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Aliniha: women leaders at the heart of sustainable development in west Africa

Aliniha's motto: Woman gives life, micro-credit gives resources, and the tree gives hope. Together they build the future

Aliniha : des femmes-leaders au cœur du développement durable en Afrique de l'ouest

Aliniha: mujeres – líderes en el epicentro del desarrollo sostenible en el oeste de África

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Aliniha: women leaders at the heart of sustainable development in West Africa

Aliniha's motto: Woman gives life, micro-credit gives resources, and the tree gives hope. Together they build the future.

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Abstract:

Born of an original association between tree southern partners in 2007, Aliniha is a methodology to link up women, the pillars of african society, for the sustainable development of their region, through their work and for their benefit. The Aliniha methodology combines the various areas of expertise of the three social entrepreneurs who created it, namely microfinance, improving women's skills, and management and protection of natural resources. The underlying principle is that every woman signing the "Aliniha Charter" benefits from a microcredit allowing her to undertaken an economic activity; in return, she undertakes to plant and look after three trees given to her with the money, and to follow the training courses offered by the Aliniha partner structures. The aim is to teach women sustainable management of their resources, be they human (knowledge), financial (money) or natural (trees).

In order to make the project sustainable and ensure that the methodology spreads, the three partner organizations founded the Aliniha International association. Aliniha International is a network bringing together women's associations working for social, economic and environmental development of their respective regions: Gaoua (Burkina Faso), Kayes (Mali)and Tambacounda (Senegal).

Keywords: Sustainable development, Women, Micro-finance, Social credit, Management ofnatural resources, Skills improvement, West Africa



Figure 1. Logo of Aliniha



Figure 2. Aliniha's organisation circle

1. Aliniha, collaboration between tree southern partners for the development of skills

Aliniha is a methodology developed in West Africa, designed and implemented by three African organizations from Burkina Faso, Mali and Senegal, that targets sustainable

development through women. Specifically, the Aliniha International member structures support women's groups and help them organize into associations allowing them to become leaders in the field of sustainable development by incorporating goals concerning natural resources management, social development and economic growth.

Aliniha was born of the meeting in 2007 of three social entrepreneurs from three West

African countries: Burkina Faso, Mali and Senegal. These three development leaders each have a specific area of expertise: development and improvement of women's skills, microfinance and management of natural resources. Together, they decided to pool their experience and incorporate these skills into a joint program: "a woman, a credit, a tree". Thus a feasibility study was undertaken in 2008 and Aliniha was created in 2009, in three regions:Gaoua in Burkina Faso, Kayes in Mali and Tambacounda in Senegal.



Figure 3. Aliniha's region map

For three years starting, Aliniha's three founders – Burkinabe Ini Damien, Malian Alou Keita and Franco-Senegalese Jean Goepp – tested the implementation of this project. In 2012, a decision was made to turn this combination of skills and experiences that is Aliniha into a proper international structure. Thus on 22 March 2012, Aliniha International was established.



Figure 4. Alou Jean Ini

Institutionalizing the program makes it possible to formalize the practices and ensure they can spread more widely.

APFG (Gaoua's Association for the Feminine Promotion), the association for the promotion of women in Gaoua in-Burkina Faso, was taken as the baseline for the Aliniha model, while its founder Ini Damien was appointed chairwoman of Aliniha International. CAMIDE (Center of support for micro-finances and development), the micro-finance and development support center, provides technical support to the micro-finance institutions set up to provide social credit and secure savings. Its chairman, Alou Keita, subsequently became treasurer of Aliniha International. NEBEDAY (Wolof name of the miracle tree,moringa) is the technical partner as regards the management of natural resources and its founder, Jean Goepp, is the secretary of Aliniha International.

The founding structures consider Aliniha a learning experience allowing its members to acquire new skills, consider new outlooks, and improve their way of working in their own area of expertise. Aliniha's strength in the promotion of sustainable development is truly its local roots, i.e. the legitimacy of the structures that have set up this network, and there presentativeness of the women. The targets that have been set, the actions that are programmed and the implementation in the field are entirely suited to the needs and problems faced by local populations.

