'Castle in the sky': The anomaly of the millennium villages project fixing food and markets in Sauri, western Kenya

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1. Introduction

World development history is characterised by a succession of interventionist development strategies which have in common the intention to reduce poverty and create conditions for sustained economic growth by increasing institutional and technical efficiencies. The underlying discourses of planned development have remained largely unchanged over the years. This fortified continuities rather than generating robust discontinuities (Escobar, 2011: 21–54), while new development questions and challenges such as enduring poverty, malnutrition, child mortality, insecurity have emerged since then. Continuities at the level of development discourse to expand and deepen the processes of 'modernisation' (Arce and Long, 2000) through planned interventions are well present in the Millennium Village Project (MVP). Wilson (2013, 2015) perceives MVP likewise as a prime example of social engineering of a 'model village-style social experiment' and again as 'a living laboratory' whereby massive investments are made in integrated programmes at village level through planned interventions within a specific timeframe.

The MVP is a high-profile project implemented with substantial financial and ideological support from the United Nations, political celebrities, business elites and academia to accelerate achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). MVP was piloted in 2005 in two villages in sub-Saharan Africa and up-scaled to about ten in 2007 and since then to 80 villages. Over the years, these projects have been praised for achieving considerable progress in the fields of education, health and, notably, smallholder agriculture (Sanchez, 2006; Sanchez et al., 2007; Nziguheba et al., 2010; Denning et al., 2009; Deckelbaum et al., 2006; Pronyk et al., 2012). MVP and more generally the MDGs, however, have been subjected to critical evaluations (Easterly, 2009; Hulme, 2009, 2010.) MVP has specifically been critiqued for not disclosing project data for independent, objective analyses (Clemens and Demombynes, 2011, 2013) and not achieving impact despite massive funding (Wilson, 2013, 2015, 2016; Wanjala and Muradian, 2013; Carr, 2008; Clemens et al., 2007). Others have argued that the purpose of most development interventions is to further capitalism and entrepreneurial values in various ways (Umans and Arce, 2014: 342) and

to extend processes of 'accumulation by dispossession' (Wilson, 2016; Harvey, 2009). This paper sets out from an assemblage perspective to contribute to a critical and reflexive analysis of the MVP and to explore, for instance, why, and how, despite that the outcomes and impact of MVP are questionable, it managed to legitimize continuous external funding to carry out its activities.

Building on the body of literature on assemblage and (re)assembling processes, we pursue here this analytic to explore the dynamics generated by the MVP and more specifically the SMV. We unravel MVP as an assemblage of people, discourses, technologies and other material elements; these are brought together to address societal problems and needs. This allows us conceptualising MVP as an assemblage that attempts to transform existing assemblages; an assemblage that claims to help create assemblages that strengthen and improve rural livelihoods and reduce poverty in this way. MVP can also be branded as an assemblage that sets out to fix solutions for problems through planned development (Umans and Arce, 2014) or through what Li (2007a, 2007b) has qualified as 'rendering technical'. Solution fix and rendering technical are among the practices that Li (2007a: 263) has classified as 'generic to any assemblage' and they are analysed as such. These practices express rather similar processes and are therefore used interchangeably here. Typical for such practices is that the style is interventionist, rather linear and bound by time and space.

Sauri Millennium Village (SMV) serves as an extended case. Sauri is the site were MVP was first piloted in Africa. SMV is important for the upscaling of MVP to other countries and would generate viable lessons for the international development community. We decided to focus our analysis on the agricultural interventions taking place in SMV. The primary objective on balance was to eliminate hunger, although 'improving agriculture in itself is unlikely to get rural communities in sub-Saharan Africa out of poverty' (Nziguheba et al., 2010: 111; Sachs, 2005; Sanchez, 2006). Sauri also offers the opportunity to draw on unique longitudinal data from a series of ongoing field studies in the region in which Sauri is situated from 1996 up to the present, that is, well before SMV was designed and implemented. These studies depict what generally characterises Sauri's assemblage before SMV was launched in 2005. They underscore that the people in Sauri noticeably share

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a history of distancing from the products of previous interventionist strategies. They have a strong tendency to continue to trust and rely on their own resources, whose use is embedded in locally shared and accepted cultural norms, and to reproduce what they can and share among themselves. This is not necessarily out of poverty which in the MVP and MDG conceptualisation of development is the condition whereby people lack the capital means to purchase the newest agricultural inputs and to engage with mainstream markets. They do engage with markets that they construct themselves and tend to enrich the key human and non-human resources themselves (Hebinck et al., 2015; Kimanthi, 2014; Mango and Hebinck, 2004; Mango, 2002; van Kessel, 1998).

Our longitudinal data and interpretations thereof permit us to pinpoint which processes at play explain why MVPs, and SMV in particular, fail to turn farmers into entrepreneurs attaining surplus yields for the market by making use of proven inputs made accessible through formal organisations such as the cooperatives. We elaborate on how SMV became vulnerable to an elite capture of inputs, injured social relations, exacerbated the existing inequalities and thus fractured the community. We also show how the SMV's approach to fixing food [production] in Sauri was concomitant with the ambition to show success - a 'twisted' way of fixing solutions, resulting in questionable data reporting.

