

Jeff Sach's Millennium Village project

by Tyler Cowen April 24, 2007 at 7:47 am in Economics

There are two current pieces on Jeff Sach's Millennium Village project; the first is in *Harper's*, the second and far superior, by Sam Rich, is in The Wilson Quarterly. (I don't see the article on-line yet). Rich reports the following about the village of Sauri, Kenya:

1. Every year the project invests about \$100 for each of the 5000 village inhabitants.
2. The villagers are much healthier now and the schools are better.
3. Some babies in the village have been named "Millennium."
4. The subsidies of the project have pushed villagers into high-risk crops and possibly depleted the soil.
5. Many of the giveaways, such as fertilizer, are simply resold on external markets.
6. The creation of a committee for allocating project resources has weakened the village's government and in effect created a more powerful shadow government in the village.
7. People who live or work in the village have financial incentives not to speak honestly about what is going on there.
8. Witchcraft still plays a major role in village elections and decisions.
9. It is not clear what will happen when the project ends in three years' time. Or should I say it is clear?

In my view Sach's work is admirable and will do much to improve the lives of a small percentage of Africans. But I do not think it is scalable. First, I believe the candidate villages are cherry-picked for possible improvement. Armed conflict remains a huge problem on the continent. Second, one key non-scalable ingredient is Sachs himself. His reputation is worth a great deal to him, and these projects will receive scrutiny and study; he has strong incentives to make sure everything goes as well and as honestly as possible. That incentive vanishes once we implement such ideas on a bigger scale and through other institutions. File this one under "Wonderful but oversold."



9 Comments



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**A Tykhyy**

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Second, one key non-scalable ingredient is Sachs himself.

Excellent touche'! I knew that talent doesn't scale well, it seems that reputation is also in this category.

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"a small percentage of Africans"

That's a still a lot of people. We should be lucky to be so unsuccessful. We don't think of people doing social work in the US as failures even when they achieve only a fraction as much. Why would we have *higher* expectations of someone in Africa, which is a harder job politically and culturally?

Chris Meisenzahl

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While these people usually mean well, they often want their efforts judged by their intentions rather than the results.

Pablo Stafforini

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2007-04-25 08:53:29

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Witchcraft still plays a major role in village elections and decisions.

So does Christianity in American public life.

SR

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It seems to me to be a very pragmatic look at how to do good. Since the levels of instability throughout the continent are so high, "scalability" is almost a nonsense proposition, so Sachs has taken a per community approach to better lives and provide opportunities for the wealthy to be able to see tangible progress on their donations. He can grow his model by adding new villages, without having to deal with the regional/national entities that are often unreliable.

Your question about the sustainability of these villages after the 3(?) years strikes me as the most valid criticism. (ASIDE: why anyone would think that a continent as big and complex and multi-ethnic/national as africa should always be thought of as a whole is still beyond me.)

When Sachs spoke at UCHICAGO earlier in the year, he focused on the anti-malarial efforts to reduce infant mortality as the main initiative. Those initiatives seem to have the best prospects for sustainability in the villages themselves.

Tom Grey - Liberty Dad

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Sachs is very important, as the near-embodiment of good intentioned postive-action against poverty do-good economist. Much of his advice has been fine since the Wall fell in 1989.

Focussing on a community is OK -- I would prefer he focus on many small private companies. What all poor countries need are more entrepreneurs trying to make money (=create wealth) peacefully and honestly.

Sachs should be measuring how many folks in the watched community are in new private (=peaceful) jobs. That he's watching any metric (malarial infant mortality) is an improvement. The economic debate should be over which metrics are the best to watch, and which ONE should be the focus, if there is only one.

Private sector employment should be that watched metric.

Jeff Buderer

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A colleague of mine noted offers a critical view about Millennium Villages

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/globalvillages/message/2675>

The program seems by his view to repeat many of the flawed practices of development efforts of the past. In particular, he says that the program promotes the use of GMOs and industrial fertilizers. Integrated farming practices as outlined here <http://green.onevillage.tv> demonstrate that heavy use of agriculture inputs is not necessary.

