

MILLENNIUM PROJECT

The once hunger-ravaged villages that have plenty of food and glory

Project aims to make Siaya the first district in East Africa to banish famine using the least resources

By DANIEL OTIENO

The lunch time bell rings, sparking a loud noise from pupils who rush from their classes at Nyamininia primary school in Yala Division of Siaya District.

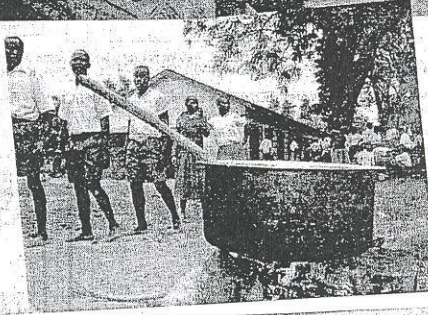
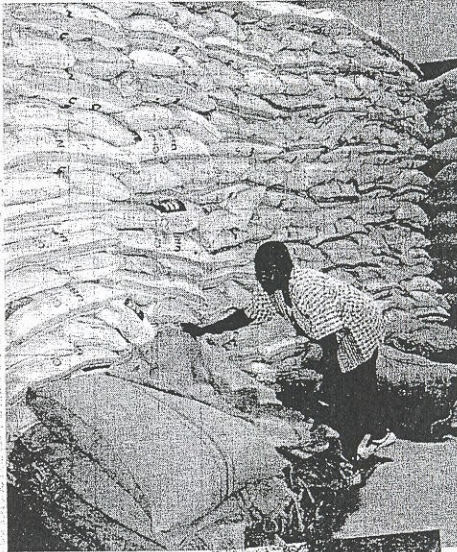
All their faces radiate joy because of one thing — their lunch is guaranteed. While in most primary day schools pupil would be rushing home for lunch, if any, those at Nyamininia are a privileged lot.

Within moments, they assemble at a corner of the school compound where cooks are waiting to serve them with steaming dish of ugali, meat, sukuma wiki and an orange — a balanced diet for their Friday menu.

Only last year, the situation was different and difficult. Most of the pupils at the school rushed home under the scorching sun characteristic of the area, and in most cases would return to school dejected, having failed to get a meal for lunch.

The United Nations poverty eradication pilot programme under the Millennium Village Project has brought a new ray of hope to the once hungry and disease-ravaged village, where residents used to live from hand to mouth.

The headmaster of Nyamininia, Mr Linus Otieno, and those of two other schools — Bar Sauri and Bar Turo — say the morale of pupils has been boosted as they are now assured of lunch and health care.



Joys and sorrows

There is a belief that a child's face and behaviour mirrors the joys and the sorrows in the community. Certainly, the UN project is reflected by the energy, performance and school retention among my pupils' Mr Otieno says.

Nyamininia Village is part of the expansion drive that aims to make Siaya the first hunger-free district in East Africa, using the least of resources possible. The project has now expanded to 11 villages.

The first village — Bar Sauri — partnered with the UN to explore the potential when life-saving interventions are introduced to a village and communities empowered with the means to pull themselves out of poverty.

The project coordinator, Dr Patrick Mutuo, says the villagers had a strong communal system, but lacked the revenue for basic services necessary to sustain economic growth. Most households, he says, were subsistence farmers, and many residents relied on remittances from people living and working outside their village to supplement their meagre farm incomes.

Year in year out, the residents woke up to tend their unproductive farms as others remained behind to look after their malnourished livestock, but the returns were almost negligible.

But now, their farms tell a different story. Rows of flourishing maize, bananas, onions and tomatoes depict a village full of life, a thing that was never witnessed before. Granaries are now coming up and villagers admit they have abundance from the farms, so much that they can dictate the price of their produce.

What used to happen is that during harvest time, everybody wanted to sell

A worker takes stock of the harvest from farms in Yala Division under the Millennium Village Project. INSET: Pupils file past a cooking point at the dining hall at Nyamininia primary school in Yala Division. The school is covered by the UN initiated project. Photos/DANIEL OTIENO

their maize to get some money to keep them going but now they have been taught how to diversify so that they create a balance on the crops grown, which helps stabilise prices' explains Dr Mutuo.

Statistics released by the project show an increase in farm yields. In 2004, before the project was launched, Bar Sauri realised an average of 1.9 tonnes grain yield per hectare. That rose to 4.9 tonnes when farmers were given subsidies. Last year, the subsidies were reduced by half, but the bumper harvest was still recorded, with the farmers getting 6.2 tonnes per hectare.

Currently, over 10,000 bags of maize and beans are stored in the village store, waiting for the appropriate time for sale.

In the past, bumper harvests led to lowering of prices of maize. What this means is that the villagers in their desperate efforts to get money would sell all their grain at a throwaway price,' says Dr Mutuo.

The move to gradually reduce the subsidies, Dr Mutuo explains, is a measure to ensure that the community is self-reliant, even when the aid is eventually withdrawn after the trial period.

Water springs

The water springs in the areas are now being protected to ensure the community has clean and safe drinking water. The overflows from the swamps are channelled to the numerous fish ponds that are already being dug in the area.

When we see the benefits we are already reaping from the resources we have always had within the community, the best way to define poverty is insanity.

I say insanity because we have been growing maize year in year out, getting the poor yield and doing nothing to better our

lives,' says a villager, Mr Patrick Okello.

The improved lifestyle has catapulted the once dusty and hunger-ravaged village to the international limelight, with leading development experts and international media jostling to see the strides made.

The village is now bubbling with life, with the building of new roads, health centres and an agricultural project that will see the residents reap the benefits of large-scale agriculture.

The average distance to a clinic or medical centre prior to the implementation of the Millennium villages was 5km over rough terrain. Yala Sub-District Hospital served more than 96,000 people.

There was no medical doctor at Yala until January 2005 when the project deployed one there to split his time between the hospital and the Sauri clinic.

Sauri is a malaria high-risk area, meaning the disease is prevalent throughout the year. More children than adults, who have developed partial immunity to malaria, suffer and die from the disease. In the region, Ministry of Health statistics show that 52 per cent of residents are afflicted with malaria and 24 per cent with HIV and Aids.

Influx of resources

Yala Sub-District Hospital has benefited a lot from the Millennium village programme with an influx of resources, which are also supported by the Ministry of Health. In addition to a doctor, there are now seven new staff members: two clinical officers, two laboratory technologists and three nurses. A new 32-bed ward, operating theatre, and incinerator were also built, and have served to greatly enhance hospital facilities.

One of the biggest problems the developing countries face is that most of the development projects do not address the issue of sustainability, throwing most of their beneficiaries in confusion because they don't know how to move forward,' Dr

arians are already under way to create a partnership between the villagers and Unilever Kenya, where the community will be under contract to grow chilly for commercial use by the food manufacturer.

The project has also seen the improvement of the road network, energy-saving cooking methods, environmental protec-

2005

The year when the project was launched

tion measures and diversification to productive ventures such as bee-keeping and fish farming.

The Millennium village project brings together a dozen scientists and development experts in agriculture, nutrition and health, economics, energy, water, environment and information technology.

They work with local communities and governments in using science-based interventions to achieve the MDGs, which involve reducing extreme poverty, hunger, disease, and lack of access to safe water and sanitation at a total cost of US\$110 (Sh8,000) per person including community and government contributions.

The UN Millennium Project was launched by then United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan to develop an implementation plan to achieve the MDGs by 2015.

It is made possible through a five-year grant from UK-based Lenfest Foundation that is applying a proven holistic package of interventions to help the villages get out of extreme poverty in the next 10 years.