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Chapter 8: Songhai, Benin

Executive Summary

Songhai is an NGO empowering rural African communities, particularly farmers, youth, and women, by building their capacities to become agricultural, agribusiness, and handcraft entrepreneurs. Founded in 1985 by a Nigerian priest, Father Godfrey Nzamujo, it involves organic and sustainable production, training and research centres, and the development of innovative techniques and thinking in agriculture and handicrafts, using local human and natural resources and a holistic approach.

The organization has grown from 1 to 6 centres across Benin and 11 in Nigeria. It is working with the Beninese government to open 7 additional centres, and with the UN to replicate its model in other African countries. At the beginning, Mr. Nzamujo received 1, and then 10 hectares of marshland from the Beninese government, and started his work with 6 young school dropouts. Today, Songhai works on over 550 hectares of land and 46 hectares of water, has approximately 1500 employees, 500 trainees and interns at any time of the year, 20,000 visitors per year, and has created a network of 250 farms delivering technical support and sharing experiences. Its main activities have achieved economic sustainability, and its numerous partnerships (such as with the ECOWAS, IFAD and UNDP) enable it to further disseminate its integrated, sustainable production system and its values of entrepreneurship and innovation; to initiate pioneering activities; develop research and experimentation; train local communities; and deliver services to farmers in remote areas across Benin and in other countries in Africa. Songhai amplifies its impacts by advocating at the national, regional and international levels for the promotion of locally-adapted agriculture to achieve growth, employment, food security and social peace.

Songhai's experience provides precious lessons about valuing and developing local human and natural resources; about sustainable and organic production, processing and marketing; as well as about entrepreneurship and leadership in rural development. It shows that an effective way to combat poverty is to build the capacities of the most disadvantaged populations to become economically sustainable entrepreneurs. It also stresses the importance of empowering local communities with the capacities to produce, but also to innovate and thus become protagonists of their own social and economic development. Its integrated agricultural system demonstrates that producing in an environmentally sustainable manner is not only a necessity, but it is also economically profitable and sustainable. All available local natural resources are used in a careful and mutually supportive manner; and a holistic value-chain approach ensures higher incomes for producers.

To create and sustain such an organization, Godfrey Nzamujo stresses the need for passion and strong commitment. He also explains that it is impossible to succeed alone, and that trust in others' capacities to react to challenges and be innovative is a key enabling factor, as well as communication, information and knowledge sharing, namely among managers, employees and farmers.

Section 1: Introduction and Context

1.1 Introduction

Songhai is a NGO founded in 1985 in Benin. Its founder, Father Godfrey Nzamujo, is a Dominican priest who wanted to contribute to African's development by empowering local communities to overcome poverty and become leaders of their own development. Songhai aims to build the capacities of all Africans, particularly youth, women, and farmers, in economically and environmentally sustainable agribusiness and cottage industries. It is named after a 14th-16th century west African Empire symbolizing the potential of the continent for autonomy and prosperity,¹ and its emblem, an eagle, represents its key qualities: foresight, courage and determination.²

Songhai is a holistic organization that engages in production, industrial, and service activities, alongside research and training. It produces, processes, and sells vegetables and fruits, and breeds several kinds of animals and fish in a highly innovative system that integrates the primary, secondary and services sectors in an economically and environmentally sustainable manner. To ensure competitiveness and adaptation to local human and natural resources, Songhai also continuously integrates national and international technologies and adapts them to the local context. To build the capacities of local communities and individuals, it offers long-term as well as specific trainings to youth, women and farmers from several African countries. And to reinforce these trainings and further disseminate its model, it provides a variety of services to former trainees and farmers at the local level while advocating and looking for partners at the national and international levels.

In 28 years, the organization grew from 1 to 6 centres in Benin, 11 in Nigeria, 1 in Congo Brazzaville, 1 in Liberia, and 1 in Sierra Leone. It has also opened 3 telecentres in rural areas, a restaurant, and a shop. Songhai works on more than 550 hectares of land and 46 hectares of water in Benin alone, employs over 1500 people, trains 500 trainees and individuals at any time of the year, and receives 20,000 visitors every year. It also links former trainees and local farmers in the Songhai farmers' network and develops numerous projects in Benin and other African countries with national and international partners.

The situation at the time of Songhai's creation was one of social, economic and political crisis. Benin had one of the lowest GDPs on the continent and the political context was tense under the Marxist-Leninist regime of President Mathieu Kérékou. Today, Benin enjoys greater democracy, but is still marred by important inequalities and a high poverty rate. Songhai has been taking these challenges as an opportunity to demonstrate the possibility of helping rural communities become self-reliant even in difficult situations. To do so, it applies the fundamental idea of its founder: "*La meilleure manière de combattre la pauvreté, c'est de rendre les pauvres producteurs*"³ (The best way to fight poverty it to enable the poor to become producers).

1 *Green tech and internet in West Africa*, BBTV WORLD series, 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O-MM1uLdjd> (accessed 17 August 2012).

2 G. Nzamujo: *Songhai. Quand l'Afrique relève la tête*, Paris, Les Editions du Cerf, 2002, p. 60.

3 D. Bousquet: "Le Bénin, modèle du bio africain", in *Libération*, 5 January 2010, <http://www.liberation.fr/terre/0101611959-le-benin-modele-du-bio-africain> (accessed 22 August 2012).

1.2 Context

Benin, a country of approximately 110,000 km², has a population of above 9.6 million people,⁴ growing annually at about 2.7 per cent.⁵ The population is highly concentrated in cities of the south, but 56 per cent live in rural areas.⁶

In 2011, Benin ranked 167th on the Human Development Index, with a life expectancy of 56 years. About 47 per cent of the population was considered to be in severe poverty,⁷ and since 2006 the country has been registering important growth in income inequalities, particularly in rural areas.⁸ Youth employment and employability are currently major concerns, with unemployment and underemployment among youth at twice the rate of those for adults, and major skill mismatches.⁹

In 2011, agriculture represented 32 per cent of GDP and employed 70 per cent of the population.¹⁰ Beninese agriculture mainly consists of crops, and 60 per cent of the cultivated areas are devoted to food-production. Small family farms predominate. There are approximately 550,000 across the country, measuring an average of 1.7 hectares.¹¹

Despite the importance of agriculture, Benin faces an increasing trade deficit in food, particularly in rice, meat, fish and vegetables.¹²

Condition of rural areas in Benin

As in most developing countries, Benin's poverty rate is higher in rural than in urban areas. Incomes are generally lower, and access to basic social services more limited.¹³ Food insecurity, which affects 7.9 per cent of the urban population, also affects over 15 per cent of the rural population.¹⁴ Benin has one of the lowest road densities of West Africa, and rural roads are often badly maintained.

Across the country, agriculture faces many difficulties. In many places the soils are badly degraded, and forests are shrinking since wood provides 93 per cent of the energy source in rural areas,¹⁵ and fishing is in decline due to a deteriorating environment, as well as inappropriate fishing techniques. Increases in production are often due to increases in cultivated areas rather than in productivity.¹⁶ Workers involved in agriculture, forestry and

4 *Benin Overview, Context, Economic Overview and Performance*, World Bank, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/benin/overview> (accessed 12 September 2012).

5 UNDP: *Human Development Report 2011, Sustainability and Equity: A better Future for All*, New York, 2011, p. 164.

6 IFAD: *Republic of Benin. Country Strategic Opportunities Programme*, Rome, 2011, p. 1.

7 Op.cit., UNDP: *Human Development Report 2011, Sustainability and Equity: A better Future for All*, 2011, pp. 129, 144.

8 Op. cit., IFAD 2011, p. 1.

9 *Benin*, African Economic Outlook, 2012, <http://www.africaneconomicoutlook.org/en/countries/west-africa/benin/> (accessed 13 September 2012).

10 Op. cit., IFAD, 2011, p.2.

11 Ibid., p.2.

12 Ibid., pp. 1-2.

13 *La pauvreté rurale au Bénin*, Rural Poverty Portal, IFAD, <http://www.ruralpovertyportal.org/country/home/tags/benin> (accessed 13 November 2012).

14 PAM (VAM) : *République du Bénin. Analyse globale de la vulnérabilité, de la sécurité alimentaire et de la nutrition* (AGVSAN), Rome, 2009, p. 4.

15 Ibid., pp. 48, 50.

16 Op. cit., IFAD, 2011, pp. 2-4.

fishing suffer from a lack of proper training, support, and inputs that would allow them to better utilize and restore their damaged ecosystems.

