

13 April 2007

Objet : The End of Poverty and the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment

Professor Sachs:

Over the past few years I have tried to follow, with interest and admiration, your work and that of Stephen Lewis with Kofi Annan and more generally. On passing recently through Nairobi, I picked up at the airport your *The End of Poverty*, encouraged by the title. I have now completed the book. Curiously enough, my reading was interrupted by the reading of the two résumé volumes of the *Millennium Ecosystem Assessment*. It was only on getting back to your book, and reading Chapter 11, that I discovered the origins of your deep involvement in the work on the Millennium Development Goals and your presence as the head of the Earth Institute.

As in my following of the work of Stephen Lewis in the attempt to achieve more responsible involvement with AIDS in Africa, I was moved in reading your book by the commitment which it shows with respect to the development challenges of the Third World. I myself have been working on sustainable development issues for close to forty years (beginning "technically" with the *World Conservation Strategy's* first mention of the term in 1980). I am writing - and hoping that you'll find the time to read - this short note because I am deeply concerned with a fundamental aspect of your book, in spite of its moving testimonial to your own decades of effort.

I am surprised that your presentation and analysis at no point takes up the issue of limits and of the deficiencies of the GNP in dealing with them. This reaches a high point on pages 288 and 290-291 where your calculations on the contributions required of the rich countries equates the GNP with income. I can only suppose that you have been so deeply involved in working with the development challenges that you have simply forgotten the deficiencies involved here. I am hoping that you'll have read this far because the justification for my bothering you is the *Millennium Ecosystem Assessment's* conclusions which constitute the complementary view to that of the economist (no matter how experienced and committed, as in your case).

None of the four scenarios worked out by the teams doing the *Millennium Ecosystem Assessment* permits the attainment of the millennium goals (page 54, *Ecosystems and Human Well-Being: Summary for Decision Makers*). This is the explicit conclusion of the work of those hundreds of scientists and administrators in another field of commitment, dealing with the capacity of the planet's natural ecosystems to "accommodate" and support human development objectives. The *Assessment* report goes further, on my reading of its description of the constraints, suggesting that we will be unable to meet the MDGs even on a longer time-line without major adaptations, for the "simple" reason that we have already passed the threshold that would permit the Third World to "catch up" while playing the same game as we have played for two centuries.

Your last page but one (p.387) provides an indication of your orientations and an explanation of why your book - and, I have to assume, your thinking on how to deal with extreme poverty - doesn't address this fundamental constraint. You seem to take sustainable development (cf. also pages 283: "sustainable management of ecosystems"; 293n: "environmental sustainability") as a domain covering environmental challenges, separated from development ones. I would like to suggest that the contribution of Brundtland was to create (or at least popularize) this term as one

which completed the concept of development by insisting that it integrate that of environment. The report does not suggest, as *The End of Poverty* seems to, that "health, education and infrastructure" (p.367) are issues for development work, and work on environmental degradation other issues, concerned with sustainability, for others; population and nutrition are the issues of the very first chapters of the Brundtland report.

Please forgive this little lecture by another former professor (and, may I add, one who followed throughout his career the approach you describe and favour, "collective rationality and analytical deliberation") who is greatly impressed by your work, and is trying to suggest that there is a way to bring together conceptually the enormous challenges outlined by your book and the disquieting constraints on their implementation associated with environmental degradation and brought out by the *Millennium Ecological Assessment*. There is every indication that your book was written before the publication of the assessment, but there is also every indication that it would be extremely valuable for you, as an economist, to take another look at your analysis. You speak of the "tremendous dynamism of self-sustaining economic growth" (p.73). Twenty years after Brundtland, may I respectfully suggest that sustainability is a term introduced to underscore, among other things, limits to the economic growth for which GNP is the indicator, but which doesn't take into account some crucial things, those which, among other things, prevent the MEA scenarios from projecting the attainment of the MDGs...

Your work is striking in underscoring what both the GNP and the GPI indicate, that in the early phases of development, there is real growth, and that's what we want and need for the Third World. My problem is in not recognizing that the development in the rich countries has gone beyond the bounds, and can't continue if the Third World is to move up. There are limits that I don't see you talking about. I was hoping that your chapter on "clinical economics" was going to be another way of speaking about "ecological economics", but that simply isn't the case.

Ecological economics has been working on an adaptive approach to traditional economics for twenty years. If you've found and taken the time to read this, and have a little more, I'd be very interested to know where you stand now that the Millennium Assessment has called into question, for reasons you don't cover in your book, the very objectives you were writing about. I'm attaching the work of Redefining Progress (a group based in California) in providing an alternative indicator to the GNP. For the "financial statement" of the US for 2006, their Genuine Progress Indicator subtracts 1.8 trillion for depletion of gas and oil reserves, and another 1.2 trillion for impacts of climate change; they add other things, but the end result is that there has been no growth since the mid-70s.

My best wishes for continued success in your impressive work.

Harvey L. Mead
Commissaire au développement durable