2. Methodology: Aliniha International, a network of women-leaders

In practice, the Aliniha women are taught to bring added value of the natural resources oftheir environment, by transforming them into quality products which they can sell for revenue allowing them to improve their daily lives. For instance, Burkinabe groups of Aliniha women have set up a shea transformation unit, using a local natural resource to make high quality butter, creams and soaps, in high demand in their region

In Senegal, some Aliniha women grow a tree called moringa which has a number of virtues, chief of which is its effectiveness in combating child malnutrition. The women can cook the fresh leaves or grind them. In Mali, many Aliniha women have turned to market gardening; garden products such as groundnuts or capsicum peppers are subsequently sold in the market or transformed into for instance groundnut paste, grilled or dried peanuts,powdered capsicum, dried peppers or even capsicum pepper sauce, which are again sold inthe market.

2.1. "Micro-credit gives resources"

To start these activities, women need a minimum amount of money for their working capital.However, the deprived women that Aliniha targets lack the means for funding and financial growth. Aliniha's social credit system provides the means to address this. Women's groups can request social credit from a micro-finance institution that is also part of Aliniha International to carry out their entrepreneurial projects and receive training in micro-finance and management of trade activities. The group is jointly liable for the financial support received by each member. A system of financial support levels has been established to promote learning on

how to manage credit, thus avoiding high default risks helped initially by the fact the women can only borrow small amounts of money. At the end of a credit cycle, if the instalments were properly met, the loan can be renewed and the maximum amount per woman is increased. Throughout the cycle (usually 6 months), the group members each pay a contribution to set up a collective savings fund, which serves to guarantee unpaid instalments. If the group misses no instalments, the fund is returned to them on request or can be used to implement community projects.



Figure 5. Granting microcredit © Aliniha

2.2. "The tree gives hope"

Every woman belonging to the group receiving a micro-credit is also given 3 seedlings and is taught how to plant and look after them. The underlying idea is that the management of anyresource, whether financial or environmental, requires making a long-term commitment asregards time and energy. This approach is therefore intended to help the women manage theirresources more sustainably and to develop their awareness of their own impact on their environment.



Figure 6. Women replanting © Aliniha

2.3. "Woman gives life"

With the revenue from their activities, Aliniha women can pay back their credits (including interest) and generate benefits. This additional income for the family gives to women a measure of independence and greater weight in decision-making within the family. In addition, women develop skills through the series of training courses tied to the trees and credits, covering many subjects, from literacy skills to management of a revenue-generating activity, through awareness of women's rights and the protection of the environment. The courses also contribute to the women's fulfilment, making them a key architect of change. After attending these courses, women are better armed to incite their families to change their own behaviour. Aliniha therefore puts the woman at the heart of the process, encouraging her to take her own destiny in hand and to be the driver of her own growth.



Figure 7. Hive manufacturing © Aliniha

2.4. A changing participative methodology

The process is opened, allowing all stakeholders of the project – Aliniha women, partners and employees – to contribute with ideas to improve the model. Every person involved learns and grows from the experience and opinions of his or her partners. "Aliniha"concept of sustainable development, emerging from the pooling of the expertise of APFG, CAMIDE and NEBEDAY, perfectly matches the reality and concerns of the African women involved in the project.

At the beginning of the initiative, in 2008, all activities (training, management of nurseries, collection of savings, recovery of micro-credits, etc.) were carried out by employees of Alou, Jean and Ini's respective organizations. In that approach, the Aliniha women, organized into informal groups, were considered as "beneficiaries" or service clients. Today, the Aliniha women are organized formally into several self-managed Aliniha associations called AAA for the French acronym – 5 in Mali, 3 in Senegal and 3 in Burkina Faso – and have taken over many of these activities, thus becoming "owner participants".

2.5. From dream to reality: the means for funding

To make the project a success, the social entrepreneurs received technical and financial support from a Belgian foundation, the Fondation Marie et Alain Philippson. Actively committed since 2008 to Aliniha, the Foundation has funded most of the initiative's structural and operating costs, while providing the flexibility every pilot project needs and allowing the directors to adapt the structure to their growing experience.

Eager to ensure a lasting financial support for the activities, the 3 founders worked to diversify the sources of funding, seeking new partners and setting up the means for self-financing.

Aliniha partners encourage the Aliniha associations to become self-supporting. That's why, the Aliniha associations are given a series of responsibilities and work together on common projects whose revenue could, in the future, make up the association's capital. The aim is to ensure that in the end, boosted by their experience and the training they have received, the women can take over a number of tasks currently carried out by the organization, relying on CAMIDE, NEBEDAY and APFG which are paid service providers to perform those tasks that are beyond their skills. To help them become self-sufficient, the three partners have set up a series of training courses and help the associations get organized and create common projects with the potential to generate revenue.

