
In July 2005, a series of concerts called the Live 8, was organized in G8 countries and South Africa to coincide with the G8 meeting in Gleneagles Scotland. The goal of its organizers was not to raise money, but to encourage the public to pressure the leaders of G8 countries to “end the scandal of stupid, immoral poverty” (Live8 website). These concerts are indicative of the latest attempt to mobilize the general population to take seriously the problem of poverty, and get active in seeking an end to it. Campaigns such as Jubilee 2000 to end ‘Third World’ debt, and the ‘Make Poverty History’ campaign have gained considerable public support, with 24 million people signing the global 2000 Jubilee Petition (the largest petition at the time in 2000), and 8 million people wearing white wrist bands in 2005 to show support for an end to extreme poverty.

Sachs’ book, *The End of Poverty*, can perhaps be viewed as the handbook of such a spirited public. It is “about ending poverty in our time” (1), and has the twin objective of helping the reader understand the causes of poverty and its solutions, and thereby inspire action. It is Sachs’ most significant work in a growing contribution to literature that encourages participation of the broader public in development debates. In a distinguished publishing career, *The End of Poverty* stands out for its intended non-academic audience; a fact exemplified in the use of Bono to write the book’s foreword.

*The End of Poverty* can be roughly divided into three sections. The first section seeks to answer the question as to why some countries are rich and others poor. Sachs’ basic argument is that all countries can ‘step up’ the ‘ladder of development’; it only requires the identification and rectification of the factors that prevent them from stepping up the first few rungs. This requires an approach of ‘clinical economics’ through which the impediments to growth (including those traditionally seen as external to economics) are diagnosed and the appropriate treatment administered and monitored.

In the second, and most interesting part of the book, Sachs illustrates this approach through several case studies. Referring to his experiences working with the Harvard Faculty and as an economic advisor to several governments, he shows how factors such as geography, history and internal social dynamics can influence a country’s economic success or failure. Sachs gives an illuminating account of how economic policies are negotiated, and particularly the political and financial constraints that leaders must face in their decisions. Sachs is highly critical of the International Monetary Fund and G8, talking of his frustration and “growing incredulity and despair over the passivity and stubbornness” (139) of the two institutions, and the difference between “spin and reality” of the world community more generally. By emphasizing that donor countries are often the biggest impediment to positive change, Sachs strengthens his argument that they must be the focus of any campaign to eradicate poverty.

The final section is a bid to mobilize the reader to take action towards this end. Sachs first outlines a strategy for eradicating extreme poverty and weighs up the costs of doing so against the costs of inaction. His next task is to convince the reader the eradication of poverty is possible with greater commitment by the donor countries to meet the target of aid at 0.7 percent of GDP, and proper distribution of that aid through sensible planning. Sachs includes the reader in the shared responsibility of achieving these ends, making a final appeal: “in the end, however, it comes back to us, as individuals” (365).
The objectives of a book such as The End of Poverty requires that it be evaluated on its ability to inform a large audience about some of the key issues about poverty and motivate them to action, rather than for its contribution to academic debates. In a systematic and well argued treatise, Sachs convincingly demonstrates the necessity of eradicating poverty, the achievability of such a task, and the means through which it can be achieved. This is a welcome perspective in an ‘aid debate’ that otherwise encourages donor fatigue through its emphasis on past failures and the overstating of private investment as a viable alternative.

Sachs convincingly overcomes these objections, and successfully argues that the required assistance to help the poor break the deadlock of extreme poverty is an obligation for all individuals. As a book of activism and getting people involved, ‘The End of Poverty’ is a success.

However, in the rush for an easily understood and achievable solution to poverty, Sachs has simplified what is a complex issue. This deficiency is apparent in the failure to define poverty in the first place, and Sachs’ over reliance on Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to explain differences in well-being. This is despite the existence of a strong body of literature that offers more nuanced conceptualizations of poverty and development, such as Amartya Sen’s (Development as Freedom, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) capability approach, and Nussbaum’s (‘Women and Equality: The Capabilities Approach’ International Labour Review, 138(3): 227–246) capabilities ethic. Rather than being considered as peripheral theories, their definitions are now increasingly included in the policies and publications of even the most mainstream of institutions, the World Bank. The failure to define poverty is a major deficiency in a book that suggests that poverty can be ended without clarifying what that means.

Sachs again appears to ignore key debates in the literature in his presentation of development as a unilinear and inevitable process once the initial impediments have been overcome. The influence of the long discredited modernization theory — which argues development takes place through an emulation of the ‘developed’ world by ‘poor countries’ — is apparent in Sachs’ analogy of a ‘ladder of development’, which is akin to Rostow’s aero plane moving along a runway of development to takeoff. Sachs uses subheadings such as “Ascending the ladder of economic development” (18), “On the Eve of Takeoff” (31) and “The Great Transformation” (35) to describe the spread of modern growth, which would not look out of place in Rostow’s seminal work The Stages of Economic Growth: An Non-Communist Manifesto (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960). Viewing development as a set of steps to a destination of ‘high-growth’, leaves no room to explore alternative meanings of development, and stifles debates as to alternative paths to that end.

In this way, Sachs reinforces the Washington Consensus view that poverty must be eradicated through growth without challenges to the prevailing capitalist system. Technological inputs and the transfer of ideas are portrayed as offering a relatively costless way to overcome extreme suffering. However such technocratic solutions have failed time and again to overcome deprivation that have political — not material — origins. Throughout The End of Poverty such complexities are ignored. For example, Sachs’ description of the Green Revolution as an unbridled success (260) neglects a large body of literature that shows how the most marginalized in India (the landless, sharecroppers and small landholders) were made worse off while the richest gained the most from the increases in yield. Such simplistic and one-sided portrayal of development programs is also evident in his treatment of the Grameen Bank (13–14), and Family Planning Programs (263).