

# TECHONOMY NYC

## Why the Global Goals are Urgent, and How Tech Can Help

### Speaker:

Jeffrey Sachs, Director, Center for Sustainable Development, Columbia University

### Interviewer:

David Kirkpatrick, Techonomy

(Transcription by [RA Fisher Ink](#))

**Kirkpatrick:** It was a useful way to lead into our conversation with Jeffrey Sachs in several respects. One, the global approach, and I think for me when I was thinking about what it is that I want to accomplish in coming years, it really is connected to why we asked Jeffrey to be here today. Here at Techonomy, I would say we're worried, despite our optimism, despite our conviction that technology is a positive force, that the world is not taking its own challenge seriously enough and as we mentioned yesterday, the Sustainable Development Goals are a big part of how we think about our own work and structuring it and structuring our thinking and our priorities. The Sustainable Development Goals that the United Nations articulated: 17 goals for 2030 that pretty much cover the full range of challenges facing the planet. Jeffrey is one of the architects of that set of goals with that approach and one of the great advocates for taking responsibility more seriously and being more methodical about how we address the challenges that we face. So welcome.

**Sachs:** Good morning.

**Kirkpatrick:** And you know, I don't know if I need—

**Sachs:** Now that you're all so calm, I want to raise your stress level again.

[LAUGHTER]

I promise to create a lot of anxiety in the next few minutes.

**Kirkpatrick:** It might be appropriate. Jeffrey is a professor at Columbia. He's an advisor to the UN Secretary General. He's written a number of fantastic books. You created the Earth Institute. Didn't you originally?

**Sachs:** I inherited it, fortunately, yeah.

**Kirkpatrick:** You inherited it. Okay. Well you turned it into something huge, and you're still there, although you are not running the whole thing anymore. But basically a lot of your work is

focused on how we can achieve the SDGs, the Global Goals, by 2030. So talk about why that is such a priority for you.

**Sachs:** The basic ideas that we have, obviously the technology, that's what brings us together here. We have the incredible affluence, and we're blowing it. This is the simple point. We have made a world that is wealthy and a world that is really teched up, and we're destroying the planet. We're nasty to each other. We have elected an idiot for president. And that's a symptom of a society that is in deep crisis. So I really am here to raise your anxiety level, because things don't work on their own. And we kid ourselves to think that things are fine.

Of course, we're in the center of the greatest wealth on the planet in the few square blocks we're meeting. We feel fine. If you're a highly skilled person, life seems probably better than ever, as long as you can tune out most of the world's realities. And our economic system does not solve problems like protecting the planet from human-induced global warming or human induced destruction of habitat and biodiversity which have reached scales that if you're attuned to the scientists are completely unprecedented in human civilization. And we've reached a level of derangement of our politics which is so corrupt and so money driven that we can't solve problems anymore. We can't even talk straight. Think of last night. How many things are we supposed to deal with? Israeli attacks on Iranian positions in Syria, absolutely against international law? Trump's withdrawal from an agreement endorsed by all other countries in the world? Or Michael Cohen receiving money from Russian oligarchs into the account and, duh, that's for consulting services? That guy is really a great consultant. We know.

[LAUGHTER]

If you want mafia services. So we're really in trouble, ladies and gentlemen. We are not in a good situation. Sorry. I'm always—

**Kirkpatrick:** Okay. That was even slightly grimmer than I expected.

**Sachs:** I'm always in a bad mood in the morning, because I get up and—

**Kirkpatrick:** He had a big smile on when he walked in this morning.

**Sachs:** I read the *Wall Street Journal* filled with lies on the editorial pages, filled with bad news—

**Kirkpatrick:** You should read the *Financial Times* anyway.

**Sachs:** I do also.

**Kirkpatrick:** You did have a smile on.

**Sachs:** I do.

[LAUGHTER]

**Kirkpatrick:** So you must not—you haven't given up, clearly.

**Sachs:** No.

**Kirkpatrick:** That is one reason you are here. The global goals are a very somewhat abstract set of targets. But what's the way you think about—if you can be optimistic in the face of what you're saying, which I believe you to be in some fundamental way, is there a pathway that you can see—leave the goals even aside—just towards calmity and civility and collective commitment in general, which is something I think that so many of us mourn the absence of and if we didn't care about it, we wouldn't be doing this conference. This is really a motivation for us. This is our small way of helping. But what do you think we could all do together to make things better?