I see nothing about sustainable development here. Also what about the need for socioeconomic decentralization in an increased corporatized, top down global economy? Much of the comments here seem to focus on how screwed up the local people are with tribalism, rent seekers and witchcraft. Oddly enough there is no acknowledgement that indigenous religions are now the minority spiritual practice in most of Africa so then how come several people here seem so fixated on witchcraft?

While I agree that tribal loyalty and sexism are problems, I think the assumption that seeing witchcraft is the problem is indeed problematic in that it assumes that spiritual beliefs needs to be eradicated. I also see the trend as overlooking colonialism as a "root cause" and instead completely focus on internal issues.

Also in relation to Tom Grey's comments why does one have to choose between community and small biz development - it seems like they could go hand in hand?

Celeste Mergens

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100 dollars per year per resident for comprehensive Aid: Health, crop assistance, trade assistance, environmental and power assistance is a remarkable feat. I am surprised to hear that they are using traditional Western fertilizer, as one of the taskforce members is reknown Dr. Pedro Sanchez who is known for alternative solutions in Africa that work. To have started the projects with just a few villages is key, as there is bound to be a learning and application curve. The fact that native belief systems are

"still practiced" is, in my opinion, an excellent sign indicating that in fact the UN Mvillage teams are not trying to displace the traditions but rather working with the villagers, which of course is ideal. As for Dr. Sachs and his teams: An extraordinary group of people have come together with an comprehensive goal. These people are not as Easterly would say, "Planners" but rather "Searchers" and it is my hope that both Sachs and Easterly will be proven right, that large scale projects can be effective if individuals intent on practical, feasible and sustainable solutions are focused on applying them in a way that gets community buy-in.

MikeyM

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Mesbah, pardon me but that is a ridiculous comment.

Spirituality = Belief over reason, Witchcraft = Belief over reason.

They are equivalent in all but but the level of development of belief. The minor fact that western spirituality, including the most popular; christianity, has been forced to modify some of its more stupid points to no longer be stuck as far back in its beliefs as Africa does not in anyway show that spirituality in the developed countries is better than witchcraft in Africa. Its all based on superstitious garbage and belief over evidence. Simple way to find out how different they are is to ask someone who believes wester spirituality and someone who believes African witchcraft if they believe in evolution.

I think Jeff Sachs is to be commended on being able to mobilize the effort that he has. If he has somewhat mis-judged the problem or the results are not optimal then at least he has tried rather than just talking. If all these developmental experts are so good then let them put the solutions in place. As a minimum let them work together with Sachs to solve the problems. Maybe if they were to provide evidence of their knowledge he would listen and improve efforts for the next village.

As for will the solution scale to all Africa? I don't see the US or Europe out of poverty so until we have our own problems sorted maybe any effort in Africa should be applauded rather than criticized for how it will scale. Even if not then empowering 20% of each African nation to be wealthy will allow them to build up the rest of their country themselves. So the WHOLE AFRICA issue is an issue for people who want to critisize.

Fortunately most of the criticism by Sam Rich seems to be aimed in a constructive way. Maybe in focusing his efforts in a better manner with more people to support him we can construct a truly effective plan to help Africa. Until that day this project is the best available. As for spirituality getting in the way the best solution to that is education over a long period of time. This needs to be provided.

Corruption is and always has been a problem and let us not pretend that it is not a problem in our own countries. If we had the solution surely we would have implemented it ourselves. We don't so we have to accept that some of our efforts get wasted. That does not excuse letting Africa rot in appalling abject poverty. Our ancestors were judged for keeping slaves, freeing slaves, giving minorities and women the right to vote. What will we be remembered for? Freedom from horrid poverty is in our grasp but we still need to take the actions to make it happen rather than talk about it.

What is the best solution to make it happen, I don't know. But Jeff Sachs efforts are better than none.

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