

Book

American hubris, African nemesis

Nina Munk's *The Idealist* is a deep and important book about foreign aid and development: grandiose plans, especially those hatched abroad, will be brought down by the complexity and unknowability of local conditions and human behaviour. Beyond the enormous punch that the book delivers, the quality of the writing is that of a fine novel, not of the usual tract in social science. We get to know and care about the characters, including Munk herself; we share their dedication, their optimism, and their dreams of improving lives. We also care when their illusions are destroyed, and their dedication is betrayed. Much of the message is conveyed by the arc of the story, and by the change in Munk's own voice as she moves from her initial optimism and her commitment to reporting on something that really matters—the fight against global poverty—into final disillusion. It is a trip that many of us have made over the years, but few with so much knowledge from the field and none whose experiences are so eloquently and movingly reported.

Academic writers have explored this territory too. James Scott's *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, documents, among other schemes, Stalin's catastrophic collectivisation of agriculture, as well as Julius Nyerere's failed attempt to relieve poverty by having everyone in rural Tanzania live in "rationally" planned villages. Both schemes took their inspiration from the USA, and from the modernist belief in technology and social engineering. In one case, in 1928, during 2 weeks in a Chicago hotel room, three American experts produced detailed plans for a 500 000-acre Russian collective farm. James Ferguson's *The Anti-politics Machine* is about a failed Canadian development scheme in Lesotho. Unfortunately for the developers,

Lesotho did not look anything like the "dual-economy" model then fashionable among economists—any more than Russian or Tanzanian farms looked like the model farms of the planners. Economists, perhaps even more than other social scientists, are susceptible to mistaking their models for reality. Ambitious plans, even when formulated domestically, can never

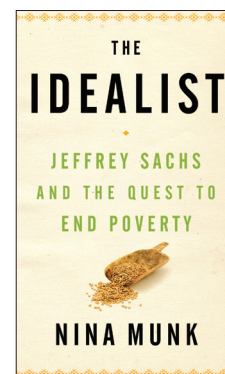
"Yet the schemes of the planners have rarely brought the improvement in the human condition that their well-intentioned architects had hoped for, and have often brought disaster."

know enough not to be undone by the complexity on the ground. The law of unintended consequences is the engine that inevitably brings nemesis to such hubris.

Jeffrey Sachs, the eponymous idealist of Munk's tragedy, holds to a model of economic development in which poverty cannot be broken piecemeal, but must be attacked on all fronts at once. Perhaps people cannot save for the future because they are too poor or too unhealthy, or both; perhaps they

cannot improve their health or their productivity without the investments that depend on saving; or perhaps their productivity is low because they are not adequately nourished which, in turn, comes about because their productivity is so low. These vicious circles cause "poverty traps" from which people cannot escape except through a "big push" from outside. "In order to make lasting changes in any one sphere of development, we must improve them all", argues the website of the Millennium Villages, where "all" comprises eight categories: education, mother and child health, business and entrepreneurship, gender equality, technology, the environment and intervention, water and energy, and food. (Note the "we", which presumably means the western visitors to the website.)

These arguments have some plausibility, but they are not endorsed by many economists today who, to be fair, do not exactly have a stellar track record in promoting development. It is also hard to avoid the fact that the now rich countries of the world escaped from poverty without even a small push, let alone one delivered from abroad. One might also ask whether gender equality was really a precondition for



The Idealist: Jeffrey Sachs and the Quest to End Poverty
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Jeffrey Sachs visits a water source near Ruhiira Millennium Village in 2007

the Industrial Revolution, or exactly what role it played in the recent poverty reduction and health improvement in India and China which were among the most spectacular in human history.