**Sachs:** The reason I like these goals, and let me describe them in a moment—

**Kirkpatrick:** Oh, there's still some of that nature left.

[LAUGHTER]

**Sachs:** Hmm?

**Kirkpatrick:** The birds.

**Sachs:** Oh sorry. I was just—no, let me say why I—not that I'm optimistic, but that I think we should figure out a way out of the very peculiar position that we're in and why I think these goals make a difference. So the idea is basically this. We've got everything going for us. We really have created an astounding amount of know-how and obviously the digital revolution that is really at the core of this meeting and the core of our world right now offers phenomenal solutions to lots of things beyond streaming movies or paying for advertising on the internet. We could really solve a lot of problems about low carbon energy, about protecting the biosphere, about monitoring habitat, about making our cities, like our wonderful New York City, work better. So there's no reason at all for technological pessimism. This is for sure. There's no reason for economic pessimism in the sense that world output is now \$130 trillion dollars a year. That's a lot by the way, even for a macroeconomist used to these numbers; \$130 trillion dollars measured at international prices is a tremendous amount of productivity.

**Kirkpatrick:** What would that have been like 10 years ago?

**Sachs:** We've been basically achieving growth of three to four percent per year pretty consistently with the bad bump in 2008, but that means a doubling time every 20 years or so, so you can say that 20 years ago we would have been roughly at half that and 40 years ago roughly a fourth of that level. That's a good growth rate. That means at that level of wealth there should be no extreme poverty on the planet, children shouldn't be dying of poverty as about 6 million do every year. We shouldn't be in desperation over hunger. We should be understanding that we have the surplus we need to revamp our energy system to get out of

fossil fuels to move to a renewable energy based system, which my group issued a report last week showing how New England and the U.S. Northeast could basically become zero carbon with smart grids and a good interconnection with Canada and Canadian Hydropower among other things linking up with our wind and solar here. So there are ways to solve problems. My worry is that we don't solve problems right now. That our politics are profoundly corrupt. We have pay for play politics in this country even cruder than I imagined because look at all the companies that paid Trump off through transfers to his—

**Kirkpatrick:** But I want to get—

**Sachs:** No, let me just say—

**Kirkpatrick:** Okay.

**Sachs:** No, but this is really important. We're not solving problems in this country. We don't even think.

**Kirkpatrick:** But how do we get there?

**Sachs:** Well, first we have to call out the scoundrels.

**Kirkpatrick:** I guess that's true.

**Sachs:** We absolutely have to call out the scoundrels, and there are two kinds of scoundrels. One is of course the politicians, most of whom are one way or another on the take in our system. And second is the business sector, which in this city and to a large extent around this country is amoral or immoral in its practices. A lot of it. Because the hedge funds or Wall Street or many other sectors don't care except for the bottom line and so they're in this business. And we keep seeing the revelations of this. Look at the oil industry. Look at David and Charles Koch. I was at the AMNH last weekend, going through the Halls of Biodiversity. Well okay, I can imagine them giving the Hall of Species Extinction, because they're experts in it. They're doing that. They're funding all of the anti-climate change action in the U.S. Senate.

**Kirkpatrick:** On the other hand, we have Blackstone on the stage later today, and they're really trying to think differently and take a step toward telling business they need to—so there are positive signs.

**Sachs:** Yes, there are some positive signs, and I hope that they follow through. I want all of you to follow through though. To understand how serious our problems are, not because they're unsolvable, but because we don't try. And because we're absolutely locked in a cycle of greed that's astounding. Maybe it is, with Morgan, the right starting point, which is that we—is that her name?

**Kirkpatrick:** Yes.

**Sachs:** Which is what are we thinking? Or are we thinking? Because we have a serious need to make a number of changes. Why is it that we gave a tax cut of two trillion dollars last December and now yesterday the White House called for \$15 billion dollars of cuts, including the CHIP program, child health for poor kids. Are we out of our minds? Is there any limit to the cruelty of Mr. Trump, who is a clinical psychopath. I'm sorry to say it. He—really.

**Kirkpatrick:** The thing—

**Sachs:** This is important because we have—I'm sorry, but we have a president who—

**Kirkpatrick:** I don't think anybody needs to be convinced that Donald Trump is a little bit unbalanced, I mean, or a lot—

**Sachs:** No, but I think the important point though is—

**Kirkpatrick:** The question is what do you do about it?

**Sachs:** Right, so the reason there are goals is that we need to orient ourselves toward what is important, and what Sustainable Development Goals call for are clear metrics for the U.S. and for every other country by the year 2030. They call for decarbonizing the energy system. They call for protecting habitat. They call for reducing inequality. We have the highest inequality in our modern history in this country measured by the Gini coefficient and other technical measures, the Palma Ratio and so forth. They call for safe water. We can't even get safe water in the United States anymore. Can you imagine? And it's not just Flint. It's hundreds of cities around this country.

