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Under Millennium Village project guidelines, residents of Mbola donate time and labor to construct a new health clinic for their village. Theresa Wolters / Millennium Promise

What a Little Fertilizer Can Do

By Jeffrey D. Sachs

Like thousands of places in rural Africa, the Tanzanian village of Mbola is a community of very hardworking people struggling to find their way out of extreme poverty. They are taking every possible action to improve their condition, as is Tanzania's democratically elected President, the impressive Jakaya Kikwete. With a little help from us, they will make it onto the ladder of economic development.

Mbola is hundreds of miles from the Indian Ocean port of Dar es Salaam, and the closest city, Tabora, served as a base for 19th century explorer David Livingstone. With Mbola so far from world trade routes, yet squarely within Africa's malaria zone, it was easy to be left behind.

I have seen firsthand how Mbola's farming households suffer from a recurrent drought--not of water but of nitrogen and other nutrients needed to achieve a decent harvest. Previous harvests have exhausted the soil because Mbola's farmers could not afford chemical or organic fertilizers.

It's a perfect trap: poor soils lead to poor harvests, and poor harvests lead to poor households unable to replenish the soil. But with a little help, Mbola has begun to break this cycle and begin the climb out of poverty. Last year it became a U.N.-backed Millennium Village and is now one of scores of such villages in more than a dozen countries in sub-Saharan Africa to receive aid from a new organization I had the honor of co-founding, Millennium Promise. Business and civic leaders helped form this poverty-ending alliance, which promotes holistic, community-driven economic-development initiatives.

The strategy is to reduce extreme poverty through investments in agriculture, health, education, roads, electricity and Internet access. In Mbola's case, the first step has been to help farmers harvest more food, by providing them with fertilizers and high-yield seeds. As a result, their maize yields have increased about 60%. This has helped families trapped by extreme hunger grow enough food not only to feed themselves but also to bring a surplus to market. The community has also set aside some of this year's harvest to provide a midday meal for schoolchildren.

At the same time, Mbola has received bed nets to protect all of its sleeping areas from mosquitoes. The burden of malaria has already begun to fall. And the community, in partnership with the district government, is building new health clinics and rehabilitating older ones, while training local health workers in the treatment of malaria and other killer diseases. New schools are also being constructed and classrooms refurbished. Several dozen students have received scholarships to attend secondary school, something their families could otherwise not afford.

From a development perspective, these initial steps give the community time to begin investing in long-term progress. An old state-owned textile mill in Tabora, which went bankrupt years ago, has recently been privatized and is being brought back to life by the new owners. Remarkably, even at a distance of several hundred miles from the nearest port, the mill is successfully exporting cotton thread to Europe and China. And Mbola's farmers have a chance to become part of that emerging success story by selling cotton to the revived mill. The farmers will also diversify into other tropical export products. And as more sections of the road from Tabora to the coast get paved, the prospects for increased exports will be even brighter. With fertilizers, bed nets and roads, even remote villages of Africa will be able to catch the wind of expanding world markets.

There is one more link in this extraordinary chain of human connection. By contributing to Millennium Promise's You+Village campaign (millenniumpromise.org) you can fortify Mbola and other villages and follow each step of their progress. You can become a partner with the poor of Africa in the most exciting and realistic possibility of our time: the end of extreme poverty.

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