

Book

Maximum prophet

On the anniversary of 9/11, and after the publication of his earlier book, *The End of Poverty*, Jeffrey Sachs made an appearance in Washington's National Cathedral, billed as the prophet of the poor. In *Common Wealth*, he extends his concerns from the poor of today to the poor of tomorrow, from eliminating poverty to dealing with climate change. A major barrier to both, according to Sachs, is the rate of population growth, and he argues for a bold international policy to reduce it. His belief that this will work is supported by the argument that it has worked before, which requires much rewriting of the history of the population control movement in the second half of the 20th century.

Sachs is deeply committed to improving the health and living standards of the poor, but he doesn't place much trust in their own judgment or in their ability to help themselves. Although he is careful not to advocate more than the Cairo declaration of the International Conference on Population and Development and to emphasise the word voluntary, Sachs believes that people need to be told—by national and international leaders—that smaller families are good for them, even when they themselves think otherwise. "The pernicious effects of large families on the well-being of the children should not be doubted." Without citations to support his views, Sachs rehearses a raft of discredited arguments from the 1950s on the negative effects of population growth. Matthew Connelly's recent *Fatal Misconception* is a fine history of how a coalition of non-governmental organisations, foundations, academics, and international organisations, inspired mostly by good intentions, perpetrated one of the most shameful episodes in the history of international policy. The fault came from the arrogance of their absolute moral conviction, and from ignoring the motivations, opinions, and needs

of those whom they were trying to help. But Sachs sees this "worldwide policy-led effort" as "one of the great success stories of modern times". And he follows with a bold denial of history: "Throughout Asia and Latin America, comprehensive family planning programs have led to reductions in TFR [total fertility rate] and slowing population growth rates, and have

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done so in Christian, Muslim, Buddhist and other religious and cultural settings. Crucially, these changes in fertility were voluntary—they were achieved without compromising freedom of choice." But what then of the past excesses of population control: of Sanjay Gandhi in India, or the one-child policy in China?

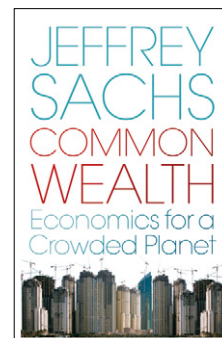
Sachs also does not trust poor people to make simple choices about their health or about whether to spend their money today or to keep some for tomorrow. According to him, they cannot afford to buy bednets, or to save for the future. These claims sound plausible but, on their own, are incoherent. We all—and poor people more urgently than others precisely because their means are so limited—make choices of how to spend. Many poor people worldwide are upgrading their food consumption to tastier and often healthier foods, they are buying or renting mobile phones, and understand the promise they hold for the future. The problem for them is not that they make bad decisions for themselves, from which they need to be rescued by the UN and by UN-inspired local politicians telling them what they really want. Their problem is the impossible economic and political

environments in which they live, which an increasing number of writers think have been made worse by well-meaning financial aid from the outside.

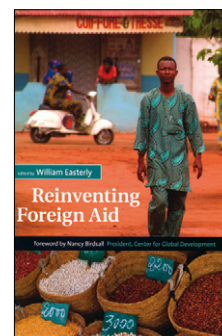
Sachs thinks of much of the world as a broken machine and lists its missing parts: bednets at so much each, vaccines at so much a dose, roads at so much a mile, and Millennium Villages at US\$60 per villager. Divide the total by the income of the rich countries, and they can have it all for less than 1% of our incomes. The technical knowledge is there, the UN—the agent of delivery and keeper of treaties—is ready, and the only things standing in the way are the Bush administration (villain number one), and academics who, incredibly to Sachs, are taking the debate back to first principles of whether aid works.

Those academics are well represented in *Reinventing Foreign Aid*, assembled by William Easterly. Unlike Sachs—and it is a crucial difference—Easterly is a full participant in academic debates in economics and political science. Although Sachs' fiercest critic, he is happy to incorporate other views. But no one in this book thinks that poor people are incapable of making their own decisions about fertility, saving, and health decisions, or are stuck in a poverty trap from which they cannot escape without external help. Sachs' views are a long way outside of the very broad current mainstream.

