

Change from within: engaging local communities in achieving the millennium development goals in sub-saharan Africa

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A B S T R A C T

As the rest of the developing world makes critical steps towards achieving economic and social progress in raising standards of living, sub-Saharan Africa continues to lag behind facing grave challenges of widespread extreme poverty, malnutrition, natural resource decline and human diseases pandemic. Faced with this predicament, scientists at the Earth Institute at Columbia University have pioneered the concept of Millennium Villages that is designed to demonstrate what it takes to meet the eight Millennium Development Goals in sub-Saharan Africa. The core idea of Millennium villages is that improvised African villagers will escape from extreme poverty and sustain their rural livelihoods through a combination of modern and traditional knowledge, technologies and practices. The project is being implemented in twelve sites identified as hunger hotspots in ten African countries. However, studies have documented that development programs in Africa are bound to fail due to the strongly embedded and practiced socio-cultural beliefs, rites and norms. In particular, these socio-cultural practices are hindering women from accessing critical resources and becoming active participants in development activities. This paper will address two issues which are a) to highlight how local communities' capacity is strengthened and empowered by giving them resources and authority to use them flexibly through a participatory process and b) to demonstrate through an ethnographic study of 24 women residing in Sauri millennium village in western Kenya that to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, cultural change must come from within the community itself. When we (women) are equipped with knowledge and empowerment and acquire self-esteem, nothing can halt the winds of change from blowing across our village.... a woman leader, Sauri village

A R T I C L E I N F O

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Introduction

As the rest of the developing world makes critical steps towards achieving economic and social progress, sub-Saharan Africa continues to lag behind facing grave challenges of extreme poverty, malnutrition, natural resource degradation and human diseases pandemic. Despite the continent being subjected to countless development paradigms and foreign aid, progress to improve the lives of African people has been excruciatingly slow or sometimes failed (Mathews, 2004; Sachs, 2004; Martinussen, 1997). The failures is attributed to absence of local people's participation in program planning and implementation and failure to take into consideration local eco-climatic conditions and cultures (Saha, 2008; Chambers, 1997).

In the past two decades, our attention has been drawn to participatory development paradigms that encourage inclusion of local people in the development process (Chambers, 1992 and 1997; Desai, 2002). Proponents of participatory development assert that it's an empowering process since the voices of local people are not only heard, but listened and respected (Terry, 2008; Chambers, 1997; Moore, 2001). Participatory approaches ensure that local communities feel they have and hold a critical stake in the process and understand that change must come from within their own environments (Chambers, 1997). Its underlying principle is building of human capital to conduct their own problem analysis, design and implementation of appropriate initiatives, and monitoring and evaluation (Narayan, 1996). It requires a total commitment in action, particularly by external agents to relinquishing power to local partners and empowers them to actively engage in development projects (Nelson and Wright, 1995; Andrew et al., 1998; Moore, 2001).

While the process of participatory development is critical in spurring change in Africa, it's not sufficient in itself if local cultures are ignored and women are not brought into the forefront of development. In rural African, women comprise the most vulnerable group continually experiencing diminishing access to resources, limited decision-making powers and other impediments to improving their lives. The voices of rural women are often unheard and the fundamental contributions that they make particularly in food production systems and rural livelihoods are often not acknowledged (Mompoti and Prinsen, 2002). In recent years, scholars and development practitioners have made great strides in recognizing the critical role that African rural women play in contributing to rural economies (Varghese, 2002; Malatsi, 1991; Quisumbing and Meinzen-Dick, 2001; Schultz, 1993). Women play important roles in food production and generating income from non-farming activities. However, their access to and control of resources are often limited and opportunities for advancement curtailed because of their gender as well as socio-cultural obligations (Quisumbing and Meinzen-Dick, 2001). This has led to increased calls from national governments, the UN bodies and other international organizations to increase rural women's access to resources, empower them to take active roles in decision making without seeking consent from their husbands or any male head as well as include them as participants in policy making, planning and implementation of development programs (UN Millennium Project, 2005). Indeed, studies have shown that women who control resources invest in future generations, particularly on their health and education (Quisumbing and Meinzen-Dick, 2001).

However, cultural practices, norms and values that rural Africans seem to strongly adhere to are hindering women from accessing critical resources and becoming active participants in development activities (Verhelst and Tyndale, 2002; Mompoti and Prinsen, 2002; Gbotokuma, 1996; Isamah, 1996). For this paper, cultural practices are referred to the complex social practices in the form of rituals, language, religion, education, gender role patterns, social and family practices. In Africa, cultural practices exert strong influence on human behavior thus affecting subsistence economic production, and social organizations and structures (Sen, 2004). These cultural practices are complex and intertwined in the every day lives of rural African people, creating an intricate link with development (Sen, 2004; Mbakogu, 2004; Harrison and Huntington, 2000; Huntington, 2000). Cultural practices for example the role of power in shaping identities sets invisible ceilings to what an individual can or aspire to be in Africa. Therefore, cultural practices may not only restrict implementation of development programs but can restrict participation as well (Khadiagala, 2001; Landes, 2000).

