

African village revitalized by farm program that could teach rich countries how to help poor ones

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SAURI, Kenya -- James Alede has never seen anything like it. His small farm has produced a bumper maize crop, and for the first time in recent memory he doesn't have to worry about his family going hungry.

In a country where every tenth person depends on food aid, this village in western Kenya is the subject of an experiment, partly American-funded, which its authors say can show rich countries how to do better at helping poor ones feed themselves.

With a scientific blitzkrieg approach that tackles everything from seed quality to school lunches, the 5,100 villagers of impoverished Sauri have doubled farm output and gone from depending on handouts to donating food to the needy.

"Five years ago, we got little," Alede, 73, said as he stood in his field, hoe in hand. Now "we get enough to last for a whole year."

Sauri is the first beneficiary of the Millennium Village Project begun 18 months ago. Here anti-poverty expert and UN adviser Jeffrey Sachs hopes to prove that if rich countries spend \$70 US a year per person, a community can be raised out of poverty in just five years.

To rich governments that are tired of providing handouts with few positive results, Sachs argues that aid, managed properly, can make a difference.

Patrick Mutuo, the project co-ordinator in Sauri, said most Kenyan farmers don't know the best farming practices and can't afford the right seeds. Sauri, he said, was chosen because it was typical of a village suffering from hunger in a maize-growing area.

It is now selling surplus food for the first time in decades. But it wasn't just a matter of better seeds and fertilizer.

Taking an overall, long-term approach, the project managers reopened the Sauri health clinic and rehabilitated contaminated water wells. The school lunch program for older students was expanded to all schoolchildren, and gets 10 per cent of all surplus food grown by Sauri farmers.

The primary school's performance in standardized tests has gone from 198th out of 350 district schools to consistently scoring in the top 10, headmaster Joseph Lanyo said.

With lessons learned from Sauri, the effort will be expanded to 55,000 villagers in the region. The idea is to have fewer experts per farmer as the project grows.

Corruption and treacherous local politics are an ever-present threat, but the donated money goes directly on Sauri's program, and also funds the research that will help others replicate it elsewhere. The Kenyan government supports the project by assigning civil servants where needed, and local officials are involved in

the planning.

Financing has come from private donations through Columbia University's Earth Institute, which Sachs directs, and a \$5-million grant over five years from the Pennsylvania-based Lenfest Foundation, which supports programs in education, arts and the environment. Yara International, a Norwegian fertilizer company, provided \$200,000 a year for three years to pay for fertilizer, school lunches and high school scholarships.

In 2005 the world's wealthiest governments promised to double their aid to poor countries to roughly \$50 billion a year, but few have delivered. Yet for just \$35 billion a year, programs like Sauri's could help 500 million Africans, more than 70 per cent of the continent, said Pedro Sanchez, a leading soil scientist working in Sauri.

To feed them for free costs 10 times as much, he said. Handouts create dependency, while Sauri's program will leave the villagers self-sufficient by the time it ends, he said.

"If you invest this way, you empower people. There is no hunger here anymore and people are getting into the market because there is money in this village now," Sanchez said.

Alede, the farmer, agreed, reeling off past development schemes that have come and gone. He credits the Millennium project for giving residents a voice in setting priorities.

Like the other farmers, he will spend the next few years switching from growing only maize and beans to producing cash crops that will earn him enough to put his grandson through college.

"I want to grow sorghum, Irish potatoes and green beans," he said.

And when the experts go, he said, "I will be able to survive on my own."

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