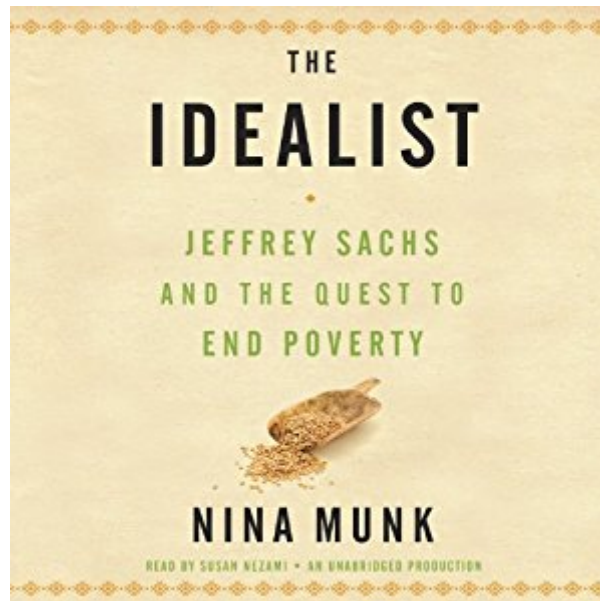


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# The Idealist: Jeffrey Sachs And The Quest To End Poverty



## Synopsis

A powerful portrayal of Jeffrey Sachs's ambitious quest to end global poverty "The poor you will always have with you," to cite the Gospel of Matthew 26:11. Jeffrey Sachs - celebrated economist, special advisor to the Secretary General of the United Nations, and author of the influential best seller *The End of Poverty* - disagrees. In his view, poverty is a problem that can be solved. With single-minded determination he has attempted to put into practice his theories about ending extreme poverty, to prove that the world's most destitute people can be lifted onto "the ladder of development." In 2006, Sachs launched the Millennium Villages Project, a daring five-year experiment designed to test his theories in Africa. The first Millennium village was in Sauri, a remote cluster of farming communities in western Kenya. The initial results were encouraging. With his first taste of success, and backed by 120 million dollars from George Soros and other likeminded donors, Sachs rolled out a dozen model villages in ten sub-Saharan countries. Once his approach was validated it would be scaled up across the entire continent. At least that was the idea. For the past six years, Nina Munk has reported deeply on the Millennium Villages Project, accompanying Sachs on his official trips to Africa and listening in on conversations with heads-of-state, humanitarian organizations, rival economists, and development experts. She has immersed herself in the lives of people in two Millennium villages: Ruhiira, in southwest Uganda, and Dertu, in the arid borderland between Kenya and Somalia. Accepting the hospitality of camel herders and small-hold farmers, and witnessing their struggle to survive, Munk came to understand the real-life issues that challenge Sachs's formula for ending global poverty. *The Idealist* is the profound and moving story of what happens when the abstract theories of a brilliant, driven man meet the reality of human life.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The paperback edition of *The Idealist: Jeffrey Sachs and the Quest to End Poverty* was eagerly anticipated. Well, by me, at least. I have spent the past year reading broadly on the topic of economic development. Sachs's 2005 bestseller, *The End of Poverty*, is by far the most optimistic and prescriptive of the lot. He declared triumphantly in that book: "The wealth of the rich world, the power of today's vast storehouses of knowledge, and the declining fraction of the world that needs help to escape poverty all make the end of poverty a realistic possibility by the year 2025." After serving a year on the ground as an economic development officer in Kandahar, Afghanistan in 2010, I'm skeptical of such sweeping and confident assertions concerning development. Nevertheless, I admired Sachs for the courage of his convictions. According to her own account, author Nina Munk came to this project with an objective, open mind; if anything, she genuinely wanted to believe in the feasibility of Sachs's grand and noble vision of eradicating poverty in sub-Saharan Africa and beyond. After six years researching this book, however, Munk is no fan of Jeffrey Sachs. In fact, I'm fairly confident she grew to loathe the man. By the end of the book, she dismissively refers to his many op-ed pieces in prominent publications as "jeremiads," his rapid fire Twitter feed as embarrassing "screeds," the man once tenured as a Harvard economics professor at the ridiculously tender age of 28 as a "sawed-off shotgun, scattering ammunition in all directions." Sachs is a controversial character; his own book makes that clear. There are only two types of people in the world, according to *The End of Poverty*: smart, noble people who agree with and unquestioningly offer their enthusiastic support to Jeffrey Sachs, and ignorant, unprofessional, and painfully misguided buffoons who do not. One of the main themes in *The Idealist* is that Sachs simply does not tolerate dissent, no matter how honestly and innocently voiced. "In effect," Munk writes, Sachs demands that you "trust him, to accept without question his approach to ending poverty, to participate in a kind of collective magical thinking." Any criticism or questioning of his vision or approach is reliably met with his usual impatience and blind faith, often ending in cruelly directed scorn and humiliating name-calling. Or, as

