

The Millennium Villages Project: How is it being sustained?

This Briefing Paper is the ninth in a series to communicate key points from the independent impact evaluation of the Millennium Villages Project (MVP). The MVP aimed to demonstrate that rural Africa could address poverty and achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) through low-cost, science-based interventions at the village level.

This mixed method impact evaluation of one MVP site in Northern Ghana took place over more than five years. The evaluation consisted of a statistically representative survey of over 2,000 households within 35 villages in the project site and 68 comparison villages. It also included three longitudinal qualitative studies that collected evidence on institutional change, a range of welfare measures and local perspectives (see MVP Briefing Paper 8). Undertaken by Itad, the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and Participatory Development Associates Ltd (PDA Ghana) and commissioned by DFID, it is anticipated that the findings will be of interest to a wide range of people in the development sector.

Millennium Villages Project

Beginning in 2005, the MVP aimed to overcome the 'poverty trap' facing some countries by applying an integrated strategy for health care, nutrition, education, water supply and sanitation, infrastructure, agriculture and small business in clusters of villages. The idea was to achieve the MDGs by undertaking simultaneous investments, rather than the usual sectoral or step-by-step efforts. The synergies from these multiple interventions were intended to have a greater impact than that of separate interventions.

By 2016, the project had been implemented in 14 different sites in 10 African countries, reaching approximately half a million people in 79 villages. The MVP sites cover different agro-ecological zones and together represent farming systems used by 90% of the agricultural population of sub-Saharan Africa.

Key messages on sustainability

The MVP aimed to strengthen local institutions and community capacity to ensure that project gains were sustainable. By strengthening local institutions, the project hoped to empower people to advance the MDGs within their own communities, increase the participation of vulnerable and minority groups in decision making and governance, and build the capacity of local government to sustain project gains over time.

Overall evaluation findings

- ▶ According to district officials, the MVP ended up creating a resource-intensive parallel structure. Project management was not integrated or embedded into existing decentralised government structures, and the MVP team continued to manage the bulk of funds and account to the donor directly.
- ▶ Many of the 'free service' interventions that the MVP provided (such as free ambulance service, the supply of medicine through the free National Health Insurance Scheme, subsidised tractor services, etc.) lack ongoing funding. There are already signs of them declining or having stopped.
- ▶ The evaluation concluded that the exit strategy and sustainability of MVP interventions was not fully considered at the design and planning stage.

The MVP in Northern Ghana

From 2012–16, the £11 million MVP in Northern Ghana targeted a cluster of 35 villages of up to 30,000 people in the West Mamprusi, Mamprugu Moagduri and Builsa South districts. This is an area of extreme poverty, with 80–90% of the population living below the national poverty line. The project was spearheaded by the Earth Institute (Columbia University), with operations overseen by the Millennium Promise and the Savannah Accelerated Development Authority (SADA), a semi-autonomous Government of Ghana agency.

Detailed findings at government and community levels

Government level

At local government level, the depth of participation in the MVP differed according to district institutions and the varying status within Ghana's decentralisation system as a whole. Some departments such as the Ghana Health Service, the Ghana Education Service, the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Cooperatives were regarded as key to implementing project activities and the MVP worked with them directly.

The MVP did not fully embed management within the local government structure and therefore could not influence or shape the institutional culture. District officials participated in project review and planning meetings but saw themselves more as guests than hosts. The MVP controlled project funds and did not use district tender boards for the procurement of services and supplies.

District officials had concern throughout the MVP implementation that it was unsustainable to pay monthly allowances to community health workers, community education workers, and top-up allowances to nurses and agricultural extension staff. It seems unlikely that government institutions can sustain this level of payment. Some services (e.g. the subsidised tractors) have already stopped, while others (e.g. ambulances, servicing and fuel for motorbikes, medicine supplies, etc.) are unlikely to continue due to lack of funding.

Community level

There were both gains and losses at community level:

- ▶ The project's push for the formation of farmer cooperatives and village savings groups has resulted in some being still active while others never took off or collapsed.
- ▶ There has been an increase in the number of meetings and the involvement in decision making by community members rather than just community leaders. This has been attributed to both the MVP and the activities of other government institutions.
- ▶ Traditional leaders are said to be more consultative with community members – this could be a result of the training received under the MVP. Plus, the position of the assemblyperson (the community's representative) has been strengthened.
- ▶ Some positions have been weakened, for instance the traditional birth attendant because the central government policy of institutional deliveries was enforced under the MVP.



The MVP Endline Summary Report and MVP briefings can be accessed from www.itad.com/knowledge-and-resources/MVEval

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Credits

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