It's important to note that participatory development programs implemented in other parts of the developing world have shown to breakdown cultural barriers, particularly for women. Empowerment of women can aid in breaking down some of the cultural practices that hinder development. Kabeer (2001) defines empowerment as "the expansion of people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them". In the context of rural Africa, this implies a woman's ability to control her own life by having freedom to choose her lifestyle and make critical decisions. One critical characteristic of development program where women were empowered is that women were the agents of change, willing to be active participants in the development programs. Thus, for development programs to succeed, change was driven from bottom-up, emphasizing the process of engaging and mobilization women.

The development project under consideration in this paper emphasized the importance of engaging local communities, particularly women in the development process. This paper intends to address two issues which are a) to highlight how local communities' capacity is strengthened and empowered by giving them resources and authority to use them flexibly through a participatory process and b) to demonstrate through an ethnographic study of 24 women residing in Sauri Millennium Village in western Kenya that to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), cultural change must come from within the community itself. By this, we will examine how a cultural practice has been modified or discarded in response to the need to meet the MDGs.

The Case Study – Millennium Villages Project (MVP)

The United Nations Millennium Summit of 2000 set eight ambitious MDGs for the developing world to be met by 2015. The goals aim at improving the standards of living of millions of people, ranging from halving extreme hunger and poverty, providing universal primary education, promoting gender equality and empowering women, reducing child mortality, improving maternal health care, combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other infectious diseases, ensuring environmental sustainability and developing global partnerships (United Nations Development Program, 2000). Most countries in the developing world have aggressively embarked on implementing and meeting the MDGs. However, sub-Saharan Africa continues to lag behind severely impeded by biophysical, economic and socio-cultural factors (UN Millennium Report 2005; Sachs, 2005; Sanchez & Swaminathan, 2005).

In March 2004, scientists at the Earth Institute at Columbia University initiated a bold, innovative and ambitious project to implement the MDGs at the village level in rural sub-Saharan Africa. By investing USD 110 per capita annually, MVP aims at providing the capital necessary for rural people to lift themselves out of the poverty trap. Based on nine principles, MVP applies an integrated endogenous approach that targets interventions to increase agricultural productivity, provide education and empowerment, improve public health and revamp and/or build infrastructure in 12 villages distributed in ten countries across sub-Saharan Africa (Figure 1 and 2). These 12 millennium villages comprise of over 18 different ethnic groups each with their own unique socio-cultural practices and biophysical environments. Each ethnic group has its own rich cultural heritage, religious practices and beliefs and, deeply embedded set of rules, norms and practices that guide their everyday life (Table 1). Earth Institute scientists understand and acknowledge that lifting people out of poverty is a daunting task, especially when attempting to change what they consider are 'harmful' socio-cultural practices. These 'harmful' socio-cultural practices have a pronounced tendency to be persistent, and a local person who has espoused the practices must have powerful reasons to change. Understanding and respecting underlying socio-cultural dynamics and, devising ways to work with these practices will provide an impetus for change in order to meet the MDGs by 2015. Therefore, MVP's bottom-up approach and the six out of the nine principles outlined in Figure 1 are based on full integration into the community's everyday life and not on negation and ignorance of traditional values and/or conflict between traditional practices and MVP interventions.

In each millennium village, local people are engaged in developing and implementing community-led actions plans that are adapted to their local needs, conditions and available resources. Involvement in and implementation of MVP activities will directly and indirectly have profound impacts on the way of life of the target as well as non-target communities. From empowerment, improved nutrition and well-being, technology, formal education, increased purchasing power and access to information – all of these will affect local people, the beneficiaries of development. In particular, MVP envisages economic transformation and this is expected to produce pervasive socio-cultural consequences from rising education levels, property inheritance regimes, rites of passage, sexual norms, declining fertility rates, value of girl child, women empowerment, age of marriage and marriage patterns to changing gender roles among others. In addition, unintended consequences might arise such as elite capture of activities and social exclusion of vulnerable groups within the village (Cabral et al., 2006).

Engaging Local People in Meeting the MDGs

One of the main principles underlying the implementation and success of the millennium villages is active involvement and participation of community members in the process (Figure 1). After identification of a target village, MVP scientists initiate the initial contact with local communities usually through the local leaders. One of us participated in the first initial community meeting where Drs. Jeffrey Sachs and Pedro Sanchez engaged the community in exploring what they want their village to have and how 'together, we can achieve it'. Much of this initial discussion is documented in Sachs book "The end of poverty". It is during this initial meeting that community members understood that they have to become active partners in development and that they need to create spaces for effective dialogue and exchange of ideas with MVP team. After the initial meeting, MVP employed a three-tier participation approach, which are contribution, organization and empowerment.

