

THE SONGHAÏ CENTRE IN BENIN

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Introduction

For more than 20 years, Benin has been host to an NGO that promotes entrepreneurship in agriculture -- the Songhaï Centre. It is active in the areas of training, production, research and development in agricultural entrepreneurship and agribusiness. From the beginning, the staff at the centre focused on developing a "model of agro-biological production and functional training in agricultural entrepreneurship" (Songhaï et al, 2010). This institution for sustainable development through the promotion of youth entrepreneurship aims at creating a space for viable socioeconomic models. Songhaï Centre has had a legal status of NGO through its administrative and master agreements with the Beninese government since May 11, 1990. It has contributed to dynamic economic development through its strategy of erecting green rural towns in each agro ecological area in Benin (Songhaï et al, 2010).

Songhaï's recognition goes beyond Benin boundaries. The United Nations Development Programme (2008) regards its approach as successful in promoting agricultural entrepreneurship and creating decent jobs in rural areas. It will now become a regional brand under the UN system to stimulate rural economy in Africa through the Regional Agricultural Entrepreneurship Promotion Project. This project covers 12 countries including Benin (Songhaï, Ministry of State for Planning and UNDP, 2010).

The objective of the Songhaï Centre is to foster the emergence of a new African society based on socioeconomic dynamics by promoting a type of social economy which in turn, is based on a duty of solidarity. This approach aims at making the poor producers actors and managers of their own future.

Background

The Songhaï Centre was created in 1985 by a Catholic priest from the Dominicans Congregation, Brother Godfrey Nzamujo. Originally from Nigeria, he travelled to the United

States in 1970, where he studied computer science and graduated in microbiology and chemistry. He then became a professor of electronics and computer science in California. In 1983, the hunger in Ethiopia challenged Nzamujo's outlook on development, and he decided to return to Benin, where he established an agriculture and livestock centre that later became a network for multiple possibilities.

Thus the Songhaï Centre was born. About 10 hectares of land were made available to the center by the Beninese government at Ouando, in the municipality of Porto-Novo. After they had cleared the land and built six fishponds, a support group helped finance the purchase of 32 quails, 12 ducks, 100 chickens, 10 pigs, and 20 sheep and goats. These animals performed well, and one year later they enabled the Songhaï Centre to obtain a financial commitment from the African Development Foundation for the first time.

These funds were used to construct 84 fishponds and a barn. In 1987, for the first time, the Songhaï Centre welcomed 28 students. These students learnt by doing and had contributed to the expansion of Songhaï Centre and abundant harvests that helped set up a sale and delivery system. Songhaï Centre has also invested in removing constraints to the availability and accessibility of energy. To that end, Songhaï Centre is developing a range of alternatives from biogas through solar energy.

Within the Songhaï Centre, the training component has become increasingly important and structured. It provides training in agricultural entrepreneurship and runs a network of producers across the country. This fabric of entrepreneurs operating in agribusiness aims not only to manage viable private enterprises but also to train farmers and other stakeholders in their region in a comprehensive and coordinated socioeconomic dynamic. Indeed, these dynamic centers aim to develop rural entrepreneurship as an engine for rural growth, thereby making rural life more attractive and limiting the migration of youth to the already saturated urban centers.

A second Songhai Centre was established in 1989 in Chi-Ahomadegbe in the south of Benin. Young men went to settle there and build fishponds, and gradually other young villagers applied for training. Out of this experience, seven cooperatives were created on the site with funding from the European Development Fund. Subsequently, the Songhai Centre opened a shop to sell its products in Cotonou in 1991. The following year, food processing activities began.

The progress made by Songhai Centre as an innovative institution and incubation centre, and its development philosophy based on the notion of economic development through an emphasis on community caught the attention of the Beninese government. It actually requested the expansion of Songhai Centres into other regions in 1999. And the Songhai Centre currently has four centers for the multiplication of its experiences and runs a network of producers throughout the country (Songhai and UNDP, 2007). This network of entrepreneurs operating in agribusiness not only helps manage viable agricultural enterprises but also trains farmers and other stakeholders in their region in a wide socioeconomic dynamic. In this way, each Songhai Centre works as a socioeconomic and rural development centre specializing in agricultural production, training and research. It supports an integrated production system based on minimal inputs and the use of local resources. Wastes from one production unit become inputs

for others, and production activities become more profitable because they belong to the system in which the various components strengthen one another through what they provide to or receive from others.

The purpose of the Songhai Centre is the professional preparation of young people. The Songhai Centre is committed to practical training to function in the agricultural sector. The goal is to support the creation of profitable opportunities in markets, reducing the need for intermediaries and strengthening the capacity for value addition and food processing. Songhai has embarked raising its technological and industrial parks to showcase the success of entrepreneurs and serve as examples for extension.

Songhai also developed a network of community teleservice operations starting in 1999 with funding from USAID to give the population in general and farmers in particular access to new information technologies. The first telecentre was built in Porto-Novo, and three others in Savalou, Parakou and Lokossa. In addition, a radio communication system connects the centers so that information can readily be made available to the people in the region.

Songhai Centre is the result of economic and institutional dynamics, but also to interpersonal dynamics because the Songhai Centre owes its current success to its members, trainers and trainees (Zoundji, 2007).