Subsistence farming is widespread and marketing is not well developed. Food-processing activities are limited, and there is little value-added to the products for lack of knowledge about quality and preservation, lack of access to small-scale mechanization methods to process products, and an overall lack of appropriate knowledge and skills. In many areas market access is not constant and so they remain isolated, which further impede marketing possibilities.¹⁷

Professional Agricultural Organizations (PAOs) cannot effectively support and advocate for rural workers as many of them do not cover remote areas. Only 30 per cent of cash crop producers and 19 per cent of food-producers are enrolled in PAOs. Further, PAOs are not numerous, are mainly channels to deliver subsidies, often have management and governance difficulties, and lack political bargaining power. Existing national ones lack linkages with local farmers.¹⁸

The Beninese business environment is not very favourable, particularly for agriculture. There is an important mismatch between agriculture's financial needs, and existing financial institutions and services. While micro-finance is growing, its efficiency is slowed by the nature of the loans (which are mainly short term); land tenure systems that are difficult to match with micro-finance requirements; management problems of micro-finance institutions; and lack of insurances mechanisms adapted to a risky sector like agriculture. Finally, entrepreneurs in rural areas also lack access to information about available economic opportunities and services.¹⁹

When Songhai began, Benin's economy was controlled by a Marxist-Leninist government administration. Since 1991, Benin's political environment has been more democratic, and also particularly favourable to agriculture, which the government considers a priority, as indicated in its Strategic Plan for Agriculture Sector Recovery (PSRSA), and the National Plan for Investment in Agriculture (PNIA) for 2011-2015. The PNIA's first goal was to ensure national growth and food security by improving agricultural productivity and management. Its second goal was "to ensure competitiveness and market access for agricultural products by promoting agricultural subsectors".²⁰ The PSRSA intervention strategy "emphasizes the professionalization of family farms, agricultural entrepreneurship and the promotion of promising subsectors".²¹

17 Op. cit., IFAD, 2011, pp. 2-4.

18 Ibid., pp. 3-4.

19 Ibid., pp. 2-4.

20 Ibid., p. 4.

21 Ibid.

Section 2: Analysis of the Catalyst

2.1 Why was it created?

Purpose

Songhai aims to develop an innovative production model to build a new African society where communities and individuals are self-reliant and able to design locally-adapted and ecologically sustainable socio-economic development strategies.²² By its successful practical example, the organization wants to restore hope and confidence among communities and individuals, and show that Africans can become major players in the world economy.²³

Songhai's goals took shape when its founder, Godfrey Nzamujo, after travelling throughout Africa and discovering its extreme wealth and diversity in terms of cultures, history and natural resources,²⁴ asked himself why a continent so rich suffered so much poverty. He found that Africans seemed to be in a “logic of poverty”, instead of a logic of wealth generation.²⁵ He thus decided to create a new economic model adapted to Africa, based on its rich resources and on the development of its human and technical capacities.²⁶ He felt that “the only way to reverse poverty is to make Africans become successful producers, by increasing their production capacities through learning, researching and through opening their eyes to the opportunities around them. On one hand, helping them see what is possible to do with their natural resources, and on the other hand, helping them equip themselves with values and skills to embrace these possibilities to create goods and services that correspond to their needs and desires”.²⁷

To achieve these goals, Songhai has a development perspective that links the social and economic fields using the following organizations created and managed by it:²⁸

- Production and industrial centre – To test its development model and thus make its activities and discourses credible. It developed and is continuously refining an innovative system of production that is holistic, integrating primary, secondary and services sectors; and competitive and sustainable, building local human capacities and preserving natural resources.²⁹ The organization is structured as an enterprise meant to sell its products profitably;
- Research, development and experimentation centre – To study and adapt local, national,

22 *Vision*, Songhai, http://www.songhai.org/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=115&Itemid=105 (accessed 22 August 2012).

23 *La charte*, Songhai, http://www.songhai.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=42&Itemid=65 (accessed 17 August 2012).

24 Op. cit., G. Nzamujo, 2002, pp. 15-16.

25 G. Nzamujo, interview, 10 October 2012.

26 Op. cit., D. Bousquet: “Le Bénin, modèle du bio africain”, 5 January 2010.

27 G. Nzamujo, interview, 10 October 2012.

28 Op. cit., G. Nzamujo, 2002, p. 37.

29 *Historique*, Songhai, http://www.songhai.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=34&Itemid=54 (accessed 20 August 2012).

and international technologies to local contexts and ensure their affordability for local communities and individuals.³⁰ Innovation and creativity are promoted, to push people to find new, better-adapted and more productive ways to produce, process, and market;

- Training centre – To build communities and individual capacities to become self-reliant entrepreneurs and leaders of local development. It trains youth, women and farmers in particular, on its innovative production system and ways of thinking so they acquire the ability to observe, find or create technologies adapted to their own challenges and opportunities,³¹ and engage in knowledge exchanges;³²



- Service centre – To support former trainees and farmers at the local level through a variety of services that continuously develop their capacities.

Songhaï also collaborates with national and international partners to widen its impact. It works with the government on policies and programmes concerning rural and semi-urban development, and to create new centres in other African countries.

Relevance

Songhaï's development and production model contributes to the Beninese, and more broadly to the African rural development in several ways.

First, it builds the capacities of communities and individuals to overcome poverty through their own model of socio-economic development. Often, farmers do not have a real choice regarding what they produce because of their limited training, material and financial capital, and are often pushed by the state or international companies to grow crops to supply cities or international trade, which makes them dependent on national and international markets. To enable them to become self-reliant, and improve their own working and living conditions, Songhaï builds their social, technical and entrepreneurial capacities so they can choose what production, processing and marketing activities are most profitable to them, meet local needs and desires, and effectively use the local social and natural resources. Further, it empowers farmers as developments actors and leaders, by training and prompting them to design and participate in their own local and national socio-economic development. The organization supports this dynamic also by calling on the State to provide the necessary infrastructures and promote the most innovative and promising initiatives for the country with a long-term perspective.³³

30 Op. cit., G. Nzamujo, 2002, p. 81.

31 Ibid., p. 50.

32 Op. cit., *Historique*, Songhaï.

33 Op. cit., G. Nzamujo, 2002, pp. 131-134, 137.

Songhai's trainings also offer a real entrepreneurship opportunity to the young generation that is looking for profitable jobs, and is disappointed by the limited opportunities in rural areas and the overpopulated cities. The organization trains these youth to develop a clear vision of their goals in life, and to pursue them. It stimulates those youth to constantly develop their potential and that of their communities and countries.³⁴

Second, Songhai's development and production model is environmentally sustainable, nowadays a major concern. Godfrey Nzamujo explains that *"Dans la nature, il n'y a pas de perte, le végétal nourrit l'animal qui nourrit le végétal. C'est efficace. En Afrique, on est mieux placés pour reproduire ce cycle car la nature fonctionne 12 mois sur 12. Elle nous bombarde d'énergie."*³⁵ (In nature, plants feed animals, which feed plants. It is effective. In Africa, we are in the best position to reproduce this cycle because nature works 12 months out of 12. It bombards us with energy). Thus the organization promotes economically sustainable businesses, able to compete with international productions, while showing that this can be achieved by making the most of and preserving local natural resources. It develops productive and sustainable activities organized in networks that use natural energy flows. For instance, the wastes of one sector, such as animal husbandry, are the natural inputs for another like market gardening. This model is also more affordable for communities and individuals as they need fewer inputs to produce.³⁶



34 Op. cit., G. Nzamujo, 2002, pp. 7, 79.

35 Op. cit., D. Bousquet: "Le Bénin, modèle du bio africain", 5 Januray 2010.

36 Op. cit., G. Nzamujo, 2002, pp. 7, 93-94, 97.

2.2 How was it created?

The founder

Songhai's founder and director is Father Godfrey Nzamujo. His motivation is rooted in several African crises, his family values, and his technical expertise.

