Kenya : A Better Way to Fight Poverty

Impact d'une initiative d'aide alimentaire sur la réussite scolaire des élèves

- Orphelins du sida, orphelins et enfants vulnérables (OEV) - Par pays -

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Kenya has never seemed to be able to live up to the potential of its rich farmland and staggeringly beautiful valleys. Its government is corrupt. Its capital, Nairobi, has become a haven for street thieves and muggers. Some 56 percent of the population lives below the poverty level. Malaria, which could be as treatable as strep throat, kills one in five children every year because the government grossly shortchanges its public health system. All in all, it is a classic case of how African governments can squander foreign aid.

But far from the noise, pollution and public and private crooks of Nairobi,the village of Sauri, practically smack on the equator, is an example of a better way to do things. It is one of two test cases for the United Nations' ambitious program to cut poverty in half by 2015. Sauri's story shows how direct aid can largely bypass governments, getting money and help straight into the hands of the people who not only need it the most, but also know what to do with it.

Anne Omolo, the head teacher of Sauri's sole primary school, arrived six years ago to find a student population that was listless, miserable and performing poorly in national exams. Some 500 children were enrolled, but attendance was low. She soon realized the problem. "They were hungry" she said.

So on her own, she started a food program. She went to the village parents who could afford it and asked them to bring in corn and beans. But almost

half of the school's students were orphans whose parents had died of AIDS, and they couldn't afford to contribute food. So Mrs. Omolo and the 10 other teachers dug into their own pockets.

Eventually, they scraped together enough to feed about 100 students. It was a terrible choice. "Not everybody could eat," Mrs. Omolo said. So she fed the top two grades - seventh and eighth graders - because they would soon be taking national exams to move on to high school. Students from the younger classes went to the windows to watch their older schoolmates eat.The result was instantaneous. Attendance among the older children shot up to 100 percent, and their test scores followed suit. Sauri went from 68th out of 353 schools in the district in 2000 to 7th in 2004.

"This year," Mrs. Omolo says, "we will be No. 1." Part of the reason for her confidence is that this year, every schoolchild will eat. Sauri was chosen last year to be one of the United Nations' test villages - Koraro, Ethiopia, is the other - to show how poverty in Africa can be ended through programs that help villages directly. For the next five years, Sauri will receive $250,000 a year for agricultural, educational and health programs.

Much of the money will go to help farmers improve their crop yields. Farms are already looking better, thanks to people like Patrick Mutuo, a Kenyan soil expert who travels there from Kisumu four days a week to teach the farmers how to get the most out of their land. Because of Mr. Mutuo and his band of agricultural extension workers, Monica Okech's six acres of corn, ground nuts and beans are lush and green. Mrs. Okech, a fiercely independent 50-year-old whose husband left her in Sauri years ago, has planted leguminous trees and plants throughout her farm. These plants provide natural fertilizer for what was once depleted soil.

Mrs. Okech now feeds 10 villagers, and is building a chicken coop. The United Nations plan, spearheaded by the economist Jeffrey Sachs, seeks to expand the program to the entire district, and then all over Africa. But that will happen only if rich countries make good on their promise to ratchet up foreign aid to 0.7 percent of G.D.P. by 2015. Britain, France and Germany have all put out timetables for meeting the goal. The United States, the world's richest

country, has yet to do so.

In the meantime, the people in Sauri work on their farms while trying to ward off killers like malaria, hunger and AIDS - some 25 percent of them are infected with HIV. But all it takes is for the villagers to look across the valley at the anemic farms and dismal test scores of their neighbors to know that they are still the lucky ones.

Pour télécharger le PDF (en anglais) issu du livre, "An End to Poverty", de Jeffrey Sachs