

The Songhai Model as a Panacea for Food Insecurity in Nigeria

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It's six years left to achieve goal 2 of the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goal of ensuring zero hunger, and yet, Nigeria has not reached the level of food sufficiency. This situation has become more worrisome following the declaration of a state of emergency on food security by the federal government of Nigeria in July 2023.

According to the 2023 report of the National Emergencies Management Agency (NEMA), the 2022 floods in Northcentral Nigeria destroyed and washed away over 675,000 hectares of farmland belonging to small-scale farmers. Climate change, population increase, and unsustainable agricultural practices are the major drivers of this degradation.

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) pegged the 2023 Nigerian population as 223.8 million¹. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization Africa Sustainable Livestock 2050 report, Nigeria's population is expected to double by 2050, reaching 400 million people². How do we feed this rapidly growing population to meet nutritional demands in the face of increasing pressure on our food system? The need for innovative and sustainable agricultural practices has never been more pressing!



¹ <https://nigeria.unfpa.org/en/publications/united-nations-population-fund-country-programme-document-nigeria>

² <https://www.fao.org/in-action/asl2050/countries/nga/en/>

Sahel Consulting Agriculture and Nutrition Limited, a management consulting firm committed to transforming Africa's agriculture and nutrition landscape, is implementing the Federal Ministry of Agriculture & Food Security (FMAFS) Capacity Support Project. With the support of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Sahel Consulting is providing critical technical assistance to strengthen FMAFS to support the implementation of the Agricultural Development Strategy of the Nigerian Government. This support is in the form of targeted local, national, and regional training programs to build the technical skills of FMAFS staff and ensure effective knowledge transfer across the Ministry.



As part of the project activities, a study tour to Songhai Farm in Porto Novo, Benin Republic, was conducted from March 6th- 11th, 2024, to enable eleven (11) key FMAFS staff to gain a deeper understanding of sustainable agricultural practices at Songhai and come up with “actionable” implementation strategies for Nigeria. This aims to confront the challenges of food insecurity and achieve the intervention plan of the federal government for food security, affordability, and sustainability.

For 39 years, Benin has been host to an NGO that promotes entrepreneurship in agriculture -- the Songhai Centre. It is active in the areas of training, production, research, and development in agricultural entrepreneurship and agribusiness. The sustainability of agricultural production in Africa is the challenge for which the Songhai Centre intends to provide a tangible solution. The Songhai integrated agricultural production model was launched in Benin on October 5, 1985, by Father Godfrey Nzamujo. The name SONGHAI, which symbolizes the potential of the African continent for autonomy and prosperity, is inspired by a 14th-16th century West African Empire³. The emblem of the farm, which is an eagle, represents its core qualities: foresight, courage, and determination.⁴ The Songhai model promotes sustainable best practices in the agricultural sector through the integration of crop production, livestock farming and fish farming, and generates a synergy among its different links, while ensuring zero waste. By harnessing by-products within its production value chains, such as crop residues and livestock manure, Songhai minimizes waste and maximizes resource efficiency — anything that can be considered a waste product in a given sector is reused as a factor of production in another sector.

The Director, Father Godfrey Nzamujo believes in unlocking the power of the soil by producing more with less. From the 22 hectares Sustainable green rural community Songhai office in Porto Novo, the Songhai Farm provides effective solutions to the problems of food insecurity, climate variability, wasteful use of natural resources and

³ <https://www.worldhistory.org/collection/61/the-empires-of-west-africa/>

⁴ <https://birdertopia.com/eagle-meaning/>



constant increase in youth unemployment. 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.⁵ 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.⁶

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. The center breeds fish and other animals, such as poultry for meat and eggs, cows, sheep, goats, pigs and bees. They produce crops, such as rice, soy, vegetables and fruits. Father Godfrey leads the team to undertake processing and marketing from the beginning of the production process. He puts a strong emphasis on transformation as he adds considerable value to production. The center also processes 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. Its integrated production system greatly diminishes the need for expensive inputs. For instance, Songhai does not buy fertilizer, using instead, compost and what it produces. Songhai Centre has also invested in removing constraints to the availability and accessibility of energy. The centre has a range of alternatives from biogas to solar energy.

The training program at the Songhai Centre has evolved into a highly impactful and well-structured initiative. It provides comprehensive guidance in agricultural entrepreneurship and manages a widespread network of producers across the country known as Songhai Graduate Farmers. During the Study tour, the delegates from Sahel Consulting and the FMFS Nigeria visited two graduate farms. The Agro-ecological Farm, Semevo owned by Mr. Yves Ahouangan and the Agro-initiative farm in Agbotagon community, owned by Mr. Gustave Gbaguidi. The Agroecological farm produces dried pineapples and pineapple juice on a 20-hectare land area. Mr. Yves exports these products to his clients in Germany. Mr. Gustave runs a 10,000-capacity poultry farm for egg production and supplies to big processing firms in Cotonou.

This network of agribusiness entrepreneurs is dedicated to not just running sustainable private enterprises but also to educating local farmers and stakeholders on a holistic and coordinated socioeconomic strategy in the form of a step-down. These vibrant graduate farmers are committed to nurturing rural entrepreneurship as a driving force for rural

⁵ <https://hal.inrae.fr/hal-02795914/document>

⁶ https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@ed_emp/@emp_policy/documents/publication/wcms_234891.pdf

development, thereby enhancing the allure of rural life, food security and curbing youth migration or the “Japa” syndrome.

The Idea behind SONGHAI is that solutions to Africa's problems should come from Africans themselves. Nigeria as the giant of Africa shouldn't be an exemption.

Recommendations for Nigeria

There are 11 Songhai Centers across the 6 geopolitical zones in Nigeria. Unlocking the full potential of these Songhai Centers requires collaboration between the government and private sector stakeholders. The Songhai's experience demonstrates that to ensure food security, government or institutional actors should:

1. **Revive the Existing Songhai Centers in Nigeria:** Despite attempts to replicate the Songhai model in states like Enugu, Imo, Katsina, Lagos, Oyo, and Rivers States, challenges of policy consistency and sustainability persist. For the sustainability of these centers, the Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security (FMAFS) should out-source the management of the Songhai Centers in Nigeria to private sectors or NGOs who are committed to transforming Nigeria's agricultural landscape and have a track record of impact. The Songhai model is economically profitable and environmentally sustainable. The private sectors or NGOs can manage the center to gain credibility by paying its salaries, and billing the revenues from its own production, while also boosting the economy.
2. **Promotion of partnerships for training, mentorship and research:** As Songhai's primary concept 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. 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 and youth. The Agricultural Research Council of Nigeria (ARCN), the Federal Ministry of Education, and the Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security should leverage this concept to engage the youths in Agriculture and get them busy. This can also be achieved through partnerships to scale existing private sector-led programs targeted at the youths. Example is the Sahel Scholars' Program of Sahel Consulting Agriculture and Nutrition Limited.
3. **Review of the Agro-industrial Zones:** The FMAFS should facilitate the review of the agroindustry clusters and integrated farming systems to be more youth-centered. Just like the Songhai Leadership Academy which provides comprehensive guidance in agricultural entrepreneurship and manages a widespread network of young producers across the country, Nigeria can raise the next generation of young African leaders in agriculture who are committed to nurturing rural entrepreneurship as a driving force for enhancing food security.

4. **Promotion of Organic Inputs:** The Farm Input Supports Services Department of the FMAFS should promote organic inputs via collaboration with relevant stakeholders, train-the-trainer and sensitization programs.