He was born and grew up in Nigeria in the 1950s-1960s, in a context that, as he explains, valued courage, sense of community and individual responsibility; values that he, in turn, fosters at Songhai. His culture and upbringing are crucial to understanding his character, drive and conviction as, for instance, they pushed him to constantly learn and build the capacities of others to enable them to never give up in difficult situations.³⁷

After some years in the Dominican novitiate in Nigeria, then in France, in the 1970s he pursued advanced studies in the USA in a wide array of fields, from chemistry and microbiology,³⁸ systems engineering, electrical engineering, computer services, mathematics, to theology, and economic philosophy. More recently, he completed a PhD in management science.³⁹

In the early 1980s, the famine in Ethiopia reinforced his will to improve the living conditions on the continent of his birth. He thus undertook a journey through Africa to understand the main challenges of the people he met.⁴⁰

Creation – Initial opportunities, support, and challenges

In 1985, Godfrey Nzamujo created Songhai in Benin, a country undergoing severe economic and political hardship, where communities and individuals were looking for alternatives. He explains that “it was a very appropriate time for me to come and be part of this soul searching”.⁴¹

After his insistent requests, he obtained from Benin's Ministry of Agriculture one hectare of marshland in the suburbs of Porto Novo. As he explains, they expected “to get me off their back because they thought I would not be able to do anything of it with my hands as I was an intellectual. So they gave it to me to get me tired.”⁴² He started to work on this poor land with 6 young school dropouts.⁴³ He actively sought individuals who were looking for a job, such as school and university dropouts, or students who had been to prison because of their political opinions. He explains that “they joined me because they had nothing to do, not because they believed in me. But then, I was able to mobilize and teach them more and more so they became my disciples.”⁴⁴ He believes he was also lucky because these young men were intelligent, brave, determined, believed in themselves, understood the techniques and Songhai's principles, and could thus progressively become technicians and even his mentors. He also realized that it was possible to teach entrepreneurship. As he says: “you are not born with it, these guys were not born with it, and I was not born

37 Op. cit., G. Nzamujo, 2002, pp. 26-28.

38 Ibid., p. 27.

39 *Natural Solution Foundation*, 2008, <http://www.healthfreedomusa.org/?p=518> (accessed 22 August 2012).

40 Op. cit., G. Nzamujo, 2002, pp. 27-28.

41 G. Nzamujo, interview, 10 October 2012.

42 Ibid.

43 Op. cit., G. Nzamujo, 2002, p. 71.

44 G. Nzamujo, interview, 10 October 2012.

with it: I was a scientist, an engineer!”⁴⁵

Godfrey Nzamujo received valuable support from family members, friends and colleagues from universities and parishes across the United States. None were rich, but they all contributed and “collected a few dollars here and there.”⁴⁶ Combined with hard work, he and the youth were able to build 6 ponds for fish farming, purchase 32 quails, 12 ducks, 100 chickens, 10 sows, 20 heads of sheep and goats to start Songhaï. They also designed their own irrigation system and thus succeeded in producing during the dry season.⁴⁷

In 1986, the Minister of Agriculture visited Songhaï and, seeing that the land was green, whereas the surrounding areas were dry and brown, he increased Songhaï’s land to 10 hectares.⁴⁸ That same year, the African Development Foundation (ADF) also visited Songhaï, assessed its progresses and potential, and signed an agreement giving the organization important funding with which it could widen its activities, which it did by building 84 additional ponds and a pigsty.⁴⁹

Growth – Main steps since creation

During its first years, Songhaï steadily grew and progressively developed new activities. In 1987, it built offices, additional hen houses and duck parks. That same year, Songhaï had a successful bean harvest and started looking for markets, which made it initiate door-to-door selling and then a home delivery service system.⁵⁰

In 1987, Songhaï also started its first training course with 28 students. Thereafter, every 6 months, 15 new trainees were admitted for 12 or 18 months courses supported by a credit system funded by the ADF.⁵¹ By 1989, the Porto-Novo Centre could launch a long-term training of 30 months.⁵² To support the trainings, research and experimentation activities also steadily increased. Gradually, other partners came to work with Songhaï, attracted by its innovative and effective processes.⁵³

In 1991, Songhaï opened a shop of “healthy food” in Cotonou to sell the products of the Porto Novo centre and to create social links between producers and urban clients. This was also a way to prevent the products sold on the premises of Porto Novo from being informally resold in the city at higher prices. The next year, Songhaï started food processing activities. It opened meat (with the support of a French butcher), fruit juice, jam, and flour facilities. In 1993, it opened a restaurant in Porto Novo serving the products of the Porto Novo centre. Furthermore, 12 trainees started following a hosteleries and catering course supported by the international hotel operator Accor, and the same year witnessed the creation of a mechanic workshop.⁵⁴

45 G. Nzamujo, interview, 10 October 2012.

46 Ibid.

47 Op. cit., G. Nzamujo, 2002, p. 71.

48 G. Nzamujo, interview, 10 October 2012.

49 Op. cit., G. Nzamujo, 2002, p. 71.

50 Ibid., p. 73.

51 Ibid.

52 *History*, Songhaï, http://www.songhai.org/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=77&Itemid=96 (accessed 22 August 2012).

53 Op. cit., G. Nzamujo, 2002, p. 73.

54 Ibid., pp. 74, 120.

Songhaï also gradually expanded its geographical reach by opening new farms and centres as well as increasing its international connections.

In 1989, as local communities, government officials, researchers, and others started discovering Songhaï and realizing that its approach was working, the organization held its first national conference in the Porto Novo centre on its concept and organizational principles. This conference enabled farmers, practitioners, and theorists to meet, and also made the Songhaï model known internationally.⁵⁵ In 1993, the *Songhaï-France* association was founded in Lyon.⁵⁶ In 1995, a *Songhaï farmers'* network was launched to promote its values and ideas across the country by supporting local farmers through a variety of services, such as vocational training.⁵⁷

In 1993, Songhaï created the Tchi-Ahomadégbé centre in another part of the country, which it left with a counselling team that remained till 1996. In 1999, it opened a farm with 6 trainees in the rural community of Lokossa/Kinwédji, and 2 big production and training centres in Parakou/Atagara, in the Borgou department, and in Salvalou/Kpakpassa, in the Collines department. That same year it began working with the UNHCR refugee centre in Kpomassè, in the Atlantique department, helping refugees to work so they could later find jobs more easily.⁵⁸ In 2002 Songhaï opened its first centre in Nigeria in Amukpè, in the Delta State.⁵⁹ To ensure the continuous vocational training of its former trainees, in 1997 the organization created the *Institut de Formation des Entrepreneurs en Développement*, IFED (Training Institute for Development Entrepreneurs). Since 1999, with USAID support, Songhaï also gives access to information and communications technologies to farmers with its 3 telecentres across Benin.⁶⁰

Even though Songhaï has developed numerous activities since its creation, challenges abounded in the beginning.

The very first resources that Godfrey Nzamujo managed to gather (a container shipped with working materials and personal items) got lost. It was found many months later in Hamburg where the contents were being auctioned and Nzamujo and his friends had to collect money again to buy it back.⁶¹

Songhaï also faced internal and external conflicts, ranging from being harassed by members of various political organizations, to encounters with individuals who tried to prevent the success of the organization. Godfrey Nzamujo explains that some did not like the idea of, “a man coming from nowhere but succeeding and making a difference. So they resisted it. And up till now, it has never really stopped”.⁶² This opposition manifested itself in the form of public mockery as Songhaï’s founder underwent training; the blocking of work by administrative officials; the imprisonment of colleagues on the false claim that Godfrey Nzamujo was an American spy; negative evaluations from other organizations

55 Op. cit., G. Nzamujo, 2002, p. 73.

56 Op. cit., *History*, Songhaï.

57 Op. cit., G. Nzamujo, 2002, pp. 74, 120.

58 Ibid., pp. 74-75.

59 Op. cit., *History*, Songhaï.

60 Op. cit., G. Nzamujo, 2002, pp. 74-75.

61 G. Nzamujo, interview, 10 October 2012.

62 Ibid.

so Songhaï would not get external support; luring trained and qualified employees to defect; the theft of animals, crops, machines or money, and production of fake-bills. The organization's beginnings were also marked by protests from trainees who wanted to be paid like trained workers.⁶³

These difficulties were overcome by will power and hard work, and by what Godfrey Nzamujo calls a “culture of success: do it right, create success, and then people will join you and your ideas. Even those who doubt, you'll be able to convince them. Not by giving lectures or talking, but by doing and having practical results.”⁶⁴ Thus when people visited Songhaï, they were pleasantly surprised to see modern techniques used in simple ways, crops and vegetable growing during the dry season, and they took the organization and its founder more seriously. At the end of the 1980s, Benin's president Mathieu Kérékou invited the national media to visit Songhaï and tell the Beninese people about the success of the organization.⁶⁵



