

Transcript of Development Drums Episode 42 – The Idealist

Host: Owen Barder. Guest: Nina Munk

Listen to the podcast: <http://developmentdrums.org/835>



Owen Barder

Thanks for downloading Development Drums. My name is Owen Barder at the Center for Global Development. And I am here in our Washington offices with my guest, Nina Munk. Nina is a journalist and author who's worked at Vanity Fair, Fortune and Forbes and her work has appeared in The New York Times. Nina's previous book was about the merger of AOL and Time Warner. Today, we're going to be talking about Nina's most recent book which is called *The Idealist, Jeffrey Sachs and the Quest to End Poverty*.

Nina, welcome to Development Drums.

Nina Munk

Thanks for inviting me.

Owen Barder

Nina, I wanted to interview you on Development Drums because I think your book gives a fascinating insight into what we mean by development, how it happens and what the role of outsiders can be into that. But as – you'd be the first to admit you're not a development expert or at least you weren't a development expert when you started out on this journey. So perhaps you can start off by telling listeners who Jeff Sachs is and why you ended up writing a book about him.

Nina Munk

I think few people have written about development who knows little about it as I did. I'd like to argue and of course I am biased here, but I'd like to argue that it's one of the great strengths of this book which is that I came to writing about Jeffrey Sachs, about the Millennium Villages Project as his project is called, about poverty, about economic development knowing almost nothing. I have been to Africa once before I start working on this book in 2006. I, for better or worse, have spent most of my career writing about the very rich and my background is in financial journalism. I know how to read a spreadsheet awfully well. I know a whole lot less about poverty and about development.

But one of the great advantages of knowing nothing is that you are given license to ask really stupid questions. And people allow you the freedom to ask as many of those stupid questions as you want and I think that in fields with so many experts, with such a degree of expertise as economic development, I really believe firmly that I wound up having a tremendous advantage going in without any preconceived notions.

Owen Barder

So what interested you in Jeff Sachs? Why did you...

Nina Munk

I, as probably many of your listeners know, Jeffrey Sachs in 2005 came out with his best-selling – then best-selling, it still continues I think, to sell very well. His best-selling book, *The End of Poverty*, and I read it and I was very moved by it. I thought it was a very thoughtful book, a very intelligent book and like so many other people, so many other laymen, I should say, in particular, who bought that book, I was moved both by his proposal. Jeffrey Sachs is not just a brilliant macroeconomist but as anyone who has actually heard him speak or who has met him in person

knows he is someone who is very, very nimble, his brain works very well at a very high caliber, he's terribly charismatic. He is far more articulate than just about anyone I know. And so to hear someone like Jeffrey Sachs insist claim, belief, passionately that it is possible to end extreme poverty in our lifetime. And more than that, that he has in his words, a simple, easy, straightforward program for ending poverty is magnetic, is very compelling and one of Jeffrey Sachs's great strengths is his ability to reduce very, very complicated ideas to their essence, to bullet points.

And for certainly, again, speaking as a layman, it was very seductive that kind of reasoning, I think that's part of the seduction of Jeffrey Sachs's book, *The End of Poverty*. And in fact, of the plan that he has laid out for how poverty should be ended that he wound up putting into practice with the Millennium Villages Project.

Owen Barder

So we'll come in a second to the Millennium Villages. So you read his book in 2005, you were moved by it and what happens? You then get in touch with him and say, hey, Jeff, I'd like to write a book.

Nina Munk

Yeah, I – as you mentioned earlier, I write for *Vanity Fair* magazine and I am grateful – lucky enough to have tremendous latitude on what I write about although officially I tend to write about things relating to finance and business. And it occurred to me really at that moment, I started reporting the story and contacted Jeffrey Sachs in 2006. That was the genesis of this book. It occurred to me in 2006 and of course none of us realize it at the time but it's very clear on hindsight. But even then, there was an inkling that 2006 was and it turned out to be a dramatic year, it turned out, in fact, to be the beginning of the end of what we now look back and realized that at least in the United States that was the great housing bubble kind of began to collapse. Then, the stock market hit its high in 2006. The issue is relating to the people we know refer to as the 1% really coming to ahead bubbling to the top in that year. And I think although I certainly didn't articulate it that way but having devoted so much of my career to writing about the 1%, I think I like many people, became aware that it was time to – something was wrong and...

Owen Barder

Right.

Nina Munk

...and something needed to be changed and the issues of income disparity and the issues of poverty were of deep consequence and this was...

Owen Barder

And it was his 2005 book that made you think about that in an international context?

Nina Munk

Absolutely.

Owen Barder

So I mean he did one of the things that he aims to do which is mobilized people around this international course.

Nina Munk

Absolutely. As an advocate, he's done a splendid job.

Owen Barder

So 2006 is the year that he starts his Millennium Villages. What are Millennium Villages? What was the idea?

