'The Idealist' by Nina Munk

Review by Brian Doe

Villagers received bed nets to prevent malaria in children. They used them on goats instead.

- JAMES TRAUB

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The Idealist

By Nina Munk
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Afterward, Meles Zenawi, the prime minister of Ethiopia and a pro-growth autocrat, politely but firmly disagreed with his American guest. The main causes of persistent African poverty, Zenawi said, are in fact bad governance and instability. "We have not mobilized our resources properly," he said. African states were too dependent on "handouts from abroad." At times, he said, "we use the failure of the international community to justify our own actions."

This debate has divided experts and policy makers for the past two decades, and no one has made the case for foreign aid more cogently, or more vehemently, than Mr. Sachs, who for years played Sancho Panza to Bono's Don Quixote, together tilting at windmills at the White House, the G-8 summits, Davos and wherever else the high and mighty gathered. They lost, mostly: Development assistance has barely budged over the past decade. In 2005, wealthy nations pledged to give 0.7% of their GDP annually in aid; the figure is now 0.29% and falling. Yet, during the same period, a number of African countries have experienced the takeoff that Mr. Sachs insisted couldn't happen without big infusions of aid. Ethiopia's economy, for example, has grown by an average of 10.9% over the past nine years. In part for that reason, the balance of the debate has tipped to the Zenawi side—so decisively, in fact, that it has become difficult to make the case for aid at all. Mr. Sachs remains undeterred.

Though a professional economist with a sinecure at Columbia University, Mr. Sachs is a protean figure with the kind of staggering ambition you need to move mountains, and Nina Munk's "The Idealist" is less a straightforward biography than a sharply rendered and deeply disillusioned account of his personal quest to end poverty.

In 2005, Mr. Sachs used a $5 million grant from a wealthy donor to establish the Millennium Village Project, a real-life experiment in which a group of villages in Africa would receive large sums of carefully targeted aid. The following year, in a major breakthrough, he secured $50 million from billionaire investor George Soros, putting him well on his way to his goal of $120 million. Mr. Sachs hoped that by demonstrating on a micro scale that development assistance, wisely spent, could transform the lives of the poor, he would win the argument at the global level, compelling donor nations to double or triple aid.

Each of the project's five Millennium Villages served as a test site for development theory. One was Dertu, a village of nomadic camel-herders located in southern Kenya but peopled by about 4,000 ethnic Somalis. Mr. Sachs and his staff budgeted $500,000 a year, or about $120 a person, to a place that had never seen development in any form. Plenty of good things followed: The project director, Ahmed Mohamed, a local man who had earned a doctorate in agronomy and jumped at the chance to build a better Kenya, established a school, hired a teacher and persuaded the local government to build a graded road connecting Dertu to the nearest town, 40 miles away. Mr. Sachs also persuaded Swedish telecom giant Ericsson to build a solar-powered cellphone tower, and soon a quarter of Dertu's citizens had bought cheap cellphones. Stores opened, villagers improved their mud homes with tin roofs and people began to see that a better life was possible.

But Dertu was beset by immemorial forms of misfortune that Mr. Sachs's team in New York hadn't counted on—first drought, then flood, then an outbreak of malaria. Each of these set back their detailed plans. The villagers often refused to cooperate in their own uplift. Mr. Sachs believed that malaria and other infectious diseases devastated economic growth by disabling and killing millions of people. One of his "quick wins" was giving villagers bed nets to prevent malaria. Mr. Mohamed distributed 3,000 bed nets in Dertu. Despite his patient explanations, however, many of the villagers used the nets on their goats rather than their children. "In a pastoral community," Mr. Mohamed explained to the author, "the livestock has more value than humans." That would be a classic example of what the neoconservatives used to describe as the unintended consequences of social engineering.

With impressive persistence, unflagging empathy and journalistic derring-do, Ms. Munk returns over a five-year period to Dertu and one other village to document the project's progress. She seems to care about the ground truth a good deal more than does her subject, who is immune to doubt and enraged by criticism. Ms. Munk shows him browbeating skeptical experts, and when she cites critiques of his work by fellow economists, Mr. Sachs shoots back: "I don't think they're on target, I don't think they're good science, and don't think they're a propos."

A planned livestock market collapsed a few months after it opened, in part because Somali herders don't like parting with their camels, which they regard as emblems of status and sources of security, just as they don't like wasting their bed nets on children. They aren't rational actors by the standards of Western economists. Dertu was supposed to have become self-sufficient after five years in the Millennium Village incubator, but it remained helpless. What's more, the admirable Mr. Mohamed was forced out, and the villagers were "despondent," Ms. Munk says.

There are moments in "The Idealist" heartbreaking and ludicrous enough to belong in a William Boyd novel. In 2007, Mr. Sachs met with Yoweri Museveni, Uganda's president for life. The economist outlined a visionary plan to eradicate poverty through agricultural investments. The president nodded sleepily and called for tea. "Go for the big scale!," Mr. Sachs cried. And Mr. Museveni, finally stirred, recalled that he once used fertilizer on his own corn. He got 800 bags of produce. And then the autocrat settled back into his stupor.

I had guessed, before I began reading "The Idealist," that Mr. Sachs's vision would suffer from what I think of as the "Stand and Deliver" problem: You can create one great school, or a few, but the underlying principle of excellence isn't generalizable. But Mr. Sachs's project never even gets to the problem of scale: He is forced to extend the period of dependency to 10 years, and then to reduce his expectations of success. (Ms. Munk also shows that his staff leaves bad news out of annual reports and refuses to publish studies with unpleasant outcomes.) Why is it so hard to create a good model with all that money? This is an important question for development economics, though one that the prickly Mr. Sachs doesn't ponder.

One answer is the sheer magnitude of those geographic and ecological features: poor soil, big disease vectors, remoteness, drought. Another is the global market: The price of fertilizer quintupled in the first few years of the program. Then there are those cultural attributes that it is considered impolite to raise. "Somali men are not lazy," protests Mr. Mohamed's No. 2. "We are descendants of Abraham, and if you descend from Abraham you don't do manual labor." When the men are caught loafing, they say they are "planning"—a nice Boyd-esque touch. Mr. Sachs has proposed a "clinical economics" that prescribes different solutions for different countries. But his assumption in this regard is that nations face different problems, not that their inhabitants have different habits or values.

Nowadays, development experts and policy makers have largely concluded that the chief cause of state failure and persistent poverty is, as Zenawi, the Ethiopian leader, said, bad governance and instability. For years West Africa was a hellish zone of civil war and corruption; a combination of national exhaustion, timely intervention from abroad and legitimate leadership has brought modest progress and stability to Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea, while Ghana, the best-governed state in the region, has become a showplace of the new Africa. Bad governance exerts a drag on growth. Uganda's annual economic growth of 4% or 5% barely tops its 3% rate of population growth because the Museveni government pays so little attention to the economy, public health or family planning.

Mr. Sachs deserves great credit for insisting, in the face of "donor fatigue" and self-serving cynicism, that outsiders can make a dent in global poverty and therefore must try to do so. But his diagnostic metaphor envisions aid as a transaction between a wise (Western) doctor and suffering victims. There is, in his worldview, no state and no politics, no culture or history. The actual wishes and preferences of the recipients have shrunk into irrelevance. That's not development, in the words of one of the many critics Ms. Munk cites—it's charity.