First, right from the onset of the project, villagers are informed of their contribution to the project, ten US dollars per person per year. The rest of the annual cost is taken by an international non-government organization, Millennium Promise (USD 50), local and national government (USD 30) and partner organizations (USD 20), making a total of 110 US dollars per villager per year. The contribution by local people in each of the village has been skilled and unskilled labor, local resources, management of programs e.g., school meals, and monitoring of the project activities.

To ensure the sustainability of activities initiated, villagers are empowered through a series of technical capacity building on interventions that can aid them meet the various MDGs as well as on administrative and entrepreneurial skills (Millennium Promise Report, 2005). In particular women and vulnerable groups such as widows, the disabled and the youth who don't directly own resources are targeted. Villagers are empowered to and engage in discourse on identifying community problems and developing locally defined cost effective solutions. These solutions are translated into various activities which are then implemented by villagers.

Various committees were created to ensure that activities are implemented. The committees also monitor the progress of each activity, evaluate and report back to the village executive board, who then report to the whole community. The committees are elected for a two-year term and comprise of health, agriculture, water, energy, environment, business, roads and education. Establishment of community training centers that can act as information venue and meetings places are equipped with computers and extension materials such as fertilizer use, child nutrition and, malaria prevention and treatment. By engaging and nurturing community involvement, the project envisages increased social cohesion and support and decreased exposure to existing and emerging vulnerabilities.

Sauri Millennium Village (SMV)

Sauri Millennium Village (SMV) comprises of a cluster of eleven villages, initiated in July 2005. It's located in the subsistence maize-based farming region of western Kenya. The region receives bimodal rainfall permitting two cropping seasons annually. Annual rainfall is about 1800 mm and temperatures are moderate ranging between 18 to 27°C with an average of 24°C. The soils derived from volcanic material are clayey, reddish, deep and well drained, though depleted in Nitrogen and Phosphorus. The economic mainstay is small-scale agriculture pursued on less than 0.5 ha of land. Demographic baseline data collected at the onset of the project documented about 970 households located in 645 homesteads with a total population of 5521 people (SMV Annual Report, 2006). Of this, 13.13% are aged below 4.5 years, 20.09% are 5-12 years, 14.92% are 13-17 years, 39.23% are 18-49% , 11.99% are equal or greater than 50 years and 0.63% are unknown (SMV Annual Report, 2006). SMV has three and one primary and secondary schools, respectively. The primary schools have initiated school feeding program with support from local people. This has led to increased school enrolled and student retention, particularly for the girl child. In addition, to encourage girls to attend school regularly, free sanitary towels are provided girls.

SMV is predominantly inhabited by the Luo people, one of the largest ethnic groups in Kenya. Like most African societies, the Luo social structure and livelihood responsibilities are highly gendered with men being the major decision-makers and controller of critical resources such as land, livestock and trees. Women's economic autonomy and power is continuously constrained due to limited ownership of property and access to economic resources (Tamale, 2004).

The Luo Cultural Rituals that might Hinder Implementation of and Achievement of MDGs in the Sauri Millennium Village

1) Widow inheritance practices

The Luo people practice a levirate system (wife inheritance) with the male inheritor known as Jatero (usually a brother-in-law or close relative) serving as the legitimate husband. Jatero assumes the role of household decision-maker for the widow and her sons (Potash 1986; Kirwen 1979). Jatero does not physically relocate to the widow's home but visits as often as required to check on the family and perform his role as head of household (Potash, 1986). Widows are still not permitted to remarry to a man of their choice and are under extreme social pressure to accept a Jatero. The Jatero is expected to provide social and financial support to the bereaved family such as building or revamping the widows' house, sexual rituals related to farming, funerals and weddings, marriage of children and blessing of farm produce. The position of Jatero is still revered. However, the practice of levirate is currently being abused whereby the Jatero have been reported to take widows and embezzle their wealth, for example, steal livestock or the deceased husband's life savings if he was formally employed (Abuya, 2002). Widows in the past did not have forum to address their complaints and most of them languish in poverty. When SMV was initiated, the practice of squandering widow's wealth was rampant and by last year, several Jateros have been reported to sell widows' farm inputs such as fertilizers and crop seeds.