Nina Munk

You know, in effect, Jeffrey Sachs took the ideas that he laid out in *The End of Poverty* for how extreme poverty can be ended, systematic. What many of your listeners will recognize as a slightly altered but fundamentally a basic, integrated rural – model of integrated rural development and his idea was that if you put into practice his theories, a bunch of interventions and you apply these interventions in villages across sub-Saharan Africa all at the same time, rather than piecemeal. So you improve healthcare delivery systems, you improve education by building more schools, you handed out mosquito nets, for example. You did all these things and individually many people are familiar with – his idea was that if you did it systematically and with a great deal of focus and with a proper commitment and with a kind of both brainpower and money behind it that he was able to summon you could decisively, if not end poverty in a five-year period, certainly, do what he refer to as lifting people on to the first rung of the ladder of development. And once they have been lifted gently, boom, they would be able to push themselves ahead on their own when the project pulled out of town.

Owen Barder

So there are kind of two ideas in that. One is that these different interventions interact with each other in a positive way that if you are growing more crops and you have roads that enable you to get these crops to market, that's more use to you than if you did either of those interventions on their own. So there is something about these things adding up to more than the sum of that parts.

Nina Munk

I think that's absolutely right, yeah.

Owen Barder

And then there is another idea in there which is that you're not just improving people's lives by giving them access to healthcare or to more food than they would otherwise have. But you're actually – it's starting some engine, you're igniting some process that once it begins, people can then climb up the ladder on their own. You give them a leg-up...

Nina Munk

A boost.

Owen Barder

... on the ladder and then they can climb that – then they have got enough to start climbing the ladder.

Nina Munk

It really ties into Jeffrey Sachs's idea of the poverty trap, which other people have talked about as well that people in extreme poverty are trapped by poverty and they can't get out of it on their own. So you need to just give them, as you say, the fuel to get the engine going.

Owen Barder

Right. And you are clear that – Jeff Sachs was clear at this time in 2006 that he was not just improving the lives – aiming to improve the lives of people in these villages but that he was going to demonstrate that if you could give them this leg-up that it would then become self-sustaining.

Nina Munk

The whole idea – the whole principle behind the Millennium Villages Project and indeed behind his book, *The End of Poverty*, was not to provide a marvelous charity for a few thousand or even few tens of thousands of people in sub-Saharan Africa. That would be an ambition far too small for someone of Jeffrey Sachs's scale. The whole idea behind Jeffrey Sachs's idea is that – was that this could be to use a word that people in development love to use, this was absolutely scalable, this...

Owen Barder

Right.

Nina Munk

... was absolutely sustainable and the way Jeffrey Sachs presented the model, in particular, to his financial backers was that this was a testing ground. We were going to start with a dozen model Millennium Villages with donations of \$120,000 to begin half of which came from George Soros's foundations...

Owen Barder

\$120,000 million...

Nina Munk

\$120, million, yes, to begin with. And having them proven that the concept works within these dozen villages, it would then be rolled out everywhere, would clearly be scaled up, the big development agencies: DFID, USAID, the large foundations, people would, of course, rally around the obvious success that he expected to see in these villages. And we would then have, in effect, a Millennium Villages Project rolled out, scaled out, all across sub-Saharan Africa.

Owen Barder

So we ended up with twelve Millennium Villages and is that around the right numbers, around \$10 million per village, roughly?

Nina Munk

Exactly.

Owen Barder

Okay. And with that money – so he was getting his money mainly from George Soros...

Nina Munk

Yes.

Owen Barder

...and some other backers. And with that money, he was investing in what?

Nina Munk

Well, the money, just to be specific, it comes out – averages around \$10 million a village, but it's actually done on a per capita basis. So Jeffrey Sachs was working on a number that was around \$120 per person per year. And that was more or less the model. Most of that money was coming from the Millennium Villages Project. His idea was that at least some of it was going to come from government, local governments, regional governments and from other donors, but that to just simply things was sort of how it works.

Owen Barder

Having raised about \$120 million, which is also – as it happens, about \$120 per person per year in these villages, how was that money going to be spent? What were the things that it was going to buy and do? What was the – what was a set of interventions?

Nina Munk

Well, Jeffrey Sachs really laid out and along with the academics mostly at Columbia University who put together this idea with him really laid out what in the scheme of economic development or fairly conventional interventions, in fact. But it was, as I said earlier, more about doing it in a very focused systematic way. So primarily there were such proven interventions as school-feeding program is a good example. If you provide free lunches in schools, it's remarkable. What it does to attendance, study after study has shown that parents are much more willing to send their children to school if, in fact, they get a free meal. So that has an immediate impact and that was one of the core interventions.

What Jeffrey Sachs preferred to is the quick wins in his project.

Owen Barder

And was it the same set of interventions in all these different villages or were they...

Nina Munk

Yes and no.

Owen Barder

... going to be tailored to individual villages.

Nina Munk

They were tailored, of course. For example, two of the villages where I focus a lot of my reporting on one is on the Somali-Kenyan border and it's very arid and the people there are nomadic, camel herders and they are Muslim and there is almost no water. So clearly, the interventions there are not going to be the same as the other village I spent a lot of time in which was in Southwest Uganda where the people are farmers and they are growing a cooking banana. So there were – of course, it was adapted for the local circumstances, but the idea really was to create a blue-print that could be used anywhere with modifications and one of the core ideas behind the Millennium Villages Project was to select the original dozen model villages in different agro-economic zones so that you could demonstrate that the model could work no matter the situation.

