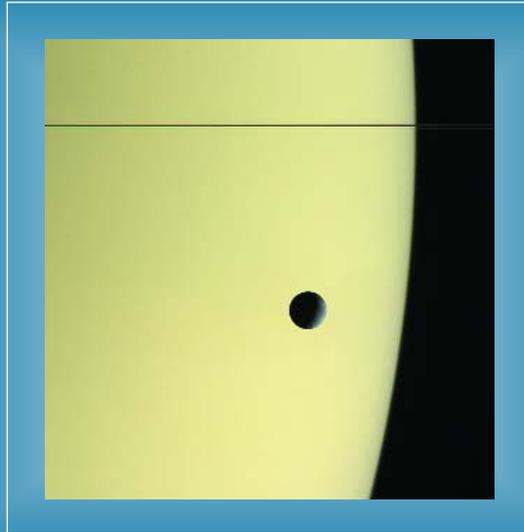


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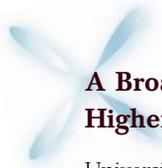
## ENDING POVERTY How Universities Can Help

**More than 8 million people around the world die each year because** they are too poor to stay alive. Malaria, tuberculosis, AIDS, diarrhea, respiratory infections, and other diseases prey on bodies weakened by chronic hunger, claiming more than 20,000 lives each day. Development has lifted most of the world's population out of the type of extreme poverty that makes day-to-day survival uncertain. But roughly one-sixth of the population—more than a billion people—lives in extreme poverty still today. Jeffrey Sachs, director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University and director of the U.N. Millennium Project, believes that collective action on the part of the world's wealthy nations could eliminate extreme poverty on our planet by 2025. Higher education has a critical role to fill in this effort. Sachs maintains that by taking an interdisciplinary approach to development, universities can put their vast stores of knowledge and creativity into action and make important contributions to global prosperity, security, and peace.



### MISSION CONTROL

- ✗ It is an intellectual lapse on the part of too many universities to consider only academic work within the university as serious and the rest that occurs outside the university, in the field, as a side interest.
- ✗ We need clinical economics in development, and we need clinical practice in general. This is the sort of practitioner strategy that we as universities ought to implement and move out into the world.
- ✗ One to 1.5 billion people are living in extreme poverty in the world today. It is reasonable to estimate that each year more than 8 million people die because they simply cannot get the basics they need to stay alive.
- ✗ The most exciting aspect of development work is the interchange with our counterparts in other countries: the primary lesson our students will learn is that these are real people with great dignity and great knowledge. They're just unbelievably poor.



## A Broader Role for American Higher Education

Universities are special institutions because their mandate does not end with research and teaching. Universities are, uniquely, repositories of knowledge, and, most importantly, they are repositories of unbiased knowledge. Universities can do things that other institutions cannot do: consulting firms, profit-maximizing firms, and international organizations may have knowledge, but they are driven by boards of governors reflecting geopolitical interests or by the need to generate revenue. The private sector is inevitably filled with partnerships that are problematic from the point of view of giving honest advice, because conflicts of interest are everywhere. Universities also face conflicts in much of what they do, but they have fewer direct financial conflicts than almost any other type of major institution.

There is no way to understand these issues, particularly poverty and development, through theory, teaching, and research alone...it's extremely important to be out in the field too... Those of us in academia should not simply be a self-replicating group isolated from the outside world.

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are wonderful institutions, but they typically lack the knowledge and expertise to meet very complex challenges. Further, large institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank cannot mobilize good science. Few scientists want to go work at the World Bank, except on a short-term basis, because it's not a scientific institution—it's a bank. Scientists do work in the private sector, but because those firms have a financial stake in their contracts, they typically cannot perform the kinds of good works in the world that universities can.

Universities in wealthy countries need to be forging partnerships with the universities in countries affected by extreme poverty. The Carnegie Corporation of New York is pushing ahead with a multi-foundation initiative to achieve this kind of cooperation. We need to make these connections, both to enhance American universities and to help universities in developing countries. If we're studying globalization—which we all have to be doing in some way in the 21st century—we should be more formally connected with universities in the places we are studying.

All those associated with the world of higher education have a special role to fill. We need to promote knowledge and research, and we need to teach—not just our students, but the world. That's a special responsibility, one that connects directly to the meaning of public education in

many ways. But we also need to act and address the important issues we all face today.

