

## Kenyan village experiments to slash poverty on the cheap

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Sauri, Kenya (dpa) - Sauri's red earth footpaths are hemmed in by maize fields and lush vegetation, giving the illusion that this village in western Kenya is fertile and self-sufficient. But two hundred years of land tillage have taken their toll on the soil making the village among the poorest in Kenya and a hotspot for malnutrition and disease.

It is for these reasons that Sauri was chosen in January 2005 to lead a grassroots campaign to break the poverty trap and wean Africa's from its dependence on external donor aid. The audacious five-year plan is aimed at helping poor rural Africans achieve eight United Nations Millennium Development Goals that the world body believes can slash poverty, disease, illiteracy and hunger by 2015.

Eleven other villages in Ethiopia, Ghana, Mali, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Tanzania and Uganda have also been earmarked for the project. "The solutions to the problems faced by these villages all require investments in education, infrastructure, health, water and agriculture," says Guido Schmidt-Traub, associate director of the UN Millennium Project.

The 350,000-dollars-per-year-per-village price tag is much lower than that of other large-scale projects. This helped leading American economist and head of the Millennium Project Professor Jeffrey Sachs to convince the private sector, donors, and host governments to put their money where their mouth is. The science that backs the project was devised by the Earth Institute at Columbia University and aims at an integrated approach for quick and tangible results in all aspects of village life.

The dramatic changes in Sauri have led 46-year-old Wilfrieda Ogutu to call it "mosquito-net development." "I was always sick with malaria or nursing my sick grandchildren. But since the project gave us treated nets, I have had malaria only twice in the last year," the slender and soft-spoken granny says. Now she has time and energy to work alongside her husband on their two-acre farm. They obtained seeds to plant shrubs that help inject nutrients back into the soil, more than tripling their harvest from eight bags of maize to 30 bags. They sell the surplus to pay for school fees and have renovated their mud-and-wattle home into a modern and cosy concrete house with solar panels for electricity. Piped water is expected in the next month. They, like the other members of the community of about 5,000, also donate 10 per cent of their harvests to support the school-feeding project at the nearby primary school.

Only four years ago, the school was blighted by absenteeism, with pupils struggling to scrape through exams. A hot lunch of bean stew, vegetables and fruit has lured the children, many of them orphaned by HIV/AIDS, back to the classroom. The school now rates among the top five in the district. "Parents from other districts bring their children here, because they know they they will be fed and the school is part of a community that also has a clinic with free medicines and a doctor," says Florence Ragwel, deputy headmistress of Bar Sauri primary school. In a region with the highest HIV/AIDS figures in the East African country, health and nutrition is by far the biggest household expense.

The government shares costs with the community by supplying and paying the local experts seconded from various ministries while the villagers build the clinics, wells, and supply the food for the school-feeding programme. The villagers also contract local artisans to work on the community projects, creating employment and stimulating the local economy. External funding for Sauri comes from Norwegian firm Yara - the world's largest fertiliser company - and the Lenfest Foundation. Sauri not only makes communities the driving force in development, it also emboldens rural Africans to use their vote as a reminder to their often-corrupt leaders not to default on their side of the bargain.

Kenya has already indicated that it may not achieve its development goals in 2015, making the Sauri experience a practical alternative to emulate and help get the country back on track. Rich nations promised to help projects like Sauri at the G8 summit in Gleneagles, Scotland last year. External funding for the Millennium project relies on those promises. But promises then to raise development aid to Africa from 70 dollars to 100 dollars per capita by 2010 have yet to materialise. However, after 18 months of success which is already attracting people back to the village from urban slums, Wilfrieda sums up the village's sentiments. "Even if the whites go away, we now know what to do, and the government, well it's their job to help us continue finish the work we started."

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