Hubris and international development: A review of Nina Munk's *The Idealist*

Nina Munk
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In the mid-2000s, Jeffrey Sachs, the Columbia University macroeconomist, famously embarked on a series of village-level interventions in Uganda, Kenya and a number of other locations in his Millennium Villages project. Many of these efforts were multi-pronged investments in a variety of services in agricultural communities, several in chronically arid areas. In *The Idealist*, the journalist Nina Munk documents these endeavors in a highly accessible book based on years of intense field work with her main protagonist and the project participants and sites themselves (Munk, 2013).

Munk is a gifted storyteller, and she embraced a terrific narrative form to tell the story of Sachs and the Millennium Villages. She intersperses coverage of Sachs, who to his credit provided very open access to her, along with the stories of two Millennium Villages staffers, Ahmed Maalim Mohamed and David Siriri, who were intimately involved in project administration in Kenya and Uganda. From their humble upbringings to the rise and fall of their Millennium Villages projects, their stories make the book. She begins Chapter 2:

> According to his Kenyan passport, Ahmed Maalim Mohamed was born in 1965. In fact, Ahmed doesn't know when or where he was born.

Because Munk teases us with only parts of their stories in successive chapters, the book has a story arc that gives *The Idealist* more dramatic tension than most non-fiction books, certainly more than those written by academics.

Munk was able to witness these projects from conception to near completion over a period of years, giving her a more lasting portrait of their legacy than a simple snapshot from either a mid-term or final project evaluation. Munk was also granted terrific access to Sachs, enabling us to see his application of intellectual firepower and fury up close and personal. In addition to internal e-mails between Sachs and the World Bank, Munk captures the most scintillating fly on the wall episode when Sachs confronts World Bank staffers on a plane for their failure to embrace universal free distribution of insecticide-soaked bednets to prevent malaria infections:

> Ten hours later, standing in the aisle of the business-class cabin, waiting to disembark, Sachs was at it again: 'These deaths are on your hands!' he shouted at a fellow passenger. It was Lengeler.
>
> Lengeler was surprisingly calm. "You are stubborn," he replied with a French accent.
>
> "No!" insisted Sachs. "You're the one who is stubborn – and people's lives are in your hands."
>
> "You do not know the facts," said Lengeler wearily.
>
> "What I know is you're letting people die!" Sachs went on in a rage.
>
> "I do not need to be insulted," said Lengeler (Selection from Chapter 9).

In the AIDS space, Sachs enjoyed some success making the case for a surge in international funding. To his credit, Sachs' work to estimate the volume of funding that would be needed to provide AIDS treatment drugs formed a key element in United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan's appeal for a multi-billion funding commitment to fight the pandemic. That materialized with the creation of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria in 2002. The Global Fund has subsequently provided tens of billions of dollars in funding to fight AIDS and put tens of millions of HIV-positive people on life-extending anti-retroviral therapy. Sachs was an important champion whose scholarship and advocacy made that possible. Munk's book picks up largely after this success and his earlier more controversial effort to advise post-Soviet republics on the need to go through 'shock therapy' to transition from communism.

Sachs had a holistic vision for what ailed poor agricultural communities: too little credit, the need for technical assistance in agriculture, not enough infrastructure for schools and health clinics, the absence of bednets to treat malaria, inadequate access to water, roads and markets among other measures. He proposed a series of investments in all areas, largely simultaneously with a large pulse of external money.

It is surprising given Sachs' work on the macro-level determinants of growth that he would embark on a set of micro-level village investments, seemingly oblivious to the 50 years of problematic project-level interventions by donors and NGOs. As Munk documents, Sachs' team seems hell-bent on learning all the same mistakes over again, from externally devised plans for investment that appear to trump community concerns to overly ambitious timetables for deployment of programs. In general, Sachs tried to do too much too soon based on problematic notions that all communities needed was a 'big push' of major investments all at once in many different areas.

As Munk documents, the results are often disappointing, in part because the larger mobilization of donor funds that Sachs thought necessary to replicate the villages concept at the regional and national level never materialized. Sachs also discovered to his chagrin the same sort of development challenges that practitioners had discovered over the past half-century of trial and error, that projects often failed because of conflict, weather emergencies, delays in delivery of key items, that imposed visions from outside often were resisted locally or subverted or projects suffered from theft and corruption. As the project funds start to dwindle, we witness increasingly desperate attempts by Sachs' team to find ways to self-sustain the investments such as ill-conceived income-generation export projects.