We can't take seriously the fact that large parts of our country, including Manhattan, are going to face massive crisis from sea level rise this century, if we continue the way we're continuing. And we have a political system designed right now to ignore all of that. So the idea of the goals is you read them, you look at them, if you are like me, an academic, you study pathways to achieve them. If you're in business you say how do we align with them, not how do we spend all our time lobbying against them. This is the future we need to make. How can technologies address these issues? That's where I find the most interesting thinking.

**Kirkpatrick:** Well luckily, we have a major corporation, Novozymes, onstage in just a few minutes that is specifically thinking about how aligning its own strategy toward the global goals makes sense, even from a standpoint of growth and profit for themselves. And certainly with the benefit of the planet. So I think it's appropriate that we should be worried. That's why we put you on the cover of our magazine, but I will say that I am struck now, and I was struck when we sat for two hours at your apartment not too long ago, with the gravity of your concern, even though I know—for several years Techonomy opened with showing the Gapminder.org data.

To show that for all of the things we worry about, the basics have been getting better on the planet for a long time: infant mortality, lifespan has been lengthening on a global basis,

average global wealth as you point out has been growing, and many of the measures even as applied to individuals have been getting better and better. So clearly there are good things happening in the context that we may be destroying the environment in which we live, which is obviously of great concern. I don't know why I'm going through that except that I just want you to factor in the positive growth. I guess I'm just trying to get you to tell us a way to address this without a fatalistic sense of fear.

**Sachs:** Yeah. I think that all of these analyses, including Steven Pinker's new book about all the progress are basically a bit of a misunderstanding. And the way I think is right to understand it is what President John F. Kennedy said at his inaugural address in 1961. He said the world is different now. For mankind holds in his mortal hands the ability to end all forms of human poverty and all forms of human life. And that is the most succinct definition of our existence in the modern world. Trying to tally up the positives and say the world is great is a mistake. Tallying up all the negatives and saying the world is lost is a mistake. Rather, understanding that the world is a choice for us.

**Kirkpatrick:** We face choices every minute.

**Sachs:** We face choices individually, but now we face collectively a choice. Because the problems that we face are global. They have nothing to do with the trade war or a 100 billion dollar imbalance with China or ripping up a carefully negotiated agreement with Iran. These have nothing to do with our real problems, nor are our problems properly measured by whether the unemployment rate is 3.9 percent today or 4.1 percent or whether the Dow is at 24,000 or 26,000. We're living in a world where all of these short run bombarding signals are a distraction from some quite fundamental issues. We're 7.5 billion people on the planet. We'll soon be nine billion people. We're in the middle of an unprecedented derangement of the physical environment in three fundamental ways: global warming, loss of species, and massive chemical pollutants all over the planet, ocean, and terrestrial.

We have such a derangement of our mentality in our political system which has been taken over by money everywhere that multiple leaders around the world are in jail, or should be in jail. Our own included I'm quite sure. If this investigation uncovers the kinds of evidence that we learned about last night. And we are therefore really in need of some anchors of what we should be doing. For 15 years I worked on what were called the Millennium Development Goals which were goals to address extreme poverty. I can tell you the funny experience I fought like hell, and strangely enough made progress with the George W. Bush administration, which at the time I regarded as the worst presidency of modern history. Now it looks phenomenal.

[LAUGHTER]

But W. put in money into fighting AIDS and malaria. Strange, by the way, it made a huge difference. As I predicted and as others predicted, we saved millions and millions of lives, then couldn't even get Obama's attention, by the way. So weird. Just to tell you how strange

everything really is in our politics right now. So I'm not especially partisan. I just don't like the whole thing for the moment.

**Kirkpatrick:** Do you think there's some point in maybe having a—the Paris Accords are one thing, but do we need to have some kind of global coming together to try to address this?

**Sachs:** Well we do, by the way. We did. And we had two of them. One is the whole world agreed on—we've had three global comings together. One was the Sustainable Development Goals. All 193 governments agreed after three years of detailed work, every day, three years, they agreed on 17 goals. Of course most people have never heard of them, don't know about them. I'm trying to keep them a secret from Washington, because Mr. Trump would bomb them if he knew about them. Second was the Paris Climate Agreement, 10 years of work, at least. One could even say 23 years of work, because the Framework Convention on Climate Change was signed in 1992. Kyoto was negotiated in '97, but the U.S. Senate, in its wisdom, never ratified it. 2009 was an attempt to negotiate the so-called Copenhagen Agreement. That failed. So in 2015, we finally got a climate agreement. And then our corruption of the Koch brothers, ExxonMobil, Chevron, ConocoPhillips, they get us to pull out immediately.