2) Sexual rituals practiced in subsistence production

SMV receives an adequate and reliable rainfall, which is bimodally distributed, thus permitting two cropping cycles annually. At the beginning of the rainy season, sexual rituals are performed before any farming activity is undertaken. A husband (or Jatero) and wife perform sexual rituals the eve of all farming activities including land preparation, crop seed sowing, weeding and harvesting the produce. This ritual entails the man ejaculating into the womb of the woman to symbolize fertilization of the farm and blessing the produce (Nyasimi, 2007). To ensure that this ritual and other cultural practices were adhered to, strong cultural sanctions are reinforced and are passed on through generations. For those who break the practice, a curse befalls which expresses itself in a terminal illness known as Chira and stigma that led to ostracization from community events and leadership roles (Ocholla-Ayayo 1976). Punishment could be passed on through the male generations, until the curse was identified and cleansed (Ocholla-Ayayo 1976; Obbo, 1986).

The above practices of wife inheritance and sexual rituals place the sexually active Luo population at great HIV/AIDS infection risk. In some regions of Luo community, widows have been considered 'AIDS carriers', though it has not deterred Jateros and husbands from having unprotected sex (Panafican News Agency, 2000), A study conducted by Luke (2002) showed that 40% of random study population of 926 Luo women, were worried about contacting AIDs from their sexual partners, particularly from a Jatero. These practices thus might hinder HIV/AIDS mitigation programs.

Study Methodology

We have briefly outlined two cultural practices that might hinder effective implementation and achievement of MDGs within the stipulated time of 2015 and even beyond, as long as the Luo people continue to strongly adhere to them. Within the SMV, with increased exposure of the community to influential people, particularly women from their own Luo group and other ethnic groups, it led to increased awareness of dangers that their own cultural practices might pose on meeting the MDGs. Women in SMV led by a widow initiated an awareness and social support system to break away from these practices. Thus forming the second objective of this paper which is to demonstrate through an ethnographic study of 24 women residing in Sauri millennium village that to achieve the (MDGs), cultural change must come from within the community itself, and particularly from women. By this, we examined how women are rejecting and/or modifying inheritance and sexual rituals and instead are actively engaging in MVP activities. This has led to increase in self-esteem, safety nets and social networks among the women of SMV.

The study was conducted for seven months between August 2007 at the start of the short rainy season and February, 2008 the start of long rainy season. Since our main concern was to explore what changes women were experiencing in their lives and why it's occurring, the study therefore relied on a qualitative mixed techniques approach, whereby we employed individual informal interviews and participant observations, focus group discussions and participatory exercises. The reason we incorporated several qualitative approaches was to capture the unfolding stories and events in the participant's lives and validate the data collected. Three focus group discussions were held and the information collected was used to generate questions for the individual interview guide. Individual interviews involved five visits to each participant's home. In addition to home visit, participants were observed during village committee meetings, general village barazas, interactions with friends and neighbors and at nearby market places where they were selling farm produce. A participatory wealth ranking exercise was done to characterize the participants in order to know the wealth status of the participants and use the data collected to determine whether women from different wealth status were experiencing similar changes in their lives. Another participatory exercise called social venn diagramming was also conducted with the study population to assess their social networking within the villages and linkages to other non-millennium villages.

Findings General characteristics of the participants

This study targeted only 24 women and purposively selected women from three main categories; widows-inherited, widows-not inherited and women with husbands. Participant's age ranged from 22 to 62 years, with a mean age of 43.2 years. 44.4% of the women have not attended any formal education, while 27.7% and 16.7% of the women attended 4 and 8 years of primary education. 11.1% completed secondary school and these women were among the youngest participants. Information collected from the participatory wealth ranking exercise showed a 41.67% of the participants were ranked as not wealthy, 25.0% as less wealthy and only 33.33% were ranked as wealthy households (Table 2). Most of the inherited widows were classified as not wealthy while widows-not inherited were classified under less wealthy and wealthy households. The main reason given was that since SMV started, widows-not inherited have gained autonomy on decisions regarding management of resources, farming activities and engagement in income generating enterprises such as rearing chicken, growing peppers and making crafts to sell in local market.

All the participants except two women who were inherited widows are members of at least three informal social groups, which were initiated after SMV begun. The social groups include self-help, women, church and merry-go-rounds. Two groups (Soso and Nyalego women groups) were formed prior to SMV. These two groups have increased their membership and added more activities such as poultry rearing, tomato, scallions and green pepper growing. In addition, there are clan groups that assist each household during funerals, weddings and other family functions. All the participants belonged to a clan groups though in this group women do not participate in decision making. Ten widows not inherited and five women with husbands are active members of external groups outside of SMV. These external groups were identified as women and merry-go-round groups that the participants joined after meeting other women at the Sauri health center and Yala market. In Figure 3, the interaction of the groups is in terms of memberships so that the participants were able to observe how they share information and ideas across the groups. We documented the interests and activities of each group, though not reported in this study.

