

Global Poverty Campaigner Speaks Out

World's Leading Economist Addresses Castan Centre via Satellite

By Lucinda Bradlow

The case for “making poverty history” has been plagued by criticism and scepticism, with many arguing that it is an unachievable goal. Nevertheless, in an increasingly globalised world there is no excuse for extreme poverty. This was the inspiring message of Professor Jeffrey Sachs, labelled by Time Magazine in 2005 as one of the 100 most influential people, in his video lecture at Clayton Utz on the 7th of February. Professor Sachs is Director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University, Director of the United Nations Millennium Project and Advisor to the United Nations Secretary General on the Millennium development goals and author of the enlightening book, *The End of Poverty*.

Professor Sachs argued that extreme poverty can be eradicated. He explained the current situation whereby the world's poor are trapped in a cycle of poverty, where low productivity means that all their earnings go into a basic struggle for survival. Professor Sachs showed us that through listening to “people that understand the structural challenges that very poor people face” we can recognise what is needed to end the poverty cycle. He suggested that, with provision of basic infrastructure and health care, individuals and communities can remove themselves from the cycle. Perhaps most importantly, Professor Sachs enlightened us about the humbling needs of the extreme poor and the very achievable ways of helping them.

“Rich” Governments across the world promised in 1970 to donate 0.7 per cent of their Gross National Product (GNP) to development assistance. However, Professor Sachs pointed out of the 240 billion dollars of aid promised last year, well under 100 billion was donated and of that, a significant percentage went to aid war zones (including Iraq), leaving the whole of Africa with approximately 25 billion dollars of aid for the year. Furthermore, it is not the case that the rich countries cannot afford more. President Bush has made a budget request for 650 billion dollars for military spending in the 2008 fiscal year, which amounts to more military spending than the rest of the world combined. Sachs

argued that once private citizens were informed of the opportunities for practical assistance, more than 100 million dollars was donated to the Millennium Villages Project. So far, the project has helped about 500,000 people. While private donations are important, Professor Sachs suggested the main idea is that the private sector donates 0.3 per cent of the GNP, and the public sector 0.7 per cent of GNP, and consequentially, 1 per cent of each rich nation's GNP is donated annually. The donation requirements are modest at most, and as Professor Sachs points out, should be given out of common decency. Crucially, Professor Sachs notes that the requirements for aid do not ask the rich to stop being rich!

The question that begs to be answered is why, after thirty-seven years, have the donations of aid not reached their target? Professor Sachs points out that many Governments and individuals have a “congenital fear of the poor” and a “pseudo sophisticated scepticism” that aid doesn't work. In answering a guest's question, Professor Sachs elaborated on the fear the rich feel towards the poor, arguing that they don't want to think about the poor, because they are scared the poor will bring them down too. The rich feel the problems of the poor are too overwhelming to tackle, and that attempting to help will only result in abuse and risk. Furthermore, Professor Sachs suggests the fear is interconnected with deep-seated racial issues that still linger in today's society. Perhaps the most argued reason for withholding aid is that many African nations are under extremely corrupt regimes, and therefore the aid does not go to those who need it. Professor Sachs suggests that most countries are in fact somewhat corrupt, but corruption can be overcome if there is a robust economy to withstand it. He also argues that much of the corruption stems from dealings with rich nations and these too could be overcome if productivity was generally higher, and people did not need to bargain basic human rights for money. Professor Sachs also notes that in fixing these nations' infrastructure, aid must be rigorously managed to ensure it is going to those who need it. There is a great deal of truth in Professor Sachs' argument that cynics are the “laziest thinkers of all,” their excuses are futile, and don't even begin to cover the many benefits adequate aid could have.

In his lecture, Professor Sachs presented a revealing example of how easily the poverty cycle can be stopped. In early 2006 the United States donated a few million dollars to the Tanzanian Island of Zanzibar to help eradicate malaria, the greatest child killer in the region. Within a year, from drugs that cost a little under a dollar a dose and preventive measures such as bed nets, the malaria rate in the area was reduced by ninety-nine per cent. Ending extreme poverty is, of course, an extremely complex process. But Professor Sachs made clear to us all the fact that many practical things can be done to start the process, and these things do not take significant amounts of our resources, and should be justified, at the very least, by common morality and care for our fellow man.

Professor Sachs' speech was sponsored by Clayton Utz.



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