

UN village project boosts Africa

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A United Nations experiment designed to boost health, agriculture and education in African villages has shown “remarkable results” but could be difficult to replicate at a national level, an independent study has found.

The Millennium Villages project – brainchild of Jeffrey Sachs, director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University in New York – has sought to showcase the benefits of heavy investment using 12 groups of settlements across 10 countries. In a new study, the Overseas Development Institute, a London think-tank, found there was “considerable evidence of significant improvements at household and village levels in the health and agriculture sectors”. But it said the project’s reliance on highly trained staff meant it could be hard to replicate at a national level.

The successes and challenges are illustrated in the Mwandama villages in southern Malawi, where about 5,000 inhabitants farm mostly small subsistence plots with poor soil.

Glenn Denning, director of the Millennium Development Goals centre in Kenya, says successes in tackling problems concerned with maize crops and malaria are having beneficial effects in areas such as education.

“More food keeps kids in school, and a better immune system helps them resist other diseases,” he says.

The project spends \$50 (€39, £32) per head each year and also receives donations in kind, and supplies skilled project management. A network of nurses and community health workers run outreach clinics in the villages, dispensing malaria medication, mosquito nets, immunisation and family planning.

One villager, Cecilia Natchengwa, says her family has not been affected by malaria since using the nets.

Meanwhile a subsidised distribution of maize seed and fertiliser, together with good rains in recent years, has resulted in bumper harvests. Mr Denning says maize yields are four to five tonnes per hectare – more than twice the national average.

One critic of the project, Michael Clemens, a research fellow at the Center for Global Development in Washington, points to a similar donor-funded initiative – the Southwest Poverty Reduction Project in China between 1995-2000.

Within five years of subsidised inputs ending, the villages were no better off than those that had not benefited.

“What creates sustained growth and poverty reduction is the interaction of village economies with towns and the wider world economy – not pouring in vast amounts of resources to an isolated community,” he says.

To run the project in the Mwandama villages, a team of highly talented and dedicated Malawians has been assembled. One has a PhD in agronomy from Cornell University in Ithaca, New York.

The lessons from these villages will be harder to administer elsewhere, using the underpaid, less well-educated and sometimes corrupt civil servants often encountered in Africa.

Mr Denning insists: “Similar people exist across Malawi – it is just that no one is paying them.”

Jean, a community nurse in the Mwandama project, notes that Malawi produces plenty of nurses, but low wages drive many to work abroad.

Professor Sachs says that one thing the project has often discovered is a missing layer of local government at the village level.

Government too often stops at the district level administering 250,000 people, and is too remote to deliver effective services.

Both supporters and sceptics agree that it will be five to 10 years, possibly more, before it becomes clear whether the project has created a self-sustaining model that can be replicated across the developing world.

How it works

- The Millennium Villages project, run by the UN, is funded by a variety of international donors
- The 12 clusters of settlements spread across 10 African villages spend about \$100 per villager per year
- The project aims to make the case for more aid by showing returns on investment in health, education and agriculture