



Family Forests and trees on farms are part of Family Farming systems

A large proportion of forest dependent people in the world are also family farmers and a significant number of family farmers depend heavily on forests. Family forests overlap directly with family farming in multiple ways – making them an inseparable part of the livelihood strategies and natural resource management systems for smallholders all over the world. More than a billion of the world’s poorest people rely on forests and trees on farms to provide food, energy and cash income (FAO, 2012). Rural communities have recognized ownership or long-term use rights to 31 percent of the developing world’s forests – over 490 million hectares (RRI, 2013). Many of these rights are held by family forest owners. Family forests have played a vital role in the development of a number of Northern countries and continue to be a major part of their economy. In China there are now over 100 million family forest owners as a result of large scale forest tenure reform.

Trees on farms, and farms within forested landscapes and adjacent to forest lands are part of a mosaic of natural resource based production and ecosystem services that make up the life support system for the planet. For many family farmers it is almost impossible to separate these elements. Indeed it is the unique combination of forest and farm resources which allow for the complex agroecological and natural resource management systems that have been the reservoirs of nutrition, genetic materials, fuel and energy, fodder and building materials, water retention and recharge, biological and cultural diversity all over the world. Smallholder, women, community and Indigenous Peoples groups who live close to forests understand the multiple benefits of forests and trees and what sustainable forest and farm management requires in practice.

Family forests are a critical part of rural food systems

Firstly forests provide the fundamental biological inputs for agriculture: water, nutrients and soil fertility and genetic diversity. As natural reservoirs forests increase water retention, reducing run off and evaporation. Leaves and tree litter mixed with manure is the oldest form of fertilizer and forest and farm trees continue to provide a continuous source of soil nutrients both at the surface and below the surface through nitrogen fixation and maintenance of microbial diversity. Forests provide essential habitat for native pollinators. In the Himalayas and many mountainous regions continuous agriculture has been possible where there have been adjacent forests – so that for many farmers the concept of a “farm” is a combination of fields and adjacent forest seen as a single production unit. Complex traditional management systems and allocation of rights ensured livestock grazing, fodder and leaf litter collections.

Family forests and trees on farm are vital to food security

Forests and trees on farms and pastures maintained by family farmers are the source of fuel not only for home heating in the North but also for cooking food in large parts of Africa, Asia, Latin America and many mountainous regions,. This very important dimension of food security and a critical family farm issue.

Many components of daily diet of rural families come directly from forest fruits, tubers, vines, mushrooms and leafy legumes, insects and animals harvested from forests. These provide important nutritional supplements that are a vital for food security. Studies of tribal communities in a number of provinces in Central India have shown that forests may contribute up to 30 % of the diet for millions of family farmers. Forests also serve as critical reservoirs of food during droughts and floods – often making the difference in poor peoples' ability to withstand significant climate fluctuations and maintain resilience in times of poor harvests.

Family forests are vital for livelihoods of family farmers and rural economies

The ability to draw from the productive capacity of both forests and farms (and pastures and fishing resources) at a landscape level is a key component in the livelihood and income generation strategies of many family farmers. Combining products from forest and field allows family farmers to avoid the cost of purchasing essential building materials, mats, flooring, baskets, tools and farming implements, ropes and so on. In the same way the mixture of forest and farms allows family farmers to collect, process and market a wider variety of products adding everything from timber to an astonishing array of non-wood forest products, medicinal and ornamental plants, forest fruits, mushrooms, honey, edible insects, fish, bushmeat and many others to crops and horticultural farm products. Often women supplement household income through the sale of these products they collect from the forest.

Forest and farm producer organizations working together strengthens family farming

As families organize into forest and farm producer organizations they are able to capture many more benefits: Joining together in a diverse array of traditional, informal and formal organizations helps forest-and-farm producers share knowledge and experience; engage in policy advocacy; secure tenure and access rights to forest, land and natural resources; improve forest-and-farm management; expand markets; build enterprises; and increase income and well-being. Federations and associations of forest and farm producer organizations can help share the costs of vital social protection measures like group life and health insurance, and build systems to promote savings and distribute credit and investment. It makes sense to encourage existing farmer organizations to widen their scope to include forestry or to link more closely to forest producer organizations. Considering that smallholders produce 70 percent of the worlds food, together, family foresters and family farmers may be the largest private sector actors – at least in the rural portion of the world's population. They can become new “green engines” of sustainable new rural economies, especially if linked to an enabling policy environment, secure tenure and access rights, better services, financing, more distributed processing of food and forest products and strong regional metropolitan centers.