Munk describes it in one of her rare charitable moments toward the subject of her book:

“It’s never easy to disagree with Jeffrey

Sachs. One of the things I like and respect about Sachs is that he brings an entrepreneur’s vision and passion to the cause of poverty alleviation.

I’ve lived and worked in Silicon Valley for 15 years and have observed that many legendary tech entrepreneurs (Gates, Jobs, Bezos, Musk, etc.) are famously prickly and impatient with those who fail to see the future that is so clearly visible to them. For these forward thinkers, arguably the genuine geniuses amongst us, “all seems impossible until it becomes inevitable. They live a different world where “no idea is too far fetched, which is how Munk describes Sachs. Not too surprisingly,

Sachs’s strident criticism of economic-development-business-as-usual has been met with hostility from those whom work in that system. Julie McLaughlin, the World

Bank’s lead health specialist for Africa, echoes a common sentiment about Sachs, as quoted by Munk in “The Idealist”:

“Jeff’s a televangelist, which seems to go over with some people, but I don’t find him all that articulate or charming. I don’t want to be lectured to. Ah, yes, the lecturing. That’s how most development professionals unfavorably view Sachs’s approach to debate according to the author. “I don’t want to argue with you, Jeff, because I don’t want to be called ignorant or unprofessional,” one development professional is quoted as saying to Sachs in a crowded room after he delivered one of his predictably condescending, didactic, and undiplomatic public speeches on all that is wrong with development work in Africa. “I have worked in Africa for thirty years. My colleagues combined have worked in the field for one hundred plus years. We don’t like your tone. We don’t like you preaching to us. We are not your students. We do not work for you. The bitterness and (I dare say) hate drip off every sentence. These people are the professionals at USAID, The World Bank, DFID, etc. We have developed a visceral hatred for Jeffrey Sachs. It’s a bug that Nina Munk evidently contracted during his six years on the job. But what really “Hath Sachs Wrought? He boldly defined a plan to eradicate poverty in the most depressed regions of the world. His ambitious goal: to help get these god-forsaken communities at least onto the first rung of the economic development ladder. His tireless evangelism funded the first phase of his vision to the tune of \$120M, most of it from liberal philanthropist George Soros.

Sachs's narrative ensured that outside economic support was only temporary. Once the combined basics of clean water, health care, malaria-preventing bed nets, transportation networks and so on were provided for, the local population would pull themselves up by their bootstraps and carry themselves out of poverty and into the twenty-first century as self-sufficient and innovative market capitalists. For many experienced sub-Saharan Africa development practitioners it all sounded hopelessly naïve, almost farcical. But, again, my view is (and was): why not give it a try? In 2008, I was director of corporate development at Intuit when we paid \$170M for Mint.com, an online personal financial management solution that was barely earning \$1M a year. The price tag of \$120M to test Sachs's ambitious proposal to eradicate poverty felt shamefully modest. And that's where this book left me wanting, perhaps because it's still too early to tell. The author focuses on only two of Sachs's model "Millennium Development Villages," one in the badlands of northeastern Kenya, on the parched and lawless border with Somalia, and the other deep in the heart of rural Uganda. Both have experienced mixed results. On the one hand, the self-sufficiency that Sachs predicted was not irrefutably taking hold. On the other hand, pumping millions of dollars into these remote and miserably poor communities obviously had a positive impact: malaria rates were down dramatically; as was infant mortality; more people than ever had corrugated tin roofs over their homes, the African equivalent of a television in every house and two cars in the driveway. But how much of this superficial success is sustainable? Once Sachs and his dollar-rich foundation move on, will these villages be any better off ten or twenty years down the road? The author's mind is evidently made up. She dismisses even the early success of the project as illusory. "By 2010 the Millennium Villages Project had become a cumbersome bureaucracy with hundreds of dependent employees," she writes. "One hundred twenty million dollars and Sachs's reputation were riding on the outcome of this social experiment in Africa. Was anyone prepared to smash the glass and pull the emergency cord?" But is it really necessary to pull the emergency cord just now, especially given the price tag for Phase 2? When you consider that top hedge fund managers earn over \$1 billion (yes, billion) annually, is asking for another \$100M that absurd? I realize that Sachs is a polarizing figure. In fact, I'm not particularly predisposed to like him; I'd rather kick him in the shins if I could, to tell the truth. But I'm not convinced that Sachs's pie-in-the-sky vision has been fully discredited, at least not after reading "The Idealist," which most certainly sought to discredit the man and his vision. Munk declares unequivocally that Sachs

