

MBOLA, TANZANIA



The situation in Mbola is stark. The children have faces hardened by years of adversity that belie their youth—living in one of the poorest regions of Tanzania. They are everywhere in this village, and immediately you notice their stunted height and distended bellies, telltale signs of malnourishment. But despite all this, they are still children and they remain cheerful and playful especially when there is a makeshift soccerball to be kicked around.

The households of Mbola are in equally bad shape. Many homes barely stay upright as mud-bricked walls crumble away in the bright sun and grass thatched-roofs try to fight back the elements.

You wouldn't know it by looking, but set in a green valley filled with tall grass, mango trees and hundreds of households, the village of Mbola is drying up. Over the past few years, the rains, which usually fall between November and March, have steadily declined and have grown increasingly erratic in this region. And when the water does fall, there is no way to keep it—thatched roof homes can't catch it and the rain quickly washes through the sandy soils. As a result, the people of this village in central Tanzania are suffering.

Scattered throughout the village are a few shallow wells which are the only sources of water for the more than 5,000 people who live here. Because there are no natural springs or running rivers many villagers walk up to 5 km back and forth several times a day to get to these wells. During the dry season, which lasts for about seven months, many of the wells become muddy and contaminated causing dysentery and diarrhea for those who drink from them.

Mbola is the first Millennium Village in Tanzania. All together there are six Millennium Villages in the country. Mbola is the largest of all the Millennium Villages in Africa, with each household having anywhere between three to 25 hectares of land. But despite the adequate amount of farmland, the children of Mbola are malnourished because food production is inconsistent and access to improved farming techniques is poor. They have no means to store crops after the harvest. In addition, food output is extremely low, typically yielding less than 1 ton per hectare, an amount too low to feed this village.

The main food crops in Mbola are maize, cassava, pumpkin, millet, sorghum and a variety of nuts. There are also many tropical fruits which grow during different times of the year including mangoes and vitex. The villagers rely heavily on these fruits during droughts and a number of female entrepreneurs process them into other forms of consumption including jam and wine which they sell in markets many kilometers away. The modest income they earn is used to purchase food and medicine to treat diseases like malaria.

Living with malaria is a way of life for people in Mbola, even though the disease is easily treatable and preventable. Most homes have a child or parent that has died or suffered from the disease. A sole clinic located in Ilonlangulu, serves more than 13,000 people and is located about 10 km away. Medical supplies and medicines are brought to this clinic every month or so, but they run out quickly leaving many without proper care.

The clinic also provides coupons for pregnant women to buy bednets at reduced prices, but this method has proved to be ineffective as many women have no money to spare. In addition, they must travel up to 20km away to pick them up—the price of travel almost equaling the price of the bednet.

There are two primary schools in the village: one in Mbola A and another in Mpenge. Some children walk up to 10 km to school and often do not eat for the whole day while they are in class. The children who live closer to school can walk home during their lunch break and have a small meal. This, however, has resulted in poor attendance rates because the village is so spread out and many children would rather stay home than be hungry.

Another main challenge is the high rate of environmental degradation resulting from poor crop management practices and the destruction of the Miombo woodlands, where Mbola is located, for fuelwood, livestock grazing and expansion of agricultural land. The current fuel shortage highlights the need for a reliable energy source. The lack of basic infrastructure for health, education and access to markets requires immediate attention.

Initial investments in Mbola will include:

- ◇ Training farmers in proper techniques and rain water harvesting, and learning best practices from farmers in the area
- ◇ Facilitating the delivery of fertilizers and improved seed and developing community-based seed supply and grain storage systems
- ◇ Strengthen farmers' associations to improve market access
- ◇ Establishing infrastructure for education and providing incentives for school attendance
- ◇ Promoting and facilitating the use of biogas and solar energy and energy saving stoves to cut down amount of charcoal and firewood, protecting the natural forests
- ◇ Providing basic health care facilities and supplying adequate medical supplies

PROFILE



POPULATION: 37,445,392 (2005)

LANGUAGES: Kiswahili (official), English

RELIGIONS: Christian 30%, Muslim 35%, indigenous beliefs 35%; Zanzibar - more than 99% Muslim

HEAD OF STATE: President Jakaya KIKWETE

GDP: \$11.62 billion (2005)

EXTERNAL DEBT: \$7.95 billion (2005)

INFANT MORTALITY: 96 deaths/1,000 live births

LIFE EXPECTANCY: 45.64 years

PEOPLE LIVING WITH HIV/AIDS: 1.6 million (2003)

FERTILITY RATE: 4.97 children born/woman (2006)

INTERNET USERS: 333,000 (2005)

