

# DevBalls

## Exposing the absurdities of the aid industry

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### About DevBalls

DevBalls is an online space for comment on the international development aid industry. DevBalls is here because the aid industry has – functionally and morally – lost its way. And those who should hold it to account - the media, researchers, politicians - don't. DevBalls is here because aid can only become better when its absurdities and hypocrisies are open to view. DevBalls is compiled by a group of aid professionals who control its content. We welcome relevant contributions sent to [DevBalls1@gmail.com](mailto:DevBalls1@gmail.com). Anonymity is guaranteed.

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*Idealist – “a visionary, a person guided more by ideals than practical considerations”*

*Ideologue – “someone who looks at everything through the glasses of their favoured viewpoint, and – uncompromising and dogmatic – sees no merit in any other perspective”.*

### *SEARCHING FOR THE MEANING OF BEAM*

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### *THE BEAUTIFUL GAME, THE BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE AND A BETTER CLASS OF DEVBALLS*

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“Not clueless – we’re just planting flowers”  
DFID fights back against ICAI slamming



In a defiant riposte to the damning criticism contained in the recent Independent Commission for Aid Impact's (ICAI's) report on its private sector development (PSD) work DFID has reiterated that its current strategy – 'letting a thousand flowers bloom' - is exactly what is required.

Under other, more normal circumstances, the report might have been considered a touch awkward. After February's DFID announcement of a doubling in its economic development budget to £1.8bn, only a few weeks later the ICAI declare DFID's PSD work – central to economic development – to be at the second bottom Amber-Red level – "performing relatively poorly". Among the main charges labelled at DFID is that its approach is scattered, lacking coherence, is disorganised and confused, is not achieving significant impact and is not underpinned by a sense of what it is there to do. In particular, the only detectable strategy ICAI could find was DFID's repeated assertion that it wished to 'let a thousand flowers bloom'.

DFID's Management Response to the report, however, has shown triumphantly and once again that it is not any old 'normal' organisation in a normal industry! Rejecting all the main ICAI points, a DFID spokesperson insisted that a doubling in budget, in fact, represented a "prudent and modest" rise. "After all", she said, "we could easily have trebled the money, God knows we need to spend it somehow! But that, of course, would be ridiculous! A

cheeky doubling allows us to let not just 1000 but 2000 or more flowers bloom!” Reacting to suggestions that this is little more than confirmation that DFID doesn’t know what it’s doing and that the flowers-blooming allusion was, de facto, a “we-haven’t-a-clue-really, try-anything-as-long-as-it-looks-good” strategy, she insisted that DFID had a clear path ahead.

“First, we’re going to plant flowers of course. Ideas. All over the place. Of course after blooming most will die but it’s .... all part of the great circle of life and..... and anyway, who can be against flowers? And blooming. This is a good and rather lovely thing we are doing.

Second, we’re going to revisit our whole approach to engaging with large corporates. We need them as partners. We can offer juicy grants, shameless sucking up and nice photo opportunities. We think they’ll like it.

Third, we’re going to reorganise internally to offer country offices practical support from London. Taking on board the ICAI’s findings on our limited capacity, we’re focusing on what we’re good at and have set up a crack Paperclip Operations Support (PapOps) team to offer the kind of guidance people need to confront their paperclip challenges”.

But flower-blooming remains the essence of DFID’s strategic thrust. In keeping with this, as outlined in a recent internal note for DFID’s private sector development advisers (see below), a number of steps have been taken. Internally, DFID is known to have largely dismissed the ICAI report and to regard the Amber-Red conclusion as being “not too bad really”. “After all”, said the spokesperson, “there are some wonderful red and amber flowers out there.”

### *INTERNAL NOTE TO DFID’S PRIVATE SECTOR DEVELOPMENT ADVISERS FROM LEADER GREENING*

#### **How we’re operationalising our flower-blooming strategy**

There has been some unfortunate rumours circulating to the effect that our ‘letting 1000 flowers bloom strategy’ is just a pleasant-sounding slogan with no substance behind it. This note is to assure you that (a) such talk is unsubstantiated piffle and (b) within DFID we are putting in plans to get flower-blooming working on the ground, for the poor. We’re doing three things

1. We’re re-titling the new Director-General for Economic Development position as “DFID Chief Gardener”

2. We’re requiring that all our PSD staff view the classic Peter Sellers film ‘Being There’ to learn from its main protagonist and gardener, Chauncey Gardiner, and to take note of his wise words, such as “In the garden, growth has its seasons. First comes spring and summer, but then we have fall and winter”. Everyone in DFID can learn from this.

