

# Sustainable Development Goals

## An Interview with Jeffrey D. Sachs

**EDITORS' NOTE** Jeffrey Sachs is a world-renowned economics professor, bestselling author, innovative educator, and global leader in sustainable development. Sachs is widely recognized for bold and effective strategies to address complex challenges including the escape from extreme poverty, the global battle against human-induced climate change, international debt and financial crises, national economic reforms, and the control of pandemic and epidemic diseases.



Jeffrey D. Sachs

He serves as the Director of the Center for Sustainable Development at Columbia University, where he holds the rank of University Professor, the university's highest academic rank. Sachs was Director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University from 2002 to 2016. He is President of the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network, Co-Chair of the Council of Engineers for the Energy Transition, academician of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences at the Vatican, Commissioner of the UN Broadband Commission for Development, Tan Sri Jeffrey Cheah Honorary Distinguished Professor at Sunway University, and SDG Advocate for UN Secretary General António Guterres. From 2001-18, Sachs served as Special Advisor to UN Secretaries-General Kofi Annan (2001-07),

Ban Ki-moon (2008-16), and António Guterres (2017-18). Sachs has authored and edited numerous books, including three New York Times best-sellers: *The End of Poverty*, *Common Wealth: Economics for a Crowded Planet*, and *The Price of Civilization*. Other books include *To Move the World: JFK's Quest for Peace*, *The Age of Sustainable Development*, *Building the New American Economy: Smart, Fair & Sustainable*, *A New Foreign Policy: Beyond American Exceptionalism*, *The Ages of Globalization: Geography, Technology, and Institutions*, and most recently, *Ethics in Action for Sustainable Development*. Sachs is the 2022 recipient of the Tang Prize in Sustainable Development and was the co-recipient of the 2015 Blue Planet Prize, the leading global prize for environmental leadership. He was twice named among Time magazine's 100 most influential world leaders. Sachs has received 42 honorary doctorates, and was awarded the Legion of Honor by decree of the President of the Republic of France, and the Order of the Cross from the President of Estonia. Prior to joining Columbia, Sachs spent over 20 years as a professor at Harvard University, most recently as the Galen L. Stone Professor of International Trade. Sachs received his BA, MA, and PhD degrees from Harvard.

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### How do you define the mission of the Center for Sustainable Development at Columbia University?

The CSD undertakes a range of applied policy research in support of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by all UN member states in 2015. CSD works with governments and academic researchers on a variety of topics related to the SDGs, including education, healthcare, digital transformation, and climate change, among others.

### How do you focus your efforts as Director of the CSD?

My own work supports global diplomacy and finance in support of the SDGs, the Paris Climate Agreement, and other international efforts for sustainable development. Among other activities, I am proud and honored to lead a worldwide network of universities on behalf of the UN Secretary General, known as the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network, or SDSN. The purpose of SDSN is to foster solutions to achieve the SDGs through education, research, and public outreach activities. There are now more than 1,900 organizations, mainly universities, that are SDSN members.

### Will you discuss your views on the war in Ukraine and what you feel are the keys to bringing the war to an end?

The war is a proxy war between the U.S. and Russia. It was caused primarily by the

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desire of the U.S. Government to incorporate Ukraine into NATO. The European Union was also very clumsy by insisting that Ukraine should sign association agreements with the EU without also discussing those agreements with Russia, which is of course deeply interconnected economically, financially, and technologically with Ukraine. Still, NATO enlargement was and is the main reason for the war.

**You first visited China in 1981. As you look back at the last four decades, how has China changed and what are your thoughts on China today?**

China is of course an astounding success in raising economic prosperity and technological advancement – for a country of 1.4 billion people no less. I think that China’s success has a great ability to inform Africa’s own strategy for ending poverty, noting that Africa today – taking all 55 countries as a union – also has a population of 1.4 billion, like China.

**How concerned are you about U.S.-China relations and what needs to be done to move the relationship forward in a positive way?**

The U.S. Government wants to lead the world. China doesn’t want the U.S. to lead, but to be a partner. This is the basic struggle. American leaders are arrogant, in my view, repeatedly insisting that the U.S. is and should be “Number 1.” If the U.S. leaders would be respectful of

China, and respectful of the One China policy, the tensions between the U.S. and China would diminish. The two countries should engage in diplomacy, not an arms race.

**Do you feel that U.S. foreign policy has evolved and adapted to address the current times and the challenges facing the world?**

U.S. leaders are aiming for a U.S.-led, unipolar world. This concept was never justified, but is now wildly out of date and even dangerous.

**What will it take for the world to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030?**

To achieve the SDGs, we need quickly to end the war in Ukraine – through negotiations, reduce the U.S.-China tensions, and channel hundreds of billions of dollars per year into additional sustainable investments in the developing countries. Most of all, the U.S. and Europe should stop the focus on expanding NATO and refocus on expanding healthcare, education, and zero-carbon energy around the world.

**Do you believe that the fear of climate change is helping drive investment in sustainable development?**

There is an uptake of zero-carbon energy systems, as is vitally important, but the uptake is too slow and inconsistent to date. We are still prioritizing geopolitical conflicts over sustainable development.

**What do you see as the responsibility that leading companies have to be good corporate citizens and address societal need?**

Most importantly, we need a political system at all levels – UN, regional, national, and local – that puts the priorities on sustainable development, and that sets the rules of the game for business, so that business objectives align with social needs. For example, businesses should be guided to zero-carbon energy solutions through a mix of regulation, carbon pricing, public investment, and forward-looking company strategy.

**What do you feel are the keys to effective leadership?**

Respect for others, honesty, transparency, and a clear vision of the public good.

**What advice do you offer young people beginning their careers?**

Do good. Become an expert or leader in an area in which you can be proud of your work and your contribution to society.

**You have received many accolades and wide recognition for your work. Do you enjoy the process and take moments to reflect on what you have achieved?**

I am deeply grateful for recognition that puts importance on global problem-solving. We have a lot of global problems, and not enough implementation of solutions. I therefore greatly appreciate when any organization gives recognition to the importance of peaceful, cooperative, global problem-solving. ●

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