Owen Barder

Okay. And so it's a combination, I kind of interrupted you, is a combination of some health interventions, water, agriculture really...

Nina Munk

Exactly. Village-by-village the things that we're absolutely were consistent was improving sanitation on water, of course, so you might build a number of pit latrines, improve – protect water sources, springs, dig wells depending on the individual situation, bring in pipe water if possible, that was one key area, sharply improving healthcare was a very important area of focus and one that, in fact, Jeffrey Sachs's wife, Sonia Sachs, who is a pediatrician by training, spent a lot of time working on. That was straightforward in many ways, area, bringing telescopes...

Owen Barder

Microscope.

Nina Munk

...microscopes, thank you, that's the word I was looking for, for example, so that you could diagnose TB and malaria properly, make sure that working with Novartis, for example, that there were supplies of anti-malarial drugs in the sites, make sure there were adequate supplies of all the necessary and basic drugs that are often so difficult to find in dispensaries in sub-Saharan Africa.

On the education side, the school feeding program, improving schools as needed, helping to pay for additional school teachers as needed, helping to go back to helping the pay-for-salaries bringing in when the local government could not afford to pay enough to recruit doctors or nurses, helping to support those salaries so that it could be funded.

On the front of agriculture helping to pay for or paying outright for fertilizer or high-yield seeds to improve agriculture yields and on and on I think there is not much here that your listeners won't recognize it even as perhaps...

Owen Barder

Right.

Nina Munk

...interventions they themselves have used in their areas.

Owen Barder

So we're going to come in a second to how this pan out. I mean it's a comprehensive set of interventions across a range of different sectors. But let's go back to your story in writing the book because what strikes me reading the book is that you had remarkable access to these villages and to Jeffrey Sachs himself. Tell us about what it was like – what you were doing to learn about these projects and to inform you...

Nina Munk

What was very important to me as I really felt my way through the story and some people have remarked and I think it's true that the book, in many ways, follows the arc of my own experience. So it starts out with me as, I guess you could say in hindsight, deeply naïve but certainly very hopeful. And when I wrote my proposal, in fact, for the book back in 2007, I said very clearly to my publisher that I did hope that the book would have a happy ending and there was no way to know at that point, but that was my intention. And certainly I would be selling far more copies, I think, if the ending had been a very happy one.

And the book follows then my arc as I really come up to speed – get up to speed, I should say, with the complexities of these development issues with the challenges on the ground. And what I did to really allow my readers to follow the story with me is I take them into two different – very different places and I – there's a bit of jerking back and forth, I guess you could say. But there is, on the one hand, the top level reporting on this book, which was permitted, thanks, in fact, to Jeffrey Sachs's real generosity in the access he gave me. So I followed him around for six years, I really did just follow him around. I went from Ethiopia to Mali, to Tanzania, to Copenhagen, to London, to Washington, D.C., to the UN. And I sat in on meetings with World Bank officials, UN officials, top people from DFID, the presidents of Uganda and Tanzania and I had this remarkable good fortune to be able to be what we reporters call, a fly-on-the-wall.

Owen Barder

So there is an amazing passage where you – where Sachs was meeting Museveni in Uganda and you described in the book Museveni is interested in whether his tea is going to arrive and things. That's – you were actually sat there in the corner of the room.

Nina Munk

I was actually there. Every one of those and not only was I there, I recorded every one of those interviews, I carried my tape recorder around everywhere I did and all of those were transcribed. I mean those are literal word-for-word transcriptions in those cases. And I was also very careful and partly because I am aware of the fact that I am not an expert and I wanted very much to be eyes – the eyes and ears for my readers. I didn't want to impose an ideology on them. I didn't want to tell them what conclusion they should reach. I let in that section, for example, with the meeting with Museveni, I let Museveni speak for himself and Jeffrey Sachs speak for himself. And it is, to me, one of the most marvelous and interesting passages in the book because you have Jeffrey Sachs, the great idealist, the great advocate in there pounding the table trying to convince this president of a great African country to invest more and more heavily into, in particular, he was lobbying at that point for more spending on fertilizers and high-yield seeds. And Museveni appears to me to be very distracted and frankly a little bored because how many white men has he had coming into his offices telling them how to run his affairs, one can only imagine.

So he orders teas and he looks around distractedly and the only thing, by the way, in his office is hanging on the wall behind them a great big portrait of Museveni himself, which I just thought was wonderful. And Jeffrey Sachs is pounding away at the ideas and this is marvelous and Mr. President, we're going to make great headway and you should see what we're accomplishing

already and if you would just roll out these strategies nationwide, you will change the destiny, the course of your people and your economic growth will be fantastic. At which point, Museveni finally – the meeting is clearly coming to a close. Museveni is looking at his watch distractedly. He is sipping his tea loudly rocking back and forth in his big plush leather chair.