3. We’re issuing immediate guidelines - “Getting our manuring right” - on strategy implementation. This will focus on DFID’s recognised manuring strength and cover manure in all our work – spreading, generating, speaking, happenings. We are confident that all our stakeholders will soon detect the presence of better corporate manure in all DFID’s work

## Is DFID fit for purpose?

Almost as fast as its budget has grown, signs are emerging that DFID is not fit for the development purpose which it purports to be pursuing. Operating without meaningful external scrutiny, and in an increasingly politicised space, DFID also appears to be developing a culture which treats criticism with disdain and which believes its own extravagant hype. This combination of corporate incompetence and arrogance undermines the UK's aid effort.

Where does the evidence for DFID's dysfunctionality emerge? Informally, it comes from the numerous contractors with whom DFID deals and who – under their breath and out of earshot of their paymaster – complain of the increasing transaction costs of every DFID encounter. In some cases it may even come from unguarded moments of honesty from DFID staff. More tangibly, it comes from the new Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI), which is charged with scrutinising UK aid and which may now be showing its teeth. Its last two reports – on learning and private sector development (PSD) - have been deeply critical of DFID. The second is particularly revealing for what it said, what it really meant (given that final conclusions will have been watered down for public viewing) and for DFID's response.

- *What the ICAI report said:* although with interesting individual projects, DFID's work is not "coherent, realistic, and joined-up", "management structures are unclear", there is no "practical guidance [to ensure] consistency", there are "issues" with the PSD staff cadre. The scoring is Amber-Red – "the programme performs relatively poorly. Significant improvement should be made"
- *What ICAI really means:* while there are some promising experiences, overall, DFID hasn't a clue what it is doing. It is shambolic - without the people, mechanisms or strategy to be more than a scattering of disparate activities. The scoring that fits our analysis is Red ("performs poorly. Immediate and major changes should be made") but politically we couldn't give this.
- *What DFID's Management Response said:* accept one recommendation on engaging better with business but only "partially accept" the other three recommendations on the hard substance of strategy, organisation, process and capacity.
- *What DFID really means:* we reject it all. This is important, with a huge increase in budget taking place, and we're not accepting this level of criticism from an upstart like ICAI. They need to understand the game that's being played and know their place.

The scarcely-concealed aloofness in DFID's response is consistent with its new rhetoric of self-praise and self-righteousness. DFID documents refer to its "amazing" work. The new DG in Economic Development speaks of DFID's "fantastic" reputation. Staff – arid British civil servants – take it upon themselves to lecture contractors on their moral responsibilities. Increasingly DFID, wafting on the ether of money and self-delusion, moves further from reality to its own, crafted world. Planet DFID.

In this context, there has been comparatively little criticism of DFID from the assorted 'stakeholders' who throng around it – largely for the good reason that they are all dependent on DFID funds and goodwill. But perhaps a small chink of honesty has emerged recently. The outgoing head of the influential Institute of Development Studies (IDS), Lawrence Haddad, noted in his swansong blog that “the transactions costs [of dealing with DFID] are mind numbing and resource consuming”. Was DFID still fit for purpose he asked? Yes he answered – perhaps not a surprising conclusion from a high-profile figure right at the heart of the UK aid establishment - but that “it was creaking”.

Well, more than creaking Lawrence - well and truly cracked.

*Independent research?*



Different  
brands  
  
Same  
values

*Independent news?*



*When the price is right – whatever the client wants! ✓*

## Snouts in the trough at the poverty front line

**ODI cosiness with DFID:** more evidence emerges on the backscratching relationship between DFID and ODI, the UK's self-styled “leading development think-tank”. Informed sources report that the origins of the current closeness are from several years ago (under the previous government) when ODI recruited senior DFID staff to key positions.

They “went to ODI along with good contacts and promises of non-tendered cash which they used to support the group's activities”. ODI became the “go-to guys when DFID wanted a positive evaluation of an important DFID topic. ODI in return always came up with good things to say no matter what the evidence. That was the deal”. ODI's “entire focus was on sucking up to DFID and doing nothing that would upset them”.

