



THE CENTER SONGHAI IN LIBERIA

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Introduction

The Center Songhai Liberia Initiative (CSLI) is a government of Liberia program supported by partners - public, private, national and international non-governmental organizations - with the aim of creating decent employment opportunities for young Liberians. It is an integrated agricultural program that is modeled after Centre Songhai Benin. The principal business of CSLI is training of men and women and equipping them with the skills to manage small- and medium-scale, commercially viable and environmentally sustainable agricultural production and agro-based enterprises.

The three integrated components of the CSLI are:

- Agricultural centers involved in the financially and environmentally sustainable production of primary and added-value agricultural products.
- Functional training programs in sustainable agricultural production.
- A participatory outreach program to community/ies of CSLI-trained rural entrepreneurs and other stakeholders, who will manage their own farms with the aid of a network that provides services and a route to market.

The objectives of CSLI are:

- Turning the Liberian rural sector around to become competitive and remunerative – making it a viable pathway toward a sustainable and broad-based economy.
- Developing sustainable, employment-intensive sectors and considerably slowing down the massive rural exodus in Liberia.
- Tackle the discontent among youth through gainful employment.

The vision for CSLI is based on the need for the successful application of the Songhai principles for the benefit of the large number of Liberian youths who have been disoriented after years of conflict.

The principles are:

- Sustainable development that is driven by people.
- Empowerment of the most underprivileged groups in the community -- that is the base of durable growth.
- Training members of society to use the tools and methods of sustainable agricultural production and to pool these skills for the benefit of the community.

Hence, the overarching vision for the CSLI is increased self-determination, harmony and cooperation within Liberian communities, a sustained and sustainable growth in employment, and reduction in restiveness and crime, particularly among unskilled youths.

History and Context

Years of civil war, poor governance and corruption weakened the human resources base in Liberia, eroded community cohesion, undermined public confidence in state institutions and drove people away from constructive group actions. This resulted in a socioeconomic downward spiral characterized by a high level of unemployment and an increasing phenomenon of the “working poor”. This was why the battle cry of the government of President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf was “Jobs, jobs, jobs first.” The LEEP/LEAP initiatives were then introduced as central elements in the government’s policy.

With 85 percent unemployment overall and 88 percent unemployment among youth, it was not difficult to see that the challenge before the government of Liberia and its partners was staggering. To reverse this trend of poverty, the central strategic element was to jump-start a socioeconomic process in a way that tackled the short-term need to ease the unemployment situation while creating an enabling economic foundation and environment that could generate production and economic growth in employment-intensive sectors of the economy -- an integrated employment strategy targeting the most vulnerable groups: women and youth.

The primary purpose of the CSLI was to provide a basic framework for a sustainable Songhai initiative in the Mano River sub-region of West Africa.

The countries of this sub-region - Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea - not only share a common history but also have been devastated by war and socioeconomic instability for more than a decade. The challenges for this initiative called for a well-coordinated multi-partnership of major stakeholders in a sub-regional setting. The intention was to use the Liberian proposal as a reference that could easily be fine-tuned for other countries using appropriate adjustments.

In April 2006, the United Nations Development Program Liberia Office supported the participation of some Liberians, including a deputy minister of agriculture, the president of the Farmers Union of Liberia and a private-sector participant, in a development workshop at Centre Songhai Benin. The workshop took place under the auspices of the Program Support to Rural Development in West and Central Africa, which is based in Dakar, Senegal. Following that workshop and as part of their report, a proposal was formulated for the adoption of the Centre Songhai model in Liberia.

In July 2006, the director of the Centre Songhai Benin, brother Godfrey Nzamujo, funded by USAID Liberia, undertook a mission to Liberia to explore the application of the Songhai initiative in the country. During that mission, an assessment of various sites was conducted for the Songhai Liberia project, and Bensonville was selected to serve as the core location for the programs, with a number of satellites to be established throughout the country.

In 2007, UNDP, through the government of Liberia, recruited and trained 30 young Liberians and sent them to Centre Songhai Benin to be trained in agro-based enterprise management. These trainees returned to Liberia and are currently placed at the Songhai Liberia Bensonville main hub, where they are replicating the Songhai program from Benin.

Training

Training activities at the Bensonville center commenced in 2010 with the rehabilitation of seven damaged structures for training and accommodations and the recruitment of 150 farmers from across the 15 counties of Liberia. They received 15 months of training at the center. These farmers are now conducting production activities in their home counties with technical backstopping from Centre Songhai Bensonville and the county agriculture coordinators.

CSLI training focus areas are:

- **Primary sector** - livestock, aquaculture, crop production.
- **Secondary sector** - food processing and cottage industry.
- **Tertiary sector** - industrial machinery and metalwork, agribusiness and services.
- **Management** - leadership, community development.