Responding to Sauri Millennium Villages Project: Women Reshaping Cultural Practices

a) Rejecting widow inheritance

According to Uphoff and colleagues (Uphoff et al., 1998) development programs that encourages community participation are better placed to influence persistent cultural practices. In SMV, the practice of widow inheritance and associated sexual rituals has an important impact on effectiveness of MVP and the women understand that the persistence of their cultural practices and beliefs can deeply affect their economic transformation. Therefore, SMV together with women embarked on intensive awareness programs where local people are involved in sharing information and learning from other ethnic groups through exchange visits. With increased exposure to information and interaction with different ethnic groups, widows in SMV are actively advocating for alternative widow inheritance practices. In most cases, widow inheritance process the Jatero taking control of and making decision for the widow's resources and her children. Resources such as fertilizers and crop seeds provided by SMV thus fall under the control of Jatero who in most cases did not deliver the inputs to the widow. If they delivered, it was not the correct amounts. Proceeds from sale of surplus farm produce are managed by the Jatero. Furthermore, the widows were not permitted to attend community meetings and if they did, they sat at the back and hardly said a word. After observing the bumper crop yields on neighboring at the end of the first season, the widows secretly met and discussed the issue. They wanted to collect the farm inputs themselves without going through the Jatero. The widows realized that to keep pace with other households, they needed to break away from the Jatero and led their own lives. However, they understood that any widow who chases away the Jatero will be ostracized by the community. They sought counselor and support from women leaders who are respected by the community. A prominent woman leader in the Sauri village remarked:

We (women) have to stand up for each other. We must offer support and embrace widows because that is the only way we can break away from the cultural ties. We have realized that we need to break these ties move forward. I have traveled to other areas especially among the Kisii people and seen women who have taken initiative and they are more prosperous than men. A woman does not require a man in the home to become wealthy. All she needs are other women to encourage her and spur her on.

The above statement was echoed by other research participants who noted that they when a widow is left out of family functions, the other women in the homestead rally around her. The widows are now raising awareness and promoting change through advocacy, particularly through the widows and women groups. Some of the women groups have included in their constitutional support to widows who do not want to be inherited. Support can be in form of financial, food or interactions since the community ostracizes them. For the widows who cannot stand the social pressure, they are demanding for an alternative practice that involves symbolic inheritance where a Jatero leaves a piece of his clothing in the widow's house. According to one participant:

In order for me to participate fully in the MVP activities, I want to make my own decisions without seeking consent from the Jatero. To make everyone happy, I allowed Jatero to leave his shirt to my house and he passes by to check on me and the children. This gives me power to educate my children and engage in activities as I wish.

A study by Tshatsinde, (1990) found successful rural women included single and widows who could make independent decisions regarding production and marketing of farm produce and had access to credit. Others including women whose husbands had migrated into urban centers could not engage in development because they had to wait for men to make decisions for them. We are witnessing the same trend in SMV where widows not inherited and women with absentee husbands are initiating income generating activities and acquiring loans. The dynamics of SMV participation approach described previously has substantially added to the engagement of women in enterprises and the need to break away from the wife inheritance practices. One participant remarked:

If I was inherited, I could not be a member of Soso women group or be elected to the water committee. Jatero cannot allow my participation in any activities without his consent. I now feel free to assist my relatives in need of food, cloth, housing and sometimes money. I also offer companionship to recently widowed women and guide them through the process of getting on their feet after the funeral.

Customarily, the willingness of the Luo people to help relatives when a calamity strikes is culturally deep-seated. However, widows who refuse to be inherited shunned by the community. Through awareness campaigns and interactions with other communities, widows in Sauri are realizing that their need to support each other as exemplified by the statement above. Women are gaining crucial positions and respectability within SMV as characterized by their own hard work and willingness to be elected to committees, and the appreciative demeanor being expressed by men. A widow remarked that:

Men are respecting us now. We have shown that we can do without a Jatero in the home. Infact some of the men are encouraging us to hold discussions with young unmarried women in the village to encourage them to participate in SMV activities.

It appears that the customary and inherently disadvantaged position that women, particularly widows held among the Luo in SMV is shifting. Traditionally, the women had a very narrow band within which they individually and collectively made decisions and participated in income generating activities. As more men are witnessing the formidable work that women can achieve without being inherited, it's encouraging them to let their wives be part of SMV committees. We talked to an elderly man who was not part of the research study and he remarked:

We should have realized along time ago that some of our cultures are not in tune with economic progress. Why should a widow be inherited? I am encouraging my own daughters to be independent of men, to consider and make decisions by herself and if she must involve her husband, to ensure that her ideas are also not only considered but respected as well.

b) Altering sexual rituals

The sexual social norms that have permeated and persisted through time among the Luo people is due to power relations. Since a woman cannot perform any farming activity before sexual rituals are performed, the norm has made it mandatory for a dominant male presence within a household. It has become so extreme that household can skip a whole cropping season of there is no man to perform sexual rituals. In past years, a brother could step in if a husband was away (Luke, 2002; Potash, 1986). In recent years, women fear having sexual relations with husband's brother because of the pandemic HIV/AIDs – remember that the sexual rituals involves ejaculation into the womb and hence condoms cannot be used. In SMV, un-inherited widows are influencing attitudes about sexual rituals associated with farming activities. Since the community knows that they are not inherited, and they are continuing with farming activities, the rest of the community is realizing that nothing will happen to them if sexual rituals are not performed. A widow remarked:

After I rejected a Jatero that was identified for me, five elderly men visited me and said that I cannot farm without a man. I firmly stood by my early decision and quietly explained that I was ready for any consequences that might arise. They told me that I will die within a year and my children will forever be cursed. It has been three years and I am still going strong. My daughter is married and expecting a baby and no curse has befallen her.

