

*Is the Millennium Villages Project a Good Model for Reducing Poverty
in Sub-Saharan Africa?*

Amanda Studdard

Senior Project Advisor: Ashley Carruth

Abstract:

Eradicating poverty is a common goal across the map. Every region should be making strides together, working to find solutions for that goal in order to increase the standard of living for individuals worldwide. However, this goal has been especially difficult to reach in Sub-Saharan Africa. This paper will investigate the efficacy of a particularly prominent effort to decrease poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa, namely, the Millennium Villages Project (MVP). The author will analyze MVP's efficacy based on three "ingredients" that prove most effective in reducing poverty within local Sub-Saharan African villages: 1. Developing an understanding of the whole community; 2. Engaging both the local community and government in identifying problems and devising solutions; 3. Responsible resource management and use. The author finds that while the MVP had its benefits and successes, when being measured against these three ingredients it seems the Millennium Villages Project is not a strong model to emulate. These conclusions indicate that more sustainable approaches or organizations should be used as models and more research, such as what empowers people to make change and how the workers going into Sub-Saharan Africa can genuinely understand these communities before taking action, should be done to determine the best ways to decrease poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa.

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Part I: Introduction

“There is no silver bullet to addressing poverty”- Barbara Noseworthy, director of funding initiatives for the Earth Institute of Columbia University, which designed the Millennium Villages Project

The Millennium Villages Project (MVP) was a project focused on meeting the United Nations’ goal to devise the impossible and elusive silver bullet of ending poverty by 2030. Because this is not the most realistically achievable goal, the project, and those running it, did their best to reduce poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) as much as possible starting in 2004 and ending in 2015. The project partnered with multiple organizations to work towards this giant goal, and in the end met about a third of the goals created to improve the standard of living. The lessons learned from the MVP can assist others in trying to reduce poverty as what did and did not work to decrease poverty within the various Millennium Villages (MV). Once those who are leading work in a new area come to understand the community's needs, solutions can begin to be developed and more effectively address the authentic needs and desires of the community. Thus, this paper will examine the MVP’s various approaches to reduce poverty throughout its sites in SSA, with the ultimate goal of determining if the MVP provides a strong model for poverty reduction in SSA. Three ingredients for a successful community project in SSA are taking time to understand the needs of the community before pushing ideas, involving and engaging the locals and their government, and using the resources and money for the project wisely so that all goals are reached. While the MVP integrated these ingredients to some extent, the project had significant room for growth. Thus while the MVP had some positive outcomes, including improving maternal health and lowering malaria rates, but overall is not the best model for

reducing poverty in SSA.

Part II: Historical Context and Background

The global poverty rate has been decreasing since the 1950s, but SSA only started to lower its rates since the mid-1990s. In 1990 SSA had 54% of people living in extreme poverty and by 2013 that dropped to 41% of people. This is measured by the number and share of the population living on less than \$1.90 a day. Many organizations have worked to lower this percentage including the MVP. The MVP is a project partnered with Earth Institute at Columbia University, United Nations Development Program, and Millennium Promise. The goal of the project was to address the root causes of extreme poverty and use holistic, community-led approaches to sustainable development.

Sustainable development is a systems approach to development and growth with three parts: environmental, social, and economic. It manages natural, produced, and social capital for the welfare of future generations as well as our own. The term is associated with land development and human development like education, health, and the standard of living.

To address poverty and face different regions' challenges, the villages use tools including, community health workers, diversified local food production, commercial farming, malaria control, piped water, solar electricity, connectivity, etc. Through all of the MVP's strategies, the hope was to eliminate or reduce poverty.

The MVP started in 2004 and the first site was launched in 2005. The "sites" for the project were in ten different countries in SSA: Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Mali, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Tanzania, and Uganda. When mentioning the project's work in SSA this paper

will be referring to those ten. The project worked in these sites for 10 years.

