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Fighting African poverty, village by village

By **Ernest Harsch** in *Bonsaaso, Ghana*

Standing in the midst of a freshly planted maize field, Bright Osei Kwaku recalls that last year he more than doubled his output with the help of improved seeds, fertilizer and advice on farming techniques. Altogether, his 2-3 acres yielded about 15 100-kilogramme bags of maize, compared with just six bags the year before, when he had no such support.

Many other young Ghanaians have either left agriculture or dream of doing so. But Mr. Kwaku, now 25 years old, thinks he can stay on the land. "I will continue to farm," he told *Africa Renewal*. "I got income and food. I got enough from the farm."

With world food prices rising, it is a good time to push for higher production, argues Isaac Kankam-Boadu, the agriculture and environment facilitator of the Millennium Villages Project in Bonsaaso, a cluster of poor and remote settlements in Ghana's Ashanti Region. "The high food prices are an opportunity," he says. "The farmers can earn more money."

Last year, Mr. Kankam-Boadu reports, Bonsaaso's maize farmers managed to quadruple their yields from an average of about 1 tonne per hectare (2.5 acres) to 4 tonnes. Besides boosting their own incomes, the farmers contributed about a tenth of their crop to the area's new school feeding programme which helps many of the area's children.

Millennium Villages

Such linkages are at the heart of the Millennium Villages Project. The first Millennium Village was launched in 2004 in Sauri, Kenya, as an integrated development initiative. Now there are villages in Ethiopia, Malawi, Mali, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Tanzania and Uganda, affecting more than 400,000 people.

The idea grew from research and policy deliberations directed by the United Nations Secretary-General's special adviser on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Jeffrey Sachs. The MDGs were adopted by world leaders in 2000 to drastically reduce poverty and deprivation around the world.

The Millennium Villages approach is based on two central ideas: The first is that simple and inexpensive changes in nutrition, health, water, sanitation, education, women's status, agriculture, communications, roads and electricity can lift rural Africans out of severe poverty. The second is that a combination of community mobilization, government support and external aid can fund the villages for only about \$110 per person per year. Most of the

Millennium Village projects are being implemented by the UN Development Programme (UNDP).

Key funders include Japan, which initially gave more than \$9 mn and on 13 March donated another \$11.4 mn. This Asian-African cooperation comes through the Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD). The fourth conference was held in Yokohama, Japan, on 28-30 May, attended by Ghanaian President John Kufour and nearly 40 other African heads of state. Near the top of TICAD's agenda was achievement of the MDGs, which is also central to the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), Africa's own blueprint for economic, social and political progress.

From school meals to farming advice

The Millennium initiative came to Bonsaaso in March 2006, initially in 10 localities. By the end of that year, the project had expanded to 30 communities, covering some 400 square kilometres and affecting more than 30,000 people. The area was selected because many residents were very poor, malnutrition was common, there were few health services, many children did not go to school and numerous other indicators of human development lagged.

Rather than focusing on just one or two sectors, the project's designers want to show that poverty can be attacked across a wide front. If successful here and in other countries, says Sam Asare Afram, the Millennium Village manager in Bonsaaso, the project could provide a "model" for the continent.

Although the project is only two years old, Bonsaaso's communities are already enjoying real results. Rita Adjei, head nurse at the health clinic in Watreso, says that the new anti-mosquito bed-nets mean that fewer children get malaria, although diarrhea is still a serious problem caused by a lack of clean water and sanitation.

Nana Dapaah Siakwan, the traditional chief of Aboaboso, estimates that enrolment in the local primary school has increased from 200 to 500, largely thanks to the school feeding programme which began in March 2007. There also is a new health clinic. "We have seen the benefits," he says.

Mohammed Salifu, a cocoa farmer, produced nine 64-kilogramme bags in 2007, up from just four the year before, simply by following the advice of an agricultural extension officer sent to Bonsaaso by the Ministry of Food and Agriculture. With new seedlings of a higher yielding and faster growing variety of cocoa, he hopes to do even better this year.

Bigger cocoa and food harvests will bring new challenges, however. The abysmal state of the roads within Bonsaaso and with other parts of Ghana makes it hard for farmers to get their crops to market. But Chinese road contractors hired by the government are busy at work, and the project has acquired two 5 tonne trucks to help transport produce.

Community involvement

So that the Bonsaaso communities do not become dependent on foreign assistance, the project seeks to “empower” local people to encourage the government to give more support. Currently, about 60 per cent of project financing comes from donors, 30 per cent from national and local governments, and the rest from the communities. Most local contributions are in the form of labour, sand, stones and timber for construction.

Building up community institutions is also vital. The project employs several “facilitators” to help strengthen school management committees, parents’ associations, water committees and other bodies, and to engage traditional chiefs, who play a major role in mobilizing people. Stephen Antwi, the project’s community development coordinator, told *Africa Renewal* that community structures will help Bonsaaso keep developing even when outside aid eventually falls. “We’ll likely have the capacity for many years.” ■

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