



Global
Forum
on Food Security
and Nutrition



INTERNATIONAL
CONFERENCE
on

Forests
for Food
Security
and Nutrition

13-15 | FAO
MAY 2013 | ROME



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Forests and trees provide benefits for food security and nutrition – what is your say?

BRIEF based on the online discussion, held from 4 to 26 February 2013, facilitated by FAO's Global Forum on Food Security and Nutrition (FSN Forum) with FAO's Forestry Department in the context of the International Conference on Forests for Food Security and Nutrition.

Visit the discussion webpage at
www.fao.org/fsnforum/forum/discussions/forests-for-FSN

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Overview

Forests, trees on farms and agroforestry contribute to food security and improved nutrition by providing a direct source of food and fuel, by being a source of household income and through the ecosystem services they provide.

The presence of trees, for instance, improves the efficiency of watershed functioning and the quality of water, with strong positive implications for agricultural production and livestock keeping. Tree crops also help improving households' coping capacity to food insecurity that may arise due to seasonality of crop production or crop failure. Furthermore, trees play a crucial role in providing fodder and shade to cattle, indirectly benefitting food security of livestock keepers and consumers of their products.

It is estimated that 1 to 1.5 billion people worldwide directly or indirectly derive these benefits from trees and even if only the officially reported monetary contributions of forests to the economies of the developing world are taken into account, they exceed US\$ 250 billion, more than double the flow of total development assistance.

However, as the contribution of trees is so multifaceted, the role of trees in ensuring food security and proper nutrition often remains poorly understood, under-estimated and not adequately considered in policy decisions. Traditionally, only the products that can easily be monetized such as timber and certain fruits and the environmental aspect of forests get the governments' attention.

Urban and peri-urban areas

Urban and peri-urban forestry and agroforestry can have a crucial role in improving cities' resilience and in facing increasing poverty, lack of food security, pollution, and occurrence of diseases in urban and peri-urban areas. Well designed and managed tree systems in and around cities can produce good quality food and non-food products (such as fruit, timber, wood fuel, natural medicine) thus improving incomes, nutrition security, as well as health conditions for urban dwellers.

Key challenges and bottlenecks

The factors hindering a greater contribution of forests and trees to food security are deeply rooted in the institutional landscape and the mainstream governance model. The mandate of forestry departments is mostly restricted to the generation of revenue for the government through management of resources such as timber and to the management of forests as national parks, while the food production aspect remains connected to agriculture and the agriculture departments.

In such a setting it becomes very difficult to implement programmes that require coordination between different government actors and stakeholder groups.

Lack of inclusion of the wide range of stakeholders can lead to policies benefitting mainly those not living

in the areas affected, such as national urban elites or affluent societies abroad. This is particularly problematic as the needs and interests of developed countries are not necessarily the same as those of developing ones. Forestry policies advocated by international organizations and developed countries often focus mainly on carbon sequestration or environmental protection while ignoring the food security aspect important for people in less developed countries.

Development programmes often promote livelihoods practices that help the forest dependent communities "reduce" their dependency on forests. Vulnerable groups who rely on forest resources can see their access to trees reduced and their livelihoods affected by interventions that aim at formalizing tenure systems or increasing the economic value of trees.

While the lack of modern agro-forestry farming knowledge and the low technology employed limits the role of forests for food security, the disruption of the transfer of traditional knowledge that is present in many populations which rely on forest products for their livelihoods is a concern. The loss of such knowledge risks making these resources idle, sending wrong economic signals and disenfranchising people from their forests and trees.

Forests and gender

At times, agro forestry can compete with other land uses that arguably contribute more to food security and nutrition. Research in the Gambia documented that donor efforts to promote agroforestry which was being controlled by men resulted in the displacement of irrigated vegetable production, controlled by women, with negative repercussions on both food security and gender roles.

Planting trees in Niger

In the early 1980s some local communities in the in the Nigerien Sahel, began to use community based forestry management as a basis for "drought proofing" their communities with the support of several different donors.

It was conservatively estimated that over three million hectares, mostly in the most densely populated regions, are now benefitting. Tree density over the 30 years has increased 20-fold and crop yields are two to three times higher, without the use of chemical fertilizers.

What is needed for policies to recognize the role of forests

Forum contributors identified some elements that are necessary to protect and to foster the contribution of forests and trees to food security and nutrition. These included:

- Current forest-related data collection is deficient in its representation of benefits from forests and trees that are not monetized. Improving data collection and understanding of non-cash benefits of forests and trees is necessary.
- Secure tenure and its gender dimension is critical for household food security as a clear ownership helps give local people the sense of responsibility to conserve forest resources and the incentive to invest in sustainable management.
- Projects must look beyond the direct benefits of trees and see how trees can interact within the agricultural system for the enhancement of food security. A multisectoral and multi-stakeholder approach, involving practitioners, policy and decision makers, civil society and scientists, is required to achieve this.
- Projects need to evaluate forest foods' nutrient content and extension workers need to be trained in relevant nutrition and dietary aspects of forest and tree crops.
- Training in modern forest management practices with the inclusion of traditional knowledge in local educational and agricultural extension systems is necessary to facilitate effective utilization of resources and their conservation efforts.
- Policy makers need to acknowledge that forests and trees provide a range of environmental services for which communities involved in their sustainable management should be compensated through economic incentive mechanisms.
- Since investments in trees and forests is often a medium to long term undertaking, programmes need also to take into consideration the direct needs of people in two or three generations.

For further information

Visit the FSN Forum website www.fao.org/fsnforum or contact fsn-moderator@fao.org