Another widow remarked:

I realized that I could not wait for Jatero to get fertilizer and seed for me from SMV. In addition, the knowledge we received when the inputs were distributed was that we had to sow the seed and apply fertilizers at the right time. If I had to wait for sexual rituals with Jatero, I could have been late to sow the seeds and hence achieving low yields. The Jatero has to have his sexual rituals with his two wives before coming to me and that could have delayed my seed sowing time.

As previously mentioned, sexual rituals surrounding farming activities involves a man ejaculating into the womb of the woman. With strong HIV/AIDS campaigns by the MVP team that encourages people to use condoms, some of the widows who still want to have sexual relations, are demanding the Jatero to wear condoms. After the sexual act, the widows pour the semen onto the farm to symbolize fertilization. According to one widow:

I am still young and I do have sexual needs. However, I don't want to catch AIDs. I demand that my Jatero uses a condom and I bury his semen in the fields to fertilize the land and bless the yields. We are not totally breaking away from our culture, but modifying it with the changing time. Eventually when my daughter gets married, I am positive she will not believe in fertilizing the land.

The above represents a form of cultural change that results from deliberate efforts of the community to influence values and beliefs often due to pressure, for this case, the pandemic HIV/AIDS scourge. Indeed, the impacts of HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa are widely documented. These widows do not want to be exposed to HIV/AIDS and are requesting Jatero to wear condoms. Condoms are offered freely at the newly built Sauri health clinic and one widow said:

I collect about five condoms every time I visit the health center. This ensures that I am prepared whenever a Jatero visits and he has no excuse not to use it. I told him that we must use a condom and at first he refused saying that he will be killed like the man in the bible.

I insisted on it and now we use condoms. He has also started carrying condoms in his pocket.

Women are gaining the ability to negotiate for safe sex. It's documented that most women both married and unmarried face physical abuse if they suggest use of condoms (Kalichman et al., 1998; Cleland and Ali, 2001). Our study with widows suggests that women must stand firm and insist on condoms and by actually have a supply of condoms in the house, the men do not have a reason not to use them. The Sauri widows have improved their power relations with men and broken through the social norms that have for years hindered them from actively making decisions. For the women who cannot negotiate safe sex with men, they suggested that the female condom should be stocked at the Sauri health center like the male condom:

We have heard that there are female condoms at the Sauri health center. Most of us have not seen it and hence we do not how to use them. The health committee should be sensitized on female condom who in turn will share information with us. Or SMV staff should hold training sessions with adults' and teach them about female condoms. That way, women can protect themselves without expecting a man to protect us and in turn men are aware that women have their own condoms.

However, the situation is different for women with husbands. During a focus group discussion with the participants, married women lamented that widows are getting stronger and are able to lay down widow inheritance rules and sexual rituals with Jatero. Married women are still bound within social norms that permit their husbands to control them in most aspects of their social relationships. A married participant said:

I cannot demand for my husband to wear a condom because he always approaches me at night (laughing). I believe that if I suggested a condom he will think that I am cheating on him and he will beat me. My friend who knew that her husband was having relations with another woman in Yala town was beaten when she gave her husband a condom. Widows are better placed than us and are holding power over men and we hope through them, they can influence our young girls to demand men to wear condoms.

c) Women making themselves visible, heard and listened to

In African urban centers, women are playing critical role in making themselves not only visible, but heard as well (Gould, 2006). This has been attributed to increased formal education among women, cultural interactions and enhanced women opportunities (Gould, 2006).

On the contrary, in most rural African environment, women are often unseen and unheard. Rural women do not have space to be heard or seen, thus their ideas and thoughts are often not expressed. Therefore, to increase the participation of women in community activities and leadership roles, it demands for great investment in capacity building of both sexes, particularly on attitudes and 'accepted' social behaviors.

The approach taken by MVP is fundamentally about change, influencing both the direction and speed of economic and social transformations in African villages. In that context, SMV implements an empowering approach that strengthens women's asset base and encourages women to be active members and to vie for electable positions in MDGs sector committees (Table 3).

