Eco-Villages Breathe New Life Into Rural Senegal

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**DAKAR, Jul 3 2012 (IPS)** - Eighty-odd kilometres outside Dakar, the Senegalese capital, solar power and an irrigation scheme are transforming a traditional village into what the government hopes will be a model for the future of the countryside.

The project, in Mbackombel, a settlement of a little more than a thousand inhabitants, has strengthened farming and herding activities with sound water management strategies, as well as made the village self-sufficiency in energy. The village – whose name means “baobab with delicious fruit” in Sérère, a local language – is enjoying greater food security and incomes, improved protection of the environment, and a wealth of new opportunities for young people.

According to Demba Mamadou Ba, the director of Senegal’s National Agency for Eco-villages, the concept being put into practice here will bring the benefits of modern life to even the smallest village. Each eco-village represents an investment of a million dollars.

Mbackombel’s photovoltaic panels are used for much more than providing lighting to its 35 compounds. They also provide electricity for a computer laboratory and library at the village school, which runs from kindergarten through to the end of primary school: all part of reducing the digital divide and connecting Mbackombel with the rest of the world via the internet.

Solar panels also supply power to run a mill and pump water from a borehole for livestock and irrigated gardens and water livestock. Village residents are growing millet, sorghum, groundnuts and more.

“We also practice aquaculture. Currently, we only have juvenile hatchlings in our ponds, but beyond raising fish for food, we hope to make a profit from this,” said the village chief, Robert Birame Ndour.

“So many of our youth had left for the big city,” he continued, “now they have returned to the village. They’ve all found jobs here. Some are growing vegetables, while others are raising livestock or working as masons.”

Alouise Thiaw, 25, agrees that the rural exodus that drains young people from Senegal’s countryside has been reversed in Mbackombel as income-generating activities linked to the eco-village project take root.

“I was apprenticed to a mason in Dakar, but since this project was launched, I’ve returned to make a living here. This building, for example, was built by us, the youth… I work for the project managers here, and earn 55,000 CFA francs (around 106 dollars) a month,” he told IPS.

He said when there’s no construction work, he keeps busy clearing out the dam which supplies water for gardening and livestock.

According to the Senegalese Minister for Ecology, Ali Haidar, the eco-village project was launched in 2008 with 4.5 million dollars in finance from the [Global Environment Facility](http://www.thegef.org/gef) and the [United Nations Development Programme](http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home.html). The objective is the effective application of a model of innovative development for the participatory, sustainable development of rural areas like Mbackombel.

Bachir Camara, president of the monitoring council for the national eco-village agency, said the country planned to create 14,000 eco-villages by 2020, within a broad framework of fighting against poverty.

“This programme is initiated/carried out in partnership with the Africa Enterprise Development Agency. Drawing on the expertise of 15 leaders from the business community in France, the eco-villages are undeniably a means to attaining the Millennium Development Goals,” he told IPS.

“The programme also calls for the promotion of self-sufficiency of eco-villages in terms of energy, water and wooded areas, ensuring year-round availability of fruit, of wood for construction, furniture, and domestic energy. This programme signals the entry of Senegal into the ecological era of villages of the future, finding solutions to the causes of climate change, and adapting to it,” Haidar said.

He stressed that an ambitious programme of reforestation, involving the planting of a million saplings in each eco-village to restore the productive capacity of the land, as well as the promotion of green jobs and drawing youth back to the eco-villages are among the objectives being achieved at Mbackombel.

Mamadou Kane, representing the [International Fund for Agricultural Development](http://www.ifad.org/) in Senegal and Gambia, said that IFAD supports the eco-village initiative. In his view, the project is a way of experimenting with organic agriculture and creates the possibility for people to become self-sufficient in terms of their own food.

IFAD has supported agricultural development in Senegal for several years. “Village development is at the heart of our concerns and is a good thing which can bring development to Mbackombel,” Kane told IPS.

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