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UN-backed Millennium Villages project in Africa launches second phase



A water system that runs through Kominé, part of the Millennium Villages of Tiby in central Mali

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A United Nations-backed initiative designed to accelerate efforts to attain social development and eradicate extreme poverty in rural Africa today launched its second phase, aiming to improve the living standards of an estimated half a million people across the continent.

The Millennium Villages Project, a science-based partnership between academia, business and UN agencies to achieve the Millennium Development Goals ([MDGs](#)), moves into the next – and final – phase with more than \$72 million in new pledges, including nearly \$50 million announced by George Soros, the founder and chairman of the Open Society Foundations.

The second phase will focus on business development to help the rural poor escape poverty and ensure that communities are on track to self-sufficiency when the project ends in 2015, the deadline for achieving the MDGs – the globally agreed blueprint for halving extreme poverty by halting the spread of diseases, promoting access to education and improving health care.

At today's launch of the second phase at UN Headquarters, [Secretary-General](#) Ban Ki-moon recalled visiting Mwandama village in Malawi in May 2010 with Jeffrey Sachs, the Director of the Millennium Villages project and his Senior Adviser on MDGs.

“I saw first-hand how an integrated, holistic approach to development can help entire communities lift themselves from extreme poverty,” he said. “The MDGs are interlinked – a comprehensive fight against poverty, hunger and disease.

“Success in one brings success in others. We do not need to pick or choose among objectives. On the contrary, the UN is progressively investing in areas with broad multiplier effects. The challenge – especially in this time of financial austerity – is to build on this momentum.”

Mr. Ban echoed those remarks in an op-ed column published in *The Daily News* in Egypt today.

“Touring the Mwandama village, I saw the potential of modern technologies – smart phones and mobile broadband, improved seed varieties, the latest in drip irrigation, modern diagnostic tests for malaria, and low-cost solar-energy grids – to advance human well-being in ways that simply were not feasible even a few years ago,” he wrote.

According to a scientific review of the project, successes achieved in the first phase between 2006 and 2009 across 11 Millennium Villages include the following:

- Malaria rates fell by 72 per cent over the first three years ;
- Households with access to improved drinking water more than tripled ;
- Across six sites, average maize yields doubled, and in some sites quadrupled;
- Rates of chronic malnutrition dropped by one-third among children under two;
- Students benefiting from school meal programmes increased to 75 per cent.

“It is the purpose of my foundation's continuing support to help scale up the experience in the model villages in the first phase and to link small agriculture with business structures that will provide sustainable incomes for entire regions, not just for model villages,” said Mr. Soros at a news conference following the launch. “This will be the main focus of the next phase.”

Mr. Sachs said the project had made “tremendous breakthroughs” in achieving the MDGs in places that seemed “absolutely hopeless.”

“The essence of the projects has been to work with the local communities, typically clusters of villages of 30,000 to 50,000 people, using cutting edge, low-cost technologies in a highly effective way and making sure that the communities benefit from the synergies by simultaneously investing in agriculture, health, education, infrastructure and business development.”

The Open Society Foundations announced it would renew the partnership, pledging \$27.4 million to support core project interventions, key staff positions, and the project's monitoring and evaluation activities.

The Soros Economic Development Fund said it would also provide up to \$20 million in loans to support investment-worthy business projects within the villages over the next five years.

“With the significant improvements already achieved in health, education, agriculture, gender equality, and incomes, plus the continued progress that we can expect in the second phase of the project, the Millennium Villages are on track to achieve the Millennium Development Goals by 2015,” said Mr. Sachs.

In phase two, the project will focus on raising incomes through business development and linking farmers to larger markets to ensure continued growth and greater economic stability.

The project will also work to fine-tune service delivery and other local systems put in place in the first five years; ensure sustainability by gradually withdrawing financial support from the project as governments scale up investments; and to document and replicate project interventions through rigorous monitoring and evaluation, as well as an open-source online toolkit.

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