63 G. Nzamujo, interview, 10 October 2012.

64 Ibid.

65 Ibid.

Another main challenge faced by Songhai at the start was what Godfrey Nzamujo describes as a widespread “hand out mentality”. He explains that when people hear the word “project”, they generally thought that Europeans or Americans would send large sums of money to support it, thereby not requiring project participants to work hard. Mr. Nzamujo initially regretted calling Songhai a project because many joined expecting money instead of having to work hard to create and sustain the organization. It was difficult to sell Songhai’s core idea that people should get out of a “mentality of poverty” and stop asking for external help. In the 1980s, he was inspired by the slogan disseminated by the government, “Comptez d’abord sur vos propres forces” (Rely first on your own strengths), which he used to advocate Songhai’s approach and to prompt people to become self-reliant. He explains that it was especially important that he himself, who had 3 doctoral degrees from renowned universities, combined his “brain with hard work with his hands.”⁶⁶

2.3 How does it currently work?

Structure

All Songhai centres have the same goals and essentially the same means to achieve them; all the sites aim to develop rural areas and enable local communities and individuals to become productive entrepreneurs as well as leaders of their own local development. To achieve these aims, all the centres:

- Produce, process and market agricultural products and other related goods according to Songhai’s innovative production model adapted to the local human resources and agro-ecological characteristics of their area;
- Research, develop and experiment technologies to improve the productivity and efficiency of production activities;
- Train Songhai’s trainees as well as local communities’ members to use these technologies and develop new ones themselves;
- Offer services and support to former trainees as well as local entrepreneurs;
- Advocate a positive image of agricultural activities and sensitize decision-makers to the potential of agriculture for national wealth, employment generation, and civil tranquillity.⁶⁷

The main centre is that of Porto Novo, in south-east Benin. It is the headquarters of the Songhai model and the head office of the organization: strategic national and international decisions are taken there. It is also the main innovation, experimentation and training centre, and it leads the Songhai farmers’ network.⁶⁸ It also backstops activities of satellite centres, for instance by providing trainings to the trainers of satellite centres, or support for management tasks. The Porto Novo centre undertakes more research, training and advocacy activities than other centres, which focus on production and training. It currently works on 21 hectares, has over 200 employees, 350 trainees and individuals enrolled in

66 G. Nzamujo, interview, 10 October 2012.

67 *Siège/centre régional Porto-Novo, Vocation*, Songhai, http://www.songhai.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=69&Itemid=75 (accessed 20 August 2012).

68 Ibid.

specific workshops at any time, and registers over 20,000 visitors every year, including government officials, farmers and researchers.

The Parakou/Atagara satellite centre, located in north Benin, works on 300 hectares of land and 45 hectares of water, has over 40 employees, and 150 trainees at a given time. The Savalou/Kpakpassa satellite centre, located in the centre of the country, works on 200 hectares, has over 30 employees, and approximately 140 trainees. The Lokossa/Kinwédji satellite centre, located in the south-west, has over 25 hectares.⁶⁹

Songhaï's decision-making and organizational structure presents the classical characteristics of NGOs, but also that of an enterprise. It has a board with members from universities and industries, farmers and community leaders. The head of the current board is the former US ambassador to Nigeria, Robin Sanders. Songhaï also has a director general, currently Godfrey Nzamujo, managing all its departments, such as the Training, Aquaculture, and Animal departments. All of them function as fairly autonomous enterprises: each has its own director's office, senior technicians, technicians, animators, and interns. The most important departments are sub-divided in specific activities, such as in the Animal Department that includes the branches of: Chicken Production, Eggs Production, and Other Poultry.⁷⁰

Concerning Songhaï workers, 4 elements are particularly original:

- Each “employee” is considered an entrepreneur. As Songhaï promotes entrepreneurship and aims to lead by example, it created a remuneration system pushing its workers to continuously look for more efficient and innovative ways to work, and rewarding these efforts. Salary thus has 3 components: one is the “social” part, which is a basic wage; another is the “production” part, which varies according to the amount of output the worker produces; and the last is the “innovation” part, which varies according to what the worker was able to develop, improve, invent or discover. The more the workers invest themselves in their work, the more they earn. Also, the organization cannot afford to pay workers who are not contributing. As its founder puts it, “we don't share poverty at Songhaï: we share wealth”;⁷¹
- Each employee, whatever the title, is a mentor and a mentee at the same time. As Songhaï believes in vocational training and knowledge sharing, everybody is expected to teach and learn continuously;⁷²
- Following this logic of exchange between trainers and trainees, even when they are not formally employed, Songhaï's former trainees are considered part of the organization. As they know its values and techniques, they are encouraged to pass them on to others in their local communities to actively support local development. They can also relay back to Songhaï what they learn from their communities;⁷³
- Finally, approximately 80 per cent of Songhaï's workers are former trainees. Since the

69 Op. cit., *Siège/centre regional Porto-Novo, Vocation*, Songhaï (accessed 20 August 2012); L. Sessou, email correspondence, 10 October 2012.

70 G. Nzamujo, interview, 10 October 2012.

71 Ibid.

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid.

values of creativity, entrepreneurship, development and respect of the local human and natural resources are core to its work, the organization prefers to recruit people who already know how it functions and have an entrepreneurial state of mind.⁷⁴

Activities

Songhai's activities are grounded on the idea refined through years of experience that developing rural areas by building the capacities of local communities and individuals requires investments in 5 types of capital: human, environmental, social, technical, and financial. Workers and trainees, as well as local communities and individuals, receive the necessary trainings to develop their:

- Human capital – Including values, know-how, managerial and organizational skills, to become innovative entrepreneurs;
- Environmental capital – To recognize the value and potential of their natural environment, the sun, climate, rivers, seeds, insects, etc., and organize them to produce, process and market effectively and efficiently, and thus create wealth;
- Social/cultural/interpersonal capital – To network and create connections for sharing knowledge, experiences, difficulties or opportunities, but also to negotiate, discuss, and work jointly;
- Technical capital – To discover, develop, and incorporate innovative technologies, e.g. new tools, machines and production techniques to improve productivity;
- Financial capital – To better manage their finances and start their own sustainable projects. But Songhai grants or lends money only if the 4 other capitals have been developed, to ensure that the beneficiaries are impregnated by its logic of productive production.⁷⁵

All these capitals have to be developed together as they reinforce one another. For instance, organizational and technical skills allow people to use natural resources effectively, efficiently, and in a economically- and environmentally-sustainable manner. Songhai thus works to integrate these capitals to create synergies, make the most of all local human and natural resources, and build local communities and the individual capacity to do the same.⁷⁶

Production, processing and commercialization centres

As mentioned earlier, all Songhai centres are productive enterprises running a variety of activities in the primary, secondary and services sectors. By producing, Songhai leads by its successful example and shows that its methods are economically profitable and environmentally sustainable. It gains credibility by paying its salaries and bills the revenues from its own production, rather than from international donations. It also promotes the value of entrepreneurship. Godfrey Nzamujo explains that “*Songhai doit prendre le risque de l’entrepreneuriat. Avant d’être un centre de formation, Songhai est un centre de production parce que nous ne pouvons pas donner ce que nous n’avons pas. Nous sommes en mesure de guider les gens parce qu’on*

74 G. Nzamujo, interview, 10 October 2012.

75 Ibid.

76 Op. cit., G. Nzamujo, 2002, pp. 106-107.

*danse notre danse.*⁷⁷ (Songhaï has to take the entrepreneurial risk. Prior to being a training centre, Songhaï is a production centre because we cannot give something that we do not have. We are able to guide people because we dance our own dance).

Songhaï centres breed fish and other animals, such as poultry for meat and eggs, cows, sheep, goats, pigs or bees. They produce crops, such as rice, manioc or soy, as well as vegetables and fruits. They grow trees and flowers.⁷⁸ The organization also undertakes processing and marketing from the beginning of the production process. It puts a strong emphasis on transformation as it adds considerable value to production.⁷⁹ Songhaï centres also process food and produce, for instance, fruit juices, dried fruits, oil, meat, bread and pastries. To further diversify activities, they include cottage industries, such as soap and pottery, and they also design, create and maintain machines and tools, and recycle metal.⁸⁰

Songhaï works on the integration of activities.⁸¹ It follows the principle that in nature everything is transformed, so the waste of one field can be a valuable input for another one.⁸² Its integrated production system thus combines energy consumption and production in a holistic approach, which not only gives value to by-products, but also greatly diminishes the need for expensive inputs. For instance, Songhaï does not buy fertilizer, using instead, what it produces.⁸³ This systemic approach has 2 main principles:

- First, activities are organized to *recycle* a maximum of by-products. The main example is composting: elements that have been consumed by humans or animals, and have thus lost part of their energy, are still useful to grow plants. For instance, the water in which fish are bred, that needs to be regularly changed as it gets polluted by fish waste, is used to water plants that need ammoniac and carbonic gas (such as manioc and soy), which are in turn used as part of the fish diet.⁸⁴ Another example is recycling for energy production. The poultry is bred on stilts, so that its wastes can be gathered and transformed into compost. Additionally, wastewater is purified by being passed through pools with water hyacinths. Once used, these hyacinths are cut and mixed with animal waste and are fermented to create biogas,⁸⁵ which is then transformed into electricity and used on the farm for lighting, cooking, in telecentres, etc.⁸⁶
- Second, activities are organized to maximize *synergies*. The idea is to combine biological systems so that one's waste is directly used by another. For instance, Songhaï breeds fish and 20 per cent of the fish eggs rot in the water. By rotting, the eggs free chemical

77 G. Nzamujo, interview, 10 October 2012.

78 Op. cit., *Siège/centre regional Porto-Novo, Vocation*, Songhaï; *Centre Satellite Savalou, Vocation*, Songhaï, http://www.songhai.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=66&Itemid=76; and *Centre Satellite Kinwédji, Vocation*, Songhaï, http://www.songhai.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=68&Itemid=78 (accessed 20 August 2012).

