

Of Jeffrey Sachs, the Millennium Villages Project, and evidence

By Terence Wood

Jeffrey Sachs, arguably the world's most influential development economist, is no stranger to criticism. From the right, academics such as William Easterly have been [attacking his advocacy of aid](#) for at least a decade. On the left his opponents have been just as strident in critiquing his advocacy of privatisation, structural adjustment and trade liberalisation for even longer (for archetypal examples see [this](#) review in the Left Business Observer and critical opinion in the Nation Magazine [here](#)). Yet the latest round of criticism of Sachs feels different. It's in the form of an [article in Foreign Policy magazine](#) that takes aim at the Millennium Villages Project of integrated village level aid assistance that Sachs has very publicly championed.

The critique feels different in part because it takes the form of a news article, canvassing the views of a range of development thinkers, rather than an op-ed style attack from just one opponent. And it feels different in part because it is published in the sort of US establishment journal that has been pretty friendly to Sachs in the past. But most importantly, to me it at least, if feels different because it has little to do with ideology (the terrain of much previous Sachs sparring) and a lot to do with evidence. In particular the fact that Sachs failed to set up gold-standard impact evaluations to help assess whether his Millennium Village work did in fact work. And that he and co-authors have also made errors in academic work that has purported to show the project's successes. In the words of the article:

These days, though, Sachs is increasingly on the defensive, assailed by a growing number of critics for what they say are fundamental methodological

errors that have arguably rendered his [Millennium Villages Project](#) (MVP) — now consisting of 14 village clusters scattered across Africa and covering half a million people — worthless as a showcase for what can lift the poorest of the poor out of their misery. In May 2012, shortly after an [editorial in Nature](#), the influential science journal, scolded Sachs and his colleagues for unreliable analysis, Sachs and his team were forced to admit they had committed a basic error in an academic paper intended to prove their project's effectiveness. "The project's approach has potential, but little can be said for sure yet about its true impact," Nature stated.

This strikes me as progress. I'm not opposed to ideology (like everyone I have my own). And I'm not opposed to Jeffrey Sachs, whose suggestions are often interesting and sometimes inspired (an MVP response to the Foreign Policy article can be found [here](#)). I don't think Randomised Control Trials (the sort of impact evaluation that should have been established at the outset of the Millennium Villages Project) are a panacea or without their own issues (for an interesting critique see [this](#) blog post by Paul Farmer). And I'm not the sort of naive empiricist who thinks that research is sufficient on its own to bring us the answers we seek in development. Yet for decades aid and development work has been the battleground of big, bold ideas, none with particularly wonderful track records in practice. And for much of that time we've done too little in gathering good systematic evidence of what works, where it works, and why it works. Ideology will always be with us, and the battle of ideas is necessary, but maybe now all of this will be augmented with more and better evidence? I hope so.

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