The project had its final evaluation in 2015. Jeffrey Sachs, who was the director of Columbia University's Earth Institute, led the MVP and is known as one of the world's leading experts on economic development and the fight against poverty. He wanted to work towards eradicating extreme poverty and improving the standard of living in SSA.

This type of work is of importance in SSA because other regions of the world have been reducing their poverty and SSA has not been able to keep up. With the United Nations' goal to eradicate all the world's extreme poverty, we should all be making strides together to reach this goal. Doing this work and research can help bring the world together and understand the different regions around us all. The United Nations' "No Poverty: Why it Matters" explains this importance by stating "because as human beings, our wellbeing is linked to each other. Growing inequality is detrimental to economic growth and undermines social cohesion, increasing political and social tensions and, in some circumstances, driving instability and conflicts" (2). Poverty is a multidimensional concept that involves a lot more than a person's income. It is important we understand this concept more genuinely.

Poverty as explained by the World Bank is "using household income or consumption data is a function of both the level of mean income or consumption in a population and the inequality in the distribution of these resources" (Growth 1). The United Nations defines poverty as a deprivation of basic human needs. How poverty is experienced between people is partially relied on the way things, such as food, water, and clothing, to name a few, are distributed among those in a community. Millennium Development Goals (MDG) were created by the United Nations with a mission to combat poverty, hunger, disease, illiteracy, environmental degradation,

and discrimination against women. The MDGs were developed in 2000 and consisted of eight goals to eradicate extreme poverty. In 2015, the United Nations added several more goals to the MDGs so they now total 17. They entail a similar overarching mission as the MDGs did but build upon the idea of combating what is believed to slow or stop development. The SDGs build on the principle of “leaving no one behind” and call all countries into action, no matter how developed. SDGs are certainly an improvement upon the MDGs.

Part III: Research and Analysis

MVP's Shortcomings

As a professor at Columbia University, Jeffrey Sachs created the MVP as an integrated approach to combating poverty that used multiple interventions throughout all the project's sites. The MVP had successful outcomes in lowering malaria rates and increasing maternal health, but also had shortcomings because it did not fully include the three ingredients: 1. Developing an understanding of the whole community; 2. Engaging both the local community and government in identifying problems and devising solutions; 3. Responsible resource management and use.

At the time, the MVP was bold and exciting with many potentials, however, Sachs pushed his idea into action too quickly. He felt an urgency to begin the project because people were dying. When conducting a personal interview with Barabara Noseworthy, the director of funding initiatives for the Earth Institute of Columbia University, she said that Sachs “felt this was a life and death situation, and he needed to rush in to help”. However, Sachs did not know the people or culture within the project's sites that he entered. French states in “The

Not-So-Great Professor: Jeffrey Sachs' Incredible Failure to Eradicate Poverty in Africa” that “[c]onfronted with the inability of [Sachs] villages to sustain themselves financially, he kept changing the plan, improvising frantically” (par 17). This improvising showed that Sachs had moved in to the project quickly without a sound plan.

A project’s work can be more impactful if the workers first get to know the communities they are in so that they can be conscious of the environment that will surround them while implementing their ideas. Akinwumni Adesina was the Minister of Agriculture in Nigeria and has immensely helped Nigeria decrease corruption in their agricultural efforts. He created successful solutions to their problems because he was from Nigeria and understood the ways in which it runs. Knowing the community before beginning work is beneficial to the outcomes created. In “Experiencing Poverty in Africa: Perspectives from Anthropology” Booth, head of two large collaborative programs working to develop Africa, Leach, co-founder of Social, Technological, and Environmental Pathways to Sustainability, and Tierney, a nursing theorist, state that “anthropological findings often derive their comparative value from forms of research that concentrate on understanding what is there, without any immediate intention to change it” (37). If Sachs had slowed his project at the beginning and taken time to research more before taking action, going in with no immediate intention to change things, then he could have gained understanding for the community and its needs.