79 Op. cit., G. Nzamujo, 2002, p. 117

80 Op. cit., *Siège/centre regional Porto-Novo, Vocation*, Songhaï; Op. cit., *Centre Satellite Savalou, Vocation*, Songhaï and Op. cit., *Centre Satellite Kinwédji, Vocation*, Songhaï (accessed 20 August 2012).

81 *Activités*, Songhaï, http://www.songhai.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=35&Itemid=55 (accessed 22 August 2012).

82 Op. cit., D. Bousquet: "Le Bénin, modèle du bio africain", 5 January 2010. .

83 Op. cit., G. Nzamujo, 2002, p. 54.

84 Ibid., pp. 52, 54.

85 Op.cit., D. Bousquet: "Le Bénin, modèle du bio africain", 5 January 2010.

86 Op. cit., G. Nzamujo, 2002, p. 54.

particles that pollute running water and kill the fish larva that hatch. Songhai turned this difficulty into an opportunity: on the first day, as the eggs begin to rot, egg-eating bacteria are introduced in the water; on the second day, water flies are introduced to eat the rotting bacteria and seaweeds; and on the third, the hatchling fish which, by that time, have eaten all the nutrients they had in their eggs, start eating the water flies.⁸⁷



Research, development and experimentation centres

To produce and process throughout the year, including in the dry season, and in an economically- and environmentally-sustainable manner, Songhai's centres continuously develop a variety of innovative technologies, following specific principles.

First, the organization undertakes applied research, starting with local needs. Songhai seeks to overcome current and foreseen future barriers to productivity. It learns about traditional and modern, local, national and international technologies, combining and adapting them to local human, economic and natural resources. Research at Songhai is often small-scale. For instance, it seeks to improve market gardening tools, or finding simple processing techniques to preserve or transform mangos.

Also, its *Institut de Formation des Entrepreneurs en Développement* (IFED) links the people who conceive and develop technologies with those using them. It allows national and international researchers and practitioners to meet and discuss, and the Songhai farm's network helps develop and experiment their ideas.⁸⁸

87 Op. cit., G. Nzamujo, 2002, p. 53.

88 G. Nzamujo, interview, 10 October 2012.

Second, local communities and individuals must be able to use and afford the technologies developed.⁸⁹ The idea is that every trainee, once working in his own farm, should be able to access capitals goods, which is possible if the technology is simple but well thought out, affordable and made locally with directly available materials.⁹⁰ For instance, Songhai develops rice-beating machines that work with pedals instead of electricity or oil.⁹¹ Also, most of the tools and machines used in Songhai's centres are produced there, with scrap materials melted down to create the needed pieces.

Third, the organization promotes creativity and innovation to boost local development. It believes that anyone, if properly trained, can research and innovate.⁹² Songhai's founder himself designed the majority of the tools and machines used in the organization's centres.⁹³

Songhai centres thus research, develop and experiment, in particular, large- and small-scale irrigation systems; large- and small-scale mechanization and animal traction; soils regeneration and techniques fighting erosion; agroforestry and combined cropping; and composting and recycling systems. They also test and multiply locally-adapted seeds; and test and reproduce locally-adapted animal and vegetal breeds.⁹⁴

Songhai currently focuses on energy production. As the national electricity grid will not reach all villages in Benin in the near future, it is developing modular, decentralized and renewable sources of energy production to provide access to energy in rural areas for domestic and industrial uses. It has advanced considerably on biogas production, and is also developing and using solar energy technologies.⁹⁵

Today, Songhai is also working on new materials to show it is possible to build affordable houses of good quality and comfort in rural areas. As the organization always links activities, it is also equipping these new houses so they can get electricity and pump water through solar energy.⁹⁶

Industrial areas clustering production, processing and recycling activities are also being set up to improve Songhai's productivity and competitiveness, and to develop new products responding to local demand. For instance, new seeds are being developed for rice and tomatoes as their consumption is increasing; and plastics are being collected, cleaned and recycled into different products.⁹⁷

Training centres

As Songhai's primary goal is to enable African communities and individuals to become self-reliant and leaders in development, producing and developing innovative technologies are means to accomplish this goal, and training is fundamental.

89 G. Nzamujo, interview, 10 October 2012.

90 Op.cit., D. Bousquet: "Le Bénin, modèle du bio africain", 5 January 2010.

91 Op. cit., G. Nzamujo, 2002, p. 99.

92 Ibid, pp. 97-98.

93 Op.cit., D. Bousquet: "Le Bénin, modèle du bio africain", 5 January 2010.

94 Op. cit., *Siège/centre regional Porto-Novo, Vocation*, Songhai (accessed 20 August 2012).

95 G. Nzamujo, interview, 10 October 2012.

96 Ibid.

97 Ibid.

Songhai offers many types of trainings: specific workshops and internships on several subjects, from crop production, animal husbandry, food processing, to machinery design or renewable energy production, specifically aimed at women or at farmers.⁹⁸ It also offers long-term training for youth coming from Benin, as well as from west, east and central Africa.⁹⁹ The goal of this training is to enable youth, including school dropouts, to run their own businesses in one or more fields of activities developed at Songhai. These trainings also stress the values of creativity, innovation and leadership, so youth may also become development leaders.

The strength of the long-term trainings is that youth are immersed in the production process and are thus operational once training is completed. Potential trainees first come to the centre for 3 days, to evaluate their reflection capacities and willingness to learn. The selected trainees stay at Songhai for 2 months, and if their work is satisfactory, the organization opens a savings account for them where they start depositing sums from family members and friends who are encouraged to support them. After the initial period, they start a training of 18 months, at the end of which they receive a certificate. These long-term trainings follow a holistic approach combining theoretical and practical courses on multiple subjects, such as production and processing techniques, marketing and commercialization, business creation and management, and the socio-economic context. Trainees also visit numerous farms, share and work with elders, and elaborate a business plan. Their families take part in the business creation process by getting involved in building infrastructure, such as wells and houses, on their own properties.¹⁰⁰

At the end of the 18 months, trainees take part in an internship programme, often at a Songhai centre, during which they start their own business. Songhai provides them with infrastructures, such as fish farming ponds, fields with irrigation systems or henhouses, as well as a loan, up to 3 times the amount they saved during their 18 months training. During the internship programme, the organization also matches students with one another to make them work together and combine their strengths.

Songhai also insists on collaboration with local villagers. When trainees start their internship, the organization first discusses placement options with the local village authorities. If Songhai obtains 100 hectares of land, the “mother farm”, which is a mini Songhai centre, uses one third; another third is allocated for the trainees; and the last third is given to villagers. The advantages of this approach are multiple: Songhai and trainees can learn from villagers and in turn teach them new techniques; trainees and villagers can ask Songhai’s farm for advice, new technologies, etc.; and trainees and villagers benefit from the infrastructure build by Songhai, such as wells and irrigation systems, and processing equipment. Thus, dry lands have become productive, to the benefit of the organization, its trainees and local farmers. This is also a way to widen the impact of Songhai’s training, as youth can pass on their knowledge where they start working.¹⁰¹

To receive their diploma and become “Songhai socio-economic entrepreneurs”, trainees are evaluated at the end of their internship on their productivity, but also on their

98 Op. cit., G. Nzamujo, 2002, pp. 66-67, 82-83.

99 G. Nzamujo, interview, 10 October 2012.

100 Op. cit., G. Nzamujo, 2002, pp. 83-85.

101 G. Nzamujo, interview, 10 October 2012.

negotiation capacities with suppliers and social relations with villagers. They can then go to work wherever they want, with another loan from Songhaï to start their new business.¹⁰²

Services centres

To strengthen and widen the impact of its activities and approach to local development, Songhaï centres provide services to former trainees, to ensure the sustainability of their enterprises, but also to local farmers. The department organizing these services is currently the biggest in Songhaï's structure.



