



Saturday interview: Professor Jeffrey Sachs

Be here now

Best known for being the rock aristocracy's economist of choice, Professor Jeffrey Sachs sees China as a role model in the fight against global poverty

Interview by Jonathan Watts
Saturday August 26, 2006

Guardian

So, professor, spill the beans - was Brad Pitt suspicious when you flew off for a week with Angelina Jolie? How often does Madonna call you? And is it true that you did psychotropic drugs with Bono? These and other tempting questions run through my mind as I wait for Professor Jeffrey Sachs, director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University, to fill his bowl of muesli at a Beijing hotel buffet.

It is not perhaps the most obvious approach to a breakfast interview with a macroeconomist. But then Sachs is no ordinary academic. Described impressively as "the most important economist in the world", snidely as "the Mother Teresa of the economics profession" and unavoidably as the "rock star economist", Sachs is the man with the plan to save the planet. His agenda is more ambitious than that of many national leaders. And his book on global poverty relief has influenced everyone from Kofi Annan to Madonna.

So why is he in China? "Everyone has to come to Beijing now," he says. "We can see from China's experience that the end of poverty is absolutely palpable and real in the space of a very few years. That is the point I am making."

The 51-year-old professor might not appear too often in Heat magazine, but he is as happy to use MTV as university lecture halls to reach as wide an audience as possible. And he has proved as willing to fight for millionaire activists as he is for the millions of invisible poor. This month, he strode to the defence of Madonna after the singer was accused of publicity-seeking when she announced her plans to travel to Malawi, to raise \$3m (£1.7m) for orphans there. She had called him to ask what she could do after reading his book *The End of Poverty*.

"It is amazing how many times I am asked sceptically or told sceptically 'Isn't this a publicity stunt?'," he says. "There is a class of pundits who make it their business to denigrate the work of movie stars and rock singers. They have it completely wrong. This is the most amazing way to reach huge numbers of people."

"These are remarkable people with great capabilities. They run large businesses. They have incredible organisational talents and they understand the global marketplace of ideas and images better than anyone." Madonna, he says, was already interested in Malawi. "Her involvement is thrilling. And it makes a difference. A lot of major companies and philanthropists want to get involved because of her."

I wonder if he is now inured to celebrity cold calls. Does Mrs Sachs cover the mouthpiece with a sighed: "It's another bloody pop star. Shall I tell them you're not at home?"

Sachs isn't having any of it. "Am I used to it? No. Do I like it? Yes."

It is with Bono, the lead singer of U2, that he has established the longest, and most successful, partnership. In the past seven years, their combined efforts have been crucial to the debt-relief campaigns that Make Poverty History and others pushed high up the G8 agenda.

At a recent lecture, Bono described how he, Sachs and producer Bobby Shriver criss-crossed the globe "like the

Partridge family on psychotropic drugs". At the risk of taking Bono too literally, I ask Sachs what this meant. Were some trips really of the chemical kind?

"I think he had in mind the dazzling things we see," says Sachs. "There is a very surreal aspect to it. One moment you can be in a remote village in the most impoverished area in the world. Then eight hours later you can be in the splendour of Fifth Avenue, or the fanciest part of London, or the halls of Congress. Yet it is the same planet. It is amazing that these gaps exist, and are just hours away."

Critics have accused Sachs of insincerity, of being too close to the International Monetary Fund to be a genuine reformer and of being an egoist puffed up with his own celebrity status. But no celebrity or politician I have met would stay at the Beijing Downtown Holiday Inn. Dressed in a nondescript suit and tie, he is anonymous in the buffet line.

He refutes the suggestion that he is naively utopian. "I have probably spent more time thinking about the technical feasibility of the Millennium Development Goals than anyone else. And, yes, they are still possible to achieve," he says of the targets set by the United Nations to cut poverty, disease and hunger by 2015.

"The step from extreme poverty, which kills millions each year, to tolerable survival and a foothold on the ladder of development is not a huge one. The ground can be covered in a few years. Ending extreme poverty is not an abstract social transformation, but rather a set of practical steps to address hunger, water, disease, farm productivity and the like. We have the tools to get the job done."

Thanks partly to the work of celebrities, he says, the poverty issue is higher up the global agenda than ever before. Real progress is being made. Crop yields in some African nations tripled in one year after the introduction of new farming techniques. Five-dollar mosquito nets can dramatically lower the risk of malaria.

But there is a big stumbling block. "In US politics, the war has crowded out other issues. It is constantly pushing the poverty agenda aside," he says, comparing the Pentagon budget of \$440bn (£232bn) to US aid to Africa of \$4bn. "How anyone can believe this is a proper balance to achieve US security is beyond me. Our political leaders have got it all wrong. The results are plain to see."

Conversely, he has nothing but praise for the country where we are having breakfast. "China is history's most successful poverty elimination experience. It has happened before our eyes. What was deemed impossible - hundreds of millions of people being lifted out of poverty in the course of a single generation - has been achieved."

But isn't the Chinese route of relieving poverty the opposite to the West's approach? In Europe and the US, poverty is packaged to provoke sympathy. It is about children, tears, dirt, starvation and Africa - all, thankfully, far away, as far as the viewers are concerned. In China, poverty is recognised as something grim, tedious and close to home, with victims who are just as likely to be clean, proud and old as otherwise. The remedy is not charity and human rights. It is more pollution, more exploitation, more national and personal self-interest and not a jot more democracy. It's ugly, but - in terms of incomes, at least - it works.

There are other challenges. As we step outside the hotel, the sickly yellow Beijing smog and clogged-up roads are a reminder that more development too often means more stress on the environment. What's the point of trying to provide everyone with a first-class berth if the ship is sinking? Sachs answers without hesitation. "Climate change is a profound challenge and we are in the middle of it. But the priority must be extreme poverty. It will kill 30,000 people today. It is not a matter of convenience, it is life or death."

Celebrity involvement, he acknowledges, may add to the air of unreality. But it also draws attention to people who would otherwise be invisible. "The biggest crime is negligence. The celebrity thing is not about charity. It is about urging us to practical action. Bono, Angelina Jolie, Madonna are urging us to take up real solutions."

So is he a celebrity himself now? "I sometimes tell the story of a visit to the Pope with Bono. When we left the Castel Gandolfo, the Pope's summer residence, we drove out of the gates in a van that was pursued by hundreds of delirious fans. I turned to Bono and said, 'They always do that for macroeconomists.' He looked at me rather sceptically."

Rock star anecdotes to further a good cause? OK, I can buy that. It might even help to save the world. I am

tempted again to try a "So, professor, if we could go back to Angelina Jolie ...". It would only partly be missing the point. Sachs is a great connector - of pop and macroeconomics, communism and Hollywood, millionaires and paupers, the frivolous and earnest. "When I give talks these day - which I do a lot - I say to any audience: you must do something. This is not a luxury. It is not just for rich people or politicians. This is the only way we are going to have a functioning world. If we don't take more practical steps to look after each other, we'll end up with more Lebanons than solutions."

EducationGuardian.co.uk © Guardian Newspapers Limited 2006