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Kenyan Village Serves as Test Case in Fight on Poverty

By MARC LACEY (NYT) 1489 words

Patricia Awino Odera had her handmade hoe cocked over her head the other day, her face scrunched up into a scowl, sweat pouring from her brow, her labors the very image of futility. Then hope descended onto her cornfield.

"No, no, no, no!" cried Herine Okoth, an agricultural extension worker, as she marched over the freshly tilled land. "Stop!"

Ms. Odera, a frail-looking 54-year-old grandmother who had never had a day of schooling in her life, had thrown fertilizer in with her corn seeds and spaced her holes too closely, both of which would reduce the harvest she and her children would get.

"We agreed that you'd put the fertilizer in first, separate from the maize," Ms. Okoth said. "It's not so difficult. It's like this. Fertilizer first. Then cover it with some dirt. Then throw in the seeds. Then cover those. It's not hard at all."

This settlement in western Kenya, where Ms. Odera lives, has become a giant test tube, and Ms. Okoth's instruction is one part of that experiment. Eventually there will be 10 such test villages, scattered across the world's poorest continent.

Led by Jeffrey Sachs, director of the Earth Institute of Columbia University, the project aims to fight poverty in all its aspects -- from health and education to agriculture and energy in one focused area -- to prove that conditions for millions of people like Ms. Odera and her neighbors can be improved in just five years.

It is an important and uncertain gambit. If it fails, initiatives like that pushed recently by Prime Minister Tony Blair of Britain to greatly increase foreign aid to Africa may seem foolhardy. If a single village cannot be turned around with focused attention, how can whole communities and even countries be revitalized?

The project led by Mr. Sachs grew out of the Millennium Development Goals, benchmarks created by the United Nations in 2000 aimed at prodding the world into reducing hunger and sickness by half, increasing school enrollment, and generally improving the lives of the poorest of the poor. Kofi Annan, the secretary general of the United Nations, appointed Mr. Sachs to oversee its poverty reduction efforts.

But setting the millennium goals -- and putting in place a deadline of 2015 for seeing them through -- has so far not meant much to people like Ms. Odera. Today the projections for reaching those goals keep slipping further and further into the future. It is now estimated that many of those goals will be reached decades late.

By then, Ms. Odera will be long gone. Her children may be dead, too. Her grandchildren, many of whom have already lost their parents to disease, will be well along in poverty-stricken lives of their own.

That looming failure is what spurred Mr. Sachs and his colleagues to select a particular village with dismal social indicators -- this one -- where they would apply a more focused antipoverty strategy to prove that, with enough attention, the goals could be reached quicker than people think. Sauri's remoteness is one of the factors that has allowed poverty to get such a foothold here. It is a forgotten place in a country that has seen corruption devastate its national economy.

Ms. Okoth, who interrupted Ms. Odera's planting, is one of dozens of experts working to make sure that this Millennium Village Project does not become another pie-in-the-sky effort.

The researchers behind the program are keeping track of every penny they spend, trying to demonstrate that for a modest amount, somewhere around \$110 per person, a village can be tugged out of poverty.

They have tried to measure exactly how bad Sauri was at the start of the project last fall. Every home was surveyed to get an accurate portrait of the population. Blood tests were taken among a smaller group for a nutritional analysis, because many villagers eat only once a day, and show it.

Blood will also be tested to determine how widespread the malaria parasite is, and then again later, to see whether the mosquito bed nets given to every villager help keep more people, especially children, alive.

A new health clinic has gone up in Sauri. Villagers did the labor, and the project pitched in the sacks of cement, the sheets of tin and the white and blue paint. The Kenyan government must provide the drugs, one of many contributions required of the government to make the project fly.

Before the arrival of the health clinic, villagers relied on the district hospital, which got its first government doctor recently as part of the project. It had been without one since 1994.

At the hospital, there is an ambulance up on blocks; it has not moved for five years. The villagers will receive a free truck to share, which will double as an ambulance and a way for farmers to get their produce to market.

Those gifts aside, the project is not aimed at bringing about prosperity by writing big checks. Nonetheless, the arrival of so many Westerners in a remote village inevitably brings big expectations among the locals.

"Projects come and go in this part of the world," said Patrick Mutuo, a Kenyan soil scientist who is the project director. "Some people participate in order to get a free lunch. They see the immediate benefits and not necessarily the long-term benefits. This project is not about free this and free that. The attitude of the people will ultimately determine whether it succeeds. People need to get involved and stay involved long after the experts go home."

Most of the aid in fact will come in the form of shared knowledge from some of the foremost experts in the world in subjects as varied as health, agriculture, energy and economics. Residents, project officials say, will lift themselves out of poverty.

Pedro A. Sanchez, a top soil scientist at Columbia, is advising the people of Sauri on how to revive their badly damaged fields and how to plant trees as a way of fertilizing the soil for free. Officials estimate that villagers' dismal yields could double or triple as a result.

Not all the new food the farmers produce will remain theirs. This project is devised to create a community spirit and so, in exchange for their free fertilizer and seeds, farmers had to agree to give 10 percent of their yields to local schools. The schools will then start a feeding program that will feed children at noontime and, the advisers hope, lure more of them, especially underrepresented girls, into class.

The project also plans to bring electricity to Sauri by extending the power grid that came close to the villagers here, as part an old World Bank project, but never actually reached them.

Researchers are also working to rehabilitate water pipes that were set up years ago in yet another development project that went awry.

It is too early to say whether this effort goes the way of other failed ventures, such as the "integrated rural development" approach that never took root in Africa in the 1970's, despite much talk of wiping out poverty.

Although the project is just getting off the ground, organizers are already learning how much more complicated poverty reduction is the closer one gets to those mired in it.

It is easy, for instance, to talk of the importance of bed nets. But how does one ensure that villagers use them and do not sell them in the market instead? Already, village leaders have persuaded one farmer not to sell his free fertilizer, as he had planned.

Not least, tackling AIDS will be a challenge. Although an estimated one-fifth to one-third of the people here are H.I.V. positive, many fear the stigma if others find out they have the disease. How, then, does one treat those who have it?

Ms. Odera herself was mulling whether to undergo an AIDS test. Some volunteers unaffiliated with the millennium project had come by the village to encourage more people to have their blood checked. The reward was a free bed net and a free paper visor to shield one's face from the sun.

Ms. Okoth, who has seen poverty reduction efforts come and go in Kenya, was leaning toward taking the test. After all, she figured she could sell this net, and keep the other free one. "We need to do what we can," she said, "or we'll always be poor."

Photo: Patricia Awino Odera, with a grandchild on her farm in Sauri, Kenya, has received tips on how to plant crops. (Photo by Guillaume Bonn for The New York Times)