



The magnificent seven

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How a few simple reforms can lift African villages out of poverty

With its multitude of problems, Africa is often treated like some ailing patient by international agencies, with regular bulletins on the continent's vital signs issuing from its bedside. And in case it ever gets out of the intensive-care ward, it also has a daunting rehabilitation programme to keep up with: the UN's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), agreed on in 2000, which set such targets as halving the proportion of people living on less than \$1 a day by 2015. Other continents have the same targets, but as the most egregious examples of poverty, poor health and under-development are usually to be found in Africa, that is where most of the world's attention is focused.

The latest bulletins on Africa's progress bring the usual mix of good and bad news. A combined World Bank-IMF report on the MDGs strikes some hopeful notes. There has been a reduction in child deaths in Burkina Faso and Mozambique, for instance, and the report cites a decline in HIV/AIDS infection rates in such high-prevalence countries as Uganda and Zimbabwe. But the report also says that African countries are still not doing enough to meet their targets on poverty reduction.

A report from Unicef, the United Nations Children's Fund, is still gloomier. Whereas China managed to cut its proportion of underweight children by more than half between 1990 and 2002, in Africa over a quarter of children under five are still underweight, "a catastrophe for development". Moreover, in east and southern Africa the number of underweight children has actually increased.

It is this sort of statistic that fires up Jeffrey Sachs, a voluble macroeconomist who serves as the head of the UN's Millennium Project, which aims to see the MDGs achieved. The sometimes pathetic performance of African countries, and in particular their governments, is not, he believes, a fair reflection of the desire and capacity of ordinary Africans to pull themselves out of poverty. Governments, often corrupt, can do only so much anyway. To have a real chance of ending poverty, more needs to be spent at the bottom. In short, Africa's leap forward must begin, barefoot and with hoe in hand, in the parched and pestilential villages where up to 80% of poor Africans actually live.

To this end, Mr Sachs has set up 12 "research villages" in ten African countries, to pioneer models of development that can be replicated by other villages in the future. Another 66 villages have been added to the experiment in clusters around the original 12. The hope is for 1,000 such villages by 2009, with exponential growth thereafter. Each village will receive practical help from the Millennium Project amounting to \$250 per person over five years.

Take the experience of three of the villages: Alafia, near Timbuktu in Mali; Koraro, in the Tigrayan highlands of Ethiopia; and Sauri, in the verdant lowlands of western Kenya. The Millennium Project is trying to show how a few simple reforms, seven in all, can substantially improve lives and provide livelihoods. These are: fertiliser and seed to improve food yield; anti-malarial bed nets; improved water sources; diversification from staple into cash crops; a school feeding programme; deworming for all; and the introduction of new technologies, such as energy-saving stoves and mobile phones.

Progress is most advanced in Sauri, the first Millennium village. There, committees of elders (and some not so elderly) have taken responsibility for almost every innovation, proving themselves to be competent and resourceful. According to Glenn Denning, of the Millennium Project's Nairobi office, the incidence of malaria in Sauri has dropped by at least 50% since the distribution of free bed nets. Food yield has more than doubled and villagers say that everyone can now find at least a little to eat. A school feeding programme, whereby farmers give a portion of their harvest to the village schools, has had a dramatic effect. Children stay in school longer and, with a bowl of maize and beans in their belly, are able to concentrate. Since school feeding began, Sauri has risen from 108th to 2nd in district exam results, out of 253 schools.

Almost two years into its five-year boost, there are signs of economic activity in Sauri as well. Several shops have opened. A few people have purchased mobile phones, one or two have managed to invest in dairy cows, and many more are diversifying into cash crops. Most significantly, there are 200 new households in a village of 5,000 people, some of whom have returned from towns and cities.

But is the Millennium-village concept capable of having any real impact across the whole continent? Mr Sachs concedes that the seven reforms can, in the short term at least, be repeated only with "resources from the outside". This makes the model unduly dependent on foreign aid, a common complaint of Africans about many Western-inspired development projects. Some also claim that the villages suck in resources from neighbouring districts, rather than spreading the benefits outwards.

However, it is still early days, and the ease with which Mr Sachs has raised money from hard-nosed American businessmen is significant. If you want to help the poor, there is hardly a better investment. Half the children in Sauri carry a range of worms. Some of the worms, such as the hookworm, are disabling. It would cost about the same as a cup of coffee in New York City to deworm a child in Sauri for a year, so the equation goes.