



## **UN poverty plan ignites mass school enrolments in Ghana**

By Kennedy Abwao - 07/05/2008  
Panapress

When African leaders assemble in Yokohama, Japan, to discuss the next round of the continent's development progress later this month, Ghana will be reporting some tangible results of its own progress on reducing abject poverty.

Within months of its own donor-funded Millennium Villages Project's inception, Ghana's leader, President John Kufuor, would be making a case for "quality support for new and bold anti-poverty initiatives" to help lift Africa out of poverty.

For years, the residents of Bonsaaso area in the Ashanti Region had never tasted the fruits of real development, much until recently when a project was introduced to improve the living conditions of the region's cocoa farming communities.

Elizabeth Yeboah, a 10-year-old school girl in Aboubosi traditional area in the Ashanti region, has seen her school life change for the better.

The cheer in her voice as she stood before the Aboabosi Chief, Nana Dapaah Siakwan and a handful of his council of elders, to narrate how life has changed for many a school-going child in Ghana, illustrated the extent to which hunger had stopped the progress of many would-be school-age children from accessing education.

"There are many kinds of benefit now for going to school," Yeboah said. "We are served with beans, oranges, water melons and gari, fried grated cassava - served with beef stew."

UN says Africa has the greatest proportion of people living in extreme poverty, mainly fueled by the environmental and geographical challenges such as low agriculture productivity, high disease burden and high transport costs blamed for worsening poverty.

However, there is hope for some 30,000 inhabitants of Bonsaaso, one of the 10 Millennium Villages sites spread across Africa to pilot a combination of measures which could drastically speed up Africa's war against poverty and under-development.

"When this project started, we had no clear understanding of the project and how it would work but when we saw how agriculture, health and education issues were being addressed, we came to have a clear understanding," said Nana Siakwan.

Experts say the school enrolment rate in Bonsaaso has nearly doubled since the school feeding programme was introduced. It increased by 35 per cent in the first six months.

"I had twins, my grandchildren, who never wanted to go to school, now they run to school because of the food," said Nana Siakwan's wife, holding the 12-year old lads, each close to her.

Nana Siakwan says the school feeding programme has increased school enrolment while the health of the school children has improved because the classrooms have been improved, reducing on dust contamination.

The Millennium Project has improved the lives of the villagers.

"We do not have to carry pregnant mothers on the tables because the hospital is now here, what we need is a doctor, had it not been for the millennium project, we would never have known about these benefits," Nana Siakwan said.

In 2006, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) with the help of Japan piloted the groundbreaking initiative, which provided a model on how to overcome poverty using a series of interventions on health, education and agriculture.

The project was introduced in 10 of Ghana's poorest villages, aiming to increase the farmer's crop yields, increase school enrolment rates and to enhance the commercialization of the country's locally produced cash and food crops.

Japan has provided funding for research on the appropriate technologies and interventions that would help Ghana to increase school enrolment, while also helping farmers to sell produce at profitable rates.

For the school-going children of Bonsaaso, the meeting on 28 May in Japan could determine whether the recently introduced school feeding programme would be extended beyond 2011, along with the rich package of other life-enhancing services.

"The project aims at eliminating extreme hunger and malnutrition," said Samuel Asare Afram, the lead manager of Ghana's Millennium Villages Project.

Afram says a grant from the Japanese government administered by the UNDP has been used to feed 900 pupils in several schools in Bonsaaso although some 1,320 children in some 22 primary schools are in need of food in school to enhance their stay.

"We believe we can make an impact on extreme poverty by investing in energy efficient cook stoves for households and schools," Afram added.

Ghana's millennium villages plan has rolled back hundreds of school age children who stayed home previously or skipped school in search of food.

The Millennium villages plan has introduced a new concept of development in Ghana's poorest districts such as Amansie West. A place rich in minerals and home to one of the sites of illegal gold and diamond miners in Africa, the region has been neglected.

In Watreso village in the Bonsaaso area, a celebratory mood is rekindled every time a convoy of cars passes through the village, making a brief stop-over the recently revived clinic, one of the benefits of the millennium village projects.

Rita Adjei, the village nurse, says although cases of malaria have been on the decline in the region, cases of malnutrition have been on the increase lately.

"The under-five are attacked more by diarrhea rather than malaria," she told PANA.

Access to safe drinking water still remains a big problem for most people in Africa. The nurse attributes the re-emergence of diarrhea to unsafe drinking water and malnutrition.

Some 400,000 people in 79 villages across Africa have benefited from similar initiatives first initiated by the UN. In Ghana, children in the rural rain forest walk for long distances in search of water while several others are victims of malnutrition.

Japan has been holding a series of meetings with Africa's political leaders under the Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) forum aimed at increasing political partnerships with African states on poverty eradication. Japan is among one of the leading financiers of the Millennium Villages project, which is slowly beginning to transform the face of Ghana's cocoa-rich Ashanti region, a vast but sparsely populated area which is now enjoying the fruits of an international partnership.