Sachs, however, is extraordinarily persuasive, at least to development agencies, donors, and film stars, if not to his fellow economists, and the United Nations and other funders agreed to support a series of Millennium Villages, currently in 20 countries in Africa, in which his ideas are being implemented. Given Sachs' confidence in the outcome, the testing of the ideas was not given much priority, at least initially, so that, for example, no matching untreated villages were selected at baseline. This has led to controversy about how well the villages are doing. Investigators outside of the project have found it difficult to get access to data on outcomes or on costs. Michael Clemens of the Center for Global Development and Gabriel Demombynes of the World Bank have done much to develop relevant evidence. A torrent of comment in blogs, working papers, and social media has put the project on the defensive. Much debate also surrounded publication in 2012 in *The Lancet* of an interim analysis of the Millennium Villages with the authors later withdrawing flawed estimates of key benefits to child mortality; even so, the paper, uncorrected, remains on the Millennium Villages website as of late January, 2014.

The Idealist tells the stories behind the numbers and its evidence is as compelling and as important as anything in the data. Munk shadowed Sachs for 6 years, and lived in two of the villages, Dertu, in Kenya and close to the Somali border, and Ruhiiira, in Uganda. In Dertu, a village of itinerant camel herders, we meet Ahmed Maalim Mohamed who, against great odds, earned a PhD in dry-land resource management from Gembloux University in Belgium. A year later, he "set out to eradicate extreme poverty by following to the letter"

the *Millennium Villages Handbook* "a 147-page, single-spaced document written by 29 academics, mostly from Columbia University". Neither Ahmed's faith in the project, nor his admiration for "the Great Professor's ideas" ever wavers, even as the irrelevance of the *Handbook* to the facts on the ground becomes clear, and even when he is apparently scapegoated by Sachs' team for the inevitable failures. Dertu suffers the fate of a small town that is briefly visited by a travelling circus; it is filled to overflowing with exciting temporary activity, not excluding prostitutes and scoundrels fighting over the spoils, and leaving behind only debris. By the end of the book, Dertu is unreachable from outside, engulfed in drought, war, and terrorism. The Millennium Villages team writes off this misfortune as an "artifact" for which they cannot be held responsible but, as Munk rightly asks, "why in the world were drought and violence and hostage taking unexpected in sub-Saharan Africa?"

In Ruhiiira, the Millennium Villages project decided that fertilised high-yielding maize was the key to ending poverty. The yields were indeed high, but maize is not a food that the locals like to eat, and there were no storage or marketing arrangements. Much of the harvest rotted or was eaten by rats. And unlike the local bananas, growing maize does not fit into local patterns of life in Ruhiiira.

The Millennium Villages project was supposed to be self-sustaining after 5 years; after the initial external "push", people should be able to cope on their own. Not surprisingly, this horizon proved optimistic. Sachs extended the length of the project from 5 to 10 years, "a course correction", but found increasing difficulty raising funds. His solution was to move the villagers from subsistence to commercial agriculture, and for them to borrow money to finance what was sure to be their eventual success. The impossibility of irrigation in Ruhiiira was only one of many subsequent problems. Those who were persuaded to take loans, instead

of just losing what they had, lost more than the little that they had had. Meanwhile, Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni, whose interview with Sachs is the comedic high point of the book, seems to display no interest in plans for eradicating poverty nor for increasing yields in Ruhiiira (except to boast about the yields on his own farm). Around the same time, he bought about three-quarters of a billion dollars' worth of Russian fighter jets.

Modern technology, with its models and manuals, has an irresistible fascination for social engineers, and has done so for most of the past century. New knowledge and new ways of doing things have indeed been the source of much of human progress. Yet the schemes of the planners have rarely brought the improvement in the human condition that their well-intentioned architects had hoped for, and have often brought disaster. Thousands of years of painstakingly accumulated local knowledge cannot be incorporated into such plans. Nor can technocratic methods make up for bad politics, or provide a substitute for the two-way contract between politicians and people that provides public goods in exchange for taxes and that underpins development. Indeed, and although Munk does not emphasise it as do Scott and Ferguson, the ultimate beneficiaries of such schemes are likely to be the local politicians who, one way or another, by extracting project funds, or by exploiting the resultant chaos, strengthen their own positions at the expense of those the schemes were intended to benefit.

The Millennium Villages come with none of the coercion that accompanied the rural development projects of Stalin or of Nyerere, let alone the murderous horrors of Mao's Great Leap Forward. For that we should be grateful. Yet the crying shame is that while the hubris came from Sachs, the nemesis came to the villagers.

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