Todd Moss, Gunilla Pettersson, and Nicolas van de Walle provide a convincing argument against Sachs. Many countries in Africa (and a few elsewhere) receive aid flows that are more than a fifth of national income and more than half of government expenditures. This enormous, unearned inflow, like oil or diamond wealth, paralyses the development of state capacity, particularly the capacity of the state to raise revenue and spend it with the democratic involvement of citizens. The aid flows "alter fundamentally the



Common Wealth: Economics for a Crowded Planet
Jeffrey Sachs. Allen Lane/
Penguin, 2008. Pp 400. £22.00.
ISBN 9-780-71399-919-8.



Reinventing Foreign Aid
William Easterly, ed. The MIT
Press, 2008. Pp 537. US\$75.00.
ISBN 0-262-05090-0.

relationship between government elites and local citizens”, so that “If donors are providing the majority of public finances, and governments are primarily accountable to those external agencies, then it may simply not be possible to expect a credible social contract to develop between the state and its citizens...aid may undercut the very principles the aid industry intends to promote: ownership, accountability, and participation”.

My own view is that we should do the opposite of what Sachs recommends, and stop the mass external aid flows to the poorest countries of the world. We are most likely doing harm, not good; financial support cannot be given in exchange for good governance because financial support undermines good governance. Yet there are policies that can be implemented from the outside, many of which are widely agreed. We can stop buying blood diamonds, and we can stop our oil and natural resource companies preserving and enriching corrupt regimes. We can

make it harder for illegitimate regimes to sell us the common property of their citizens or bonds that mortgage their futures. We can supply technical support for countries to negotiate trade and pharmaceutical treaties with rich countries. We can support incentives for the discovery of new drugs and new vaccines, through both “push” (financial support) and “pull” (advance purchase commitment) mechanisms, as argued here by Michael Kremer. The history of health improvement in both rich countries and poor is a history of new innovations and of their spread to the world’s population. But innovations do not just fall like manna from heaven, they can be induced and funded, and markets will not do it unaided.

Related arguments can be made in favour of The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, the US President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, and other vertical health programmes, although the argument is more difficult. These programmes have no doubt worked to reduce mortality in

poor countries and to speed the delivery of new medicines to people who would otherwise have to wait, often until it is too late. But these programmes also involve large financial flows and the associated negative effects, and they undercut the indigenous development of health provision by government and civil society. Better health in poor countries will ultimately require that the poor attach higher priority to their health—surveys currently show Africans rate health behind poverty and employment—and the development of contracts for health delivery between governments and citizens. Such contracts cannot be imposed from outside, and one of the first responsibilities of foreign governments and agencies is to do no harm through well-meaning policies. Technical solutions buttressed by moral certainty are no more likely to help in the future than they have in the past.

Angus Deaton
deaton@Princeton.EDU



Abbas/Magnum Photos

Disposable People: Contemporary Global Slavery
At the Royal Festival Hall, Southbank Centre, London, UK, until Nov 9, 2008, then touring throughout the UK in 2009, for details of venues see <http://www.southbankcentre.co.uk/visual-arts/hayward-touring/current/contemporary-global-slavery>

In brief

Exhibition Photographs for freedom

“The Arabs were not fair to me, they beat me every day and one day they injected me in the left leg to paralyse me to stop me escaping”, says Wol Deng, a southern Sudanese man captured and enslaved when very young. The trans-Atlantic slave trade was abolished in 1807, but campaigning organisation Free the Slaves estimates 27 million people are enslaved today. Historical images of manacled slaves obscure the reality of contemporary slavery, defined by Free the Slaves president Kevin Bales as “people forced to work without pay, under threat of violence and unable to walk away”.

The photographs in *Disposable People* document the impact of modern slavery, including Bangladeshi

child labour, bonded Haitian cane workers in the Dominican Republic, young people trafficked in eastern Europe, Indonesian domestic servants in Singapore, and chattel slavery in southern Sudan.

One of the photographers who has aimed his camera to help expose 21st-century slavery is Stuart Franklin. His picture of Wol Deng, redeemed from slavery by the Committee for the Eradication of Abduction of Women and Children, shows Deng’s despair at having been robbed of his childhood, and not knowing his family or home.

“Slavery in the contemporary world is what it has been since the beginning of human history—the complete control of one person by another”, says Bales. The exhibition reaffirms the powerful role of still photography in documenting social

injustice and raising public awareness. The graphic images exhibited, and moving case histories they present, focus attention on a global reality that is intolerable in the 21st century.

Colin Martin
Cmpubrel@aol.com



Stuart Franklin/Magnum Photos

Stuart Franklin, *Wol Deng*, southern Sudan