Loans are one form of support. They are needed because many agricultural credit institutions are not always competent, but also because it is hard to get credit when the only form of capital trainees have is land. As training at Songhaï builds trainees' human, environmental, social, technical, managerial and financial skills, enabling them to effectively use the loan and start production quickly once on their farm, the recovery rate of the loans is over 90 per cent.¹⁰³ This support tightly links beneficiaries to the broad Songhaï "community". It leads them, for instance, to become responsible for local trainings, multiplying seeds, or popularizing innovative agricultural techniques.¹⁰⁴

102 G. Nzamujo, interview, 10 October 2012.

103 Ibid.

104 Op. cit., G. Nzamujo, 2002, pp. 88-91.

Another form of support are the visits youth receive from the animator of the Songhai farmer's network 4 to 12 times a year. The animator gives them technical, organizational or marketing advice, as well as moral support.¹⁰⁵ Ensuring the long-term success of new farms also enables Songhai to build its credibility across Benin and neighbouring countries.

Songhai also works with local farmers to enable them to use the new tools and technologies developed at Songhai, and adapt them to their local context. This is done through trainings, workshops, briefs, or by using ICTs, for instance through three telecentres in Porto-Novo, Savalou, and Parakou.¹⁰⁶ The centres also offer continuous services, such as equipment rental, counselling, access to inputs, transformation and marketing support.¹⁰⁷

To strengthen vertical links, a Songhai farmers' network was created in the 1990s to enable farmers to share knowledge, experience and difficulties, find solutions together, and also sell their products under the Songhai farmers' brand. Network members currently work in agriculture, animal husbandry, food processing and cottage industries in many different countries, including Benin, Burkina Faso, Togo, and Nigeria. Local joint committees organize and support common vocational training, projects, input acquisition, commercialization coordination, and cooperative credit unions. They are supported by Songhai which, for instance, sends animators to visit a farm 3 to 12 times a year or to organize decentralized workshops. This network thus widens the impact of Songhai's trainings as farmers support each other across several countries, and enlarges the visibility of the organization as the products are also sold in these different countries. Songhai farmers' network also has national committees where Songhai's workers and farmers analyse their common activities and impact, then share with government and international organizations the methods for creating a more enabling environment for agricultural entrepreneurs.¹⁰⁸

Projects, external collaborations and support

Regional Songhai Project for the development of agricultural entrepreneurship

In 2008, Songhai launched an important international project with the support of several UN agencies that visited the organization and were convinced by its approach.¹⁰⁹ The *Regional Songhai Project for the development of agricultural entrepreneurship* aims to replicate the organization's production, research, training and service model through new Songhai centres in 11 other African countries. These centres would generate an enabling environment for the creation of micro-, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in agriculture by, among others, building the capacities of agricultural entrepreneurs, and linking them with various credit structures.¹¹⁰

105 Op. cit., G. Nzamujo, 2002, pp. 83-85.

106 Ibid., p.99.

107 Op. cit., *Centre Satellite Savalou, Vocation*, Songhai (accessed 20 August 2012).

108 Op. cit., G. Nzamujo, 2002, pp. 86-88.

109 Op. cit., *History*, Songhai.

110 *Perspectives*, Songhai, http://www.songhai.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=49&Itemid=68 (accessed 11 September 2012).

In 2011, the Beninese government signed a financial agreement worth 51 million with UNDP to implement the National Songhaï Project,¹¹¹ which promotes entrepreneurship as a means to transform rural areas into “green rural cities” where agriculture, but also industries and services, are developed.¹¹² This project has the following objectives:

- Reducing youth un- and underemployment by training them in Songhaï’s production, processing and commercialization system; building their entrepreneurial skills, and their human and natural resources management capacities; improving their access to inputs, such as land, seeds, water, and innovative technologies; and building infrastructures. It aims to train 1,500 young people in 5 years;¹¹³
- Widening Songhaï’s activities and impact by: maximizing the comparative advantages of the different agro-ecological areas where existing centres and farms are working; developing value-chains across the country; and opening new centres in Benin as well as an entrepreneurship platform enabling farmers to share knowledge and information, and access markets, technologies and inputs.¹¹⁴



Significant collaboration between Songhaï and the Beninese government started around 2009, when President Yayi Boni heard about the organization and visited the centre of Porto Novo. He found Songhaï’s approach to rural development inspiring and made its founder one of his advisors. Since then, the President brings Heads of states visiting Benin to the centre,¹¹⁵ and he seeks advice from Godfrey Nzamujo in the formulation of policy on socio-economic entrepreneurship, integrated programmes

linking the agriculture, industry and services sectors, and in the development of green villages and towns where people from rural areas would stay instead of migrating to urban areas.¹¹⁶ In September 2012, the first in this series of new Songhaï centres was inaugurated in Kétou, Benin.¹¹⁷ This centre, of 107 hectares, is separated in 3 different areas: an entrepreneurial zone where young agricultural entrepreneurs trained at Songhaï can start their own agribusiness projects; a production, research, training and services zone where Songhaï can popularize its production models, techniques and values, and support local farmers to process and market their products; and accommodation facilities, a restaurant, and a farmers’ market including storage and conservation facilities.¹¹⁸

111 UNDP : “Songhaï, faire reculer les frontières de la pauvreté”, in *Tandem*, No. 13-14, July-December 2011, http://www.bj.undp.org/docs/bulletin/Tandem_13-14.pdf (accessed 10 January 2013).

112 G. Nzamujo, interview, 10 October 2012.

113 Op. cit., UNDP, 2011.

114 Op. cit., *Perspectives*, Songhaï (accessed 11 September 2012).

115 G. Nzamujo, interview, 10 October 2012.

116 Op. cit., *La charte*, Songhaï (accessed 17 August 2012).

117 Op. cit., L. Sessou, email correspondence, 12 October 2012.

118 *Le Centre national Songhaï de Kétou, un joyau de développement intégré*, International Planned Parenthood Federation, panapress, 2012, <http://www.panapress.com/Le-Centre-national-Songhaï-de-Ketou,-un-joyau-de-developpement-integre--13-842637-0-lang3-index.html> (accessed 23 November 2012).

Collaboration with the government supports the organization financially, as the President actively raises money to develop Songhai's centres in the country, including via the African Development Bank (ADB). It also helps the organization disseminate its model, as a number of heads of states that visited the centre expressed the intention to implement such facilities in their own countries. Also, the Beninese Minister of education recently announced that all students studying agronomy at university would have to do an internship at Songhai's centres, an announcement that further recognises the effectiveness of the organization's activities.¹¹⁹

External collaboration and support

From the beginning, Songhai found important partners linked to various international donor agencies from the US, European Union, and Denmark, who supported the centre's evolution through funds and technical support. It also experienced, and still does, very effective partnerships with small entities and individuals. For instance, American friends, and brothers and sisters from the Dominican Order lent considerable support for the organization's growth, and professionals, such as butchers, mechanics, and journalists, from all over the world have been coming with technical support. In exchange, Songhai regularly keeps them informed about its activities, visits them, and host them in its centres.¹²⁰

Since 2010, the organization's regular budget has been covered by its own profits, so its main production, research, trainings and service activities are run independently from external financial support.¹²¹ To widen its scope and impact, besides its collaboration with the Beninese government and the UNDP, Songhai also works with a variety of national and international partners, including Africa Rice, Ahern Seeds, Biochar Engineering, Bio Organics, East West Seeds, the Economic Community of West African States, Gonzaga University, and other top universities worldwide, ICRISAT, IFAD, ILO, Koppert Biological systems, MASHAV, Research Institute for Aquaculture N°1, SNV Netherland Development Organization, South South Global Assests and Technology Exchange (SS Gate), UNESCO, UNICEF, UNIDO, Underhill International Corporation, USAID, Vietnam National Agency for Science and Technology Information Coordinated Institutions, the West and Central African Council for Agricultural Research and Development.¹²²

Challenges

The first challenge still faced by Songhai comes from the people who doubt and criticize its goals and means, or do not appreciate its success. Godfrey Nzamujo explains that some authorities do not want the Beninese President to invest excessive resources on creating new Songhai centres in all provinces; others try to appropriate money; and still others openly criticise the organization. He also admitted that he has sometimes also faced racial stereotypes, as external specialists, collaborators or visitors tend to think