Beyond DFID, ODI took the same “meeting the client's needs” approach to private sector groups, “going to corporations (such as CitiGroup, Rio Tinto, etc) looking for cash from them in return for saying nice things about them and, in particular, their corporate social responsibility (CSR) work”. Several staff, troubled by the organisation's continual compromises with the truth, left, some exiting from the aid world entirely.

The closeness to DFID that emerged then has served ODI well, laying the basis for the doubling in turnover witnessed over the last five years. Moreover, while times, personnel and DFID procurement rules may change, from this time, ODI has learned the value of its core guiding (if tacit) principle: find out what DFID wants you to say, then shape your findings to ensure you say it.

**MDGs: UNDP lead the millionaires' charge at the UN:** determined not to be outdone by reports of high-remuneration private contractors in the aid industry, the UN continues to set a formidable pace in terms of earnings. As reported in UNDP Watch, figures for 2011 from the UN Federal Credit Union show that 637 individual accounts from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) have \$1m plus dollars in them (with more than 1000 others with home loans of \$850k-1.5m).

It seems the UNDP is leading the way in the UN family with respect to the unofficial ninth millennium development goal (MDG). Although with a semi-mythical status, the ninth MDG "UN staff rights" is rumoured to have its own challenging target - "By 2015, increasing the number of UN staff who are dollar millionaires to 10,000." This news from the UNDP suggests that progress is being made but other agencies - UNDP, ILO, UNIDO - are reported to be concerned that they are not matching the UNDP's diligent endeavours. Commitments to "do better" have apparently been extracted from senior managers and there is reported to be a new resolve that, "yes, we can do this".

When speculation reigns about the extent of achievement in the other eight MDGs, DevBalls takes comfort in the performance in this the unofficial, but perhaps most important, ninth.

## **MDG NUMBER 9**

Increase the no. of UN millionaires



The one MDG that will be achieved!

## **Why does the mainstream media fail development?**

Picture this scenario. A government department announces that it's going to double its budget in a priority area. Weeks later, an official independent assessment delivers a savage critique of same department's performance in same priority area with a withering 'next-to-clueless' conclusion. Finally, aforementioned department responds with a thinly-veiled rejection of all key points; spending plans are unaffected. The whole story happens without any serious scrutiny by the mainstream media.

How can this be in a mature, democratic country with - apparently - a vibrant press? It happens because it's international development (DFID and its work in private sector development) and the mass media - vigilant in other spheres of public spending (health, education, etc) - fails to hold government to account. Why do such double standards prevail in the media's coverage of development compared with other spheres of public policy?

First, there's a knowledge problem. Development is outside the experience of most people. And it's different - not about directly delivering in 'our' country but about enabling other countries to do. Laudable, virtuous - but slightly

weird. Most journalists don't understand it, so allowing any coverage to slip to a superficial, default level of instinctive response. But more than knowledge, there's an incentives problem. Why bother looking at aid at all? At one level, this is understandable; it's a peripheral 'nice-to-have' concern for most listeners/readers/viewers - although, in true chicken and egg style, it is always likely to remain so when coverage is so weak. Beyond this, the media's incentives to scrutinise aid objectively are murkier.

For the right-wing media, the very notion of aid triggers visceral suspicion. Helping the feckless and downtrodden, and foreigners to boot, is not a winning message. Aid, from the outset, is seen an enterprise of dubious validity. They take delight in highlighting aid's, easily identified, excesses and failures – of which there are many (far more than the press identify). Coverage is opportunistic and mischievous and with no real interest in how aid can be improved. Every DFID office lives in trepidation of catching the attentions of the Daily Mail.

For the left-leaning, aid is inherently a good thing – helping the poor people in far flung places ticks every progressive box. The UK's Guardian is a flag-bearer for those of an internationalist liberal-left persuasion and a natural 'friend' of aid. Perhaps here there might be interest in more rigorous and insightful reporting of the aid industry? Certainly in recent years it has upped its coverage.