It is an intellectual lapse on the part of too many universities to consider only academic work within the university as serious, and the rest that occurs outside the university, in the field, as a side interest. Another major conceptual mistake at many universities is to think that the only criteria by which to judge a university are how it affects its students, its teaching program, and its research. In my view, fulfilling a broader social purpose—one that cannot be replicated by any other kind of organization—is a key criterion by which to judge a university's success.



## The Promise of Interdisciplinary Work

At universities, structure and roles should follow the problems. Some problems fit within individual disciplines and others do not. One example is economic development, which cannot be left to the economics department. Economics departments cannot solve the problems of poverty on their own. But, when economists work together with malariologists, public health specialists, agronomists, climatologists, soil scientists, hydrologists, and engineers, what they can achieve is absolutely phenomenal. The good news for the social sciences is that the scientists who know so much more about the problems of development need help with public policy. So there is a role for us, and we all need to embrace the idea of shared work.

Columbia University's Earth Institute is a unique, cross-disciplinary undertaking. It has a tropical agriculture unit that is deeply involved in poverty reduction work. It has a malariology unit engaged in stopping the spread of a disease that is almost entirely treatable and largely preventable, and yet will claim the lives of approximately 3 million children this year. The situation is perverse in many ways. One of the perversions is that the United States government has not seen fit to help impoverished people who have no resources gain access to simple technologies such as long-lasting insecticide-treated bed nets. It has tried to sell the nets at a discount to people who have no money. Both policy and scientific expertise are required to understand this problem. Malariologists can explain the technical options and how to organize a country such as Tanzania to tackle the disease. We need the economists to understand the hurdles that need to be overcome, be they matters of logistics, procurement, or underlying finance issues. It takes a team to effectively address these deeply interdisciplinary problems.

There is no way to understand these issues, particularly poverty and development, through theory, teaching, and

research alone. While it's important to have theory and academic pursuits in certain areas of the university, it's extremely important to be out in the field too. Telling an economics student to write a dissertation based only on a data set from Nigeria is like training a medical doctor without ever making him or her see a patient. We should never have students write dissertations on countries they have not visited and worked in.

Fieldwork is problem-driven. Students want to do something meaningful and solve real problems. They want to apprentice. My specialty is negotiating policy documents—for example, translating an IMF program into something that is halfway comprehensible. The only way students are ever going to see such work is to be at my side, because they need an apprenticeship to learn these skills. The skills are too complex and too amorphous to put into a textbook; they require learning by doing. The result of putting all those pieces together—working across disciplines, working abroad, solving problems in the world—is an incredible opportunity for the university.

### **Fighting for Survival**

Universities today have roles to fill well beyond their borders. Ninety-five percent of the world's population lives outside the United States. Eighty-five percent of the world's population lives in so-called developing countries and lags far behind the top 15 percent in living standards and access to basic necessities. And much of the world is fighting every day for survival.

Extreme poverty is not the poverty we know in our country, which is awful, unjustified, and remediable. However, we eliminated extreme poverty in this country decades ago. Extreme poverty means that you could die tomorrow because you are too poor to stay alive. You could get a simple infection, which requires three days of treatment with an off-patent antibiotic, and you can't afford it because it costs one dollar and you have none. Or there's no clinic within 20 miles of your village. Or you're not sleeping under an insecticide-treated bed net. Or, commonly, there's no safe drinking water anywhere nearby, so you're constantly ingesting pathogens, and your children are carrying worms their whole lives, from their earliest days.

One to 1.5 billion people are living in extreme poverty in the world today. It is reasonable to estimate that each year more than 8 million people die because they simply cannot get the basics they need to stay alive. My view is that this is anachronistic—how life was 100 years ago.

Yet we've made significant progress on our planet, and

development is a real phenomenon. It has reached five-sixths of the population and lifted it out of extreme poverty. Mercifully, for our generation, that includes most of China and soon will include most of India. So we're getting down to the narrow numbers, where we could realistically aspire to end this phase of economic history. It sounds outlandish, but we've done it already in our societies, and most of the world has escaped the extreme "you-could-die-today-or-tomorrow" kind of poverty.