According to Quisumbing and Meinzen-Dick (2001), increasing women's assets base and improving their informal and formal education, ensures that the human capital of future generations is positively impacted. In the SMV, eight committees to implement and manage various activities were initiated. An overall executive board was also created to foresee the activities of each committee. The first chairperson of Sauri Executive Board was a woman, an un-inherited widow. This woman did not bear children and hence was held at a lower status than other women in the village. However, with personal ambition and strong desire for leadership, she repackaged herself as a community leader and was elected the first chairperson.

According to one participant:

The chairlady has demonstrated that women can overcome their lower status and emerge as equals with men. The persistent and courage she has displayed and the way she managed the development projects within Sauri is amazing and extraordinary. If a man takes over, he will probably marry a second or third wife because that is all they think about when men acquire new status. But with this chairperson, all she thought about and encouraged us women is to be strong and rise above our cultural norms and vie for positions in the committees.

Access to decision-making positions for SMV women has hinged on the ability of women themselves to serve as an enabling and transformative tool. Women are taking deliberate measures such as voting for another woman to ensure there is a woman representing them in decision-making positions. In SMV women who held positions in the first committee election of 2006 also vied during the second election.

According to these women, it's because participation and involvement in key community leadership positions enhanced their self-esteem and confidence. A widow who was elected to represent her village on the water committee remarked that:

By holding a position at the village committees, we make ourselves visible and our voices heard and listened to. I feel important when I share my ideas during the meeting. Since time immemorial, our productive work has not valued and only reproductive work particularly if we delivered sons was important. As a community leader, I have brought this issues during meetings and shared with men who never realized how marginalized we were. Some of the men readily agreed to encourage women to participate in SMV, but some are still reluctant. What we need is a culturally sensitive forum where men and women can explore the issues of power and inequality and together come to an agreement. This forum should be conducted in such a way that the reluctant men do not feel threatened, but recognize that the traditional role of a woman is rapidly changing while men still cling to old and outdated social norms.

Our interview among women with husbands reveals that there is evidence of minute and slow changes in their husbands. These husbands might be willing to relinquish some power, particularly for those residing in urban centers. According to one participant:

Since the SMV project started and my husband has seen the crop yields and been treated at the health center, he has told me to gather as much from the project as possible. This is in terms of resources and education. He also encouraged me to vie for a position in the Sauri Executive Board, which I did and was elected. My husband now does not demand to know what I have been doing like previous years. He opened a savings bank account at Equity Bank for me and I know have my own passbook. I feel highly regarded by my husband. I encouraged other women to also have their own bank account and I know my friend has opened one too.

Overall, there are more women elected to the committees comparable to men (Table 3). During the period of data collection, the Sauri executive board is headed by an un-inherited widow. Within the Sauri executive board, positions were created for vulnerable and marginalized groups such as youth and the disabled people. At the sector level, there is unequal gender representation with some committees having more women than men such as health, water and sanitation, enterprise development and education (Table 3). A married woman urged that:

We are aiming to have the constitution changed to reflect half and half representation for men and women, particularly at the Sauri Executive Board. This is the highest committee level and we want our voices to be heard. Most of the women do not attend this meetings and I was told by my husband not to attend and if I attended to vote for a man. I opted not to attend. However, if women understand that half the positions in each committee were left for them, more women could attend and vie for positions.

At household level, women are strongly getting involved in decision making, particularly encouraging their girls to attend school, planning farming activities and diversifying their livelihood strategies. In 2003, the Kenyan government introduced free universal primary education and witnessed an increase in school enrollment (Daily Nation, 2003). According to the report, more boys than girls enrolled and sustained attendance than girls because the girls were needed to work at home to provide food. With the introduction of free school meals, all parents enrolled their children in Bar Sauri Primary school which recorded an increased student enrollment for both girls and boys. A participant remarked that:

I am now increasingly involved in my two daughter's education. I check their books every Friday evening to monitor their progress and give them advice. My husband used to do this but now I take it upon myself to monitor my daughters' school progress. I attended secondary school but my mother never at anytime checked my books. I believe our own belief in women's traditional role as the passive spouse is coming to an end. The generations of my daughters will have more power in decision making and men better be ready to accept that change.

The above was reciprocated by a widow who noted that: Unless we stand for ourselves and speak out, no man is going to relinquish any power or seek our advice and send our daughters to school. I never heard my grandmother and mother contradict the men in their lives. I was told by my grandmother that I need to listen to the men and not raise my voice. As a widow who does not want to be inherited, I now make my own decisions and speak out at village meetings because no one will speak for the widows.

*D) Increased women's social interaction,
support system and safety nets*

Active participation at various levels of village committees and community events such as harvest festivals, field days and tours, is enabling the women to expand their social interaction and mobility.