However, this has been primarily through its online Guardian Development Professional Network (GDPN). This provides a forum for information, news and analysis. It consists of a number of 'hubs' on different development fields and issues (malaria, nutrition, aid effectiveness etc) with each hub being sponsored – usually by an NGO but also by commercial contractors. The deal offered by the Guardian varies but will comprise a mixture of articles from the sponsor, articles written 'independently' by Guardian journalists on topics to be agreed with (and in close coordination with) the sponsor, roundtable debates on relevant issues (with a summary placed in the 'real' paper), advertising space etc. Each deal has a separate price tag – for example, a basic 12-month partnership is £80k; a one-off roundtable event is £25k. The deeper your pockets the more you can have.

In offering this service the Guardian blurs the distinction between being an independent news reporter and being a vehicle for the views of others. It has moved into the same space as other online information providers in development – such as Devex and Business Fights Poverty – service providers to the aid industry rather than independent observers of it. And like them, and in common with many in development, too much criticism of aid is seen as disloyal to the greater cause.

With around ten individual hub sponsors and funded overall by the Gates Foundation the GDPN is a venture likely to be worth in the low-millions of pounds, a welcome source of revenue for a cash-strapped newspaper. But what has it meant for their coverage of development? Well, it's unlikely that there will be any in-depth critique of Gates' work any time soon. Nor of other sponsors – which includes large commercial contractors. Other mainstream news organisations are unlikely to be immune to the persuasive powers of the development dollar. Even the Economist, proudly independent it claims, will be aware that ¼ to ½ of its recruitment ads are filled from the aid world.

So, whether from the perspective of the right or left, the mass media fails to throw meaningful light on the workings of the aid industry and the processes, incentives and capacities that shape its efficacy. Either it doesn't have the knowledge to do so in detail. Or it is not interested in any engagement other than throwing stones. Or it has been captured by the aid industry, with commercial self-interest - the promise of aid lucre - trumping news independence. In this context, the effective space for informed and nuanced coverage is small and declining.

## UN opens up new front line in the War on Want

*BY*

*"DISGRUNTLED-UN-WORKER-WHO-THINKS-IT-SHOULD-BE-DOING-A-LOT-BETTER"*

Battles lines were re-drawn earlier this year as a leading UN development agency made a shocking new discovery: the field.

This modern-day El Dorado had been written about in countless reports, but few believed it really existed. Until now. From the airy corridors of its European power base, Dr Dieter Fart, Chief of UN Organisational Flatulence, thundered "Thank God! We've spent years looking for a place to roll out all these useless training courses we developed".

The conquistadors swooped in. Armed with large binders, containing larger reports and carried by men (yes, almost always men) with even larger egos, the experts quickly set about establishing Working Groups and Steering Committees. A Memorandum of Understanding for a Terms of Reference on Strategic Capacity Building was signed. The government then set about creating new words for all these things, since shockingly such nebulous concepts had no equivalent in the local tongue. Meanwhile the minds of the experts started to wander. Can get a decent latté around here? How good was that tahini salad in business class on the way over?

A crack team of researchers was dispatched to waste a lot of time asking the natives to quantify exactly how helpless they were, and what they thought of their new occupation as Poor Beneficiaries. Some at the esteemed agency questioned the utility of all this: we don't need a baseline, they said, as the locals were all so primitive and needy before we came, anything we do for them is bound to be awesome.

Proof of success was sped back to HQ in rosy reports that no-one ever read but definitely said very important things. This persuaded more donors to fund the Really Good Stuff that was happening. Even more dough was shoved in through the multilateral back door (yay, the taxpayers have no idea how this is all spent, so we don't need to bother about due diligence!). The world's World Class™ donor, DFID, remembering about VfM (Very fudged Measures) - just in case anyone asks, you know - made plans to undertake a multilateral review that dressed up a load of subjective political opinions in a fancy methodology. The streets of El Dorado really were paved with gold, it turned out, for pretty much everyone apart from the people living there.

Then one day, someone made a second shocking discovery: the field of the field.

Apparently this was when you went to a poor place and actually travelled outside of the capital city. Back in HQ, people started to feel a bit uncomfortable with this Matrix-like revelation, somehow feeling threatened that their tax-free taxpayer-funded bourgeois lifestyle may not be reality after all. Experts were less enthused with this place as well, as the choice of restaurants wasn't great. People spoke no English there, and the local food gave them the runs.

