

# Africa's Village of Dreams

*A small Kenyan village is the laboratory for celebrity economist Jeffrey Sachs's ambitious scheme to lift Africa out of poverty. Can big money buy the continent's poorest people a better future?*

BY SAM RICH

SAURI MUST BE THE LUCKIEST VILLAGE IN AFRICA. The maize is taller, the water cleaner, and the schoolchildren better fed than almost anywhere else south of the Sahara.

Just two years ago, Sauri was an ordinary Kenyan village where poverty, hunger, and illness were facts of everyday life. Now it is an experiment, a prototype "Millennium Village." The idea is simple: Every year for five years, invest roughly \$100 for each of the village's 5,000 inhabitants, and see what happens.

The Millennium Villages Project is the brainchild of economist Jeffrey Sachs, the principal architect of the transition from state-owned to market economies in Poland and Russia. His critics and supporters disagree about the success of those efforts, often referred to as "shock therapy," but his role in radical economic reform in the two countries vaulted him to fame. Now he has a new mission: to end poverty in Africa.

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Africa has been drip-fed aid for decades, Sachs writes in his 2005 book *The End of Poverty*, but it has never received enough to make a difference. What money has trickled in has been wasted on overpriced consultants and misspent on humanitarian relief and food aid, not directed at the root causes of poverty. The average African, Sachs says, is caught in a "poverty trap." He farms a small plot for himself and his family, and simply doesn't have enough assets to make a profit. As the population grows, people have less and less land, and grow poorer. When the farmer has to pay school fees for his children or buy medication, he is forced to sell the few assets he has or else go into debt. But if he had some capital, he could invest in his farm, grow enough to harvest a surplus, sell it, and start making money.

It's not this diagnosis of Africa's problems that makes Sachs's theories contentious, but his proposed solution, which might be called shock aid—huge, sudden injections of money into poor areas. Over five years, \$2.75 million is being invested in the single village of Sauri, and an equal amount will be sunk into each of another 11 Mil-



A new Millennium? Angelina Aloo Oweg, 52, farms half an acre near Sauri and cares for seven children. Her hand rests on the cross above her husband's grave.

lennium Village sites that are being established in 10 African countries.

The project is structured around the Millennium Development Goals that the United Nations laid out in 2000 as part of an ambitious plan to reduce global poverty. The UN wants poor countries to meet these benchmarks in health, education, and other sectors by 2015. Halfway there, most countries appear unlikely to meet these targets. However, the first two Millennium Villages—Sauri, which was so designated in 2004, and Koraro, Ethiopia, where efforts were launched in 2005—are on track to surpass them.

Sachs has persuaded Western governments, local governments, businesses, and private donors such as Hollywood stars and international financiers to foot the bill. Under the auspices of the Earth Institute, the project he heads at Columbia University, he has gathered specialists in fields from HIV/AIDS research to soil science to work out master plans for these dozen villages.

Never before has so much money been invested in an African community as small as Sauri. If Sauri succeeds, it could usher in a new era for development in Africa. The hope of Sachs as well as those who head the United Nations Millennium Project, with which he has partnered, is that by 2015, when the Millennium Development Goals still seem far away, these villages will be seen as models whose success can be duplicated across Africa. But if Sauri fails, the West may become yet more disillusioned with aid, and perhaps even reduce what it presently contributes. This is a defining moment in the aid debate.

Last year I paid a visit to Sauri, this village on which so much appears to hang. I'd just finished reading *The End of Poverty*, and I'll admit I was skeptical about the soundness of spending vast amounts of money in a single small village. But most of all, I was looking for early indications of what this exhibit in the aid argument might show.

I was carried on a bicycle taxi through the dusty streets of Kisumu, Kenya, past vendors selling barbecued maize in front of shacks cobbled together from tin cans beaten flat and nailed onto

wooden struts. Occasionally I could make out the faded logo of the U.S. Agency for International Development on the rusted shell of an old vegetable-oil can. As I neared my destination I caught a glimpse of Lake Victoria's shore, where vendors in stalls sell fried tilapia and chunks of boiled maize meal.

