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Jeffrey Sachs: 'Don't let the G8 leaders leave Scotland without a serious plan for ending poverty'

The Monday Interview: Economist

By **Johann Hari**

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Jeffrey Sachs has a simple message for the people of Britain. "Don't let the leaders [of the G8 countries] leave Scotland without offering serious plans for ending poverty and climate change. They are not going to Gleneagles for a game, or for a little vacation, not for photo-ops, not for smiles. They are there to set us on a real path to ending extreme poverty. Give them a serious warning - don't leave here without doing your work. Don't leave here without putting in place solutions to these problems."

Are these the words of a man trapped outside the system, angrily tossing stones at the Gleneagles Hotel? Not quite. Sachs is - according to The New York Times - "the most important economist in the world", and certainly one of the smartest. He was made a Harvard Professor at the age of 28, has worked as an economic advisor to governments on every continent on earth, and is now Special Advisor to the UN's secretary general, Kofi Anan. He has never aimed low, and he's not going to start now: his new book is called *The End of Poverty* - How we can make it happen in our lifetime.

As Professor Sachs sits in a London hotel explaining how high the stakes are for the G8, he speaks like a tape playing at double speed with long, flowing paragraphs cascading from it. "Every day, your newspaper could put on its front page, 'More than 20,000 people died yesterday because of extreme poverty.' Every day. And every single one of those deaths is preventable. It's not just something that just happens, like rain. It is something that we can change in a short period of time. The G8 is the time for the world to stand up and say, 'no more.'"

Professor Sachs has heard the obvious objection - that this is utopian fantasy - a thousand times. "When John Maynard Keynes was writing at the height of the Great Depression in 1930, he said there would be no more extreme poverty in Europe and America by the end of the 20th century - no starvation or absolute desperation. It sounded like fantasy then too, but Keynes got it right. What we need to do now is lift up the remaining one billion people who are struggling to stay alive on less than 60p a day. There are practical, pragmatic, realisable plans that can do this in my lifetime and yours."

It's easy to perish in a sea of statistics, so Professor Sachs takes me on a verbal guided tour of a village in Malawi that represents "the perfect storm": it has been hit by all the tornadoes that cause poverty. "It's called Nthandire, about an hour along mud roads from the capital, Lilongwe. I was there recently. It's a village that depends on growing maize for subsistence, and it was horrible to see how death hung over the village.

"There were no young men anywhere, so I asked if they were out in the fields working. But no. They are all dead from Aids."

This is the first tornado. Every single one of those people could have been kept alive for decades - "could have risen from their deathbeds and cared for their children and worked", as Professor Sachs puts it - if they had a drug that costs 60p a day. "Because that doesn't happen, I met grandmothers who were caring for 15 orphaned children," he says, and leaves a rare pause hanging in the room.

But isn't all this - as right-wingers like to shrug - the result of corrupt, incompetent governments? "Malawi actually put together one of the earliest and best conceived strategies for bringing treatment to its dying population. It was incredibly thoughtful. They had structures for drug delivery, patient counselling, community outreach, everything. They used these plans and appealed to the international community for the means to treat a third of the total infected population - 300,000 people - with anti-Aids drugs.

"And you know what the international community said? The plans are 'too ambitious'. Cut them. So the government in Malawi cut their plans to saving 100,000 people. Still it was too much. The international community told them to cut another 60 per cent from the plans. In the end, only 25,000 people were saved. That's not a failure of African government. That's a failure to give enough aid to a good African government."

With his solid black hair and preppy smile, Professor Sachs looks like Barbie's ex-boyfriend, Ken, worn down by a life of seeing things a preppy boy just shouldn't see. But there is no time to make this observation: he is locked in Nthandire. "And the village was levelled by another disease that we could deal with easily: malaria," he says. "As many as three million people die in Africa every year of malaria.

"Even though it is a preventable disease if you use bed-nets and other environmental controls. There is no clinic nearby to help with this. There is no aid here. That's what my friend Bono calls insane, stupid poverty, deaths for the price of pennies, and it's true.

The role of aid, Professor Sachs says, is to lift countries out of "poverty traps" like this. "When you are struggling to live from day to day, struggling to eat, you have no surplus capital to build roads or to acquire medicine or malaria nets, and nor does your government.

"So your poverty literally traps you. There is no margin of income above survival that can be invested for the future. When people say Africa needs 'trade not aid', they miss the point. They need trade plus aid, or they will never get out of the poverty trap. We have calculated you actually need a small amount to end all of them, just \$15bn, a 30th of what the US spends on the military - and then you have trade.

"At its best, aid can provide what I call 'weapons of mass salvation'. For far, far less than the cost of a nuclear bomb, we can save millions of people with vaccination programmes. Isn't that something we want to do?"

But we are not finished with Nthandire's preventable disasters. It has also been hit by environmental stresses. The rains have failed this year, and even when they come, the soil has been depleted of its nutrients through overuse. "That's why Tony Blair was right to make poverty and climate change the issues of the G8. But everyone has to understand - they are not separate issues. Not at all.

"Let me give you another example. I was recently in northern Ethiopia, where I saw for myself the effect of the drastic changes in weather patterns that are now happening across the world." The people there have depended for millennia on two seasons when they could grow crops: the short rains in March and April, and the long rains in the summer months. "But now the short rains are gone entirely, and the long rains have become erratic," he says. "The result? Hunger is omnipresent. Half of the children are severely underweight. That's where climate change meets poverty."

He pauses, shakes his head slightly, and picks up again, his voice even faster and more urgent. "And this is happening all over sub-Saharan Africa. You can see it in Malawi, and I could see it in Nthandire. Over the past 25 years, rainfall has fallen considerably, while at the same time the surface temperature of the nearby Indian Ocean is rising.

"That suggests this is part of the long-term process of man-made global warming." In other words, it's our fault; we did this? "It seems so. The environmental shocks that will come if we don't act will have a huge impact of poverty, from extreme weather events to rising sea levels."

"But all these problems hitting Nthandire and thousands like it are solvable," he says, returning to determined optimism. "Climatic disaster, impoverishment, Aids, malaria - all solvable."

The CV

BORN: 1954, Detroit, Michigan

EDUCATION:

1976: BA, Harvard College

1978: MA, Harvard University

1980: PhD, Harvard University

CAREER:

1982: Associate professor, Harvard University

1983: Full professor, Harvard University

1986-1990: Advisor to the President of Bolivia

1994: Founded the Institute for Economic Analysis in Moscow

1999-2000: Member of the International Financial Institutions Advisory Commission

2000-2001: Chairman of the Commission on Macroeconomics and Health of the World Health Organization

2002: Joined Columbia University as director of earth institute and professor of health policy and management

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