Faced with such messiness and general incomprehensibility, everyone felt much more comfortable retreating to an air-conditioned workshop to come up with a National Action Plan for The Important Supply Driven Crap We're Gonna Do To Make You Totally Dependent On Us You Suckers. A press release from the UN Fund for Gobbledygook summarised the clear, agreed way forward:

“In the context of decentralisation, we will work to unlock clusters, through inter-agency-coordinated governance-related socio-economic policy advocacy activities. At the national level, exploratory research points to nationally owned and monitored cost-benefit analysis frameworks for development assistance planning.”

**Watch out poverty, the UN is on your case!**

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## Hanging out with the Opus Luvus

The Opus Luvus is the elite inner-sanctum of the luvvie, celeb world. It is a small, notoriously secretive organisation open only to those who have demonstrated outstanding commitment to high-profile international philanthropy that reaches out to “the poor folks”, and who are also marvellous human-beings and humanitarians. And celebrities. (And rich of course). Membership is by invitation only. This is the top of the pile when it comes to doing-good and being achingly cool.

In a break with usual practice, Opus Luvus allowed DevBalls access to a recent meeting of its Executive Council on a yacht in Monte Carlo which was considering a number of new candidates for Opus Luvus membership. And so we hung out with Bill, Angelina, Bono and the other guys – talking poverty and chilling over a glass of Chardonnay. Here’s some of what they said.



**Bill Gates (BG):** so we’ve got a number of potential new members to look at – all apparently keen to join. Bono, you and I both know Jeff.

**Bono:** Jeff Sachs is just the best – he’s a professor – he definitely knows his stuff - he writes all these books and I write the introductions for them. I see him as the thinker in the band. As long as he’s thinking I don’t need to. I call him the “the squeaky wheel that roars!”

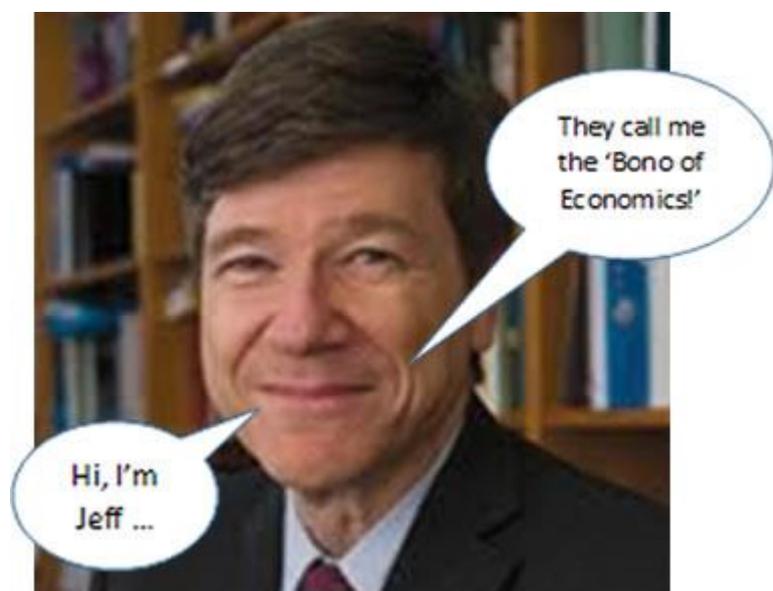
**BG:** Yes, I saw that - but I have no idea what that means.

**Bono:** it doesn't matter. Bill, what matters is that Jeff belongs with us.

**BG:** Well, we couldn't support his Millennium Development Village (MDV) work. Everyone knew it was all wrong from the outset with no pretence of learning from past experiences. One of the most regressive development interventions of the last decade. But nobody could say that to Jeff. That book that's just come out by Nina Munk – The Idealist – is a blow for Jeff; it has the feel of truth about it.

**Angelina Jolie (AJ):** what about his work against malaria with insecticide-treated bed nets? All my friends in Hollywood like to dole out bednets and Jeff says it's the right thing to do. People are grateful and smiling. And there's nice pictures. This has to be good, right?

**BG:** right, we have made positive noises about his work in insecticide-treated bed nets. But that was partly because we felt he needed a lift. Not entirely sure it's going to sort out the root cause in the longer-term. But then again, I have called him the Bono of Economics .....