Inside a concrete compound at the headquarters of the Millennium Villages Project, development experts sat at computer monitors in glass-walled offices. As I entered, the receptionist at the front desk was on the phone: "You need notebooks? . . . How many? . . . Three hundred, is that all? Right, I'll order them for you tomorrow. You'll get them in a few days."

I've spent the last five years in Africa, where I've worked with outfits ranging from big international nongovernmental organizations to tiny one-man-band agencies, but I've never seen an order made as breezily as this. At most NGOs, the procurement even of stationery entails filling out forms in triplicate and long delays.

There was a tour leaving on the 30-mile trip to Sauri the next day. I imagined trekking around the model village with one of Sachs's celebrity protégés, perhaps Angelina Jolie or Bono, or maybe a millionaire altruist the likes of George Soros, so I was slightly disappointed to find myself at the appointed hour in a Toyota Land Cruiser beside a couple of unglamorous American professors on a brief visit to advise the project.

The air conditioning purred as our driver bumped the Toyota over potholes on the single-lane highway that runs inland from the Kenyan coast through the capital, Nairobi, toward Uganda. Sauri itself lies just off the road, some 200 miles from Nairobi, and the sight of tall, strong stalks of maize was the first indication that we'd arrived. Women in brightly colored headscarves and second-hand clothes imported from America and Europe sold homemade snacks and Coca-Cola from wooden shacks dotting the sides of the red-brown dirt road. The grass behind them was a lush green, giving way to a wall of maize plants beneath a sky heavy with the clouds that hang in the rainy season.

Our four-by-four negotiated footpaths through

the maize fields and under acacias. The first stop was Sauri's health clinic, which provided stark reminders of the depth of Sauri's problems and the benefits money can bring. The nurse there told us that each household received mosquito nets at the start of the project, when a sample test of villagers revealed that more than 40 percent had malaria. Now that figure has dropped to 20 percent. Malaria, a debilitating and sometimes deadly disease, is being treated free of charge with Coartem, an expensive drug unavailable in most parts of Kenya. The clinic provides condoms and Depo-Provera contraceptive injections, and there are plans to introduce tests for HIV, thought to afflict one in four villagers, and to administer anti-retroviral therapy.

Outside the clinic was a covered waiting area furnished with benches. It wasn't big enough to accommodate the burden of the clinic's success: a queue of 50 people waiting to see the facility's sole doctor. More than 200 patients arrive for treatment every day. Most walk from villages miles away.

Minutes later, we arrived at the green courtyard of Bar Sauri Primary School. The red-brick buildings with holes for doors and windows house classrooms for more than 600 children. One of the buildings lacked a roof. The teacher seemed embarrassed to tell us that it had blown off in a storm just days before. He knew roofs don't blow off schoolrooms where we come from.

But he was enthusiastic about the school's innovative feeding program. Ten percent of the village's harvest goes toward school lunches for the children, he said. In addition, the Millennium Villages Project buys fruit, meat, and fish to provide students with necessary vitamins and protein. The project has built upon Sauri's own school feeding program, established five years ago for students in the top year. Now the entire student body receives nourishing meals. Since Sauri began the program, its school ranking has risen from just inside the top 200 in the district into the top 10. Improved nutrition means

that the students can concentrate better, and they're also healthier and more energetic. Sauri won everything at the regional sports day, the teacher told us. With a proud smile, he recalled, "And not one of our children fainted!"

The next stop was the information technology center. It was just a shack with a nice sign on the outside and a few books inside. One day, when the village is connected to the electricity grid, computers will be bought and Internet access provided. Bridg-

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ing the digital divide may seem a low priority when Sauri has so many pressing problems. But textbooks are a rare commodity, and an Internet connection will allow students access to unlimited information; their parents will be able to obtain up-to-date reports on crop prices, pesticides, and fertilizers.

**W**e returned to the Land Cruiser and set off to visit another ramshackle brick building with a crude dirt floor. Here, the dozen men and women who constitute the village's agriculture committee make decisions key to the success of the whole project. Improved harvests can support the school feeding program and provide income for farmers. Successful farming should enable the village to continue to grow after the five-year project finishes in 2009.

