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COMMENTARY

Big changes in poor villages

A special program aids sub-Saharan Africans. They want things that we take for granted.

By Douglas Pike

In a destitute village in Africa, people talked with me recently about the droughts, diseases and other conditions that endanger their lives. They don't have electricity or safe drinking water. Only a few have bed nets to protect them from malaria. The nearest clinic and public school are more than an hour's walk away.

A drought left them hungry and dependent on relief agencies until a few months ago. One of the men said: "We want to forget about this Stone Age existence."

Yet Mwandama, Malawi - a cluster of brick shacks in one of the world's poorest countries - is brimming with hope because it has been chosen as a "Millennium Village." These special villages in sub-Saharan Africa, a region where almost half of the people exist on less than \$1 a day, are meant to show how smart basics can bring dramatic change.

At an outdoor meeting a few weeks ago, dozens of villagers shared their dreams while the project leader, Rebbie Harawa, 34, translated. "I am expecting to get fat from this," Foustino Machemba, 56, said as the crowd laughed. Josephine Smoke, 41, said she hoped that homes with grass roofs would get metal ones and that she could get braided hair like Harawa's. More laughter.

They want things we take for granted: food security, safe water, a paved road, a clinic, a school. To get there, they are customizing a five-year plan drafted by experts led by globe-trotting economist Jeffrey Sachs. The cost - about 30 cents per person per day - is coming from philanthropists, foundations, corporations, and the government of Japan.

The effort to turn Mwandama around started with agriculture late last year because drought had seriously damaged the nation's staple crop: corn. Malawi's rain came back in time for a decent harvest several months ago, but in Mwandama and other Millennium Villages nearby, the farmers were superstars: They produced more than five times as much corn per acre as they did the year before.

They excelled because the project gave them free fertilizer and Monsanto Co. gave them hybrid corn seed for free. Experts also helped them with plants that replenish the soil, and better methods to store their harvest.

Villagers proudly showed me a field where a new health clinic will be built, so that their sick don't have to walk about four miles to line up outside an overcrowded clinic. Two preventable, treatable killers - malaria and AIDS - will be priorities. With a population of 12 million, Malawi has almost three million cases of malaria a year. About one million citizens carry the AIDS virus, and the vast majority of them don't know it.

We walked up a nearby hill where a new school will go, so that youngsters don't have to hike more than four miles on rutted dirt roads to a school whose classrooms have rocks where the desks and chairs should be. Making school more convenient and comfortable - including a midday meal - is expected to boost attendance and discourage dropouts.

The Millennium Village model is simple: Ensure that folks are nourished and healthy, upgrade their children's education, get full participation by women and girls, and help some folks shift into better jobs than subsistence farming. This strategy has transformed villages in Kenya and Ethiopia that started sooner, and it is poised to succeed in Malawi and elsewhere.

Good news from these villages raises the question: Instead of helping the fortunate ones in dozens or even hundreds of villages, why not extend such life-changing help wherever folks are trapped in poverty? Indeed, Sachs and his sidekicks designed the villages to drive home this point.

Granted, it is a difficult, complex challenge for poor nations to achieve economic growth and to spread the benefits broadly. What's more, affluent nations are still making the challenge harder in some ways, such as unfair policies that block poor nations from increasing their exports.

Yet there are plenty of reasons for hope. On the economic fundamentals, Adam Smith is in, Karl Marx is out. Major foreign debt has been canceled. Aid for development is rising. Official corruption is getting squeezed. Warren Buffett and the Gateses are flexing their billions to save millions. Thanks to Bono, Live 8, and The ONE Campaign (www.one.org), the public is tuning in.

And in the middle of nowhere in Malawi, Josephine Smoke is reaching toward a better life at a weekly cost of a Starbucks coffee. By succeeding, she and her neighbors can embolden the world to keep its promise for 2015: to help half a billion people escape extreme poverty.

For more information about the Millennium Villages, visit www.millenniumpromise.org. Douglas Pike (pikestuff@aol.com) writes on current issues.

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