

[HOME](#)**Focus Media (Kigali)**

Rwanda: Millennium Village Brings Prosperity And Unity

Yolande Cole

28 August 2009

Mayange is home to the only "Millennium Village" in the country, designed to achieve the MDG targets. The model should serve as an example to other communities.

Jean Baptiste Gahigi stands out front a new cassava production plant which will soon be launching in Mayange. It is one of the newest co-operative businesses that comprise the Millenium Village. (photo Yolande Cole)

Jean Baptiste Gahigi is a few days away from launching a new cassava production plant in Mayange sector. The plant will soon employ 700 locals and will produce seven hectares worth of the drought-resistant grain.

The locally-run cooperative is one of the latest projects that are part of the Millennium Village in the Bugasera district, where until recently, locals were facing hunger and drought due to erratic rainfall and poor agricultural conditions.

"When we went to Mayange, there was evident famine," says Donald Ndahiro, the coordinator for the village. "Now farmers have enough to eat, they are storing and we are going into processing."

Through cooperative businesses like poultry farming, basket weaving and beekeeping, locals are beginning to see sustainable financial benefits.

"There is more confidence than ever before among community members. When you meet them, they are discussing their projects, discussing business ideas," says Ndahiro. "Before they were asking for food, they were asking for support with medicine. Now they are more organized, they have a lot of business ideas, there is a higher possibility for them to access finances."

Started up in 2005, the cluster of five villages in Mayange sector is home to about 25,000 people. The project is based on the Millennium Development Goals, which were established by the United Nations in 2000 with targets for reducing extreme poverty and hunger by half by the year 2015 and improving education, health, gender equality and environmental sustainability.

Funded by a non-profit organization called the Millennium Promise, the United Nations Development Fund and Columbia University's Earth Institute, the Millennium Villages model is now employed in 80 sites across 10 countries in sub-Saharan Africa.

The project aims to help rural African communities eliminate poverty through empowering locals with technologies to improve agricultural productivity, health, education and access to markets.

"What we do is we work with the community and the local leadership to empower them and to transfer skills," says Ndahiro of the Mayange village. "To me what is most important is to let people know that things can be done and to build that confidence among them."

"It's about economic empowerment, it's about community organization, and it has a direct link with the way people live together in harmony," he says. "They have a lot to share because of the interventions that we carry out with them."

Reconciliation village

The Millennium Village employs 26 staff who work with locals on improving agricultural practices, providing access to essential health care, tackling malnutrition, creating business plans, forming economic partnerships, introducing internet connectivity and a range of other science-based interventions.

Ndahiro says so far the project has been successful in eliminating hunger, improving health targets and increasing financial sustainability for the community. Maternal death has been controlled over the last two years, infant mortality and child malnourishment reduced and the malaria prevalence rate has been reduced from 25 to about 5 per cent.

Barahira Anastase is the umudugudu leader of Rwimikoni II, one of the villages, which comprises 45 households. This community is also a Reconciliation Village, based on the model established by the Prison Fellowship and the National Commission for Unity and Reconciliation, whereby former perpetrators of the genocide who have served terms in prison and confessed their crimes are encouraged to return to their former communities to live among survivors.

Tour company New Dawn Associates organizes tours so that visitors can hear testimonies from the village residents. Seventy per cent of the profits from this community tourism are directed back to community members.

Anastase and other locals say that living together has not only created trust and a sense of unity, but the ability to generate savings and improve economic sustainability.

Resident Frederic Kazigwemo says that after re-building houses together and sharing their lives in the community, he and his neighbors began working together on income-generating activities such as farming, harvesting and keeping livestock. They have also started up a credit union for community members.

"What is changing is this community spirit," says Kazigwemo. "You don't work on your own - you know there are people around who can assist you and you can help them. Before they started this reconciliation, you would leave and you would take all your children with you because you fear your neighbors. But now, you leave children at home or with your neighbor - you don't need to go with all of them."

Sharing lessons

Betty Mukamugenzi is vice-president of a basket-weaving co-operative in one of the cells that form the Millennium Village. She says she is now able to pay staff to work on her farm, and members of the co-op are able to pay their children's school fees.

They're still facing their share of challenges though; while they have an abundance of baskets, they're still missing the market needed to generate a bigger surplus for the co-operatives' 230 members. Currently, 90% of profits from the baskets go to the women who produce them, while 10% is directed back to the co-operative.

"There are times when we make a lot of baskets, but we're lacking customers," she says.

Village coordinator Ndahiro hopes that the principles of the Millennium Village will expand to help meet health, education and prosperity targets across the country.

"We are working now with the government on sharing lessons learned from our model, and their model is the Vision 20/20. We think our project cannot scale up but the government can scale up," he says.

As for the Mayange village, Ndahiro hopes that through production plants like the one run by Gahigi's cassava cooperative, and through diverse business ideas like the community tourism project, the village will continue to grow as the locals become increasingly independent and sustainable in their business practices.

"We are going to have an airport just about 80 km from the village, so the village will be between the airport and Kigali," he says. "If the community does not start thinking very creatively, opportunities will bypass them."

Copyright © 2009 Focus Media. All rights reserved. Distributed by AllAfrica Global Media (allAfrica.com).

AllAfrica - All the Time

