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## From dirt poor to soil rich in just five years

Xan Rice, Sauri, Kenya  
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ANDREW Apollolutta stands in his maize field and grasps a young corn cob from a 2.4m plant.

"This is very much good," the young farmer says. "It's going to be a bumper harvest."

All around Sauri, a village of about 5200 near Lake Victoria in western Kenya, subsistence farmers are expecting their best crop in decades. This is not down to good rains or even luck. It is the result of an experiment in development aid.

Late last year, scientists from the Earth Institute at Columbia University in New York launched an experiment in Sauri to prove that a dirt-poor village could be lifted from poverty in just five years.

Led by economist Jeffrey Sachs, the team believes that by simultaneously targeting the factors that cause poverty - poor health and lack of education and clean water -- their goal can be achieved at a cost of just \$US110 (\$145) per villager per year.

There will eventually be 10 Millennium Village Projects across the continent. Sauri was selected as the test case because its problems were seen as typical of many remote African communities. It had no vehicles, paved roads, running water or electricity.

Almost two-thirds of the villagers lived on less than US55c a day. Up to a third of adults were HIV-positive and malaria was rife. The nearest hospital served 100,000 people and had no doctor.

Most families lived on subsistence farming. But on Mr Apollolutta's plot, and many others, years of intensive farming had left the soft red earth depleted of nutrients. Last year his yields were so low he had to buy maize to feed his wife and two young children.

This planting season he was given new hybrid maize seeds, lessons on efficient planting and nitrogen-fixing trees to rejuvenate the soil. The clincher was a supply of previously unaffordable fertiliser.

"The villagers were a bit sceptical at first," says Patrick Mutuo, the Kenyan on-site co-ordinator who trained at Imperial College in London. "But when they received fertiliser it all changed."

In his tiny house Mr Apollolutta proudly shows off new mosquito nets hanging from the roof. The village now has a truck to take surplus produce to the nearest town and it doubles as an ambulance. People with AIDS are being given anti-retroviral drugs. A few shared mobile phones will make business dealings easier.

The experiment was inspired by the Millennium Development Goals, which aim to halve world poverty by 2015. But Professor Sachs, recently named one of the world's 100 most influential people by Time magazine, watched as African countries made only tiny steps towards those targets.

With projects such as this he is determined to show donor countries -- not least the US -- that even a modest amount of focused aid can help the poorest nations meet their goals.

The key is cost. About \$US70 of the total annual per-person budget of \$US110 will come from the Earth Institute's private funding. This money would come from rich nations and would be covered easily if donors gave 0.7 per cent of their GDP in development aid, as British Chancellor Gordon Brown suggests they should.

The villagers themselves each contribute \$US10 a year in labour or goods. A few weeks ago they were building benches for Sauri's new clinic. The farmers will pay for their fertiliser and seeds by giving a tenth of their crop to the school for pupils' lunches.

Sceptics focus on the Kenyan Government's role. In Sauri the authorities agreed to extend electricity to the school and clinic as part of their \$US30-a-person contribution. The taps, which had been dry for six years, are flowing again.

But this is one tiny village in the public eye. Can a country notorious for corruption be trusted to replicate this rapid development on a national scale?

*The Times*

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