Book Review

The End of Poverty: Economic Possibilities for Our Time

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Jeffrey Sachs, an economist with a passion and experienced global view, makes a compelling call to action to bring an end to extreme poverty worldwide by the year 2025. He makes a strong case that not only is this goal within our reach, but that Americans have a vested interest in seeing the rest of the world in a stable economic situation.

Based on years of experience in impoverished countries and his work as the director of the Columbia Earth Institute at Columbia University, Sachs makes a direct comparison between poverty, government instability, and an ongoing threat to the safety of the United States. He points out that any time a country is impoverished and its population lacking in education, the citizenry is more likely to be susceptible to the radical ideas and actions of terrorists groups. Giving the necessary support to begin the process of becoming self-sufficient will do more to alleviate the danger of further threat to our country than can be accomplished through military means alone.

Throughout the book, Sachs illustrates the importance of education for the successful development of a nation. John Dewey, in his pedagogic creed, states, “Education is a regulation of the process of coming to share in the social consciousness; and that the adjustment of individual activity on the basis of this social consciousness is the only sure method of social reconstruction” (Dworkin, 1959, p.30). Sachs clearly defines primary education as a basic necessity for all peoples of the world. In numerous examples he points out the need for education as critical
to successful development. For most societies in extreme poverty, there is a self-defeating cycle of high rates of population growth. Sachs reports cases of countries where planned parenthood education has been applied in conjunction with health services and the cycle has been dramatically curbed in even a single generation. Sachs calls for targeted education in places like Africa where the majority of the people live in remote, unconnected villages. He believes that it would be possible to give rudimentary education to members of the village at very low cost to serve as their own interventionists. For example, one village member might be trained to provide basic health care while another member might be trained to disseminate information about agricultural practices. By investing in the targeted education of village members, it would be possible to have a significant impact nationwide without large numbers of relief workers. Education is indeed one of the keys to freeing societies from poverty. As Dewey states, “Education is the fundamental method of social progress and reform” (Dworkin, 1959, p.30).

While Sachs specifically concentrates on poverty at the global level, the approach he uses for analyzing the needs of a country could apply equally well to poverty on the family level. He likens his approach to clinical medicine and details the concept in five lessons. The first lesson is that situations of poverty, like the human body, are complex systems. A failure in one of the systems may cause a chain reaction of failures in other systems. Lesson two states that this complexity calls for a differential diagnosis. Although two families of poverty might appear to have similar needs, without an understanding of underlying causes, an intervention could fail to achieve the desired outcome. Lesson three is that all interventions are family interventions. This lesson encourages social workers to look at the family as a whole rather than as isolated members. The fourth lesson is that monitoring and evaluation are essential. Even after careful analysis, well-intentioned interventions may have unintended side affects. The final lesson cautions that all interventions into the lives of others need to be done with the utmost professionalism. Without these precautions, interventions have the ability to damage as easily as help.

A few small adjustments to Sachs’s argument may improve his chances for support in the current political setting. First, while he clearly focuses on a global view of poverty, detailing his experiences in Bolivia, Poland, Russia, China, India, and Africa, he makes his argument to his home country of the United States. While poverty in the United States is in no way on the scale of that in Africa, there are still many Americans who do not have adequate food and shelter. Jonathan Kozol (1991; 1995) documents the challenges of inner city citizens. Many American children are being raised in conditions that rival the condition of those in developing countries: no access to appropriate health care, unsafe living environments, rampant HIV/AIDS, and dilapidated schools. Sachs’s case would be stronger to the American public with an acknowledgement that there is poverty right here at home. Sachs points out that the government is spending billions on the war in Afghanistan, but he misses an opportunity to build an alliance with others to work toward getting
money currently going to the military to be spent in other ways. If successful, there would be ample money to support social services not only within the United States, but globally as well. Finally, when appealing to the American public, especially in the current political atmosphere, it is unwise to dismiss the Christian population. Rather than take a condescending tone to those who believe in “irrational biblical prophecy” (p. 360), Sachs could have called on those with Christian beliefs to exercise generosity, compassion, and concern for their fellow man. Here is another missed opportunity to build alliances with the very people he is calling to action. With these few suggestions, an excellent book has the potential to be even more compelling.

Overall, Sachs’s work demonstrates a practical and impassioned application of the field of economics. This is no professor sitting in a lecture hall expounding on theories, but a man of passion and action who is willing to step into the fray.

References


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