119 G. Nzamujo, interview, 10 October 2012.

120 Op. cit., G. Nzamujo, 2002, pp. 110-111.

121 Op.cit., D. Bousquet: "Le Bénin, modèle du bio africain", 5 January 2010.

122 *Our partner*, Songhai, <http://www.songhai.org/en/> (accessed 22 November 2012); and Op. cit., L. Sessou, email correspondence, 27 February 2013.

that Songhai's director is actually a "white man."¹²³ Over the years Songhai's strategy has always been to continue working so people visiting its centres would realize how Songhai really functions. Currently, as the organization has grown and achieved positive results, and as Benin's president supports it, these kinds of attacks have not been as damaging as they were earlier.¹²⁴

Another set of challenges is linked to Songhai's numerous partnerships and collaborations:

- Obtaining and working with external funds requires time, as partners naturally expect to communicate regularly and receive information about financial management as well as progress reports;¹²⁵
- External partners might set specific conditions. Once, Songhai had to refund partners who were asking it to change certain activities.¹²⁶ Another time, some European partners disagreed with the dismissal of a European researcher;¹²⁷
- External partners sometimes change their priorities. For instance, the organization could not implement the Regional Songhai Project because the successor of the Director of the UNDP's Regional Bureau for Africa who pushed the collaboration with Songhai in 2008 was replaced, and the new one was less interested in this project;¹²⁸
- International experts might also come with very precise ideas of how Songhai should work, and may not want to adapt to the local socio-economic context. For instance, a European mechanic who wanted to have a workshop as clean and organized as it was in his country, left as Songhai improved its workshop but not to the point he expected. International experts might also simply not have the time to understand and adapt themselves and their work to the local context. Songhai continues to work with international experts though because, as he indicates, experiences have generally been quite positive, and because it is the best way to share existing knowledge of technologies as well as gain new knowledge.¹²⁹

To avoid these types of difficulties with external partners, Songhai's founder explains that it is necessary to look for people and organizations with similar goals and values.¹³⁰

Several international institutions have criticized the imposing size of Songhai's administration and its efficiency. To ensure the efficiency of such a big organization, Godfrey Nzamujo explains that the managers have to make sure that workers take their responsibilities by rewarding or sanctioning them. Songhai's founder estimates that a large administrative structure is needed to support the organization's current important production and training activities.¹³¹

123 Op. cit., G. Nzamujo, 2002, p. 31.

124 G. Nzamujo, interview, 10 October 2012.

125 Op. cit., G. Nzamujo, 2002, p. 111.

126 Ibid., p. 109.

127 A European veterinarian was dismissed by Songhai because he was letting poultry die for months in order to be able to study the illness and later write an academic paper on it. He actually never found the cause of the illness, whereas one of Songhai's trainers with some trainees stopped it in a few days. Source: Op. cit., G. Nzamujo, 2002, p. 97.

128 G. Nzamujo, interview, 10 October 2012.

129 Op. cit., G. Nzamujo, 2002, p. 101.

130 Ibid.

131 G. Nzamujo, interview, 10 October 2012.

Selling products in rural areas is another important challenge that Songhaï and rural producers face. As the population is scarce in certain rural areas, even though their products are of high quality, there is often not sufficient demand.¹³² This is why Songhaï is trying to create “green rural cities” in rural areas so primary, secondary, and services sectors can develop, encouraging rural dwellers to stay and even attracting people from urban areas.

Another difficulty related to sales is the fact that Songhaï, being a non-profit organization, is not allowed to advertise its products. One solution has been to organize an annual fair, where Songhaï and its farmers present their activities and sell their products. This event has proven successful, both to increase incomes through the sales themselves, and also to make Songhaï known to consumers, and to disseminate their ideas and technologies.¹³³

A final challenge is to find sufficient funds to train more, and to support trainees once they have finished their training. The organization cannot train all the young people who apply to its programme, and thus continues to seek external funds to address this increasing demand and to give loans to more former trainees when they start their own business.¹³⁴

132 Op. cit., G. Nzamujo, 2002, p. 119.

133 Ibid., pp. 120-121.

134 G. Nzamujo, interview, 10 October 2012.

Section 3: Assessment of the Catalyst

3.1 Main achievements

In 25 years, Songhai has grown remarkably and widened its activities. What started on 1 hectare of marshland in Porto Novo's suburbs with Godfrey Nzamujo and 6 school dropouts, is now an organization with over 550 hectares of land and 46 hectares of water across the country, employing over 1500 workers. It has opened 6 production, research, training and services centres in Benin, 11 in Nigeria, 1 in Congo Brazzaville, 1 in Liberia, and 1 in Sierra Leone; it is building 7 new ones in Benin in partnership with the Beninese government, and is planning others across Africa with UN agencies.¹³⁵

Songhai started with a few fishponds, heads of poultry, cattle and sheep for breeding, and some crops, vegetables and fruits to grow. Progressively, it developed an innovative holistic organic production system integrating a diversified and sustainable agriculture, productive fish farming and animal breeding, processing and cottage industries, renewable energy production, with an entrepreneurial state of mind and values of local community and individual respect and development. Today, Songhai has become an economic leader in environmentally sustainable production, processing and marketing of several different breeds and species of animals and vegetables specifically adapted to their agro-ecologic areas.

The Porto Novo centre grew from producing 500 kg of *clarias* (a fish) in 2006 to over 14,000 tons in 2010. That same year, it also produced 26,000 tons of chicken and over 1.6 million eggs. The Savalou centre, more specialized in crops, produced in 2010 over 32 tons of maize (yield of 2.34 tons per hectare), over 630 tons of manioc (yield of 49 tons per hectare), and 3.9 tons of soy (yield of 1.3 tons per hectare). It also produced 18.7 tons of rice with a yield of 3.4 tons per hectare,¹³⁶ compared to only 1 ton of rice per hectare at its beginnings.¹³⁷ The shop opened in Cotonou and the restaurant in Porto Novo, now famous for its cuisine, have enabled the organization to sell and advertise the high quality of its products. Demonstrating to rural communities and individuals that it is possible to succeed by using local human and natural resources is one of Songhai's main goals, and the organization works hard to disseminate this approach. Songhai's success is attested by the over 20,000 visitors it receives every year, and by its partnerships with the Beninese government as well as with UN agencies to replicate its model across Benin and throughout the rest of Africa.

Concerning research and experimentation, Songhai has developed numerous innovative technologies that are affordable to rural communities, and use local human and natural comparative advantages. The Porto Novo centre for instance now exports agricultural machines across Africa. Songhai also has important applied research partnerships with several research centres, universities and producers.¹³⁸

135 Songhai: "Songhai et ses réalisations", Presentation document, 2013.

136 Ibid.

137 Op.cit., D. Bousquet: "Le Bénin, modèle du bio africain", 5 January 2010. .

138 Op. cit., *Siège/centre regional Porto-Novo, Vocation*, Songhai (accessed 11 September 2012).

The trainings offered by Songhai to youth, women and farmers also considerably developed over the years. Today, in Benin alone, over 500 persons are being introduced to, and becoming masters in, integrated production, processing and research system. Since 1987, over 1,700 individuals among those who have been trained by Songhai have created their own business.¹³⁹

Since Songhai's goal is to boost long-lasting rural development, it has also developed a variety of services to enable its former trainees as well as local farmers to create economically-productive and environmentally-sustainable enterprises. Former trainees can receive important loans, and technical and managerial support as well as inputs and new technologies that are available through Songhai's satellite centres. A network of Songhai farmers has also been set up to enable agricultural entrepreneurs to meet, communicate and share experience, challenges and solutions. 3 telecentres in Porto Novo, Savalou and Parakou have been created to improve these horizontal links and give rural communities access to ICTs.