The project's major contribution to agriculture has been the purchase of fertilizer to increase maize production. Maize, which has been grown for as long as anyone can remember, is the main subsistence crop here, as it is in large parts of Africa. Synthetic fertilizers are far too expensive for the average farmer, but in Sauri the project spends \$50,000 a year on them. The chairman of the committee said



Jeffrey Sachs shares a laugh with Bono, one of his many celebrity fans.

the maize harvest has increased two and a half times as a result. Now the question is how to store the surplus so that villagers can sell it in the dry season when prices are high.

At the tour's final stop, the professors stayed in the Land Cruiser to apply more sunscreen. Outside, I found a cement block with a tap jutting out of it. A water and sanitation expert at the site explained that this was an outlet for a filtered spring, and that purified drinking water is supplied to 50 taps around the village. In neighboring villages, long queues form by a single borehole that slops out murky water, which must be boiled over a charcoal stove before it is potable.

The tour over, the professors drove off, but I decided to stay. Clearly, the Millennium Villages Project has achieved some great things, but I didn't feel I'd seen the full picture. As the light fell, I walked toward the guesthouse by the main highway. A woman was handing out cobs of corn to some kids, and offered me one too. We sat on a bench to eat it and watched the steady stream of lorries roll by, carrying imported goods from the Kenyan port of Mom-

basa into Uganda, 40 miles up the road. The returning lorries moved faster: They were usually empty. None of them stopped in Sauri.

**T**here are two schools of thought about development. The "macro" school, with its emphasis on national-level economic policy, aims at developing an entire society by changing government policies and encouraging investment. This is often called a top-down approach, because people at the top are making decisions for the benefit of those at the grass roots. This is the work of many economists and other academic specialists as well as organizations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

Then there's the "micro" school, oriented toward community development, which advocates working with one group of people at a time, trying to solve particular problems by providing training and minimal investment. This bottom-up approach is the domain of most NGOs and charities.

Though these two schools have the same general objectives, their adherents rarely interact and seemingly speak different languages. What's interesting about the Millennium Villages Project is that it is essentially a micro project run by experts from the macro school, such as Sachs.

But Sachs is no ordinary economist. His charisma and fundraising ability are legendary. He convinced Bono, the lead singer of U2 and a well-known activist in his own right, to write the introduction to *The End of Poverty*. In it, Bono describes traveling with Sachs as the economist enthused about development. Bono modestly portrays himself as the smart, clean-cut geek hanging on the words of the wild-haired creative guy.

It was Sachs's influence and initiative that spawned the Millennium Villages Project. In 2004, after a visit to Sauri as a special adviser to Kofi Annan, then secretary-general of the UN, he wrote an open letter in which he outlined a plan of action for the village that he had developed with the Earth Institute and the UN Millennium Project. He called on donors to support the plan: "The rich world needs to wake from its slumber."

Even Sachs's harshest critic, New York University professor and former World Bank economist William Easterly, has described Sachs as "the economist as rock star." But Sachs's fan base doesn't rescue his theories, in Easterly's opinion. He points out that the idea of investing vast sums of money to close the poverty gap in Africa was tried in the 1950s and '60s, and failed. He says that Sachs's book peddles an "administrative central plan" in which the UN secretary-general "would supervise and coordinate thousands of international civil servants and technocratic experts to solve the problems of every poor village and city slum everywhere." The solutions Easterly favors instead include measures designed to improve accountability and reduce corruption, and specific investments aimed at tackling one problem at a time. In his eyes, Sachs is a utopian. Sachs dismisses Easterly as a "can't do" economist.

But economists aren't Sachs's only critics; others within the micro school he wants to win over are asking questions, too. They want to make sure communities such as Sauri are not simply passive recipients of handouts from donors and lectures from experts, but are actively involved in making decisions about their own development. This is what they mean when they talk about empowerment. Any development project can bring temporary benefits. The trick is to ensure that a community is not enjoying a honeymoon that ends when the project does, but is making changes on which it can continue to build. They want sustainability.

