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UN unveils 10-year plan to lift 500 million out of misery

By Maxine Frith**18 January 2005**

UN unveils 10-year plan to lift 500 million out of misery

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Aymiro Gedamu, a coffee farmer in the steep northern highlands of Ethiopia, used to dread the rain: every year it washed away his livelihood.

Like most farmers in the Lalibela region, Mr Gedamu attempts to make a meagre living cultivating a hectare of hillside, perched perilously above a ravine. His farmland lacked something very simple: stone walls. "In the downpours," he said, "there was huge flooding, taking away all the soil, and the water would pour away into gullies".

Without the money, know-how and materials to protect his soil, the rains regularly wrought havoc. But one relatively modest aid project has changed his farm, and his family's life, for the better. Mr Gedamu was given the training and the money to enable him to build walls.

Yesterday, the United Nations Millennium Project produced a 3,000-page report which suggests that, if it chose to, the West could ensure similar success stories across the developing world - and prevent millions of unnecessary and premature deaths. By 2015, according to the report, world poverty could be halved. But it will cost a great deal more money than has so far been promised.

In *Investing in Development: A Practical Plan to Achieve the Millennium Development Goals*, Professor Jeffrey Sachs, the head of the UN anti-poverty effort, calls for a massive increase in aid to poor countries - from the \$20bn (£12bn) a year at present to at least \$135bn a year. Only investment on that scale will help prevent 700 million people slipping further into preventable disease and extreme poverty.

Mr Gedamu is an example of what can be done once the world's poor are given the means to help themselves. Once he had been given training in basic agricultural methods and some financial help, Mr Gedamu and his neighbours began to build, using the rocks all over the Lalibela hills.

The project was run in partnership with Christian Aid and the Ethiopian Orthodox church. Seven hundred farmers were involved. Soon, stone wall enclosures (bunds) began to appear across the region. One hundred hectares of land have now been transformed.

That, in the language of yesterday's report, was a "quick win". Mr Gedamu benefited from aid that was easy to organise and had a big short-term impact.

As the report also points out, help on a far larger scale for Ethiopia's poor is imperative: two-thirds of children in Ethiopia are classed as suffering from chronic malnutrition and the majority of the population live on less than \$1 a day. But at least Mr Gedamu can testify to the success of his stone walls. His farm has never been so successful.

"Now we have more land to cultivate," he said, "Before, I was harvesting five pack loads of animals - now it is seven or eight. He added: "I believe in the importance of maintaining these walls. We contribute free labour days to maintain the broken walls because it means I can sustain myself."

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