Science to Save the World

Economist Jeffrey D. Sachs thinks the science and technology of resource-rich nations can abolish poverty, sickness and other woes of the developing world By DAVID APPELL

In a borrowed office on the 16th floor of United Nations Building 2, Jeffrey D. Sachs is on the telephone when I arrive. Although he began working in New York City only eight weeks ago, he seems right at home. He calls the city a unique base of operations. "I think New York is one of the few places in the world where one could find the breadth, the scale and the depth of expertise that you need to be able to address this," he comments.

FLYNN LARSEN

JEFFREY D. SACHS: SELLING SCIENCE

- Director, Earth Institute at Columbia University; a special adviser to U.N. Secretary-General Kofi A. Annan; chairman of the World Health Organization Commission on Macroeconomics and Health
- Early interest in economics sprang from the tension between capitalism and socialism. "Economics answers the most fundamental questions."
- Tireless world traveler: "The only person I know who goes to India just for the day," says his assistant, Gordon McCord.

By "this," he is referring to sustainable development—and how science and technology can be brought to bear on poverty, AIDS, tropical diseases, climate change and other issues confronting the globe.

Sachs is director of Columbia University's Earth Institute, a collection of about 1,000 scholars across eight institutions. He is also a special adviser to Secretary-General Kofi A. Annan on the Millennium Development Goals, eight key development objectives endorsed by more than 160 world leaders in 2000, and was recently chair of the World Health Organization Commission on Macroeconomics and Health. His curriculum vitae runs 26 pages.

In a pressed white shirt, red tie and blue suit, with J.F.K.-like hair, the 48-year-old Sachs is quick, complete and polished. In the two months after he left Harvard University for Columbia in July, he has been to Columbia's Biosphere 2 Center in Arizona, the Barcelona AIDS conference, Cambodia, the Tibetan plateau, and then to the Johannesburg Summit on sustainability before heading back to New York for the beginning of the semester.

His extensive travels have led him to realize the importance of geography, he informs me as we wait for his first appointment on a brilliant September morning. "It isn't possible to do good economic development thinking without understanding the physical environment, deeply, in which economic development is supposed to take place," he says. He complains that this "physical framing" is hardly considered by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, nor is it taught to graduate students in economics.

As a result, "the physical scientists inherently feel that public policy somehow passes them by," Sachs remarks. "They feel politicians neglect a lot of the important messages or don't understand the risks, say, of anthropogenic climate change or of biodiversity depletion." Yet he has often encountered a resistance among social scientists, who believe everything is at root a political problem.

When the president of Bulgaria, Georgi Purvanov, arrives, the meeting is a getting-to-know-you, with Purvanov asking through an interpreter for Sachs's help. "[European Union] membership and entry to NATO will be the framework to make Bulgaria advance the fastest," Sachs tells Purvanov. He also recommends that Bulgaria invest in education, science, and technology and points to Ireland's growth in information technology and financial services as a good model. He urges Purvanov to flatter corporate CEOs for their business.

One of Sachs's first international triumphs was as an economic adviser to the government of Bolivia from 1986 to 1990, when he helped to bring down that country's inflation rate from 40,000 percent a year to 10. But his role as leading economic adviser to Russia in 1992 and 1993 has drawn criticism: advice such as the elimination of price controls and of subsidies to unprofitable state enterprises had proved successful in eastern European governments but was fruitless in Russia's tumultuous transition to capitalism.

The meeting with Purvanov ends with thanks all around, and immediately Sachs is before the bright light of a Bulgarian television crew. His assistant, Gordon McCord, worries that we have 30 minutes to get to someplace that is 45 minutes away. Sachs ends his television interview, and we race six blocks through the U.N. security zone to a waiting town car.

"The rich are already rich enough to be able to end poverty."

Once inside, Sachs jumps on his cell phone, talking to a reporter from the *Nation* about cross-border commercial bank lending. Traffic is a mess and has our driver swearing. We pull up to the Crowne Plaza hotel near LaGuardia Airport 45 minutes late; hanging up, he comments that his life is "pretty much to the wall every day."

Prominent in Sachs's frequent op-ed pieces is the inadequacy of foreign aid in light of the tremendous problems affecting the developing world—the genesis of which, he says, was the American use of foreign aid as a tactical tool during the cold war. The strategy, he thinks, remains in play.

"So far the United States remains committed to gimmickry rather than real solutions. In the short term the U.S. is courting a worldwide backlash of anti-Americanism" that nontravelers don't recognize. And he sees the U.S. eventually suffering from its failure to address the collapses of governments, failed economies, mass refugee movements, the spread of disease and terrorist activities arising from such conditions—not to mention the longer-term risks of climate change, biodiversity loss and the depletion of vital biological resources.

Over the next 45 minutes Sachs presents his views of the Indian economy, off the cuff, to about 75 participants at the Global Organization of People of Indian Origin conference. Again he demonstrates his mastery of economic details, holding forth on India's business environment, its recent rain-deficient monsoon season and especially its "profound underinvestment" in health care: only about $2 per person per year.

Sachs is not a fan of unfettered capitalism. "I don't believe in free markets for health care and science policy," he says. Long fascinated by the debate between capitalism and socialism, the Detroit native studied economics at Harvard all the way to his Ph.D. in the field; he received tenure there at the age of 28.

Back in the car, Sachs calls Bono, lead singer of the band U2, who has been active in addressing the problems of developing countries. They traveled together last January, when a visit to an AIDS hospital in Malawi left a deep impression on Sachs. The ward was filled with patients, in some cases three to a bed—or huddling under them, out of the way. Sachs has written of "a constant low-level moan and fixed gazes of the emaciated faces," all for the lack of a dollar-a-day's worth of antiretroviral drugs sold elsewhere in the building. The trip, he explains, demonstrated to him "why you have to be there to get it."

Bono is "very impressive and committed," Sachs says. He leaves him a message about an upcoming meeting of philanthropic foundations at investor George Soros's house.

At the Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory in Palisades, N.Y., Sachs gives a lecture to his troops, the first time many of them have seen him in person. His talk includes a long and impressively detailed aside on the biology and epidemiology of malaria. "Malaria has been the single greatest shaper of wealth and poverty in the world," he informs the group.

"He is the best ally we could have for raising money for malaria research," says Harold Varmus, who is president of Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York and who served on the WHO commission with Sachs. Varmus relates how Sachs, while writing the WHO report, took a train with his wife on the Silk Road across Asia, e-mailing sections of the report from Mongolian villages. "He is a phenomenon," Varmus adds.

There's no time for a beer afterward—Sachs is catching a plane back to Boston for the weekend, where his wife and son still live until his son graduates from high school this year. "Like every good day," he says, "it ends with a mad dash to some airport."

When we're in a cellular dead zone, I ask Sachs for his broader views. He sees many underlying trends that are very positive, especially the mobilization of science and technology around the world. "The rich are already rich enough to be able to end poverty. But we have the capacity to wreck things," too, he states. "So many of our problems revolve around our capacity to cooperate on a global scale, which we've never done before in the history of the world. We have to do the things we've never done before." At the airport Sachs tips the driver, bids us good-bye, and goes off to do them. SA

David Appell, a frequent contributor, is based in Ogunquit, Me.