And he finally looks up from his tea and he says, yes, yes, I see, but you know there are other things to consider, Professor, he has a sort of wonderful voice. In these countries of Africa, we have other problems, I mean absolutely dismissively really. There are no markets. There is no network. There are no roads. There is no rail. We have no political cohesion and the meeting ended and he left.

And it almost made my heart stop because I thought my goodness, here is this man, this President really speaking the reality of the situation and who sees it in a way that is so very different and so much more honest in many ways than this visitor from the West who was coming to convince him that poverty can be ended. And the kind of icing on the cake was that as we left Museveni's office and went back downstairs and got into the car together, Jeffrey Sachs and I, I said to him very innocently, so, Jeff, how did you feel the meeting went? He said, wow, it was fantastic, we're making great headway. And it – again, it cemented something about Jeffrey Sachs and your listeners who know him will appreciate this, there is a combination of possibly delusion combined with maybe a naivety and then again, I felt as the years went by also the characteristics of a man who doesn't really read people, doesn't read individuals. This is a macroeconomist who thinks in big broad terms who has a mind that is terribly well-oiled, certainly much better oiled than mine, much better refined and yet doesn't read individuals and can't see individuals.

Owen Barder

Can't imagine what makes you think that some macroeconomists are not very good at reading individuals but...

Nina Munk

Shocking.

Owen Barder

But at the same time, what the book does, I think, brilliantly and I should say if it is not clear to listeners by now you should go and buy this book and really it's a fantastic insight into the way development works and doesn't work and development cooperation. So one of the reasons it's such a great insight is that at the same time as you're sitting in on these meetings in state house in Kampala, you're also spending time in the village – in two of the villages especially themselves and seeing the world not just from the top down, but from the bottom up. Tell us about what you were doing and what that was like.

Nina Munk

It became clear to me right from the beginning that the only way to tell the story was to spend a lot of time in the field as people say. I had been with Jeffrey Sachs already to a few of the Millennium Villages as part of his entourage, you know, even back when I had started first written about him for Vanity Fair profile that where this book originated. And I had – it had been very clear to me that, that was no way to understand what was happening in the ground. We would come in these convoys of UN-issued vehicles with a bulletproof glass and the window shut tight and the air-conditioning on high. And you'd show up and there would be this terribly well – perfectly choreographed schedule that maybe consisted of two or three hours and there would be songs and dances performed and Jeffrey Sachs would be presented with various gifts suitable for dignitaries and all the local politicians would have showed up in their best suites and their shoes polished high and the tents would have been put out and they are flapping in the wind, and a few goats have been slaughtered to make sure there is enough food for all these visiting dignitaries and all the hangers on.

And it occurred to me after the first or second of these visits that aside from the fact that they were just ridiculous and embarrassing and I was kind of horrified to be in attendance that there were clearly no way to get any reporting done. And this is not Jeffrey Sachs's fault, nor is the fault of any other UN, World Bank, IMF, DFIDs, USAID official who goes to these villages. This is part of the definition and the sadness, in fact, of trying to do your work which is that people know in advance that you're coming and there are all kinds of restrictions and you're never going to be able to really see what's going on. And no one's ever going to tell you the truth.

And in these villages and I talked about this in my book, I was there when Jeffrey Sachs's surveyors came through to do this endless households surveys that people in development try to do so that they can have some sort of data. And I was there in one of the villages when a young woman who I came to know very well, Beatrice, was asked by one of the surveyors, how many pregnancy she'd had, how many children she'd had, how many she intended to have and so forth. And Beatrice rather beautifully just looked the surveyor right wide-eyed, looked her right in her face and said, two children, that was how many children she intended to have. And I thought, well, that's interesting and the surveyor laughed and I turned to Beatrice and I said, Beatrice, you have five children, why did you tell the surveyor you only intend to have two. And she looked at me, she shrugged and she said, well, we know what you Mzungu want to hear.

Owen Barder

Right.

Nina Munk

And you know that just right there captured up the terrible, I guess, the difficulties inherent in trying to understand what's happening in the field as an outsider. And the only way I could try to make some headway, try to actually figure out what was going on was to immerse myself as best as I could. Still limited, of course, by the fact that I am an outsider, that I am not native, that I don't speak Somali, that I am white, that I am woman and every possible problem I still face any number of limitations but at least if I return again and again and again, at least if I stayed in peoples' huts with them, if I shared their meals, if I went out to walk with them and their camels, at least there was a possibility that they would begin to trust me, that they would begin as they did to welcome me as "a sister" as best that is possible. And I could do the kind of reporting that is essential to understand what's actually happening.

Owen Barder

So the book is – contrast beautifully the vision, the dynamism, the ambition that Jeff Sachs brings to what's going to happen in these villages to the reality which, inevitably is much more messy and difficult and it's not over yet, but as you imply, the story doesn't seem to have a happy ending. Give us an example of what really happened and how actually you see this – that this experience is unfolding.