The paper proceeds as follows: we first explain the conception of MVP and its implementation in countries in sub-Saharan Africa. The next sections discuss our ways of data collection and shortly elaborate our methodology for analysis by explaining what we mean by assemblage and why MVPs and SMV can be conceptually unpacked as assemblage. What then follows is an analysis of how, and in what ways, SMV tried to assemble and display project success. The last section discusses against the background of the broader literature the specificities of MVP inspired assemblages. We particularly pay attention to farmers' (re)assembling practices in response to SMV practices. In our concluding section, we reiterate the significance of our analysis for the study of agrarian development and promote, argue for and suggest more robust interventions that strengthen assemblages in which farmers, villages, communities are not the object of external interventions. Such assemblages potentially appreciate fully the capabilities of human and non-human actors within the villages as they do not relate to the villages as external actors.

2. The birth and implementation of MVP in African countries

The 1970's saw the emergence of the Integrated Rural Development (IRD) approach to planning and development (ODI, 1979; Ellis and Biggs, 2001) which was soon followed in the 1990's by Structural Adjustment Policies (SAPs) (Stiglitz, 1998). IRD was a response to failures of previous technocratically conceived strategies like the Green Revolution whose impact was limited to those regions that are endowed with conducive natural and social conditions (Griffin, 1979; Pearse, 1980, 1977). IRD stood for widening the scope of development interventions beyond agriculture *per se* to include other economic sectors like education, health and physical infrastructure (ODI, 1979; Ellis and Biggs, 2001). It also called for proper (state) planning and participation of the less fortunate through mobilisation, income and assets redistribution and an increase in technical and institutional efficiencies in order to raise marketable production. All these served to ease the integration of subsistence farmers into the market economy to reduce poverty and in turn to enhance participation (Leupolt, 1977; Ellis and Biggs, 2001; Ashley and Maxwell, 2002).

SAPs, on the other hand, called for a retreat of the state as the donor community lost confidence in central planning and the key political and economic role of the state in the economy. State control would hinge too much on economic inefficiencies, restrictions, patronage and political prices rather than real prices. Trade-liberalisation, more space for the market and private property arrangements and entrepreneurship

would trigger development. Stiglitz (1998) critiqued SAPs as being inadequate for not considering the 'underlying factors' of social life in the rural areas which prevented rural households from participating in the market. He showed that the need arises for a paradigm based on a broad conception of development that would allow for a broad and inclusive vision of development strategies, one that would assign international development assistance a different position and role which included a different way of delivery to the people. In short, the earlier development paradigms viewed development too narrowly and thus did not succeed (Stiglitz, 1998: 1–2). SAPs were succeeded by the international prestige project MDGs (Hulme, 2009; Sachs, 2005; Sachs and McArthur, 2005; DFID, 2002).

The MDGs were launched in 2000 by the world development leaders at the Millennium Summit as the next global development strategy that would make a difference. Initially, eight goals were formulated which would lead to the transformation of societies, reduce poverty and improve the standards of living across the globe by 2015 (Sanchez, 2006; Sanchez et al., 2007; Sachs, 2005). The MDGs were designated as '*the world's biggest promise*' and deemed too important to fail (Wilson, 2013:2; Hulme, 2010:15). However, it was realised after some time that most countries in the Global South were not likely to achieve these goals by the year 2015. The then UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan commissioned the Millennium Project to formulate a strategy for the achievement of MDGs which were then implemented as Millennium Villages. MVP was born out of the perceived need to catalyse the achievement of the MDGs. Headed by Jeffrey Sachs[1] and assisted by former director of ICRAF, Pedro Sanchez, and associates from Earth University, MVP formed a 'task force' that included representatives of the World Bank, the IMF, UN and donor agencies, civil society organisations, the private sector and celebrities like Bono and Bill Gates (Binagwaho and Sachs, 2005; Carr, 2008; Sanchez et al., 2007; Hulme, 2009; Kanter et al., 2009). The Earth Institute from the University of Columbia in the USA, played a key role in design of MVP. In Sachs's words:

> 'All of the UN Millennium Project work has depended utterly on the Earth Institute. Fundamentally, progress on the MDGs rests on thorough scientific understanding of the underlying challenges of disease, food production, undernutrition, watershed management, and other related issues. These, in turn, require specialized expertise. Modern science has given us technological interventions, or specific techniques for addressing these problems, such as anti-malarial bed nets or antiretroviral drugs' (Sachs, 2005: 224).

Wilson (2016:4) refers to the projects emanating from such configurations in which philanthropists play a central role as examples of 'philanthrocapitalism'. '*Unlike previous forms of charity and philanthropy, philanthrocapitalism claims to infuse its projects with the dynamism and innovation of capitalist enterprise*'. Hence the strong focus on establishing and nurturing entrepreneurship and achieving measurable success. Development projects should moreover be based on scientific insights, goal-driven, realize quantifiable outputs and have a strategy in place to scale-up interventions to national and regional levels (Sachs, 2005; Sanchez, 2006; Kanter et al., 2009; Wilson, 2013, 2016). It was also clearly felt that the MDGs were either not met or hardly met and certainly not fast enough achieved. MDGs made progress but more could be achieved provided they were properly targeted (Sachs and McArthur, 2005). The MVP model stipulates that poverty and hunger can only be reduced by *accelerating* the transformation of the resource base of the societies and their economies in the Global South from reliance on the 'traditional' to adoption of the 'modern'. This model would deliver and help articulate assemblages where all other previous approaches to development failed to do so (Sanchez, 2006; Sachs, 2005;

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[1] Wilson (2014) devoted an entire book to Jeffrey Sachs clearly illuminating how Sachs' career has evolved and why neoliberalism entices him.