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In the village where aid makes a vital difference

By Steve Bloomfield in Sauri, Kenya

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Elvis runs through his grandfather's field, laughing and shouting. He runs past banana trees and cassava plants, onions and beans. Past the sweet potatoes and millet, over the sorghum and soya beans.

When Elvis was born, just two years ago, this two-acre plot of land in the village of Silula, part of the Sauri area in Kisumu, western Kenya, grew only maize. The yield was poor and Elvis's grandfather, Edward Oyier, was beginning to wonder if he would ever manage to grow enough on his land to feed his family.

It was the same story elsewhere in Sauri. Two thirds of the 5,000-strong population were living below the poverty line, on less than \$1 (55p) a day. Health problems were chronic. The prevalence for malaria was 43 per cent, for HIV 24 per cent. Two fifths of all children under five years old were malnourished, while one in four children did not reach the age of five. One in 10 mothers died during childbirth. But in Elvis's short life, much has changed. The 11 villages in Sauri have been turned into a giant experiment. With a budget of just \$110 per person per year, the Millennium Villages Project is trying to prove aid money can make a difference.

Food production, nutrition and health. Education, roads and energy. Water, sanitation and the environment. Nothing is left off the list. Agriculturalists have been brought in to teach new farming methods. A health clinic has been set up providing free health care. A school feeding programme has been established, providing children with at least one good meal a day. The government has agreed to provide electricity and carry out road maintenance. Water points have been introduced, giving residents clean drinking water for the first time.

Two years into the project, set up last year by the economist Jeffrey Sachs as part of the UN Millennium Development Goals, the results have been staggering. Maize yield has tripled. Malaria rates have more than halved. The primary school, which was failing, is now in the top 10 in the province.

Standing in a massive storage warehouse surrounded by thousands of 90kg bags of maize, Mary Asiko, 65, beams with pride.

Last year, she produced 10 bags of maize; this year she has 30. "Not only do we have enough food now, but we have a lot of knowledge. We are working towards sustainability. We are taking all the teaching seriously to make sure the young people can take over." Ten per cent of the harvest is now used for the school feeding programme.

As dinner time begins at Bar Sauri primary school, children sprint across the playing fields to the newly built kitchen. The school's headmaster, Joseph Lanyo, looks on as his pupils queue for their beef and vegetables with ugali, a staple food made from maize.

"The children used to go home for lunch - sometimes there would be nothing there," he says. "Some of them would not come back in the afternoon. When we used to do athletics some of them would faint."

But, since the introduction of school dinners, the pupils' school test results have improved dramatically. Bar Sauri has gone from being 198th in the province to seventh. The difference, said Mr Lanyo, is food. "They are not hungry and they are here. It is simple."

Improved nutrition has also led to better health. A new clinic, fully staffed and providing free healthcare, has helped. The drop in malaria rates owes much to a decision to give every resident a mosquito net treated with insecticide.

A new clinic, agriculturalists, clean water points. With all that attention, it is no surprise such startling results have been achieved in Sauri. But the key to Sauri's success has not been a huge lump of cash. The Millennium Village Project itself has spent just \$50 per person each year. A further \$20 has been given by other donors. Government has spent \$30, the community has contributed \$10 each. In total, the project costs \$110 for each person every year.

The \$70 per capita provided by donors is the exact sum the rich world is committed to spend on development in Africa every year. By 2010 the G7 countries (it is G7 not G8 - this is finance, Russia isn't included) have pledged to raise that to \$100 a head. If the results in Sauri are replicated in the 11 other projects across 10 African countries it could fundamentally change the way aid is delivered.

Professor Sachs said: "The point of this is not about transferring money. It is about investing in very practical things."

Elvis's grandfather, Mr Oyier, plans to sell his new crops. "I will live on maize, but these are my cash crops," he said. "Lack of knowledge was a big problem but now everything has changed tremendously.

"Elvis should regard himself as a lucky one. He has a chance for a very good life."

Voices of the children

Harun, 13, Kenya

Harun is at his happiest when he is in a classroom. "When there is no noise and we are busy reading. That is a good day for me," he said.

Secondary education, which Kenyans do not begin until 14, is expensive. Harun's parents, who live in the slum of Korogocho near Nairobi, cannot afford the 30,000 Kenyan shillings (£240) to send him to school next year. He has eight brothers and sisters.

"I just want to learn so I will search for a sponsor. I want to be a pilot. "When I have a job I will live in Hurlingham [Nairobi] where rich people stay."

Jacky Akongo, 16, Uganda

Jacky is an Aids orphan with two brothers and three younger sisters and is responsible for all of them; her parents died of Aids. The family, who were displaced by the war in Uganda, live in one room with no electricity. The children sleep in the room, which measures no more than 12 feet by 10. They live off what Jacky earns by giving talks to young people about HIV.

She is still in school and would like to go on to study law at university. "If there was no war, we would have enough to eat. It is difficult to study when you are hungry," she says.

Mohammed, 13, Ethiopia

"I go to school in the morning, at seven, and in the afternoon I go to the agricultural plots and work there," says Mohammed, who lives with his two sisters, brother, mother and father in the village of Agajin. Most villagers in the Somali region are small farmers. But he doesn't want to be a farmer. "I'd like to be a teacher," he says.

He hopes to move to Jijiga, 30km away, to continue with his education. He has been at school for three years thanks to Save the Children projects which cater for 3,500 children in his region.

Mohammed, 10, Sudan

Mohammed fled his village in Darfur, west Sudan, seven months ago when Janjaweed Arab militiamen attacked. "They told us to leave," he says. "I ran away with my mother and sister. I don't know what happened to my father."

He lives in a child centre run by the International Rescue Committee, where Mohammed and his friends can be allowed to be children. "When I'm not here, I work," he says. "I rent a donkey... then I go out to collect water, sell it in the camp and split what I earn with the donkey owner. I make 250 Dinars (\$1) a day."

Yusuf Hajji, Kenya

Yusuf Hajji looks to be seven or eight, but he does not know his age. "People have never told me my age so I don't know," he said. He is playing with a friend outside a primary school in Korogocho, a slum housing 200,000 people in Nairobi.

Kenya introduced free primary education three years ago, but Yusuf has never been. Instead he does odd jobs for his mother or collects water or plays.

"We have no money so I can't go to school," he says. "If I could choose a birthday present I would choose school. I want to go to school."

Sherldeen Boucher, 7, South Africa

Like many children her age, Sherldeen Boucher is full of life. She hopes to complete school and become a doctor, but she is not aware of the obstacles that can unravel her dream. She was born HIV positive and drugs constitute her regular diet, thanks to St Barnard's Hospice in Johannesburg.

Her mother died of Aids when she was three months old and she was adopted by her mother's best friend, who is also HIV positive. Sherldeen does not know her father, who vanished before she was born.

Africa by numbers

19,000 children die daily from easily curable diseases

80% of children under the age of 15 who suffer from HIV are living in Africa

17% of Africa's labour force is estimated to be made up of children

25% of children between the ages of 10 and 14 in Africa are involved in labour

100,000 children believed to be begging on the streets by the Senegal government

21% of Kenya's children are not attending school

130,000 children estimated to be living on Nairobi's streets

200,000 children are orphans in Rwanda

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