Nina Munk

This is exactly the disconnect between our big ideas that we develop whether in the comforts of our academic settings in New York City or in London or wherever they happen to be or in think tanks in Washington and what actually happens once you try to impose those ideas or make them happened in practice on the ground is just insurmountable, it sometime seem to me. And although this book is about Jeffrey Sachs and the Millennium Villages Project, as many reviewers have noted it, in many ways, in so many ways, applies, I think, to just about any development project and people who've worked in development have said to me again and again that they recognize so much of this book. And some parts would just make them cringe because it is altogether too familiar. And there is just by way of example and one of the villages that I focused on is – in Uganda, in Southwest Uganda, as I mentioned, and is called Ruhira. And in that village, it was very clear that one of the most immediate and obvious interventions was to provide fertilizer and high-yield seeds. It's agriculturally based community, the nutrients in the soil like so many parts of sub-Saharan Africa have been pretty well wiped out, it's a place where the yields of

agriculture are terribly desperately low. There is pretty well no use of fertilizer and the most advanced technology that's used is a hand-hoe.

So it was self-evident that the fastest way to improve people's health, nutrition, income, was to improve their agriculture. And so Jeff Sachs and his staff introduced, gave bags of fertilizer to the farmers as well as high-yield seeds. And they decided to focus on corn because that was an easy crop, they felt and on beans, in some case, smaller quantities of beans. And I was there in the planting season when they first planted and they were also taught proper improved farming techniques to make this work as well as possible. And sure enough, as people who worked in this field know better than I, the results are astonishing. They're immediate pretty well. In a single growing season, from one rainy season to the harvest a few months later, you saw and three, sometimes fourfold increase in the yields in the corn and the beans. And I was there at harvest time and people were celebrating and it was wonderful and I was thrilled with myself and there were great feast and there were dances and then very, very quickly the reality hit. Because what the hell do you do with a whole lot of excess corn and beans when you have no roads, when you have no markets, when you have nowhere to sell the stuff, when you have no connection to the global economy of the 21st century.

And basically, to simplify the story, you'll have to read the book for the full take. But basically large quantities of this excess bumper crop was left to rot, was eaten by rats, or was otherwise spoiled. There was no way you could find anyone willing to come and risk his or her truck up those tracks – dirt tracks into the hills of Ruhiira to pick the stuff up and to sell it. And even if someone had been willing to do that, any profits there may have been would have been wiped out in the cost of transport alone.

Owen Barder

So you have this bumper crop, I happen to have the figures in front of me, 1.8 tons per hectare was the average crop before and then with the high-yield seeds and the fertilizer, it rose to 3.7 tons per hectare, so huge improvement in harvest. And then you have the surplus corn sitting around and rats and what was the impact on the villages on – how did – what did it feel like in the village with this experience?

Nina Munk

It's a great question. And this is part of the tragedy of when development goes wrong, because Jeffrey Sachs was in those villages time and again and I saw him giving speeches, these fantastic, beautiful, uplifting speeches, making promises to people about where their lives would go and the ways in which their lives and the lives of their children would improve, thanks to the interventions of Jeffrey Sachs and his team at the Millennium Villages Project. And I think we've all seen that again and again the promises that are made and partly you need to make these promises because you have to convince the local people to work with the project and to help it and Jeffrey Sachs's project like so many others needed the involvement of people on the ground to work. And you have to have them buy-in as people say. And yet the disappointment on the other end, the anger, the hostility that emerges, that erupts when, in fact, things don't turn out as expected. And I saw in both of the villages that I focused on, I saw very angry demonstrations. In the case of Ruhiira when they discover that the beans and the excess maize could not be sold, couldn't be marketed as promised, they actually took one of the Millennium Villages' vehicles and destroyed it, they broke windows, they protested. There were serious consequences.

And I think there are consequences not just in terms of disappointing people, but there are longer term consequences. You're not paving the way for the best future of development in each of these places by setting up people for disappointment again and again and for failure. And Jeffrey Sachs can afford at the end of the day to go home and sort of shake his hands together and say, well, it might not have worked out as well as expected but you know, we're making progress and we'll do it differently next time and yet there are these individuals in the villages who have just been completely forgotten and who arguably in many cases whose lives are actually worse off

than they were before these interlopers came and re-arranged their lives and advised them on what their ideas of progress are.

Owen Barder

You also paint rather a sad story of what happened in Dertu, the village in Northern Kenya on the Somali border where the fact that there was money being spent there, attracted people into the area and tell us a bit about what's happened to that town.

Nina Munk

That village – again, that's the village, as you say, on the border of Somalia and Kenya, it's quite close. Many of your listeners might be familiar with the Dadaab refugee camps. It's very close to those refugee camps. It's really a horrible part of the world. It's arid. It's getting worse all the time, the water table – what little water there is. There is less and less of it, camels devastate the few trees that there are. It's no place for human habitation by anyone standards. And yet, thanks in large part to the refugee crisis, the problems in Somalia, there are ever more people in that part of the world, it's violent, it's an unhappy place. Jeffrey Sachs valiantly tried to improve a lot of the people in one corner, one small corner of this province of Northeastern Province in Kenya. It was certainly – of the villages that I saw, I was in perhaps about half of the Millennium Villages Project at some point. This village was probably the one that presented the greatest number of challenges.

