

# SONGHAI – an attractive model that needs scaling up

*Agriculture is the basis for development in most African countries. Highly dependent on climatic conditions and unsteady market prices, African agriculture remains unattractive to investors. It was in this context that a Dominican Father from Nigeria founded the SONGHAI Center in 1985. The Idea behind SONGHAI is that solutions to Africa’s problems should come from Africans themselves. After two decades, SONGHAI has become a real pole of attraction but still has challenges to overcome.*

African agriculture is still small-scale family farming faced with uncertain climate conditions and fluctuating market prices. Not being attractive to investors is a major constraint to any positive development of the agricultural sector.

Dr Godfrey N’Zamujo, a Dominican Father from Nigeria, founded the SONGHAI Center in 1985. SONGHAI’s main objective is to train young agricultural entrepreneurs. Beside its training activities, SONGHAI aims to develop a sustainable agricultural production system based on agrobiology.

After two decades, SONGHAI has become a real pole of attraction and admiration. The main achievements of the last two decades can be summarised as:

- More than 200 students at any time attending 18-month training programmes in the sites of Porto-Novo, Savalou, Parakou and Kinwédji.
- More than 500 farms established and managed by young people trained in SONGHAI Centers.

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- More than 300 participants from various backgrounds and countries taking part in different training courses each year.
- More than 150 permanent staff, facilitators, technicians and administrators.
- More than 5,000 visitors every year.
- More than 40 partners from public and private institutions, NGOs and international institutions.

## Challenges

Nevertheless, this success story should not distract from the fact that SONGHAI still has challenges to overcome. This fact is demonstrated by the many cases where young trained people have failed in their attempts to settle down. What is the relation between the 500 farms created and the number of trained young farmers? How many of these farms actually become an attraction that the local population want to reproduce as the model aims? How can a rate of installation and success be guaranteed for these young farmers who are so admired today at the SONGHAI facilities in Porto-Novo and upcountry? The problems that commonly hamper the success of farmers include:

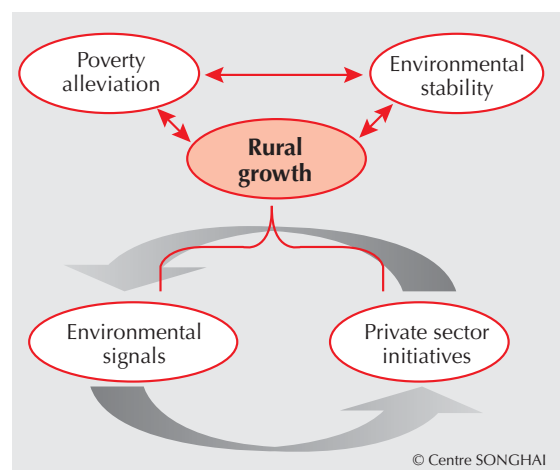
- Land issues;
- Uncertain climatic conditions which often make it impossible to reach campaigns’ objectives;
- Financial problems (especially access to suitable credit);
- Difficulties in selling products at a profitable price;
- Problems of organising and facilitating farmers’ networks.

These difficulties are coupled with the weak interaction between the SONGHAI model and the national innovation system, including research, the extension system/supervision, etc.

SONGHAI officials have tried various problem-solving approaches, but they have not always significantly changed the situation.

Maybe the failure of young farmers can be partly explained by their lim-

## SONGHAI scheme for rural growth in Africa



*The SONGHAI centre in Port Novo, Benin.*

ited capacity to develop an integrated value-added system. Indeed, what degree of financial independence has SONGHAI achieved after 24 years of operations in which it now successfully integrates primary production, processing, marketing and other services? How long will it take to achieve complete financial independence as stated in SONGHAI documents?

In view of its originality, the SONGHAI model should be more open to research and to more objective analysis which would allow its development approach to reach higher echelons. The role of research in this context will be to analyse flanking measures to assist the trained farmers in setting up successful enterprises.

If it became better anchored in local communities, the SONGHAI Center could support the governments of the sub-Saharan African countries in their policy of promoting agricultural entrepreneurship in rural areas.

To scale up the SONGHAI experience and reach a critical number of farmers who are able to influence positively the take-off of agriculture in Africa, a capacity development approach should be adopted to promote agricultural value chains through two cornerstones:



Photo: SONGHAI

- Strengthening public and private structures for sustainable capacity building by improving the performance of these service providers to make them more demand-oriented;
- Building key actors' capacity to develop the given value chains by training them on the main topics

necessary for the development of agribusiness.

The SONGHAI Center is one of the "unreleased" models already existing in Africa which needs to be supported and improved to make it become a reference for the emergence of the African continent.

## Zusammenfassung

Die Landwirtschaft in Afrika besteht immer noch weitgehend aus kleinbäuerlichen Familienbetrieben, die unsicheren Wetterverhältnissen und schwankenden Marktpreisen ausgeliefert sind. Ihre mangelnde Attraktivität für Investoren ist ein Haupthindernis für jede positive Entwicklung des Agrarsektors. Dr. Godfrey N'Zamujo, ein Dominikanerpater aus Nigeria, gründete 1985 das SONGHAI-Center, in dem junge Landwirte eine Ausbildung in nachhaltigen Produktionssystemen auf der Grundlage der Agrarbiologie erhalten und ihr Wissen später als

Vorreiter im lokalen Agrarsektor weitergeben. Nach zwei Jahrzehnten ist SONGHAI zu einem Träger geworden, der Zulauf und Bewunderung genießt. Diese Erfolgsgeschichte darf jedoch nicht davon ablenken, dass SONGHAI immer noch große Schwierigkeiten zu bewältigen hat.

## Resumen

La agricultura africana todavía se caracteriza por explotaciones de pequeña escala y de tipo familiar, que afrontan condiciones climáticas inciertas y precios de mercado fluctuantes. Su falta de atractivo para los inversores representa

un obstáculo importante para cualquier desarrollo positivo en el sector agrícola. El Dr. Godfrey N'Zamujo, un religioso dominicano oriundo de Nigeria, fundó el Centro SONGHAI en 1985. El principal objetivo de dicho centro es capacitar a jóvenes empresarios agrícolas en sistemas sostenibles de producción basados en la agro-biología y tomarlos como modelo para el mundo rural. Después de dos décadas, SONGHAI se ha convertido en un verdadero polo de atracción y admiración. Sin embargo, estos éxitos no deberían soslayar el hecho de que SONGHAI todavía afronta desafíos por superar.