It is important to understand what it is like in the place of work before going in with ideas to fix it. However, because of Sachs’ team’s urgency, they took shortcuts that neglected this essential process. Booth et al. also state in “Experiencing Poverty in Africa: Perspectives from Anthropology” that “poverty-reduction policies have to engage with poverty as it is lived. That

means interventions that deal with the poor should be designed in a way that accommodates the uncertainty that goes with complexity; that is to say, on a process basis” (39). The process basis to which Booth et al. refer involves taking time to understand what the people whom you are trying to serve are going through, what is involved in their experiences of poverty and then thinking through multiple options of next steps before actually deciding on the steps that will be put into action. Sachs had an idea and thought he could easily implement it and solve the problems that so many people have been facing. French states that “[t]his goal was premised on the notion that development can be accomplished simply by assembling the right set of instructions, and then paying for their implementation” (par 10). However, sustainable solutions do not come this easily. This process basis, getting to know how poverty is lived and its complexities, could have been one factor that would have improved the MVP’s outcomes.

Another aspect that could have improved the MVP’s outcomes would be to engage the government and have the project locally-run. Locally-run means the people that live in the community are those in charge of the work being done. The MVP could have found organizations or groups of people who live in SSA that were already trying to do work that would lower their communities’ poverty and support them. This fits with the idea of needing to spend time in a place before trying to solve its problems. If an organization is not locally-run then it will not have the best impacts it could. In other words, it will not likely be sustainable. Statistics show that about 48% of researchers not from SSA spend less than 2 years in SSA before leaving for an institution elsewhere. The Lwala Community Alliance is an organization that works to develop solutions to challenges that arise in Kenya with a community-led approach. The Alliance organizes community committees to launch health initiatives and train

community members to work on governance committees. Because of the Alliance's work there has been a significant decrease in child deaths in Lwala communities. This structure, focusing on giving the locals roles, helps maintain the work being done. It may look like progress is being made but the true test of the efficacy of poverty reduction work comes once the aid workers leave. When locals are stepping into these roles in the community they are being empowered and given more motivation to stay involved and continue the work they start. If the locals care about the work being done and invest themselves in it then it will have more lasting effects.

Locals caring about work done in their communities is just the start, they must also feel engaged and help create change. To engage people in effective social change, it is critical that those people feel empowered and have a sense of agency in the work. In "Determinants of Empowerment in a Capability Based Poverty Approach: Evidence from The Gambia" Trommlerová et al. explain that agency is an important part of making people feel empowered. Sen defines agency freedom as "what the person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important" (qtd. in Trommlerová et al. 3). Trommlerová et al. explain when individuals are empowered they believe more in their abilities to make changes: "we see empowerment as a gain in agency, enabling the individual to pursue valuable and important goals" (3). With this agency and empowerment, great change can come from the work of those who are already in a community. For example, Leah, one of Lwala's first Community Health Workers, and a former traditional birth attendant said "[g]etting trained as a Community Health Worker affected my life greatly – we were told the dangers of giving birth outside of the facility, and it reduced the mortality of the women and the babies" (Community-Led). As mentioned before, the Lwala Community Alliance encourages and teaches

locals to be a part of committees working to improve health. Since Leah was trained, she could pass on what she had learned in order to help her community grow and understand that going to the hospital will reduce mortality. The Lwala Community Alliance helped people, like Leah, to step into a role in their community to create change. The MVP involved the locals of its sites by teaching them how to do the work, such as teaching them how to grow certain crops, but did not put locals in charge of the work. There is a also great opportunity for change when engaging the government.