More women are interacting with outsiders who come to provide information such as government and non-governmental officials. There is a growing awareness among women that they can directly seek for assistance from agricultural and health officers when they have a problem. A participant who is an elected official in the agricultural committee noted that:

As an official in the agricultural committee, I get to attend field days and tour other places. What I learn in the field days, I share with fellow Sauri villagers during public meetings and this has increased my confidence and self-esteem. I feel confident that I can answer questions particularly from men who feel that I might panic and not answer their questions. I am no longer intimidated by men and other women told me that I am brave.

For un-inherited widows who feel that they are more socially disadvantaged than their inherited widows and married women, participation in committees and in various social groups offers them an expansion of friends and networks to facilitate them take necessary actions to improve their livelihoods. For example, being a member of the widows' self-help group, the widows have access to group labor, revolving group funds and loan schemes from the Kenya Women Finance Trust – a local Kenyan non-government organization that caters strictly to women groups. All the participants expressed a positive peer-to-peer pressure when they interact amongst themselves.

We encourage each other to improve our livelihoods. When I visit my houses of my friends and group members and see what new changes they have made, I feel encouraged to do the same or even better. My friend bought an improved dairy cow and within three months I had bought mine.

The cow belongs to me and not my husband or my sons and they understand that. Having my own cow improves my self-image among other women. In addition, our women leaders started an initiative to build houses for widows.

A Jatero is expected to build a house for a widow or revamp it. But most Jatero just want to munch off the widows.

All the participants expressed that involvement in social groups has increased since SMV was initiated in their villages. Social linkages to non-millennium villages also increased when the women interacted during field days, at the health center, markets and other social spaces such as the community center. The women also supported each other when they go to the Sauri health center for reproductive health. In particular the younger women asked their friends to accompany them to the health center when they wanted to pick birth control pills and condoms. Women have formed networks that help them exchange ideas, identify their needs and present it to women leaders, and develop friendships that economically promote each other. These informal networks (women only members) give a sense of hope, solidarity and possibilities.

This is the only way we can expect to change our culture and improve on our wealth. Including men in the networks will make other women not talk or refuse to participate.

The dynamism that these women are displaying in their social lives through strengthening their own group associations and interactions with external groups is creating and enhancing opportunities for women's participation and leadership. These groups are offering women 'safe havens'.

Conclusion: Change is slow but.....

This study has highlighted the changing cultural practices among the Luo of SMV in western Kenya. We have documented women's own energetic efforts to see the need for change and actually work towards achieving the change. Cultural change is a highly sensitive aspect for any external agent to deal with or attempt to change. This is because cultures provide rules and guidance for behavior and social interaction in a community. External attempts to change cultural practices are often stonewalled and any initiated programs fail to sustain itself. Unintentionally, SMV has provided space for local people to critically reflect on what they want and discuss pressing issues amongst them. The diverse groups of women - widows and married women - are connecting with each other and overcoming their invisibility within the community. Through participation in community activities and involvement in key leadership positions, they have developed their self-esteem and are resisting negative cultural practices. Our next research will focus on men and explore ways in which they are dealing with the cultural changes and the 'emerging' women leaders. This study touched briefly on power relations and it revealed that increasing internal and external social interactions exposes women to new ideas. They are also pressing for increased participation and inclusion in community activities and advancement for their young girls. By actively speaking out, forming women's only social support groups and expanding their safety nets, they are simultaneously strengthening their positions within their own respective households and enhancing the villages' development prospects.

The gradual cessation of the wife inheritance practices and sexual rituals implies that widows in SMV will soon be culturally recognized and respected as women headed homesteads. These household will no longer be economically marginalized since they will have access to land and other resources, freely engage in small enterprises and hold the power to make their own decisions in their hands. In particular, widows are strongly emerging as independent households capable of supporting and raising families on their own, albeit with support from other women.

We have outlined cultural shifts and changes that are taking place among the Luo women of SMV. Even though the SMV approach provided the impetus for change, the cultural shifts and changes are internally driven by women as they attempt to meet the MDG milestones. Women in SMV are demonstrating an urge – an eager urge – to participate in SMV and other organizations in order to shape their lives. The women recognize that for any consequential economic and social transformations to take place in community, they must foster their own abilities and capabilities and make the necessary changes. Cultures are dynamic practices, though the speed of change differs depending on the source of impetus. We do acknowledge that the cultural practices outlined in this paper might have changed with time without the presences of SMV, but appreciate that SMV has influenced what cultural practices ought to change and their speed of change.

Finally, a lot of development programs are involved in documenting technological change, which tends to be more dramatic and easier to monitor than socio-cultural change. For example, within SMV, increases in crops yields, reduction in malaria incidences, increased school enrollment and sustained attendance have been reported. This study is the first step towards documenting the impacts of SMV on local people's cultures. We are currently working with the people of SMV to develop a cultural participatory monitoring and impact assessment tool.

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List of Figures

Figure 2: *Location of Millenium Village Project in Sub-Saharan Africa*

