

## Millennium Village in Senegal Starts Spending Donor Dollars

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**The United Nations has chosen 12 of Africa's poorest communities, calling them Millennium Villages, to receive hundreds of thousands of dollars and international support to reduce poverty. In Senegal, the rural fishing village of Potou was chosen last year and is now deciding how to spend the money. Phuong Tran talks to Jeffrey Sachs, director of the U.N. Millennium Villages Project, about the challenge of rapidly reducing poverty.**



**Jeffrey Sachs, Director, UN Millennium Villages Project, 19 May 2007**

Jeffrey Sachs has been working with the governments of some of Africa's poorest countries and their local communities to halve extreme poverty by 2015.

World leaders adopted this goal and others, including cutting hunger and disease, seven years ago.

Sachs says funds must be invested at the village level, where 80 percent of Africa's poorest live, to give villagers a chance to escape poverty.

To achieve this, his team has invested in 12 sub-Saharan African communities with harsh climates, few natural resources and extreme poverty.

One of those villages is Potou in Senegal. The village of farmers and fisherman faces rapidly expanding sand dunes that threaten to encroach on agricultural land and wipe out crop production.

Sachs says this is only one of the villagers' worries. "During the first phase of the project, the idea is to raise food output in the community, fight malaria, to get children in schools, to get the community connected with electricity, a paved road, to improve transport capacity, to have access to safe drinking water," he said.

Sachs knows the agenda is ambitious. But he says between deadly disease and dying livelihoods, there is no time to lose. "The clock is ticking and we have a responsibility to move as fast as possible. This is not trying to gold plate a village, and it is not aiming to create a utopia, it is aiming to create a base for survival," he said.

Under the program, each Millennium Village gets \$110 per resident. Most of the money comes from the U.N. Smaller amounts come from national and district governments and then from local community groups and the Millennium Village itself.

For Potou, its 5,000 residents will receive about \$500,000 every year, for five years.

But critics say five years is not long enough to solve the crippling problems these communities face.

Many say that when investors pull out, the communities will slide back into extreme poverty.

Millennium Project Director Sachs says he hopes other countries and businesses will continue funding.

"This project gives a focused investment in a very poor area counting on the increased overall aid to be able to pick up some of the important features of this project such as the clinics and schools," he said.

The world's richest countries have pledged to double aid to Africa by 2010 to \$50 billion. Sachs is hopeful, but skeptical. "The past has been rampant neglect. We are trying to do something against a baseline of almost nothing and that is the harsh truth that is not well understood. There is very very little help over the last 20 years for these kinds of rural communities," he said.

Sachs says the goal of the project is to get the villages to a point where they will not need as much outside aid. This can be achieved, for example, by helping villagers earn more from their livelihoods.

In Potou's fishing community, Sachs' team is helping villagers sell their catch in the region of Louga, which has a population of about 700,000.

However, making connections is not easy in this part of the world. "When there is virtually no income, low productivity and weak infrastructure, those linkages are extremely fragile. Places are isolated. Not everything will get done at once," he said.

The first Millennium Village in Sauri Kenya, chosen shortly after the project began in July 2004, has reported cutting malaria infections by using bed nets, doubling crop harvests, and improving students' test scores by better feeding the children from the larger harvest.

Sachs is cautious when predicting whether Sauri's success can be repeated in other villages. "I do not see there being one answer, one project that is going to do it. You run until you hit a wall and you change direction. You get somewhat bruised in this process, but after all, what is the alternative," he said.

The 12 villages are located in 10 sub-Saharan African countries. The U.N. Millennium Project is funding an additional 66 villages located in clusters around the original 12 in a bid to build stronger regional economies.