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Contact: Rob Wheeler
Johannesburg: 485-4403
Pennsylvania, USA: 717-261-1894
Email: robineagle@worldcitizen.org
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US NGOS LEAD THE WAY TO A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

On Saturday, August 31, the EcoEarth Alliance, a network of civil society organizations representing 15,000 rural villages and several million people, launched a Partnership Initiative at the World Summit in Johannesburg that is leading the way towards a fully sustainable future. The partner organizations are carrying out projects in local communities around the globe, including in the US, that provide access to such things as renewable energy, organic agriculture, ecological building practices, sanitation, clean water, education, healthcare, and reforestation.

Four of the partner organizations are US based including Village Earth, Sustainable Village, EarthRights Institute, and the Global Ecological Restoration and Development Foundation. The Global Ecovillage Network also has many projects and ecovillage training programs in the US and around the world.

Many of these village projects are among the most sustainable of communities on earth and most have also taken action to restore the natural environment in the regions where they live. Through their actions they are challenging the US, along with other countries, to support more sustainable practices. The Partnership Initiative includes four primary components including access to resources; training programs and conferences; regional implementation; and advocacy for increased levels of funding for community-based and sustainable rural development.

There are many reasons that the Initiative is urgently needed. 75% of the poor live in rural communities and global funding for agriculture has dropped dramatically during the past decade. Some 2 million people, primarily women and children, die each year from indoor air pollution from cooking fires in the developing world. 800 million people go to bed hungry, 1 million live on less than a dollar a day, and in many parts of the world where conditions are harshest crop yields are dropping even as fertilizer and pesticide use is increased. In many parts of the world, particularly Sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Asia, rural populations are in crisis as the natural environment is depleted and desertification spreads.

A solution to these challenges has been demonstrated repeatedly by EcoEarth Alliance partner organizations - an integrated, multi-sectoral approach to sustainable development. Efforts to build small earthen check dams bring water back to the land and restore natural eco-systems, access to water increases crop yields and can result in reforestation, access to clean water and renewable energy options leads to a healthier population, and micro-enterprises based on sustainable resources can pull people out of poverty. When planned and implemented together each component reinforces the others.

The Alliance is supporting an initiative in Senegal <www.cresp.sn/gensen/> as its first project to develop a network of ecovillage projects throughout the country. Beginning with 12 communities that are already well along in such areas as Mangrove restoration, organic agriculture, water harvesting, micro-enterprise, protection of bio-diversity, and education, the GEN Senegal project will work with local NGOs (non-governmental organizations) to spread the project to include ecovillages in 441 local government units over the next five years.

Partner activities are also planned for India, Inner Mongolia, Nigeria, Latin America, and elsewhere around the world. The results are that civil society is leading the way towards a new development model that shows great promise. Governments, inter-governmental organizations, businesses, and civil society organizations have been invited to join in the initiative. One can find out more about the EcoEarth Alliance and the Partnership Initiative by going to www.ecovillage.org/ecoearth.