**Bono:** And you know Bill, when I hear you speak I think of you as the Bono of Business....

**BG:** ..... let's invite him in. Angelina who's next?

**AJ:** Tony Blair has been dropping hints. And he deserves it what with all that 'good governance' advice he dispels and for all his solid nation-building activity in the Middle East – he just knows so much about it. Sometimes I wonder what the world have been like without him! And you have to admire someone who's now worth \$120m only a few years after receiving a pittance for his efforts in government.

**BG:** okay, but haven't there have been a few small blips. He seems to be a friend of some very uncool types – generals, despots, oppressive regimes and the like – but I suppose you have to mix with them to make a difference. And they pay pretty well too. But what does bother me is that whole Iraq invasion business ....

**Bono:** yeh that was a pity, but anyone can have a bad gig. You just have to move on.



**AJ:** you know, you're right. Some days my hair can look awful. But then I fix it. He deserves a chance I say. He can be redeemed.

**BG:** okay – and one more. Salma Hayek. What have we got? Obviously there was the whole Boobs-Out for Africa innovation a few years ago – which was powerful. And she displayed that 'Bring back our girls' sign at the Oscars recently. Against protocol apparently – so she's pretty fearless. But anything else?

**AJ:** well, she's just been announced, with her husband, as one of the wealthiest people in the world. They have a combined wealth of \$4.1bn.

**Bono:** cool. She's in.



# The beautiful game, the beautiful people and a better class of DevBalls

The UK's annual Soccer Aid shindig in June not only presented a chance for 70,000 people to enjoy a fun-night with the celebs and the beautiful game but for a classic mix of sincerity, naivety and hypocrisy to be displayed. DevBalls, indeed, of the highest order.

The message from Soccer Aid to the paying public is simple and directly transactional. "Your support", dear public, "buys mosquito nets, vaccines, high energy biscuits, safe water etc". Development as "giving stuff". A vaccine with every half-time pie – we just need to eat more pies. Stuff your face, it's all in a good cause.

Supporting this direct 'sell', the whole event is lubricated by heart-warming tales of profound life-changing experiences from fresh-faced celebs – in this case the actor Martin Sheen – who tell of trips to deepest Africa, bonding over songs (including yes, 'All We Need Is Love') and football, realising "how much we share in common" (we're all the same really) and being moved by the "incredible impact" of continuous UNICEF goodies.

Interestingly Sheen moved dangerously close to asking a 'why question' at one point. "It shouldn't be like this ...." he mused. No, quite right, it shouldn't Martin but it's unlikely to change as long as UNICEF and the like continue to focus on easily addressed (and easily sold) symptoms rather than the harder (but at least valid) slog of underlying causes. And Soccer Aid and its participating luvvies conspire – inadvertently doubtless – to promote a spurious message of virtue, self-congratulation and progress.

Of course, as long as there's a chance to bask in reflected self-righteousness, DFID is unlikely to be far away. And sure enough, DFID is at the heart of the Soccer Aid jamboree with Leader Greening to the fore, and DFID's offer of matching funds from the "generous British public" (voters presumably as well) receiving prominent coverage. And so the £5.3m raised is doubled by (equally generous) DFID. That DFID, money coming out its ears and desperate to find ways of spending, could spend ten times this amount with scarcely a blink of an eye is somehow lost in the overall Lovefest.

## Sachs' move from Idealist to Ideologue

*Idealist – "a visionary, a person guided more by ideals than practical considerations"*

*Ideologue – "someone who looks at everything through the glasses of their favoured viewpoint, and – uncompromising and dogmatic – sees no merit in any other perspective".*

While Nina Munk's book on Jeffrey Sachs, 'The Idealist' has received favourable reviews, some have wondered if a different title would be more apt. Given his characteristic behaviour - described in the book and experienced by many others – perhaps Sachs actions now fit better under the Ideologue label?

Criticism? – respond with outright **dismissal** and **distortion** of 'evidence': the Millennium Village Development (MDV) project, the focus of Munk's attention, is more than just *not* struggling, it's "flourishing" according to Sachs. Supporting this claim he cites research on indicators such as poverty, nutrition and child mortality - but most of this has been shot down by independent analysts because of (a) questionable research methodologies and (b) inconsistency between data and conclusions.