When I tried to ask questions on the tour about these issues, I received some evasive answers. Millennium Villages staffers and Sauri residents seemed reluctant to criticize the project. This is a common problem in areas that receive a good deal of aid: Workers on the project don't want to criticize their employers, and villagers don't want to bite the hand that's feeding them. Would the crop yields and health care in Sauri be better in 10 years' time? Did the vil-

lagers believe the changes the project had bought were valuable? Would they be able to keep them up when the money ran out, and did they want to? I decided to spend a few more days in Sauri and talk to the villagers themselves.

I crossed the highway and walked into the village to meet one of Sachs's graduate students, a researcher from Columbia University. When I caught up with him, he was wearing a yellow T-shirt that said "Jeff Sachs Is My Home Boy." I'd run into him earlier in the day, and he had offered to take me to the home of a Sauri resident, Ben Bunde.

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When we arrived at Bunde's house, he and his friends were seated under a tree on wooden benches that seemed to grow from the soil in which they were planted. The group was hunched over bits of scrap paper densely covered in handwriting. They had decided to start up a publication called *The Sauri Times*, and the Millennium Villages Project had helped fund the first print run.

"There are so many stories to be told about Sauri," Bunde said. "The problem is which ones to tell."

When I asked him how Sauri had changed in the last two years, he leaned back, laughing, and said, "The girls have better haircuts now." There are more hair salons, he said, warming to his subject, and the girls are all getting braids. For the first time, people are selling French fries on the side of the highway. People are more generous, too. "A funeral is a big event in the village, with lots of food. In the old days we would get rice and beans, but now we get meat and soup too." There was so much excitement when the project started that mothers named their babies "Millennium."

I mentioned the elections that took place at the start of the project. Committees of about a dozen villagers for health, education, agriculture, and other key sectors were elected on the advice of project coordinators. The committees' role is to decide how the Millennium Vil-

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lages money should be spent, and to empower Sauri as a result. But Bunde didn't seem to have confidence in the elections or the committees.

“Few people took part, and they didn't know who to vote for. . . . What would Sachs say if he knew about the witchcraft that took place before the elections? The Kalanya were scaring people to vote for them. In Kenya, we have the Kikuyu factor—the Kikuyu are the dominant tribe. Here in Sauri, we have the Kalanya factor. The Kalanya are the dominant clan. Kalanya elders head all the committees, and yet many of them are uneducated and illiterate. And yet here,” he said, gesturing at the young journalists around him, “we have some clever, educated people.”

Bunde argued that “clanism” was fostering nepotism and other forms of favoritism. As an example, he cited one of the buildings at the new clinic, which was so badly constructed that it has been condemned. And he hinted at other forms of corruption. There were rumors that the clinic was charging patients from outside Sauri. Civil servants and police in neighboring villages were allegedly using their influence to get their children into Sauri's school.

There was fighting both within and between committees, he continued, and this had delayed development in the village. In the early days of the project, he said, Sachs had ceremoniously handed over the keys to a truck that was to be used to take goods to market and as an ambulance. But because of power struggles over it, the truck hadn't been used

or seen in the village since.

Bunde said that there wasn't enough education of Sauri's people at the start of the project. After receiving free fertilizer and mosquito nets, some villagers sold them to people in the surrounding communities the very next day and then conspired to get more fertilizer and nets.

When I asked if he planned to put any of these stories in *The Sauri Times*, he shook his head. “No, we don't want the donors to pull out!”

In the end, Bunde questioned whether outside experts really understand the problems in Sauri. While life had improved in the years since the Millennium Village experiment began, Bunde wondered fearfully what will happen when the project ends, “because we have become so dependent.” Change, he said, needs to be led from inside the village. “As we say here, only the wearer knows where the shoe pinches.”

**A**t breakfast the next morning in the courtyard of the guesthouse, I ran into one of the project coordinators, who agreed to chat with me if he could remain anonymous.

On the tour, our guide had emphasized that the elected committees make all the decisions about how Sauri is run and how aid money is spent. I asked the coordinator if there was tension between what the project's representatives wanted to do with the money and what the committees wanted.

“Yes,” he said. “We provided the inputs like the fertilizers, and so the committees just sat back. There were mistakes made on entry to Sauri. There was not enough sensitization. . . . Now the problem is [that] the project is moving so fast, the committees can't keep up.”