That's not even Trump by the way. That's just the Republican Congress, which is so corrupt and so much on the pay of the oil industry, they wouldn't even utter an honest word about climate change. They are not as stupid as they look. They are so corrupt that they will never say an honest word about climate change. So that was the second meeting. The third was to try to stop a war in the Middle East. And that was a universal agreement that Trump pulled out of yesterday. So we meet a lot, globally. We actually agree on things globally. Yesterday's agreement is not a bilateral agreement between the U.S. and Iran. It is a global agreement. It was reached by not only every member, permanent member, of the U.N. Security Council, also the Security Council, also all the U.N. membership. Trump is nuts. Sorry to tell you. And the fact that it is globally agreed is the reason to pull out. Because it is an affront to his megalomania, as well as of course to various U.S. client states or so-called allies in the Middle East like Saudi Arabia and Israel.

**Kirkpatrick:** I want to get the audience's help—

**Sachs:** Which want to have a war.

[LAUGHTER]

So we have—ladies and gentlemen, we have global agreements. We actually have a world—a few blocks from here is the United Nations. It's a wondrous institution.

**Kirkpatrick:** Wondrous.

**Sachs:** It keeps us alive, if it works. It was the greatest invention by the greatest American president, FDR. And it works. And it's in our neighborhood. And we're doing everything to destroy it in this country right now. Including with an incredibly nasty ambassador who lectures

the others that, "We pay money. You don't vote with us. We're not getting our returns." That's wonderful diplomacy I can tell you, Madam Ambassador. That's how you're going to win votes? By telling them, "You're on our take?" Well, it doesn't work in this world. A little respect might work.

**Kirkpatrick:** A lot of what you're saying is agreed by many of the other countries, luckily, I think. I mean—

**Sachs:** It's agreed by all of them. We're right now 192 against 1.

**Kirkpatrick:** Okay, could we get the lights up? Okay. Let's get them right here.

**Sachs:** Are you happy yet?

[LAUGHTER]

I'm actually not—well, yeah I am actually—

**Kirkpatrick:** Can we get the house lights up?

**Sachs:** I am pretty agitated.

**Audience 1:** I'm spending most of my time in the U.N., representing ICANN as the U.N. engagement VP.

**Sachs:** Wonderful.

**Audience 1:** And I wanted to ask you actually to bring it a little bit to the tech part of the conference. What do you think could be the roll of the U.N. in all these tech agreements? You know, the talk about in the last year—the new secretary general has been talking a lot about frontier technologies in the U.N., and there is a lot of conversation going on within the UN system. Do you see any particular place for the U.N. within the tech?

**Sachs:** Let me say where I see the roll of tech in these problems. Which is that if you take any of the problems that are identified in the sustainable development goals—I mentioned several of them: transition to a low carbon economy, universal access to healthcare, universal access to education. Every one of these needs tech in a serious way. There's been lots of mapping of things that could be done. If you want to get kids in school, there's nothing more wonderful than the connectivity right now: curriculum online, classrooms where there are no teachers, raising access of children to educational materials. If you want healthcare, I can tell you from personal experience, there's nothing more wonderful than this and a community health worker and a backpack filled with the right medicines, because you'll save millions of lives.

**Kirkpatrick:** Very interestingly, quickly, our partner Johnson & Johnson has a project in South Africa for pregnant women and new moms where they answer their questions on SMS, and I think I just heard the other day it's the largest digital health program in the world, and most

mothers in South Africa are now using it. And it's a catalytically transformative thing. So these things can work.

**Sachs:** This is extremely important. What's the problem? The problem in general is that we're not creating the content or operating at scale, because for most of this, it is not a business model. There are two meanings of business model. The meaning I like is business model means that you're running things in an organized, rational, scaled manner, procedures work, you have the feedbacks, you have metrics, you have measurement. The other is it's for profit and your quarterly shareholder report is going to report. The market economy works fine. It's very impressive for solving certain problems. It has gotten you movies streamed real time on your phones or your devices. It's really good at that. The market is good for many other things as well. The market is not good for poor people. The market is not good for nature. The market is not good for other species. And to think so is a category derangement.

