

How a journalist reignited the Sachs-Easterly aid war

By Jonathan Pryke
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In September last year Nina Munk, contributing editor at Vanity Fair, released her latest book [*The Idealist: Jeffrey Sachs and the Quest to End World Poverty*](#), chronicling her six years documenting the [*Millennium Villages project*](#). For those that don't know the Millennium Villages project, it was an endeavour launched by celebrity aid economist Jeffrey Sachs in 2005 where a handful of poor, remote villages across sub-Saharan Africa would become living experiments for a model approach to sustainable development. Sachs' argument was that the solutions to poverty are quite straightforward – with enough money and the right prescriptions it can be alleviated.

In her [own words](#), Munk's book reveals "the profound and moving story of what happens when the abstract theories of a brilliant, driven man meet the messy reality of human life." Recipient of Foreign Policy's 2013 Albie Award, along with a long list of [positive reviews](#), the book, which I read this summer, is a fantastic narrative of one man's attempt, and ultimate hubris, in proving a model approach could solve the challenges of poverty alleviation. I had intended to review the book in more detail, and do highly recommend it, but what has happened in the following months is a less documented story.

The aid wonks among our readers would be familiar with the (not always) intellectual debate between Sachs and William Easterly over the effectiveness of aid. With the release of Sachs' book [*The End of Poverty*](#) in 2005, and Easterly's book [*The White Man's Burden*](#) soon after, the heavyweight economists have quickly been rightly or wrongly polarized at opposing ends of the aid debate. While their positions are still widely repeated to development students and professionals alike, the authors have largely avoided direct criticism of one another in the past few years. Until Munk's book was released.

In January of this year, the allure of Munk's findings proving too much for him, Easterly posted a review of her book entitled [*The Aid Debate Is Over*](#). While in the review itself Easterly does acknowledge some successes (and is traditionally not opposed to *all* aid, just the *fix-all* power of aid), the provocative title appeared too much for Sachs to ignore and he has since gone on the offensive. In recent weeks he has taken to Twitter (see a wrap up [here](#)), Reddit (conducting an '[Ask Me Anything](#)' discussion, summarised [here](#)) and Foreign Policy (article [here](#), ridiculous editorial brilliance screengrab below) to justify and defend

the importance of foreign aid, while only giving cursory acknowledgement to the Millennium Villages that ignited the whole debate. Easterly has since picked up on Sachs' 'aid amnesia' in a [follow-up piece](#) also in Foreign Policy.

This doesn't look to be the end of the current round of the Easterly-Sachs saga. And I wonder for how much longer people will listen? The debate has become so binary between the two that most in the development community have moved on - we know some aid works and some doesn't, but we need to work harder on figuring out why. That is where the real aid discussion should be.



About the author/s

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Jonathan Pryke worked at the Development Policy Centre from 2011, and left in mid-2015 to join the Lowy Institute, where he is now Director of the Pacific Islands Program. He has a Master of Public Policy/Master of Diplomacy from Crawford School of Public Policy and the College of Diplomacy, ANU.

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