Involving the government in the work being done is an important step that should not be forgotten because once the government is involved, and in support of the work, they have the power to enforce the new ideas brought to them. The article “Why Nigeria’s Akinwunmi Adesina Won 2017 World Food Prize” discusses one of Adesina’s ideas that worked involving the government. The article states “as Minister of Agriculture of his [Adesina’s] home country Nigeria, our Laureate introduced the E-Wallet system which broke the back of the corrupt elements that had controlled the fertilizer distribution system for 40 years” (par 13). Adesina found a way to rid of the corrupt system. He created a way to allow the Nigerian government to deliver subsidized farm inputs. Then, the farmers redeem those inputs on their mobile phones. This idea helped stop black marketers and middlemen and have the government engage to make sure everyone was getting the subsidies they were meant to. Since this system went through the government they had to include the E-Wallet in their budget and it was assured it would be enforced. Making the government responsible for this and using their own money made it more sustainable because the cost would no longer be left to Adesina.

If the MVP could do something like Adesina and put money responsibility elsewhere,

then its money could go further and the whole project would be more sustainable. The project also could have been improved if the money it had was used in different ways such as for local staffing and getting materials for launching the projects: seeds for farming, insecticide treatment for bed nets, etc. It is vital to use money wisely because doing as much as possible with the amount available will create the most significant impacts. According to “The Millennium Villages Project: a Retrospective, Observational, Endline Evaluation” the MVP used its money to pay for the site management and Earth Institute staffing, their nonlocal staff. If more of this had been put toward local staff they could have continued to work when the Earth Institute staff left. Aid only creates patches, small sections of regions, that are getting money when it is pumped into these areas. Rather than creating these different patches we should be creating a quilt with our efforts, covering as much area as we can (Noseworthy). Some believe too much money was put into this project, however, the project never received the amount of money it was expecting. Noseworthy mentioned the project was not all that expensive in the bigger picture and Sachs stated that the project did not have as much funding as planned for. Most of the funding came from private support. The MVP still could have used more money for each of its sites. This supports the reasoning that the project was not ready to be implemented yet. Sachs states from a personal perspective of the MVP that “donor funding for the MVP was limited to a mere \$25 per person per year during the second phase” (3). The plan was to have \$60 per person, and that amount was not obtained. With less money than what was expected would be needed, the project was not ready to begin.

In my interview with Noseworthy, she discussed the project’s use of money on “things”, like the treated bed nets, home testing, seeds etc. The project focused on what they should buy to

create solutions rather than the staffing for the project. This was not a sustainable approach because once all of their bought materials were gone and the money ran out then there was nowhere to go. If money had been put towards the staffing and having locals come run the project then the project may have had more success. People would have jobs, and they would be empowered, which could have bettered the impacts of the project. In “Exploring the Impact of the Millennium Village Promise on Community Networks: the Case of Sauri Millennium Village in Western Kenya” Jivetti states that there are “concerns about the role of local communities in program design, political interference, and program sustainability beyond the funding period” (3). Jivetti discusses multiple concerns about the MVP and the way it was run, explaining that monetary incentives were used over local institutions and that the use of money has created a less sustainable project.

MVP's Successes

While the MVP could have been improved in multiple ways, it is important to note their accomplishments. Sachs noted that the project “fell short on two-thirds, although with at least some progress towards most of the targets” (1). While these are not the best results, it is positive to have made some progress. During the project "people's lives were made better and there is nothing wrong or bad about that, but the only way to sustain it was through government allocation of resources and involvement of the private sector: business” (Noseworthy). The MVP was effective in bettering individual's lives which is valuable, even if the project was not sustainable.

Some of the positive impacts that bettered lives from the MVP include maternal health

increases and malaria rates decreasing. In an evaluation of the MVP the authors state “[w]hen averaged across outcomes, Nigeria's MV did best relative to its comparison villages, particularly on the maternal health index. The outcome indices of maternal health and HIV and malaria had the largest between-country differences in estimated project impacts” (Mitchell et al. 507). This source gives credit where it was due to the MVP for improving circumstances with maternal health and malaria. It seemed that maternal health was the best-performing section as it had four of five outcomes meeting their targets. This increase in maternal health was a great accomplishment for the project and is positive for the lives it impacted.