It's a basic misunderstanding or that you were in a lousy economics class, not mine. And the point I'm making is the following. There are things that will not come from businesses solving problems on a market basis. And we cannot accept that in this country. Because we don't want to accept that. Because the businesses only want to make money. And when I go to these business, they say, "Oh yeah, really important, but you're in the wrong place." Like when I asked Facebook about helping with education. Basically I was led out the door. Why are you here? I said, "Because you connect the world." "Yes, well we're not interested in education." That's not Mark's priority, I was told. Yeah, I said, but it's Mark's responsibility. Nah, but it's not Mark's priority. Why don't you go to Washington to get this done?

**Kirkpatrick:** Is that really what they say?

**Sachs:** I said, "Why don't you pay your taxes?"

[LAUGHTER]

And then we can go to Washington. And then I was led out the door.

[LAUGHTER]

So come on, this is the problem. The problem is the U.N. has no money, and it has no technology. It is the meeting place to solve problems. But the business community wants profits and governments give away all their tax revenues to the rich everywhere in the world and then say we have no money for aid. We can't even manage—you know what we give in this country right now: 0.16 of 1 percent of our income. We spend 50 times that on the military. And we're trying to cut aid even more because aid is a waste. Aid is, you know, it's not America first. So this is the real problem. The U.N., don't look to it for the money.

**Kirkpatrick:** I'm going to get another question, Jeff. Okay. Right here. The cameraman has a question. Please.

**Audience 2:** Hi, I know this is a little unorthodox.

**Kirkpatrick:** That's all right.

[LAUGHTER]

**Audience 2:** You mentioned universal healthcare. Yesterday, we saw from a presidential candidate recommending a UBI, another big policy position that is getting traction is a jobs guarantee. I know that you were a big supporter of Bernie in the primaries, and I'm sure that you know his chief economic adviser was a proponent of MMT. I know your background is probably Keynesian, but are you familiar with Modern Monetary Theory and how it relates to those policy positions?

**Sachs:** Yeah. Well, I think so.

[LAUGHTER]

**Kirkpatrick:** We have good camera people.

[LAUGHTER]

**Sachs:** Excellent. Get a close up right now.

[LAUGHTER]

Look, the truth is there is a basic concept in politics which has been around about 100 years called social democracy, or social market economy, and the idea of social democracy or social market economy is that you have a market system, but you ensure people's needs. And you ensure that inequality doesn't get out of control. And there are a few places on the planet that follow that model. And the main ones are Scandinavia, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Germany also to an extent has a social market economy. Yesterday I was in Canada. Canada is much more a social democracy than the United States, though somewhere in between say the Scandinavian model and the U.S. model. This works. It's basic. We actually were going in that direction in the 1960s. This was from the New Deal through the New Frontier through The Great Society. We turned away from that starting with Nixon and then especially with Reagan.

That's when our great divergence came. It is arguably linked to signing the civil rights laws of the mid-1960s, when there was the anti-civil rights rebellion of the U.S. South and the shift of politics to the right wing and to the conservative white right. And we diverged in this country from these basics. So you don't need to invent a grand new framework that doesn't exist any place on the planet. If you're in Sweden, no matter what job you have, you have several weeks paid vacation, you have a year of maternity leave. If you are a father, you have nine months of paid leave. You have free healthcare. You have free tuition. You pay a lot of tax, and you get a lot of benefits, and if you read the report that I issue every year, with others, the World Happiness Report, you rank at the top of the world in happiness. If you're in the United States,

you see that unlike the progress you mention, we've had life expectancy falling the last two years in the United States.

**Kirkpatrick:** In the United States, the data is different. Yes.

**Sachs:** Life expectancy falling. We have a massive epidemic of massive depressive disorder in this country. We have a massive epidemic, obviously, of opioids. We have a massive epidemic of metabolic disease, because we have a food industry absolutely out to kill us and killing us. Because that is our fast food industry. It's addictive. It's profitable. And it's killing us. And this is the difference of our country and others. We don't need to invent the utopia or to dream or to overthrow a market economy. We just need to be sane again. We need to be moderate again. We need to be goal-oriented again, decent again, honest, and then we can get somewhere.

**Kirkpatrick:** Well, I hope you've helped push us more toward sanity, because I pretty much agree with everything you've said, but it's a little depressing.

**Sachs:** No, but we'll get there.

[LAUGHTER]

**Kirkpatrick:** Thank you so much.

**Sachs:** Thank you so much.

**Kirkpatrick:** Thanks for being here.