The parts of the world that have not yet escaped extreme poverty include most of sub-Saharan Africa and parts of South America—especially the Andean region. Much of central Asia, too, has not escaped extreme poverty. Geographic isolation has kept these regions economically isolated and apart from the world market.

### **Clinical Economics**

I'm advocating for a concept called clinical economics. My wife is a clinician and a public health specialist. I've watched her for 20 years when, for example, someone calls with a fever and she takes the patient's history. It's really quite a remarkable thing to watch a skilled clinician at work—the logic of the questions, the way the clinician drills down in a systematic algorithm. You have to ask certain questions first, because if the answer is yes, you stop and get the patient to the hospital before you ask the next question. But if the answer is no, you continue down the decision tree in a very systematic way. Getting the big picture—knowing the whole ecology of the illness—is critical.

The same thing is true with development. If we don't understand the history, the transport costs, the disease epidemiology, the hydrology, and the soils, we're never going to get it right. We're not training our students this way because we don't have the equivalent of clinical hospitals next door like medical students do. So, given the way our universities are structured today, we don't actually have the opportunity to develop an apprenticeship model. Instead, we're training people to write more journal articles rather than training them to solve problems. And 99 percent of what we ought to be doing is solving problems; the other 1 percent should be helping solve more problems in the future. Those of us in academia should not simply be a self-replicating group isolated from the outside world.

We need clinical economics in development, and we need clinical practice in general. This is the sort of practitioner strategy that we as universities ought to implement and move out into the world.



## The Millennium Villages Project

The Earth Institute and the U.N. Millennium Project, with the guidance of the U.N. Millennium Promise Scientific Council, are launching the Millennium Villages Project to fight poverty village by village throughout Africa. Universities can get involved by committing to support and launch projects that target the multifaceted needs of villages through an integrated approach designed to set each village on a self-sustaining course after five years. We have developed a detailed set of ideas and algorithms, but they aren't fully formed yet. We're encouraging colleges and universities to take on village projects and to conduct research and implement creative ideas. I envision universities getting

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together every year for the Millennium Village Annual Conference to learn, for example, that Stanford made a fabulous breakthrough in its village, and Williams did an incredible thing in its village, and in Columbia's village this intervention didn't work this year for the following reason. Our goal is to establish the villages as learning enterprises where American universities have their own African bases.

The most exciting aspect of this work is the interchange with our counterparts in other countries: the primary lesson our students will learn is that these are real people. They are not statistics. They are not inert. They know all about their situation. They understand their poverty; they understand our wealth. They are people with great dignity and great knowledge. They're just unbelievably poor. It's fantastic to engage with them directly, because it's gratifying and eye-opening. It's life changing—for students and for faculty.

At this stage, the Millennium Villages are gearing up in

ten African countries, with several clusters in each country, and more than 300,000 people covered by interventions. Information can be found at [www.earth.columbia.edu/mvp](http://www.earth.columbia.edu/mvp) and at [www.millenniumpromise.org](http://www.millenniumpromise.org). Millennium Promise is a new NGO that supports the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and the work of the Millennium Villages Project.



## Conclusion

Last summer, a remarkable gathering took place in a village in Ethiopia. In a natural amphitheatre in a canyon in Tigray Province, 1,000 or more people came out and sat on the rocks, and we had a four-hour brainstorming session. It really was a discussion. We talked about how to do land reclamation, because this is a mountainous area with many gullies and tremendous land degradation. We also talked about soil nutrient replenishment, starting nurseries with drip irrigation, distributing bed nets to fight malaria, and many other things. It was a wonderful day. One of the most gratifying experiences of my life was at the end of the day when an old man got up and walked, hunched over, to the front. He took the megaphone and said, through a translator: "I'm not part of this program, but I want to tell you something. I was born in this village, and I've lived all my life in this village, and nobody has ever come, in my whole life, to give us hope like you did today."

It's wonderful work, and I believe that higher education can fill an absolutely critical role that can strengthen every aspect of what we're doing in our professional, scholarly, teaching, and, I'll say, personal lives too.

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**Jeffrey Sachs is director of The Earth Institute at Columbia University. He is also director of the UN Millennium Project and Special Advisor to UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan on the Millennium Development Goals. His most recent book is *Ending Poverty: Economic Possibilities for our Time* (2005). Sachs can be reached at [sachs@columbia.edu](mailto:sachs@columbia.edu).**