

# AED/LearnLink

## ICT Applications for Development

*AED/LearnLink uses information and communication technologies (ICTs) to support development. Activities range from public access telecenters to teacher training, professional development, organizational networking, e-commerce, e-government, and institutional capacity building. Lessons from field experiences are shared to contribute to the body of knowledge on using ICTs for development.*

Location:

*Keyword Identifiers:* telecenter, sustainable agriculture, NGO, IT

**Purpose:** to provide farmers throughout Benin with information on using local resources for sustainable agriculture; to enable the Songhai Center, an agricultural research and training center, to share its agricultural experience and expertise throughout the country and the continent and to connect with knowledge centers around the world; to improve the quality of village life by providing access to information and communication technologies (ICTs) for personal, professional, business, and development purposes.

**Description:** The Songhai Center is world renowned for wonderful innovations in food production and distribution. Drawing on indigenous knowledge and local resources to develop zero-emission, biologically-sound small plot farming methods, the Center trains farmers from all over Benin and, increasingly, throughout the continent. This pilot activity adds a new dimension to Songhai's considerable experience, expertise, and existing global network.

Starting in September 1998, USAID supported the creation of Community Networking Service Centers (CNSCs) at Songhai's three centers in Porto Novo (in the south of the country), Savalou (in the center), and Parakou (the gateway to the north). Known as CyberSonghai, the networked CNSCs enable better administration of Songhai's training, research, and model farms. They also enable staff and students to transmit their experiences to farmers in far-flung villages, as



Children in front of the Savalou telecenter

Mary Fontaine

well as to a worldwide audience. All incoming student farmers now participate in a 5-10 day training program in using the Internet. The CNSCs also are open to the public, providing residents of each area with access to modern business services and communication methods.

Outreach to inform communities of CyberSonghai services includes flyers, posters, radio announcements, and messages delivered by the town crier. Open houses introduce NGOs, women's groups, businesses, and local officials to the centers' services, and one-day seminars demonstrate to people from all walks of life how ICTs can benefit them. A special Mother's Day opening, for example, introduced women to the Internet, gave them hands-on training, a free email account, and demonstrated key web sites for women's issues.

At the CNSCs, business people design and print letterhead stationery with desktop publishing programs, and they laminate business cards. Individuals come to send faxes, make phone calls, and buy Songhai-created Christmas cards. Those participating in CyberSonghai training programs—on using the Internet and searching the web, for example—get free email accounts and send messages to their children studying in South Africa, Canada, or the US.

The CNSC's primary function is to serve farmers, who, increasingly, come to view CD-ROMs and other multimedia products on Songhai aquaculture methods, for example, or vegetable production. Through "Ask the Experts," farmers can receive prompt replies from Songhai experts on any question they may have.

New distance learning packages also provide people from NGOs and development groups with databases on funding possibilities, or facilitate their joining global groups, such as the GLOBE environmental program, or accessing information for health practitioners.

AED/LearnLink works with Songhai Center to provide assistance with outreach, training, multimedia/distance education production, and technical solutions to infrastructure problems. CLC facilities are provided with electrical connections, security devices, climate control, and other technical know-how, and AED/LearnLink assistants are working with local staff to devise financial sustainability plans.

**Challenges:** Infrastructure is key. Outside of Porto Novo, connectivity is problematic, requiring exploration of wireless, satellite, and other non-land-line options. With virtually no online experience, training needs are great both for Songhai staff and students as well as the general public.



*A training session at Songhai Center*

**Outcomes/Lessons Learned:** The Songhai experience shows that modern technology and ways of conducting business are relevant, useful, and "appropriate" even in highly traditional settings. Increasingly, farmers, students, teachers, NGO staff, businesses, local government officials, and people from all walks of life are taking advantage of CyberSonghai's office services and appreciate the opportunity to communicate and collect and disseminate information through high quality technical means. The centers offer phone and fax services, desktop publishing, computer training, as well as Internet service for email and web browsing. Over the course of CLC

development, the number and diversity of clients has grown, and database applications are being produced for health and other development groups. Staff training in the production of web pages, CD-ROMs, and powerpoint presentations is opening the way for client training in these same skills for personal and professional use. Thus, CyberSonghai's services are enhancing Songhai Center's functions while providing entire villages with new opportunities for development.

**Unique Applications:** This ICT activity operates under the wing of a well-established organization to improve the quality of village life in Benin—not only by more expansive sharing of Songhai information, but also by providing public access to ICTs.



*CyberSonghai in Porto Novo*

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