But what affected me deeply, emotionally, was to realize that at the end of six years, this village really was, in many ways, much worse off than it had been at the beginning. In the beginning, because it was – it's a very pastoral community, nomadic, camel herder. It was a wide-open arid area and the people of that area move with the seasons. And if there was, of course, some rain, they would move to the area where there were some vegetation for their camels and perhaps some water for their families. And what happen the minute that the Millennium Villages Project began to pour money into one particular location is that more and more people gave up their nomadic way of living to settle in the area. And they became dependents, so to speak, because there was more money coming in through the Millennium Villages Project than just about anything they had ever seen. And you can imagine the immediate impact on the economy when you're building schools, building health clinics, digging wells, putting together as they did a ridiculously ambitious livestock market. And one thing after another and just the possibility that you might get a job as a night guardsman for the Millennium Villages compound is an enormous opportunity.

And so what I saw very clearly over the course of the reporting for my book in that six-year period between 2006 and 2012 – 2007, 2012 is that what had been this wide open and I don't want to sound like some silly Western romantic but it was physically very beautiful. Somali huts, which are portable doom-like made of wood and camel hide on a wide open landscape, very dusty, of course, you would see the caravans of camels coming from the distance and throwing up the sand in the air and otherwise, very, very little sign of activity of economic activity of any kind of human activity. And by the time I was there for my last reporting trip, the place really resembled a small but clearly resembled a version of, say, the slums you see on the outskirts of Nairobi or many other large African capital cities.

The huts, which by that point were being patched together with plastic – there had been no plastic when I had first been there, were all shoved together tightly one on top of the other with streams of slop with sewage pouring down between them. There was trash everywhere and it's interesting one sometimes doesn't consider the meaning of trash. When you're in a very poor place, there is no trash. If people aren't buying big pens, you don't have plastic big pen thrown out. If people aren't buying toothpaste, you don't have toothpaste tubes lying on the ground. And suddenly in a matter of a few years, thanks to the investment from the Millennium Villages, this place – there were trash heaps everywhere.

And now there were animals of all kinds and enormous vulture like birds coming in to eat and live and feed off of the trash that had been produced by the humans. And there was something so

depressing about it because it struck me at the time if this is progress, I am not sure that any of us wants a part of it.

Owen Barder

So let's get to this question of whether this is progress. You say that in the Millennium Villages, some things have got better, fewer children are dying, more children are vaccinated, fewer people are hungry, people have more access to schools and healthcare and water and so on. Is that basically – I mean we'll come to the question of sustainable economic growth, but in principle, people's lives have improved in some way in the Millennium Villages. Is that right?

Nina Munk

There's absolutely no question about it. I think even though the data that has come out of the Millennium Villages Project has been sharply criticized by academics, by people who know a lot more about data than I do, even with that, even discounting it for that and based on what I saw personally anecdotally I can say, without question, people's lives are improved. I think there has never been any doubt that if you pour a few million dollars into an isolated sub-Saharan African village that you will see results. If you build new schools, you'll clearly see more people attending school. If you hand out mosquito net, you will clearly see a reduction in the incidents of malaria. And if you have improved agricultural yields, you will clearly see better nutrition.

And so all of those gains to some degree or another have been seen. I think there are, just to briefly talk about the data and again this is not my area of expertise but as you know well all across Africa happily in the last 5 to 10 years, we have seen some fantastic improvements in all those areas that concerned people who work in global development, healthcare, maternal mortality rates, malaria...

Owen Barder

Right. I'll get fired if I didn't mention Charles Kenny's book at this point, Getting Better by my colleague, Charles Kenny written a book on this...

Nina Munk

Yes, of course.

Owen Barder

...on this whole issue. So...

Nina Munk

Of course, exactly. No, no, I know that book.

Owen Barder

...documenting this very thing.

Nina Munk

Exactly. And data point after data point is showing this. You can argue about the extent of it, where it's happening more than others, economically, the growth in many sub-Saharan African countries is fantastic, certainly better than the growth in our own countries at the moment. And so one of the real problems just as a top-level point is that as many people have pointed out, it's hard to know in Jeffrey Sachs's villages, how much is due to the fact that Jeffrey Sachs was there? And how much of the improvements may have happened whether or not Jeffrey Sachs had shown up. So right there is one problem in terms of the data specific. But, yes, I will get back to your original question and grab that there has been improvements.

Owen Barder

There has been. And is it your hunch that as you would expect if you're spending millions of dollars per village that things are probably a bit better in the Millennium Villages than they would be just in if they had been a village in that country but without that money being spent there.

Nina Munk

Again, I'm not an economist, I'm certainly not a development expert, but I just think there is no doubt that when you spend a lot of money to make sure...

Owen Barder

Right, right.

Nina Munk

...someone has a doctor that he or she is going to have better healthcare. I like to believe that. I think what you are alluding to, I'm going to guess that what you're alluding to is that the problem here is that while we're on agreement that spending money can have results, I don't think that's what most of us think of when we talk about economic development today. And most certainly that is not what Jeffrey Sachs set out to do. He had a much grander ambition as most of us do when we talk about The End of Poverty.