Table 1. Summary of results of training activities of Songhai Centre (1985-2009)

Data	Number	Location	Observation
I- Total trained people 1985 - 2009 (all formulas together: initial + ongoing)	6035	Benin and other countries	
I-1. Long cycle (initial training): 1985 - 2009	2638	Benin (mainly)	Training duration: 18 months + 1 year of application
I-2. Modular training : 1985 - 2009	3397	France, Cameroon, Congo, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Benin, Togo, Mali, Chad, Gabon, Canada, Niger, Burundi, Madagascar	Average duration: 3 - 6 months
II- Average number of people registered in Songhai Centre per month	225	Benin and other countries	For all Songhai, including 95 in modular training
III- Number of people settled with activities after benefiting initial training	1700		Includes 230 pilot women. Monitoring is effective only from beneficiaries of initial training, or a settlement rate of 65%

Source: GLIN et al., 2011.

Problems Encountered and How They Were Resolved

Songhai experienced some difficulties early on related to the management of the partnership with its technical and

financial partners and the supply of raw materials and spare parts for its agribusiness processing plants. Some donors criticized Songhai, saying it did not give measurable results after a few years of operation. As a result, donors tried

imposing accountability/reporting procedures to maintain eligibility for funding. But because the Songhaï Centre is in a process of long-term human development, it refused to comply with these rules. This refusal of Songhaï Centre to conform to orders from donors seriously affected the operation of the centre.

Songhaï provides machinery and processing equipment to certain clients. Concerned about the supply of raw materials and good quality spare parts, Songhaï concluded that only total control over the process and methodology for manufacturing several parts of its machinery would ensure the quality of the equipment delivered to its customers and ensure proper maintenance of all equipment in the medium and long terms. Therefore, with the support of the Solidarity Fund for Development of French Cooperation, Songhaï Centre established a foundry to manufacture spare parts for agricultural machinery and food processing equipment that suit the agronomic conditions of the environment. Greater flexibility, improved quality control and enhanced opportunities in research and development in agricultural mechanization are three major advantages of this new foundry.

It is also important to note that Songhaï cannot nor does it attempt to solve all the difficulties that its beneficiaries face, such as insecure land tenure, climatic hazards that undermine production forecasts, lack of adequate financing and difficulties in selling products at fair prices. Add to that the isolation of some farmers and lack of electricity in rural areas.

Often the networks of farmers trained at the Songhaï Centres experience problems in organization and coordination. There are challenges such as the electrification of training centers such as Savalou and the limited capacities of Songhaï Centre to meet the needs of all its learners. Though the Songhaï system has integrated a credit system for farmers, it does not meet all the needs of farmers (Dalohoun, Hall and Van Mele, 2009).

The Songhaï Centre cannot meet infrastructure needs such as access roads and access to clean water, schools and recreation centers, which are all factors that inhibit the inclination of young entrepreneurs to settle in rural areas. In addition, the fact that Songhaï does not charge school fees attracts many young people limits its follow up's capability/ability to help. The Centre is not able to help all alumni to start up their own business. The not grouped installation of the trained young people of these schools requires resorting to the joint actions of the state and the international institutions.

What was Successful and Why?

The implementation of the Songhaï model was a success for the Songhaï Centre because its application is combined with the entrepreneurial capacity and personal leadership of its

director. The latter offers training to "change the mindsets" of young people, not a training model that turns out project managers. The Songhaï Centre recognizes that changing students' mindsets requires effort, and it values the work and rewards productive and successful trainers with bonuses. This is, in fact, a good example of performance-based management.

In addition, the Songhaï integrated model was a success because the Songhaï Centre, upon its creation, focused on key systematic relationships to link activities that are traditionally separated.

Lessons That Could be Applied Elsewhere

The lessons of the Songhaï Centre that can be applied elsewhere are related to its model, which is based on the interrelationships between environment, agriculture, technology, services and industry. It includes a component of human capacity development. In practice, the model encourages the use of local resources, the combination of traditional and modern agricultural practices, technology adaptation and diversification of activities. Through these practices, Songhaï integrates "zero waste" and "total productivity" concepts through the use of biological and ecological farming practices. Thus, the Songhaï model provides opportunities for rural communities to use and manage their resources sustainably while promoting local economic development.

The model mainly incorporates three components of development:

- Involvement of the agricultural centers in the processing of primary products in a financially and environmentally sustainable fashion.
- Training for farmers on the qualities of entrepreneurs and socioeconomic leaders, focusing on the zero waste and total productivity concepts and including pre- and postharvest techniques.
- Facilitate access to a community of trained graduate farmers starting with viable agricultural businesses and managing their own farms, through a network of service provision and market access.

Songhaï Centre has attracted a lot of attention from the government of Benin, and in recent years also from prospective technical and financial partners. This is reflected through changes in the strategic development of the Beninese agricultural sector which, in addition to family farming, fosters agricultural entrepreneurship. It has also been promoted by the United Nations since 2008 and by the Economic Community of West African States since 2009 as a regional centre of excellence for Africa. Consequently, the Songhaï model is already implemented in many African countries, including Nigeria and Liberia (UNDP, 2008; Songhai, 2010).

Disparities in economic performance in sub-Saharan Africa, excessive increase of youth unemployment and food crises are the main challenges facing many African countries. These challenges justify the urgent need for scaling up initiatives such as the Songhaï model to apply what works elsewhere on the African continent.

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