
Jeffrey Sachs: Challenges at the Cutting Edge of Fighting Global Poverty

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The Millennium Village Project ([MVP](#)) was launched in 2005-6 in order to accelerate progress towards the [Millennium Development Goals](#) in the poorest regions of rural Africa. A dozen clusters of villages around Africa have adopted bold and novel strategies to overcome poverty, hunger, and disease. Halfway through the ten-year project, [the results](#) are very exciting: agriculture production is up significantly, free basic health care is in place, malaria is coming under control, many more children are in school, and farmers are organizing cooperatives to diversify their crops and raise incomes.

The core idea of the project is that poor rural communities can take on several initiatives simultaneously in a strategy that is sometimes called «integrated development.» In the case of the Millennium Villages, five areas of community life are prioritized: agriculture, health, education, infrastructure, and business development. By investing simultaneously across these sectors, the communities make progress towards the Millennium Development Goals and the escape from poverty.

Development leaders in Africa take the lead, with the partnership of many organizations and businesses. Scientists in Africa partner with scientists at Columbia University and elsewhere to design new approaches to long-standing problems: how to control malaria, how to improve soil nutrients, how to bring information technology into the schools and clinics, how to mobilize community health workers effectively.

In medical school, the young doctors have the slogan, «See one, do one, teach one.» The idea is lear-

ning by doing. Students watch a medical procedure; then they are asked to do the procedure, under the preceptor's supervision; finally they are asked to teach the procedure to the next crop of students. The learning proceeds very quickly. That is how a generation of clinicians obtain their training.

The Millennium Villages work in a similar way. The villages serve as a kind of model for the neighborhood and the country. The villages take proven interventions from past experience -- for example using bed nets to fight malaria -- and implement the intervention. They establish a system for implementation, do it, and then teach it to their neighbors. The successes serve as a leading edge for national programs to achieve the Millennium Development Goals.

The project has its share of critics and skeptics. This is natural. We in the project are making a strong claim: that development aid and partnerships can break the cycle of hunger, disease, and poverty if properly deployed. The experience in the Millennium Villages will help to answer the feasibility of rapid progress against long-standing scourges.

The skeptics argue many points. They say that progress is not fast enough. They say that progress is not special to the Millennium Villages but is occurring in the neighboring villages. They say that the progress is occurring but is too expensive to replicate and take to scale. We believe that all of these arguments are being disproved, yet we are the first to say that «time will tell.»

Half way through the 10-year project, we have found that certain important things can be accomplished very quickly. Malaria deaths and disease can be

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reduced within a year or two. Access to other basic health interventions for mothers and children can be improved. [Agriculture production](#) can increase significantly. [Hunger can be reduced](#), especially the kind of chronic hunger ([resulting in «stunting» of growth](#)) that can lead to a lifetime of disabilities.

Other things take more time. Poverty comes down less quickly than food production goes up. Even when farmers double or triple their production of grains, they may remain below the poverty line. The bigger gains in income require more crop diversification and local business development, a process that can require several years and more organization by farmers.

Our tendency in the Millennium Villages is to move with all responsible haste. There is no time to lose. If something is working, we work quickly alongside many partners to help the host country to scale it up. For example, when a massive distribution of bed nets in 2005-6 brought malaria down rapidly, we and other partners urged the host countries to take these measures to national scale, and many have done so.

Many critics are complaining, «Not so fast.» They want years of more testing. However, the kinds of interventions being implemented in the Millennium Villages are generally well proven but underutilized. The Project's contribution alongside government partners is to show how to introduce these interventions in a systematic way, for example, how to distribute bed nets in a manner that leads to their high rate of utilization. (One key, we found, is the deployment of [community health workers](#)).

In a [recent article in the *Economist*](#), several wrong claims were made about the project based on an unpublished paper. One claim is that the project is not working since the progress in the Millennium Villages is also occurring in the neighboring villages, albeit at a slower rate. This is a mistaken criticism.

The project itself has been encouraging the take-up of a range of interventions (bed nets, fertilizer, high-yield seeds, new diagnostic methods, and so forth) in neighboring villages and at the national scale. In fact, the Millennium Village Project in Kenya directly supported the procurement and distribution of 160 tons of fertilizer and 22 tons of seeds to two of the neighboring «comparison» villages included in this paper. Rather than undercutting the point of the project, progress nearby the Millennium Village sites often helps to prove the point.

Another claim, even more outlandish, is that agriculture production is going up sharply but poverty is remaining entrenched. That is not our finding. We are finding that poverty is coming down, albeit less rapidly than grain production has risen. It is taking time for farm households to diversify their incomes, achieve creditworthiness, and establish cooperatives that can help to finance, produce, and market a wider range of high-value products.

Inevitably our public statements are ahead of the scientific publications coming out of the project. That is the result of the policy intention to speed scaling up of the types of interventions demonstrating success in the project. We are working with the host-country governments in real time to scale up the promising interventions, and we also proceed with the scientific process, with its very careful measurement, peer-review and rigorous approach to documentation and publication. Critics are keeping the project on its toes, and we are appreciative of that; it is important that we present detailed evidence that measures the progress in the villages.

Please stay tuned. Watch the results and the debates. Most importantly, join the process with new ideas, technologies, and approaches. This is a learning process, not a rigid blueprint. Literally dozens of organizations are contributing to the progress we are seeing.

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We believe that a new, more coherent, more organized, and more accountable process of local development is taking shape, not only in the Millennium Villages Project, but in many other integrated rural-development projects like it. The revolutions in information and communications technologies in particular are permitting advances in every area of life -- health, education, agriculture, business, infrastructure -- to enable breakthroughs unimaginable even a few years earlier. We are optimistic and pleased that major advances are now underway, yet time, evidence, and the extent of poverty reduction will provide the ultimate verdict.

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