Owen Barder

So you focused particularly on two of the Millennium Villages, but you visited some of the others. Obviously, there was nothing scientific about your choice of village but is it your sense that – the sense that a process of economic growth has not been kicked off applies to all the Millennium Villages or were you just unlucky to pick the two that didn't work out and the other ten are all motoring along.

Nina Munk

No, actually, it's interesting, you should ask that question. One of the villages, Dertu, is clearly one of the worst performing villages by any metrics but interestingly the other village that I focused on in Uganda is widely held up by the project itself as one of its most successful villages. So I think my – I was quite lucky in a way in my selection but more than that. I am certainly not the only person who has done research in the Millennium Villages Project. I maybe the only one who's written an entire book on it. But many people have written at this point academic studies have focused quite a lot on other of the villages including Sauri, for example, in western Kenya and a number of the other villages, there has been work done and reports have come out of those villages that I would say overwhelmingly reflect the same conclusions that I have come to. Jeffrey Sachs and his team continued to insist that we will see in 2016 final data from these villages and that this data will prove that he was right all along. I don't want to be difficult but I am betting right now. It's only 2014 that we're not going to see that. But who am I to say?

I think that overwhelmingly it's hard not to acknowledge at this point that the Millennium Villages Project if not actually a complete failure, are a long way from being a success.

Owen Barder

So we're going to come at the end, I think, to a round-up of what to make of Jeff Sachs's, this Shakespearean character, but let's explore a little bit about what your conclusions are, not about the man but about development corporation, the enterprise, because the simple summary is spending money. We have been able to improve people's lives perhaps, as you would expect but we haven't been able to kick-start a self-sustaining process of economic growth and social and political change. So a lot of people listening to this podcast are in some ways engaged in that task, where do you come out now on what the task of development corporation is, what should we – do you think the business of creating growth is futile full stop or that just that this wasn't the right way to do it?

Nina Munk

I think that and perhaps this is a reflection of my own lack of ambition but I think that we have to be modest in our goals and I think that having some degree of humility makes it much more likely that we will succeed. I am afraid of megalomaniacs, I don't like people with messianic complexes, I don't believe that we can save the world. I think that each of us sets out – I hope each of us sets

out each day to improve the world in some small way and have an impact in some small way and that modestly and incrementally we improve the world. And I believe deeply that development when it's done well shows incremental improvements. It does help. We make progress.

Owen Barder

You mean development cooperation, the aid and things like that?

Nina Munk

Absolutely, absolutely.

Owen Barder

But the progress it makes is of the charity sort. It's the sort where we transfer money from us to them and that makes...

Nina Munk

I think there is...

Owen Barder

...people better off.

Nina Munk

I do believe there is a connection. I mean I think Jeffrey Sachs has made the point many others have made the point. You can't, for example, expect people to be productive economically if they are dying or in a malaria coma all the time. I mean I think that fundamentally on the health front, it's certainly the area that people can rally around most easily, conceptually. We understand I'm originally Canadian, so I am somewhat sympathetic to a socialized medical system. But I think fundamentally we understand that the reason that we believe in health insurance and in socialized medicine as an example is that it makes our citizens more productive generally and more able to provide economically. I think...

Owen Barder

And you want to imagine that investing in education would have some long run...

Nina Munk

Would have some similar...

Owen Barder

Right.

Nina Munk

...similar impact. I do believe firmly and maybe it's because of my background as a business reporter, I really do believe, I believe that providing capital to help people start businesses, I am hopeful that those kinds of initiatives will be successful that they have an impact, that they can lead people to have the kind of capital that gives them opportunities they might not otherwise have. I think I am open to the idea of the possibility that development happens in so many unforeseen ways and in ways that we don't know. And we can't even agree quite frankly on the history of our own development exactly. That's part of the reason why there were another dozen books a year on development. It's because no one has come up with the answer yet and people on the right claim it's one thing and people on the left have a whole other prescription and we're still not in agreement.

And so I feel it's not the most helpful suggestion but I feel that to move ahead modestly and circumspectly, if that is the word, and thoughtfully is the best possible thing that one can do and not to impose our ideas of progress on other people.

Owen Barder

So – but you're not against aid and development corporation?

Nina Munk

It's funny you should ask that because it's been one of the things that has outraged me the most in the response to my book. I have been absolutely shocked by people who say to me, so based on the conclusion of your book, I guess you're against foreign aid? No, when did I ever say that? Absolutely not. What I am against is a lack of accountability, what I am against is grandiosity, what I am against is delusion. I am against not being honest about what we're able to accomplish and not being honest about our failures and if I go to the website of one more NGO or one more not-for-profit that claims to be helping to end poverty, and that website or NGO or not-for-profit does not in any way talk about – discuss openly its failure I'm going to scream. I think I have already screamed about this. I wish that we would discuss more openly our failures and those who read my book and say, you talk about the great failure of our project, therefore you must be against helping the poor or against foreign aid. I just don't know what to say in response to that because if you are against honesty, if you're against transparency, if you're against speaking openly about our problems, about what we're doing wrong, then you can't ever hope to do anything right.