misjudged the complex, shifting realities in the villages. Africa is not a laboratory; Africa is chaotic and messy and unpredictable. I am 70% confident that she is correct, although she didn't make her case nearly as airtight as she evidently thinks she did. The most damning evidence of Sachs' ill will presented by Munk is that he dismissed the assistance of celebrated MIT economist Esther Duflo to rigorously test the affects of intervention in the MVPs. Sachs evidently rejected such help because it treated global poverty alleviation like "testing pills." It is a shame that Sachs isn't more open to a rigorous and scientific approach to testing his results. I put this book down feeling even more depressed for the fate of sub-Saharan Africa than when I started, which was pretty depressed. The cover photo in the paperback edition shows Sachs surrounded by African villagers. It's a photo well selected by Munk and her editors as it captures perfectly the mix of Sachs's arrogance and ridiculousness that Munk conveys in this book. I just sincerely hope that she isn't nearly as accurate as believes that she is.

I didn't expect this book to be hard to put down. But it is. I enjoyed reading it very much. I decided to read it because I currently have a daughter at Columbia. I like to read things related to Columbia. It's a wonderful place. Other reviews here provide all the details you need to know. I just want to share some words that describe Jeffrey Sachs and speculate on his motivations based on this book. I will stipulate that Jeffrey Sachs wants to end poverty. But he seems to be self-promoting, self-aggrandizing, somewhat delusional and surprisingly naive. In my opinion, as Sachs was approaching 50, it occurred to him that he needed to end his career with a big bang. Why not claim to have a way to end poverty in Africa and find others to pay for an attempt? At the same time he would rub shoulders with the likes of Bono and Angelina Jolie. He simply bit off more than he could chew. His hubris makes him pretend that he has been succeeding in his Quixotic quest. It seems obvious to me that Sachs would really like to be a rock star. And that would have been much easier than taking on a challenge that's not likely to ever be achieved.

Munk brilliantly skewers the clerical economist. Her deceptively simple description of the gaps between rhetoric and reality do it all. Her charitable balance spotlights his vilification of people who disagree with him. Though his failure is tragic, feeling for those he lifted with hope then failed, release us from sympathy for the man who sacrificed intellectual integrity to his poster child left-academic vision. But I can't give this book five stars. This sick joke doesn't have a punch-line.

One starts waiting for it from half-way through, from the initial darkening of the bright pictures of hope. Waiting starts as a niggling hope that her perspicacity will identify elements worth preserving from Sachs's arrogant analysis and prescriptions. But she leaves a lot hanging. She describes Sachs' torpedoing of generations of development agency work to create in Tanzania a self-sustaining domestic market in insecticide mosquito nets, when his vituperation badgered the world into a big bang distribution of free nets to everyone. We hear that they get used for fishing, and fencing goats, but we do not learn whether there was a dramatic reduction in malaria. Nor do we learn the fate of those who will be needed to replace the nets when the free ones wear out after five years. But we do see enough for it to be clear that Sachs simply dressed up 'non-judgmental' charity in overwhelming optimism to disguise the usual left hatred of our Western forebears' Christian capitalist virtues (thrift, diligence, honesty, rationality, freedom). Without a critical mass of those virtues our forebears could not have lifted us from the normal Malthusian cycles of famine, disease and tyranny. Munk leaves Sachs with the dignity of some learning from the experience. After summarizing his decline into Occupy fulmination against the world and humans as they are she quotes him qualifying his previous conviction that he knew exactly what should be done and that everyone who opposed him were stupid or venal. "I believe in the contingency of life. This isn't one grand roll of the dice. The world is complicated, hard and messy". But I really want to know what she would prescribe.

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