Different contexts? – **blanket application of the same 'model'**. Sachs' MDVs are especially criticised for their lack of concern with scale and sustainability. Essentially they are relatively short-term blasts of resources –

training, inputs, seeds – to produce temporary immediate results but little consideration of systems of delivery in the longer-term. His views on insecticide-treated bednets are the same – free distribution now but unconcerned with the future and with the damage that ill-considered freebies might inflict on mixed public: private systems that have been developing. Universal free distribution in Tanzania could consume more than half of the country's national health budget – unsustainable without continued massive infusions of external donor funds which no one seriously suggests is likely or is desirable.

Opponents? – **belittle, deride, threaten**. Whether government officials, development agencies or esteemed international epidemiologists, opponents are described variously as “baby-killers”, “punks” and “criminals”. Munk, meanwhile, is dismissed as a mere “reporter for Vanity Fair”. The moral certainty that comes from their self-appointed good guy status – the knowledge that only they really feel the poor's pain – gives Sachs and his acolytes license to be disdainful and, where necessary, bully, especially with senior officials in African governments.

Supporters? – develop a band of **pliant, zombie followers**. Among Time Magazine's 100 most influential world leaders and named by the New York Times as, “probably the most important economist in the world,” adoration of Sachs is especially marked in the fantasy world of celebs and luvvies where Bono and Geldof are among his



most prominent fans and Sachs is widely held in awe.

And this extends to the media – the UK's Guardian newspaper has been a faithful, unquestioning supporter of the MDVs, and chided as the “MDV Public Relations Dept”. in social media.

Jeffrey Sachs remains a powerful influence on international development – in many ways the intellectual counterweight to luvvie froth. This influence has long-since departed from its idealistic roots to move to the realm of manipulative ideologue – a reality that some, if not his most ardent supporters, recognise.

## Searching for the meaning of BEAM

Confusion surrounds the meaning and significance of the new BEAM Exchange. Funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and by DFID (mainly by DFID) this is implemented by a Price Waterhouse Coopers (PWC)-led consortium. It aims to be “a new forum for knowledge exchange and learning about the role of market systems approaches in reducing poverty”, and succeeds the short-lived M4P Hub. But what it is – let alone what it will do – remain a mystery.

A reasonable question and a reasonable place to start might be what does BEAM (the acronym) stand for? Unfortunately this is absent from all BEAM literature. However, DevBalls readers have been helping out by putting forward a few useful suggestions:

- Blather Expounding Anything Markety
- Blowing Everyone's Aid Money
- Belittling Everything Analytical on Markets
- Bleating Endlessly About Manure
- Baloney and Existential Angst on Markets

And what will BEAM do? Apparently in search of an answer to that very question, BEAM's newly installed management team has flooded the internet ether with questionnaires asking, ... well... what should we do? And to motivate sluggish would-be respondents it has offered grand incentives – skype eVouchers worth \$20 (!) to five randomly selected full survey respondents. And DevBalls also now understands that, in a final big push, a bottle of Babysham and a large Winnie the Pooh toy are to be offered as well. Already BEAM oozes class and quality, suggesting that it is completely on top of the challenges ahead.

Perhaps a small clue on what we can expect from BEAM comes from a PWC source. Apparently BEAM is the name of PWC's internal magazine for its China, Hong Kong and Singapore firms. This contains fascinating features on such matters as tax symposiums, PWC award ceremonies and cooking tips as well as special offers on PWC-branded items such as lapel pins and stainless steel mugs. And the magazine's writers are referred to as BEAMERS. So, the tone of the future becomes a little clearer .....

Whatever BEAM does it remains of little import in the context of PWC's overall portfolio of work, especially with DFID. PWC makes its development mint here in a range of ways but notably implementing challenge funds, such as the (£300m) Girls Education challenge fund, and other grant-giving conveyer belts. Which means we might wait in vain for BEAM's hard-hitting rigorous and independent assessment of the impact of challenge funds. PWC is also, as a member of DFID's Key Supplier Group (aka DFID's Oligarchs), conscious of the need to indulge in high profile "giving back" exercises such as providing pro-bono advice to DFID's new Director General of Economic Development.

This sets the context for BEAM. At £3-4m this is unimportant small fry to PWC; likely at best to be a chance to position itself favourably for other DFID work; at worst, a written-off cost-of-business.

As one senior official from a major bilateral agency confided in DevBalls, expectations for BEAM are very low - let alone understanding on what it actually stands for.