



Photo: Courtesy of the Sabin Vaccine Institute

## Improving Health, Bettering Lives



Photo: Courtesy of the Sabin Vaccine Institute

“We knew this was the right investment for us, and for humanity.”

*Financier BILL GROSS and his wife, SUE, who auctioned rare stamps from his collection to support the Millennium Villages project*

Suppose you need to see a doctor but have to wait in line with more than a thousand other people for the few physicians serving your community. This is the grim reality of Africa’s health system—lack of access to crucial health services. Combined with other challenges like tropical diseases, a picture of poor health emerges that can hamper a marginalized population’s ability to escape the trap of poverty.

With the help of donors—Merck, GlaxoSmithKline, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Bill and Sue Gross, Nancy and Randy Best, and Betsee Parker, to name a few—Earth Institute staff and researchers are working through the Millennium Villages project to train community health workers and address malaria and other tropical diseases. The idea is that healthy communities will be better able to put their energy toward challenges such as education and environmental sustainability and work to improve their economic well-being—all part of the UN Millennium Development Goals set out to halve poverty by 2015.



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Through interactions with household members and health care professionals in clinics, community health workers (CHWs) can deliver preventative and curative services at the household level, and they form an important link to the larger health care system by providing information and directing referrals to clinics and district hospitals. Because community health workers are from the communities they serve, patients often feel comfortable volunteering information they might not otherwise reveal.

“The community health worker is the backbone of the health system for us,” says Prabhjot Dhadialla, a program director at the Earth Institute’s Center for Global Health and Economic Development, which runs the training program. New York-based staff and the staff in the Millennium Villages are working with national governments on key policy issues necessary to expand the model to a national scale. “Our goal is to make this a community and country program—replicable and adaptable,” says Dhadialla.

There are between 350 and 500 million malaria illnesses occurring annually and more than one million needless deaths, despite it being a highly preventable and curable disease. The Earth Institute’s Quick Impact Initiative and its key component, the Breaking the Bottlenecks to Malaria initiative, led by Awash Teklehaimanot, provide crucial expertise and advice to more than 10 African nations to boost their malaria control programs. Thanks to generous donors like the Morton K. and Jane Blaustein Foundation, the initiative is meeting its goals for interventions such as bed net distribution and expanded diagnostic capacities in seven countries.

Neglected tropical diseases (NTDs) are a group of 13 parasitic and bacterial infections that affect more than 1.4 billion people worldwide. They are diseases of poverty and are widespread among people in poor and marginalized communities. Yet, seven of the most common NTDs are easily controlled with medicines that cost roughly 50 cents per person, per year. As one of the co-founders of the Global Network for Neglected Tropical Diseases, the Earth Institute is helping to raise the profile of these ailments and is developing models for scaling up the prevention and treatment of the NTDs in Africa. The Earth Institute also leads a nationally scaled NTD control program in Rwanda. ■

Good health is an important part of escaping the trap of poverty, which affects many communities in Africa.