Owen Barder

So that somewhat takes us to thinking about Jeff Sachs. You're against messianic but as one of your conclusions, so this is partly a book about a person and this extraordinary captivating character, someone who I think you say throughout the book is clearly very well-motivated, right? He wants to make the world a better place, he is not – so how do you feel about him now? What's your conclusion about Jeff Sachs, the man and at one point you quote somebody, I think, saying that it's good that we have him even if his ideas are flawed because at least he is fighting the good fight and attracting attention to these crucial issues. How do you feel about him?

Nina Munk

Well, I think somebody recently wrote a piece and I am so sorry that I am not sourcing him or her because I can't remember the source, but stating that one of the problems with Jeffrey Sachs is that it's never clear whether he is an advocate or a scientist. And if he is just an advocate, all is well and good because we know clearly what the job of an advocate is. If you're Bono or Angelina Jolie, to name two of the people who are great followers of Jeffrey Sachs, we understand what their purpose is. They may not always have their facts straight. They may be promoting the wrong prescriptions but we understand fundamentally their hearts are in the right place and they are pushing like mad and they are gathering support for an idea that they believe in for better or worse.

If, however, you are a scientist, which Jeffrey Sachs claims to be, then, it's absolutely essential that what you're promoting, what you're advocating is backed up with good science. And the difficulty with Jeffrey Sachs is he tries to have it both ways. And so that when the academic community, when the scientific community comes down on him for his poor data, for the terrible quality of the numbers that have come out of the Millennium Villages for flawed studies, for example, the one that had to be retracted from the Lancet. When the scientific community comes down on him for those problems, he doesn't engage them properly in debate, he sidesteps it, he avoids it because then he gets to put on his advocacy hat. And I think that is what makes Jeffrey Sachs both very powerful and potentially very dangerous. He has tremendous way over the layperson because he is so charismatic, he has access to people in the highest corridors of power both in sub-Saharan Africa, in Europe and in North America and yet he largely ignores – chooses to ignore, has blinders on, I'm not sure which it is to any criticism or thoughtful discourse that does not line up with his approach.

Owen Barder

It is interesting you say you are not sure which it is because you know him pretty well, right, you spent six years following him around. You really don't have a sense of whether he – do you think

he has inner demons, he wakes up thinking, what if it's all wrong but I can't possibly reveal that or that he is past the point of really understanding the problems.

Nina Munk

I fundamentally believe that people are good. I don't think Jeffrey Sachs is a fraud. I think Jeffrey Sachs genuinely set out – has set out to improve the world. I do believe that many people who set out to change the world are motivated, in part, by their enormous egos. I don't really have a problem with that. Some of the most important leaders in the world who have done great things for our planet, for our nations were motivated in part by ego, big deal. We're not asking these people to be saints.

I think the part of Jeffrey Sachs that I have never been able to nail and maybe he himself isn't fully aware of it is whether he is conscious of his mistakes and he just continues to bang the table and insists he hasn't made mistakes, but as you say goes to bed knowing that he has or whether in fact, which I think is more probable he genuinely he is incapable of seeing his own flaws. And there are many men greater than him who have had that as their great Achilles' heels, so to speak.

Owen Barder

Towards the end of the book, the last few pages, you portray a man who shifts his attention from the Millennium Villages, he is writing about inequality and global systems and of course, he is very engaged now in issues of the environment and climate change. Is this a tactic to move to the next thing because he thinks that the Millennium Villages are probably not going to succeed or is it – is this him moving up yet another level to say, well, the Millennium Villages aren't succeeding because the bigger environment isn't propitious for them to succeed. So we have to fix the big global system problems and that's what it will take for them. What's going on there and is he backing away from the Millennium Villages or do you expect to see him in 2015 and 2016 still leading the charge on them?

Nina Munk

No, I think there is a great poignancy to Jeffrey Sachs and you allude to that in your question. This is a man who, in 2005 and 2006, 2007 when my profile of him came out in Vanity Fair of all places was really at the top of his game. I think he had this extraordinary following. I remember being at places where people lined up waiting for him to sign books...

Owen Barder

Yeah, I did. I did, yeah.

Nina Munk

... sure. And on Columbia University his – this university where he teaches in New York, I mean people had T-shirts with his name on it and there was even for a while Sachs for President campaign. And so we have this committed very, very deep following. And he wrote that and he wrote it beautifully and then I think that we have come crashing down since then. And I sometimes feel almost badly in a way because it turns out, I didn't realize it at the time but I think my book, in some ways, has kind of bookended this extraordinary career. And I think there is very few people anymore out there who work in development certainly in any serious capacity who take Jeffrey Sachs very seriously anymore. And that's when I say there is a poignancy, I think it's very, very sad because he is obviously a brilliant man, he is obviously a man who was very committed and he is someone who should have had more success in this area than he did and many people smarter than I've pointed out that, that this book in the end is really a book about the dangers of hubris. And I think that's a legitimate way to describe it.

Owen Barder

You have been listening to Development Drums with me, Owen Barder, and my guest today has been Nina Munk, the author of The Idealist, Jeffrey Sachs and the Quest to End Poverty. Nina, thanks very much for coming on Development Drums.

Nina Munk

It's been my pleasure, thank you.