Lack of education, or “sensitization,” both within the committees and in the village generally, has caused problems, the project coordinator observed. The villagers often disappoint their benefactors. When project officials want to implement a change,



**People walk for miles to seek treatment at Sauri's health clinic, built in 2005 with funds received through the Millennium Villages Project. Sauri's malaria rate has halved since then. But some villagers wonder what will happen to the facility when the funding cornucopia disappears.**

they advise the committees. But the committees sometimes move slowly, because there's not enough support for a particular proposal either within the committee or in the village as a whole. In the surrounding villages to which the project has been expanded, there has been more education, but he doubted that there has been enough.

The basic inputs of the project have also changed. In Sauri, he said, the amount of fertilizer given to farmers was based on plot size. But this scheme was contrary to traditional community practice because its effects were thought to exacerbate existing inequalities and were often divisive. At the new Millennium Villages Project sites, each farmer will be given the same amount of fertilizer.

**F**rom Sauri, I walked half a mile down some railway tracks to the neighboring village of Yala, passing the old, dilapidated train station. Even though only one train passes by a week, the station's colonial-era ornamental gardens are still tended with care.

The local government is based in Yala, and I

wanted to find out how its members viewed the new Sauri. A hand-painted sign pointed to a small, spare room, where the paint peeled under a corrugated-iron roof. There I found Richard Odunga, a resident of Sauri and Yala's town clerk. His secretary sat next door in front of a typewriter.

Odunga owns a big plot, uses the fertilizer, and has sold a lot of maize. When I asked him if he'd been able to save money, he sighed. He has been forced to support family members who live outside of Sauri. They ask him for help with school fees and medication, and have drained all his maize profits.

He said relations between the local government and project organizers have been strained. "At first, there was no consultation with government. Later, they realized we were a stakeholder and they needed our assistance." Project leaders initially wanted to build not just a clinic but a hospital in Sauri, before the government pointed out that there was already a hospital just a few kilometers away. The project wanted help from government in electrifying Sauri and grading its roads. Two years on, work has started on the roads, but there is still no connection to the national power grid.

Odunga wondered what will remain after the



project finishes. When I asked if the community had started contributing to the project yet, he said, "There is some cost sharing, but it's at a minimum level." Who will pay for the clinic after the project ends? he asked. But villagers will at least benefit from the training they've received: "Skills. That's the most important thing."

**A** couple of days later, I met a senior official working on the Millennium Villages Project for the UN who has a background in community development, as Sachs, he noted, does not. This official, too, would only talk if he were not identified.

The Millennium Villages Project, he said, "has made all the classic development mistakes. . . . If you give away tons of fertilizer, it's predictable that much of it will end up on the open market. If you put millions [of dollars] in a small place, you're going to have problems."

Encouraging farmers to grow maize is the wrong strategy, he argued. "It just means you move from being food insecure for 11 months of the year to food insecure for just nine months of the year."

Growing only maize year after year depletes the soil. It's also a high-risk strategy, he said, as the entire crop may fail. The price of maize has dropped dramatically around Sauri, he noted, as the village's crop yields have improved and supply has increased. Maize is a subsistence crop that has fed Sauri families for years, but, he contended, its price is too low to make it a cash crop. He is trying to push the project to spend more time touting vegetable crops that fetch good prices at market, such as onions, tomatoes, and cabbages.

In this official's opinion, the project could be more effective if it pushed for some macroeconomic changes, rather than concentrate all its efforts in the village. For instance, farmers in Kenya don't buy fertilizer because it costs three times as much as it does in Europe, he said. If the Kenyan government eased taxes and import duties on fertilizer, "a lot more farmers would buy it."

Many UN officials I spoke to criticized the Sauri project, but none would speak openly. It was clear

that dissenting voices were not welcomed, as an e-mail I received from one made plain: "Unfortunately I'm already in a lot of trouble for talking about what every good scientist should be talking about. The current environment is one in which scientists can no longer speak openly and expect to keep their jobs."