In the face of such setbacks, Sachs' team sought to put a brave face and reported on the positive outcomes associated with their projects, claiming that in a number of villages that key indicators of performance such as crop yields had gone up (Sachs, 2011). Although this was in some instances true, one could critique these studies in different ways. These results might not be durable, particularly if the influx of foreign money were to dry up (which it did). Indeed, many of the impressive mid-term results of the projects were later erased as funding declined and projects suffered reversals.

A more damning critique came from scholars who noted that Sachs' projects and project reviews contained a fundamental flaw. As Munk notes, Sachs' team only measured the improvements in Millennium Villages for the project participants but did not include evaluations of villages not part of the project. If one looked at outcome measures in those non-participant communities, in some cases they too also experienced improvements during these years. Thus, it's unclear whether the Millennium Villages had any additional effect on observed improvements or if those would have been observed anyway (Clemens and Demonbynes, 2010; Clemens, 2011a, b; McKenzie, 2011; Wanjala and Muradian, 2013).

Another potential criticism is that Millennium Villages were hand-selected for success, that there might be attributes of the villages themselves that make them good candidates for prospective success. In such circumstances, the selection bias of what villages were initially chosen might pre-condition an area for success, making it difficult to generalize the findings in one community to another. On some level, this might be less of a problem for some of the participating villages as Sachs appears to have selected them for idiosyncratic reasons based on how awful the living conditions were in those places. Munk describes Dertu, a village in the arid pastoral areas of Northern Kenya that was hardly a town when the project started, had few to no natural resources, and critically lacked an adequate supply of reliable water. This village had so little going for it that it was perhaps a least likely case for success. Success there would have been a heroic achievement. Unfortunately, this project, based on Munk's telling, largely ended in ruin.

Sachs had no way of knowing whether the projects were truly contributing to improved outcomes because monitoring and evaluation criteria were not baked into the cake of project selection, as they typically are in many of the state of the art efforts such as randomized control trials (RCTs) that have become fashionable by development economists of late.

RCTs adopt procedures of natural scientists by randomly assigning project locations to so-called treatment conditions (those that receive a project) and controls (those that don't). Through random assignment and monitoring of both treatment and control locations, projects can be more confident that differences between the two are a function of the project rather than unobserved differences in site locations that might have made locations more (or less) favorable to project success.

RCTs are especially good at isolating the effects of individual (or a limited number of clearly defined) interventions. They perhaps are harder, though not impossible, to deploy for multi-treatment efforts like Sachs' project. Such methods have been pioneered by microeconomists, such as Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo from MIT's Poverty Action Lab documented in their book *Poor Economics* (Banerjee and Duflo, 2012; Karlan and Appel, 2012).

Munk, drawing on a *New Yorker* profile, recounts that Sachs reached out to Duflo at one point to see what he could learn about deploying RCTs for the Millennium Villages:

> Duflo explained to Sachs in an e-mail that while it was too late to use her methods to evaluate the first phase of his project, she could suggest better ways to measure outcomes going forward. He never replied.

If there is one quibble I have with Munk is a general skepticism about the prospects for foreign-funded development efforts. I myself have something of this bias, but I fear that sometimes Munk may take the argument too far. For example, in her discussion of malaria-treated bednets, she raises a question about what happens when they need to be replaced:

> Let's say that universal coverage of bed nets *is* achieved, and that as a result, the rate of malaria transmission plummets. After four or five years, insecticidal long-lasting bed nets start to disintegrate. Unless they're replaced, transmission rates in Africa will start rising. How likely is it that in four or five years, Africans themselves will be able to afford new bed nets? Is it realistic to assume that, when the time comes, groups like Malaria No More or the Global Fund can summon up the resources and enthusiasm to roll out another campaign for universal coverage? (excerpt from Chapter 9).

These are legitimate concerns, but by the same logic, one could indict any development project that has a more open-ended timetable for seeing results. For example, the international effort to provide life-extending AIDS drugs that patients are required to take for their duration of their lives. This commitment by developed countries to extend anti-retroviral drugs to people in poor countries is implicitly a multi-decadal commitment. Donors could conceivably cut back on their expenditures for these drugs, but it would consign some number of patients to death. For this reason and others, AIDS spending largely weathered the 2008 financial crisis. In that case, donors remained committed to their core goals on HIV/AIDS.

While it is important to consider the availability of finance over the longer term for health and development interventions, it would be all too easy to raise these objections at the outset to strangle ambitious projects and plans before they start. Despite this concern, Munk's book is meticulously reported and an important reminder that good intentions in the development space are not enough to see long-run gains.

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