Songhai has thus contributed to transform social and economic aspects of agricultural activities. It has managed to give a strong impulse to the sector and to restore its image by developing a production model that is innovative, productive, sustainable, and adapted to local human and natural resources and affordable to local communities and individuals; by building and supporting local capacities to use and develop this model and reach self-reliance; and by promoting this professionalized agricultural entrepreneurship approach integrating social and economic sectors and activities at the national and international levels as the base of rural development.¹⁴⁰

Songhai is also recognized worldwide and has received several prizes and distinctions. As early as 1993, its founder, Godfrey Nzamujo, received the "7th Leadership Africa 93 Award" from the Hunger Project in Tokyo, which honours outstanding contributors to sustainably ending hunger.¹⁴¹ Further, Songhai received in 2000 the "Excellence Award" by the Benin National lottery for its leading role in the development of agriculture and animal husbandry across the country. That same year, it was awarded the prize for the "Best local initiative on setting up profitable agricultural systems" at the Hanover World Exposition 2000 in Germany. In 2008, it received the "Award on special achievements in Agricultural Entrepreneurship" by the United Nations Industrial Development Organisation (UNIDO), the "Special and steady achievements for South-South cooperation Award" by the South-South Cooperation Unit of the UN in New York, and the Porto Novo Centre was promoted as a "Centre of Excellence for Africa" by the UN. In 2009, the Economic Community for West African States promoted Songhai as a "Regional Centre of Excellence;"¹⁴² and in 2010, UN Secretary General Ban-Ki Moon sent it a "Letter of appreciation" after his 3-day visit to the centre.¹⁴³

139 Op. cit., L. Sessou, email correspondence, 12 October 2012.

140 *Songhai spirit*, Songhai, http://www.songhai.org/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=78&Itemid=97 (accessed 11 September 2012).

141 *Honoring Africa's Leadership*, The Hunger Project, http://www.thp.org/what_we_do/key_initiatives/honoring_africa_leadership/overview (accessed 22 August 2012).

142 *Award*, Songhai, http://www.songhai.org/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=119&Itemid=108 (accessed 22 August 2012).

143 *Ban Ki-moon's letter of appreciation*, Songhai, 2010, http://www.songhai.org/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=129:ban-ki-moons-letter-of-appreciation-&catid=50:remarks&Itemid=144 (accessed 22 August 2012).

3.2 Future

Songhai intends to continue its current activities, but as entrepreneurship and innovation are its core values, strengthening current activities also means constantly improving them and developing new ones. To remain a leader and a model of productive and sustainable rural development, all Songhai's centres will continue to:

- Produce, transform and market agricultural products and other related goods in demand among local communities and individuals;
- Research, develop and experiment with new technologies adapted to the local socio-economic and agro-ecologic context. For instance, Songhai intends to further diversify sources of energy in rural areas, and further improve the productivity of fish farming and of post-harvest activities;¹⁴⁴
- Train youth, women and farmers. Among others, Songhai plans to intensify trainings, capitalization and dissemination of knowledge, know-hows and technologies more broadly;¹⁴⁵
- Provide a wide array of services, such as technical and managerial counselling, machinery and other inputs, to former trainees and local farmers;
- Improve the socio-economic dynamics at the local, national and international levels, both horizontal links between farmers, and vertical links with authorities.¹⁴⁶

To strengthen and widen its activities and impact, Songhai is implementing the National Songhai Project to open new centres in Benin; and is pushing to revitalize the Regional Songhai Project in collaboration with UN agencies to replicate its model in other African countries.¹⁴⁷

Foreseen challenges

Songhai's main challenge for the future is related to the support it brings to its former trainees and to rural communities at the local level. The organization can train an important number of young people in its different centres, but its current resources do not allow supporting all of them once they receive their diplomas. The services offered to rural communities, such as access to technologies, to productive seeds or processing facilities could also be up-scaled. External investments are thus needed to support and increase these support services.¹⁴⁸

Additionally, attracting young entrepreneurs to remain in rural areas and revitalize agricultural, industrial and services, calls for important infrastructure, such as roads or irrigation systems. Songhai's founder stresses that investments in Songhai and infrastructure are not donations, but real investments for the future, as they are major empowering elements for young people and local communities to allow them to be innovative and productive engines of rural development.¹⁴⁹

144 Op.cit., *Perspectives*, Songhai (accessed 11 September 2012).

145 Ibid.

146 Ibid.

147 Op. cit., L. Sessou, email correspondence, 12 October 2012.

148 G. Nzamujo, interview, 10 October 2012.

149 Ibid.

3.3 Lessons learned

Songhai's experience and achievements provide immediate lessons. Concerning the creation and sustainability of such an organization and the taking of entrepreneurial risks, they suggest that founders should:

- **Have a real interest in the projects promoted and the people targeted** – According to Godfrey Nzamujo, passion is indispensable to create an effective development project because it creates the will to work for oneself and others, and stimulates ideas. He founded Songhai because he believed in the potential of Africa and wanted to counter the general pessimism about its development;¹⁵⁰
- **Commit to goals** – Every development organization encounters important challenges, such as the lack of finances, internal or external criticism, but, according to Nzamujo, if one takes the resolution to accomplish a goal, he or she can overcome these difficulties. Naturally, it is also crucial to adapt visions to changes as well as challenges;¹⁵¹
- **Believe in the commitment and capacities of others** – Engaging in development needs belief in oneself, but also in others, and in their abilities to react to challenges and overcome them by investing all their energy to find innovative solutions. Nzamujo explains that he could never have built Songhai alone;¹⁵²
- **Take responsibility for one's actions and make others do the same** – Adopting an entrepreneurial approach means that all workers have to take responsibility. To ensure that colleagues remain committed, productive and innovative, Songhai's founder thinks that managers have to react to their actions, both positive (through commendations or promotions) and negative (warnings or dismissals);¹⁵³
- **Promote projects by providing practical, successful examples** – To attract external support and partners, organizations have to prove they can accomplish their goals. Thus Godfrey Nzamujo thinks that a practical project needs to exist before an organization starts looking for important funds.¹⁵⁴ In 1985, he started with 1 hectare, but received more from the government once he demonstrated that his organization could grow crops, vegetables, and fruits even during the dry season;
- **Gradually diversify and extend activities** – To ensure the sustainability of each activity, an organization should initiate them one after the other. Once the activity is productive and successful, it is possible to start and invest funds and energy in a new one. If all activities are initiated at the same time, they may exhaust all the finances of the organization;
- **Finance the organization's activities through its own products and services** – Activities supported by financial resources generated by the organization itself are more sustainable than those depending on external funding. In Songhai's case, profitably producing is also essential to demonstrate that its organic and integrated production model is economically sustainable;

150 Op. cit., G. Nzamujo, 2002, pp. 33, 35.

151 Ibid., pp. 32-35.

152 Ibid.

153 Ibid.

154 Ibid., p. 107.

- **Promote excellence** – Producing products of better quality than the competitors at affordable prices demonstrates the validity of an approach. For Songhai, the excellence of its products shows that its production model is a viable and needed approach to produce healthy food, while ensuring decent income and working conditions for farmers, and without degrading natural resources;



- **Find diversified funding partners** – When funds are needed, Nzamujo explains that partners have to be diversified to ensure independence, and to avoid being associated with one country or one type of development partner;¹⁵⁵
- **Find partners who share the organization's vision** – To achieve an effective partnership, both sides need to share a vision for the future and certain fundamental ideas on how to achieve it.¹⁵⁶

Songhai's experience also demonstrates that to ensure long-lasting rural development, individual or institutional actors should:

- **Address local needs and interests** – When the activities offered match local needs, local communities and individuals are likely to adopt them. Songhai is successful because it enables farmers to improve their productivity while regenerating and preserving natural resources. It also offers a dignified professional activity for young people by giving them the means to become innovative entrepreneurs;

155 Op. cit., G. Nzamujo, 2002, p. 111.

156 Ibid., p. 109.

- **Build the capacities of rural stakeholders** – Training rural communities and individuals to become agricultural entrepreneurs empowers them to become economically self-reliant. Further, Songhai shows that teaching innovation and creativity enables people to become leaders of their own development;
- **Develop local human and natural comparative advantages** – Each rural area has its natural, economic, and social specificities, and Songhai's approach demonstrates that these differences are strengths. Local knowledge is precious as it has been adapted to the context in the course of time, and it is thus imperative to account for them in the approach proposed. The value of local natural resources is also boosted by production systems creating synergies among its activities and engaging in recycling;
- **Establish knowledge, information and best-practice network** – Knowledge and information sharing enable individuals, communities, and organizations, to overcome challenges and improve their productivity and effectiveness. Songhai uses ICTs so its employees and local farmers can constantly share experiences about their work, discuss difficulties, find innovative solutions, and coordinate their action. ICTs also allow Songhai to connect with others throughout the world, to share ideas, technologies and lessons learned;
- **Link with the macro-level** – Organizations can considerably strengthen and widen their impact through collaboration with national and international institutions. These can provide financial as well as technical support, but they can also disseminate and promote their approach across a country and abroad. In Songhai's case, partnering with the Beninese government was crucial to start, grow, receive support and recognition, and grow further.