

## Q & A with Nina Munk

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### **Josh Busby: Were you surprised by the reaction to your book?**

Nina Munk: I've been delighted by the reaction to my book; reviewers have been exceedingly generous. What has surprised me is the enthusiasm with which development experts, foreign-aid workers and academics have embraced *The Idealist*. My target audience was a general-interest reader, perhaps someone donated money to Heifer International or had read Tracy Kidder's book about Dr. Paul Farmer. Needless to say, it's been a happy surprise to find my book appreciated by people in the field.

### **JB: How did your relationship with Jeff Sachs and the Millennium Villages organization change over the course of writing the book?**

NM: I first met Jeffrey Sachs in 2006, when, on assignment from *Vanity Fair*, I spent 6 months reporting on his campaign to end extreme poverty. I traveled with him to sub-Saharan Africa, sat in on his meetings with heads of state and with World Bank officials, and heard him give countless speeches. At the time, I knew very little about economic development. But Sachs's best-selling book, *The End of Poverty*, had impressed me: I was moved by his commitment to the poor and by his elegant solution to extreme poverty. Eventually, the 6 months I'd spent reporting on Sachs turned stretched out into 6 years and resulted in *The Idealist*. I couldn't have written the book without Sachs's cooperation. Initially he gave me full access, enthusiastically. But as the years went by, as the Millennium Villages Project got bigger and more bureaucratic and faced more and more problems, it was harder to report the story. My requests for certain reports or information were dismissed, critical questions went unanswered or were met with obfuscation. On

more than one occasion, Sachs lost his temper with me; he was personally offended, it seemed to me, by my skepticism. I'm sorry to say that Sachs has not spoken to me since *The Idealist* was published. Publicly, he's dismissed me as misinformed, ignorant, 'sardonic' and so on. Lawyers for the Millennium Village Project have sent threatening letters to my publisher. Sachs is well-known for attacking his critics; yet I didn't anticipate his anger toward me, perhaps because my book is not malicious. Again and again, I gave Sachs the benefit of the doubt because I wanted the project to work. In the end, however, there's no way to whitewash failure.

### **JB: If you had to write a postscript or updated edition to the book, is there any new information about the project or protagonists that you would add?**

NM: Some critics have said my book is too kind to Sachs. In hindsight, I would agree. The Millennium Villages Project was a folly. It's been more than a year, but the last time I checked, David was no longer in Ruhiira: he'd been promoted to 'country coordinator' for the Millennium Villages Project based in Kampala. As for Ahmed, he was working for a European (Scandinavian, if memory serves me) NGO devoted to planting trees (or more vegetation generationally) in Kenya's North Eastern Province.

### **JB: Have any of your judgments about international development and foreign assistance in particular changed since you wrote the book?**

NM: You can't spend time in sub-Saharan Africa and not be moved and impressed by the impact of foreign and humanitarian aid. Countless people's lives have been saved by aid. There's no shame in that, God knows. But it's important to be clear about the difference between economic development



and humanitarian aid or charity. There's never been any doubt that if you invest US\$1 million or \$10 million into a small, isolated African village, you will see results. If you feed schoolchildren or dig pit latrines or donate donkeys, you will help people in need. Lives have been improved, thanks to the Millennium Villages Project. However, people who work in the field of development wrestle with something larger: How can economic development take root and be sustained in desolate, desperate places with no roads or power or water, where people are illiterate and unlikely to live past the age of 55? Can people be lifted out of poverty, as Jeffrey Sachs puts it, or do they have to lift themselves? What's the best way to connect an isolated African village to the global economy of the twenty-first century? We don't have the answers to those questions. Yet we impose our ideas and our view of the world on faraway places – the arrogance of that can be breathtaking. Sometimes I think a dose of humility would be the most effective form of assistance we could offer.

**JB: Would you or are you considering writing more work about international development in the future?**

Gladly. The hitch is convincing a publisher to pay for a book about international development.

**JB: For some, reading your book might be a vindication that foreign support for international development causes is likely a fool's errand, what would you say to that concern? In your view, are there still effective forms of assistance that international audiences and actors can provide?**

NM: During the course of my reporting, I saw too many well-intentioned outsiders misjudge or oversimplify the complex reality of the problems they intended to solve. If we hope to end extreme poverty, we have to ask difficult questions and promote rigorous evaluations. We have to acknowledge and speak openly about our mistakes. To cover up the failures of our humanitarian- and foreign-aid programs is to participate in a kind of collective magical thinking.

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