The Millennium Villages Project is being launched in locations in Kenya, Ethiopia, Ghana, Malawi, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal, Tanzania, Rwanda, and Uganda. Each cluster of villages will be transformed thanks to the investment of nearly \$3 million over five years. The sheer scale of investment in the Millennium Villages Project is difficult to convey. The sums involved are not just bigger than those for other community development projects in Africa; they are hundreds of times bigger.

But is this level of investment really plausible for all of Africa? In Kenya alone, aid from abroad would need to increase 10 times, from \$100 million to \$1 billion, to blanket the whole of the country with the amounts equivalent to what is spent in Millennium Villages.

Sachs says that if the West spent the 0.7 percent of its gross national product on aid set as a goal by the Monterrey Consensus in 2002, this could start to become a reality. This assumes that all the additional aid would go to Africa, and not, as is often the case, to projects in more developed countries such as those of the former Soviet bloc. Currently, only a few countries, such as Denmark, Sweden, and the Netherlands, are reaching the 0.7 percent mark; the United States gives about 0.2 percent of GNP in aid. It justifies its contribution by pointing out that it's still giving more in absolute terms than any other nation—in fact, it gives more than the world's next two biggest economies, Germany and Japan, put together.

The scale of the Millennium Villages Project makes it seem a different breed entirely from most micro programs, which go into a village with modest funds to achieve a specific goal. They may give a farmer a single cow bred in the West for its high milk yield, and train him to look after it. The farmer passes his first calves on to a neighbor and trains him, and gradually the benefits extend to the wider community. The idea is to create a cycle of develop-

ment that doesn't require extra money. The progress in this kind of program may be slow, but it's much easier to pinpoint what's working and what's not, to figure out why, and to adapt as necessary.

**S**auri has achieved more than such projects could ever reasonably hope to, but it's not yet a model village. Instead, Sauri remains Africa in microcosm. All the fundamental problems that exist in Africa still exist in Sauri; in some cases, these problems are magnified.

The village's political framework is confused. Sauri now has two governments in conflict with each other: the committees and the existing local government. The project's committees have introduced a new layer of bureaucracy, and their vastly superior resources have weakened the local government's power. Further, committees are accused of working against each other, and of being corrupt, slow, and unwieldy. Their representatives are said to have been chosen for their ethnic ties and standing in society, rather than their political acumen. As in many parts of Africa, it's unclear which decisions are made by government and which by donors.

Sauri faces the same economic challenges it always has. Most farmers are still growing subsistence crops and depleting their soils. They could instead be growing crops for market or investing in livestock. Low-cost improvements in farming techniques, such as the use of manure and other organic methods that are more sustainable in the long run, are only beginning to be promoted. Growth will be slow because taxation, bad roads, and a lack of electricity need to be addressed at a national level.

Villagers are clearly enjoying better health as a result of the project. The simple extension of a school feeding program has improved students' performance and could serve as a model for schools across

Africa. The clinic has transformed health care: The incidence of malaria has decreased, family planning has increased, and soon anti-retroviral treatments will be available to people with HIV and AIDS. But when the project ends, the funds for the clinic and the doctor, the mosquito nets, and the anti-retrovirals will dry up. In three years, the Kenyan government will face the difficult choice between continuing to fund one model clinic in Sauri or cutting the budget considerably.

And Sauri still must contend with the divisions that are typical throughout Kenya: between ethnic groups, men and women, young and old. Witchcraft was employed to influence the outcome of the elections. The practice of wife inheritance remains com-

## CRITICS OF THE MILLENNIUM Villages

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mon, indicative of a wider set of gender issues. These kinds of cultural problems can't be solved with handouts, but only with subtler interventions.

This is not to say that Sauri cannot change, or that investment in the village is wasted. But if Sauri is to become a useful model for development on a bigger scale, and not just another development expert's white elephant, Sachs and others working on the project must acknowledge that they are still learning about Africa. Sauri is not yet a success.

Lasting changes in Sauri will come about not through distribution of commodities, but through education for children and training for adults. To put it another way, give a man a mosquito net, and when it rips, he'll come and ask for another one. But show him how using a mosquito net benefits his health and how it will save him money on medication in the long run, and he might just go out and buy one for himself. ■