To make these improvements, the project used technologies that include “free mass distribution of insecticide-treated bednets, home-based malaria testing by community health workers using rapid diagnostic tests, use of mobile health applications for collection of real-time operational data, and micro-grid solar-powered electrification in rural areas” (Mitchell et al. 511). As mentioned before, lowering malaria rates is a good example of work that the MVP did well. They distributed the insecticide-treated bednets for as many as people as they could, which lowered the rates of malaria, and they implemented the home-based malaria testing which dropped the rates as well. This made it easier for people to find out if they had malaria because they no longer had to make their way to a hospital, instead, they could find out early on if they had malaria and then get the treatment needed for it. For instance, at the beginning of the project malaria diagnoses and treatments were largely facility-based with microscopists reading blood smears, but then artemisinin-based treatments were introduced via clinics (Lessons). This improvement of technology played a big role in the malaria rates dropping. Sachs states “the project was not based on testing the effects of a specific and fixed set of interventions. It was

instead based on reaching a specific set of targets. Throughout the project, the available technologies to achieve those targets improved rapidly” (473). These ideas and technologies helped the MVP work towards its goals and potentials.

The MVP began with the best of intentions and made a great effort at using an integrated approach to combat poverty, which seemed would create sustainable outcomes. There were some successes along the way. For instance, “[a]lthough poverty is difficult to define and accurately measure, the project's overall positive impact on household asset ownership is a promising indication that living standards were improved” (Mitchell et al. 512). Though the project had some downfalls it did help people’s lives and create positive impacts even if the project did not reach its highest potential. Bettering people’s lives even on small scales is beneficial and worthwhile.

Part IV: Conclusion

Now that over a decade has passed since the first MVP’s site took root in Sauri, Kenya, we have had ample time to evaluate the MVP’s successes and failures. The project made positive impacts on people’s lives, especially in increasing maternal health and lowering malaria rates. However, it is clear the MVP had multiple limitations that could have been improved. The MVP rushed into its beginning operations too quickly. The project did not involve the government and or local community members, which limited how sustainable the project could be. It also suffered from inadequate and poorly-used funding. If these factors were changed, the

project could have had bigger, more lasting effects.

Overall, after researching the MVP and the ways in which it operated in SSA, despite its benefits, the MVP should not be used as a model for future work and projects. Some aspects can be emulated since lives were bettered, such as the integrated approach the project used and the targets that it managed to reach, but should not be used for a model as a whole. Many organizations have good hearts and good intentions but do not reach their maximum potentials or make the most positive changes for the community they are involved in. This is because they do not know how to maximize their positive impacts. It is crucial to first look at what local organizations are already working in that community and support them rather than running in with new groups that displace the local efforts. If there are no local efforts yet attempting to implement a group's ideas then it is vital to encourage locals to be a part of and run the new work being brought in. It is important to look for business opportunities so that the locals are taking over and running the work. These efforts will be more sustainable with a minimum number of non-Africans involved. This way, when the organization leaves the work continues.

More research could be done on empowering individuals and groups of people, as well as how this empowerment relates to change amongst communities. Finding connections such as this could better our understanding of what approaches create the largest impacts and help find ways to encourage locally-started work. It would also be beneficial to do more studies that do not include immediate action. If researchers go into communities to experience the way life is lived and get to know the people and the culture before deciding what should be done, then, well-informed decisions can be made on what actions should be taken. If there is a case where time is of the essence then people who have spent time in the community should be consulted

that way there is no blind action, and if this is not a possibility then consider consequences of every action and question motives. It is important to question others' or your own motives when going into SSA to work. Ask the questions: Is there a commitment to leadership? How is the work sustained? How does this work respect the community? Asking these questions helps to gauge if the work will genuinely help the community and individuals reduce poverty, and how sustainable those results will be.

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