The project itself is based on giving micro-credit to the beneficiaries in order to finance the activities they wish to undertake. These credits generate interest that covers the expenses associated with managing the micro-finance activity. In addition, the women are strongly encouraged to save money, both individually and collectively. It is a good way for these women to undertake projects without running into debt.

At the same time, the organization encourages the groups and associations to set up a contribution system in their statutes. The objective is to create a collective fund, allowing the groups to cover their operating costs and possibly to undertake collective projects.



Figure 8. Training project management © Aliniha

With the idea to enable the sustainability of the activities, whatever the project, the beneficiaries are always asked to make some form of contribution. For instance, a group of Aliniha women was given a mill but the facility was built by the village, on a piece of land granted to the group. Aliniha women contribute with either manpower or physical means.

It is obvious that the Aliniha project won't achieve complete financial independence since the project comprises a series of social and environmental actions that the project cannot afford by itself and initially generate no revenue. However, project members are working to reduce their reliance on outside sources of revenue as much as possible in order to guarantee the project's viability over the long term.

3. Results: Aliniha, resources bringing hope of a better life

In three countries, Aliniha's unique approach has resulted in learning and actions that make social, economic and environmental impact. To date, 6000 women have signed the ALINIHA charter. This has given them access to a series of training courses, to credit, and since 2008 they have saved almost 100.000 euros. At the same time, their revenue generating activities have diversified, in particular through the sharing of skills between the women in different countries.

Thousands of trees have been planted. Plastic bags have been replaced by baskets and cloth bags – a new a revenue activity for the women. Plant nurseries have been set up,also run by the Aliniha women. Alternatives to burning charcoal, such as the use of gas orgrass briquettes, are also emerging. Lastly, many women have received support to obtain their identity cards, making them full citizens.

A true movement of women-leaders is developing in the three countries, contributing to the region's economic, social and environmental transformation.

4. Discussion: autonomy and durability of the model

As we have explained, a key concern to guarantee that the model can be extended, replicated and spread is reducing its reliance on outside funding, making sure the growth of its activities does not result in a proportional increase in its funding needs. Consequently, the three socialentrepreneurs are working actively to make the structure self-sufficient to ensure the activities are sustainable. This requires giving responsibility to all participants at all levels in setting up sustainable funding mechanisms. The principle is to make sure that, whatever the initial source of funding, the project is set up in such a way as to ensure that the activities make it possible to renew the investments and other expenses.

Aliniha international's ambition is to spread the Aliniha methodology and extend the networkof self-managed Aliniha Associations so that other African regions and countries can benefit from this original approach to achieve sustainable development.

Aliniha International has multiple missions. These are:

- to organize and facilitate exchanges between the eleven existing AAAs, and between those associations and the partner micro-finance institutions;
- to continue to provide the eleven existing AAAs with the support and tools to implement their activities combining valorisation of the environment, development and economic growth;
- to help spread the method, working with women's associations wishing to help reach the goals set by Aliniha International.

In addition, Aliniha International has set itself specific goals to contribute to the sustainable development of Africa. As a result, all its members must work towards the following priorities:

- reduce wood consumption, promote reforestation, and help control erosion;
- give women responsibility in tree planting and sanitation activities;
- set up activities run by women to organize production and sale of products bringing added value to natural resources (shea, soap, moringa, monkey bread fruit, improved cookers);
- implement initiatives to promote women's access to land;
- set up mechanisms to mobilize and organize savings by women, to use this capital to fund credits.



Figure 9. Women pottery © Aliniha

5. Aliniha International – together we can build the future!

Aliniha is first and foremost a marriage of convictions. At a time of economic, social and ecological crisis, Aliniha provides a chance to work together towards an idealistic goal, placing women – the pillars of African society – at the heart of change. More than the birth of a model, Aliniha represents the emergence of hope for sustainable development in Africa. Joining forces together will help build a shared future.

Today, Aliniha is heading towards new horizons: self-sufficiency and internationalization. If you too wish to build a world where natural resources are valued, where women are not spectators but actors, where people do not hold out their hands to receive help but to take opportunities and become masters of their own destiny, join us, and together we will build the future! That is our hope for this project. We will go on monitoring our activities and refine our processes to achieve our aims. We will look to report this in future communications and publications to provide incentives to others in Africa and beyond.