



# A Big Boost in the Fight Against Poverty

**Billionaire Pledges Millions to a U.N. African Project**

By **MARTIN SEEMUNGAL**

**MBOLA, Tanzania, Sept. 13, 2006** — - The fight against poverty got a big boost today. George Soros, the billionaire philanthropist, has pledged \$50 million to the United Nations' Millennium Villages project in Africa.

As part of a five-year U.N. commitment, 78 villages in 10 African countries receive support in the fundamental areas of farming, health care and water.

Jeffrey Sachs, the American economist who is convinced that poverty can be beaten in our lifetime, is in charge of the project. He said the Soros pledge is important because it will act as an example to others.

In an interview with The Associated Press, Sachs said "[Soros] just empowered us to do something that is incredibly important."

Sachs was in Mbola, Tanzania, recently to meet the villagers who are part of the project's latest effort. It's a place with no running water and no electricity. Preventable diseases, such as malaria, still kill people there.

On one scorching hot afternoon, several hundred villagers listened intently as Sachs, with the help of a translator, explained how the project works. When Sachs asked the gathering how many people had been sick with malaria this year, a forest of hands shot up.

Sachs promised the villagers that in coming weeks they would receive specially treated bed nets to keep out the mosquitoes that carry malaria. The nets, which cost only \$7, can save lives. Experts from the Millennium Villages project will visit Mbola regularly to ensure the villagers use the nets correctly. For proof of the difference the nets can make, visit Sauri, Kenya, the site of the first Millennium village. Over the course of a year, malaria cases dropped 60 percent there. Farmers in Sauri have also tripled their harvests, thanks to the improved seeds and fertilizer the Millennium Villages project provided.

Better harvests mean more food, and now Sauri's main school provides a free lunch to students every day. According to the principal, the students seem more energetic and more attentive, and their marks have shot up dramatically.

In contrast, Mbola's classrooms sit half-empty, the students appear half-asleep and seem generally unhappy. There is great hope this will change next year.

With the promise of better seeds and fertilizer, Mbola's parents are determined to give their children a free lunch every day.

This simple approach, targeting basic needs, is what the Millennium Villages project is all about. "The key is to give a hand up so that people below the ladder of development who can't even get on the first rung ... can start climbing on their own," said Sachs.

Sachs urges world leaders, corporations and even individuals to take a positive approach when confronting the enormity of global poverty to avoid what he calls "defeatism."

"They don't know how practical the solutions are. They don't realize that at very low cost -- just a few dollars -- you can save children's lives."

Copyright © 2006 ABC News Internet Ventures