Under the Youth Employment Skills (YES) project, CSLI has commenced the recruitment of another 150 farmers from five counties (Montserrado, Margibi, Bong, Grand Bassa and

Grand Cape Mount). Full training began in March 2012. For local partners (e.g., CHF, CARITAS Liberia, LDLD and CARE Liberia) CSLI also offers tailored courses on various topics.

Though still supported by partners, Songhai is designed to be a self-supporting institution and is now beginning to generate revenue through its training programs and from the sales of its products. External support will be required over the next five years to get the center and its satellites up and running.

Challenges And How They Were Addressed

- **Limited resources:** The CSLI needs at least five years of financial and technical support and support in all aspect of activities to enable it to get fully up and running. It currently relies on donor support, with minimum funds generated from sales of farm products. There are appeals for CSLI to be included in the government budgetary allocations.
- **Water for drinking and irrigation:** Water, primarily for irrigation purposes, is crucial. Construction of water collection tanks across the production fields has begun to assist in the irrigation of crops, and the revitalization of water pipes and bore holes is ongoing.
- **Identification of micro credit institutions, banks, etc.:** It is imperative to identify entities that are willing to provide farmers resettlement loan packages (agriculture loans). Efforts to create widespread awareness about Songhai's activities is ongoing, with partners and other institutions invited on a regular basis to observe the activities taking place at the center.
- **Rehabilitation of additional structures for accommodations:** It is necessary to increase farmer enrollment and expand project activities. Accommodations are inadequate to meet increased demand for training. The center is currently using some vacant rooms of the school building for short-term accommodations.
- **Electrification and fencing of the Bensonville Centre:** Electricity, currently provided by a small 6 KVA generator is inadequate. Fencing of facilities is ongoing using local materials (riffs).

Success Factors

- The beneficiaries of CSLI are mainly youths and women, those going through Songhai training programs and those benefitting indirectly from the CSLI presence in the region. Around the main hub, the CSLIs provide technical and material support to farmers and community dwellers, such as trainings in piggery, aquaculture, vegetable production and postharvest practices, and the employment of community members as daily hires and/or support staff members.
- CSLI has also trained and graduated farmers who are now in the various counties of Liberia producing and

supporting communities with food and employment services. As part of the requirements for farmer certification, each graduate is required to train at least five community farmers in and around his/her farm in the Songhai modern farming methods. These trainings have created a huge demand on both the main hub and farmers in the field.

- The Songhai system is integrated, starting from the production of crops to value-added processing. Nothing is wasted. Animal and plant wastes as well as processing byproducts are all utilized as organic inputs for quality crop production. CSLI farmers have been introduced to organic low-input farming, and they practice and teach these practices to others. The result is that large numbers of farmers no longer rely on chemical fertilizers, for example.
- Young people who have completed training in the Songhai new farming methods are now very active and heavily involved in developing their own farms, thereby taking their minds and attentions away from criminal activities. As continued coaching and support is provided to them, they will eventually become entrepreneurs producing food for themselves and their families, being able to send their children to school and providing employment opportunities for community members.

Lessons That Could Be Applied Elsewhere

High government involvement:

- Taking full ownership with a functioning steering board headed by the Ministry of Youth and Sports and the Ministry of Agriculture.
- Seconding of staff of the Ministry of Youth to support the staff of Songhai Center Liberia.
- Recruiting CSLI staff members under the CSLI contract modality rather than UN contracts. This will facilitate continued employment even after donor funding ends.
- Making available sites and physical structures such as the Bensonville facilities for the program.
- Providing farmland to Songhai graduates, which is a critical component for successful farmer resettlement.

Follow-up monitoring:

- The main objective of Songhai is to train young agricultural entrepreneurs who, once established, become examples of success and draw the attention of the surrounding populations to the new kind of

agriculture practiced by Songhai. This training does not stop with the acquisition and mastery of techniques of agricultural production. Songhai follows up with its farmers from the installation stage to the establishment of their farms and beyond. The CSLI has a Farmer Resettlement and Monitoring Unit to follow up on the activities of rural farmers.

- The government and partners on the steering board met frequently (bi-monthly and monthly) during the inception stage to review and follow up on urgent issues. Board members must be willing to attend meetings regularly and to nominate permanent focal persons with authority to make decisions. Frequent changing of focal persons by ministries and agencies weakened the weakened the board and slowed down implementation and retentive memories which eventually slowed the implementation of pending decisions.

Songhai is designed to be a self-supporting institution. Therefore, it must be developed and supported to be able to generate its own resources, with systems and procedures in place that will account for all resources generated in the program. CSLI is now beginning to generate funds from the sales of its farm products and upgrading its processing unit to add value to farm products for better sales as a long-term sustainability strategy.

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