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16 October 2007

Africa: Rising to a global challenge

By Juno McEnroe

COMMANDING a budget of €20 million for some of Africa's poorest citizens is no easy task.

Disease, disasters and bureaucracy all conspire against the best of plans.

But, for the director of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) centre in Africa, Glenn Denning, it is the hope in the eyes of those he meets that sustains a dream of creating self-sufficient and vibrant villages across the impoverished continent.

The Australian is in Ireland for World Food Day.

Running the MDG technical support centre in Nairobi, Kenya, the 53-year-old is charged with implementing the UN Millennium Development Goals, agreed by world leaders in 2000.

Tackling extreme poverty, access to food and gender equality, among other matters, the MDG centre has responsibility for the Millennium Villages Project. The project supports 79 villages with over 400,000 people across 10 countries. The long-term goal is to mirror successful village projects across the continent.

"Our role is to create a bridge between commitments made at a global level, the UN and countries like Ireland, and turning that into action from national policy, all the way down to working on village programmes."

Fighting off donor fatigue is best achieved by showing how projects work on the ground, Mr Denning said. In the villages where he works people "have improved their food production, have improved school attendance by receiving school meals from locally-grown food, have improved access to drinking water and have also improved their connectivity to electricity, roads and information technologies" but "we're only scraping the surface".

However, as a result of its progress to date, Rwanda plans to mirror its benefits in 30 other villages.

The MDG centre is also keen to link Irish firms with business in Africa. Already, Sony Ericsson has helped bridge gaps in African villages, with mobile phone networks. This has helped save lives in medical emergencies, as well as boost agricultural trade.

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