could be your local bank manager. He jogs his knee intermittently, and speaks with a flat, broad Mid-Western accent. Nevertheless, he is a man with a cause in his heart and numbers at his fingertips.

'Every morning,' Sachs writes, 'our newspapers could report, "More than 20,000 people perished yesterday of extreme poverty."' The World Bank defines extreme poverty as a personal income of under one dollar a day. 1.1 billion people in the world live, or fail to live, on that, and 315 million of them are in Africa. Malaria, Sachs points out, is a disease that kills as many children every month as died in the Indian Ocean tsunami, and the disease is 'largely preventable and utterly treatable'.

Sachs argues that extreme poverty could be obliterated altogether by 2025, if only the rich world would stick to the promises it has repeatedly made over the past 35 years - namely, to give 0.7 per cent of each country's gross national product in development aid. As it stands, the US - the main culprit, in Sachs's view - gives only 0.25 per cent. 'The US is basically absent without leave on the fight against global poverty,' he tells me. 'It needs to hear that it can't spend 500 billion dollars on the military this year, and only one thirtieth of that on development aid,

and expect that the rest of the world views this as a normal state of affairs.'

The End of Poverty is a gripping read. Sachs can make a meeting with the International Monetary Fund sound like a scene from Erin Brockovich. You hear of the people he meets on the ground in over 100 different countries, and follow him as he discovers each gap in his knowledge - how a PhD hadn't prepared him to fix a real economy, how hyperinflation hadn't prepared him for the harsh realities of geography, how helping a country's transition from communism to capitalism was a new challenge but how, despite having advised the Polish government, 'the hurricane in Russia' was 'so big, so noisy, so tumultuous' that he had to quit - so that the book becomes a kind of backhanded autobiography.

Jeffrey Sachs grew up in Detroit, the son of a prominent constitutional and labour lawyer who represented many of the great labour leaders of his day. When Sachs was 16, he left North America for the first time, and travelled with his parents to the Soviet Union. 'You had to be interested,' he says of what lay behind the Iron Curtain. 'The world was divided into these two camps, armed to the teeth. It was necessary to at least try to see something of what was happening on the other side.'

In the lobby of their Moscow hotel, Sachs met an East German boy who became his penpal, and whom he visited in East Berlin two years later. 'And from there began this quite riveting experience of trying to understand why our shared planet is so different in different places, and what is it that's working, and what isn't working, in terms of different ways to organise societies. I travelled in Europe and a little bit in the Middle East, and as an entering student at Harvard, I was interested in the question, what makes for a good society? What is an economy? Why are some places rich and some places poor? I was asking those questions, knowing remarkably little, of course. But basically, that was 33 years ago, and I'm still asking the same questions.'

His widespread travel has led directly to his economic theories. As Sachs explains: 'The most important single phenomenon of my approach is seeing the world from comparative perspectives, and realising that in some ways the problems are very similar - because we're all genetically the same and because we're all grappling with our place in a now global society. But also realising that the problems are quite different at 12,000ft above sea level in the Andes or in the tropical lowlands of Eastern Kenya or in the malaria-infested villages of Senegal. For me, that comparative perspective helps me to understand each of these different places more than I ever could had I just focused on one place.'

There is another piece of Sachs's personal life that has influenced his public policy: his family. Sachs's wife Sonia is a paediatrician, and he has extrapolated from her work a pioneering theory he calls 'clinical economics' - a way of thinking which underscores, as he puts it, the similarities between good development economics and good clinical medicine. Economies, Sachs suggests, are complex systems, as is the human body; economic doctors should look for different causes of sickness in different places; the idea that 'all medicine is family medicine' might be transferred, for example, to investigating how trade barriers with other countries might be affecting one country's fate, and so on.

For over 20 years, Sachs and his wife have travelled together, with the gradual additions of their children, who are now 22, 19 and nine. They have been to around 80 countries together, with Sonia's ever-present medical bag lending them a sense of security. 'Your children teach you an incredible amount,' Sachs says. 'And they've each imbibed a lot - our oldest daughter is getting a graduate degree in international affairs. She's very interested in the rights of the poor, and that's because she's lived among them. Our son is studying earth sciences and economics, and our daughter who's in fourth grade is giving lectures to her school about foreign assistance and African villages. They see it with a lot of passion.'

Passion is something Sachs himself is not short of either. It is both his greatest strength and his most frequently cited weakness. Some, like Mark Weisbrot, co-director of the Centre for Economic and Policy Research in Washington, admire him for speaking out against the US government and the international financial institutions. Others, such as Sebastian Mallaby, fear that his utopian promises leave the field wide open for conservative critics. 'Conservatives come along and say, we've given all this money, and we have precious little to show for it,' Mallaby explains. 'The only reason why conservatives can get away with talking such rot is that the goalposts have been set by these utopians who say the goal is to eliminate world poverty. That's just so hard to do that you're setting yourself up for failure.'

The question of how the aid might be used is a divisive one, and not the only controversial issue surrounding Sachs's work. Broadly speaking, the right thinks all third-world governments are corrupt, and therefore not worth

giving money to, and the left thinks the occasional consequences of his recommendations, such as large scale job losses and wiping out people's savings, are a strange way to end poverty. Sachs is also in favour of sweat shop labour, though his reasons are subtle and clear. 'These jobs are better than what these young women would ever have had without them, and they are not the end point, they're a rung on the ladder out of extreme rural poverty,' Sachs says. 'None of that is an excuse for the lack of hygiene, for the lack of physical safety, for mental and physical abuse, for sexual harassment. Arguing for human decency and human rights is always important. But saying, "Oh no, unless the wages go way up we should keep these goods out of our economy" - I regard that as maybe in the interests of people trying to protect jobs here.'

Whatever your opinion, one of the most striking things about Sachs is the vigour with which he is prepared to see a broad range of problems as his business, thus treading ground other economists apparently fear to. When he started writing about malaria at the end of the 1990s, for instance, he did a literature search on the economics of malaria and found only one article, from the mid-1960s.

Every trip, he says, is an epiphany: 'You see things with your own eyes. You don't read it in the textbooks, you don't read it in the IMF and the World Bank reports. You have to see it. And when you see it you know that this isn't right, and you know that it's directly solvable.'

Despite these words, Sachs claims not be a total optimist. He sees that these problems can be solved, he explains, but he does not believe they will be solved necessarily. The burden, ultimately, is on us.

So what can we do as individuals to combat global poverty? In terms of financial donations, Sachs recommends the Global Fund to Fight Aids, Tuberculosis and Malaria - a Geneva-based, transparent organisation which he helped to set up. 'But what I would encourage people to do first,' he stresses, 'is speak out. To tell their governments: it's outrageous, we're 35 years on on these commitments, every year 8 million people are dying of extreme poverty, and we are blaming the poor for their deaths rather than holding ourselves accountable.'

2005 has long been considered a make-or-break year. Britain is hosting the G8 summit this summer, and the Commission for Africa has just released its report, with a comprehensive recovery plan. But the United States, Sachs says, 'seems to be gung ho to make it a "break" year, and that has to keep us running even faster. You can't give up.'

Before he goes off to fight the next global battle, I ask Sachs one last question. If he won the Nobel Prize, what would he do with the money? 'Oh my God!' he laughs. 'Let's do one thing at a time. Let's see if we can get the United States to change its spots.'