



Forests and Gender Equality

Community-based forest enterprise development



The use of non-wood forest products (NWFPs) is an important area of forest management that relates to both the conservation of natural resources and the food security of forest-dependent people. The NWFP sector is complex, however, given the huge variety of landscapes, species and cultural patterns that characterize communities in different regions of the world. Therefore, the role of women in NWFP-related activities can differ substantially, even within the same country.

FAO's NWFP programme gathers, analyses and disseminates information on NWFPs; assesses the social and economic contributions of NWFPs in rural development; encourages networking among NWFP producers; and provides technical assistance. A particular focus is the development of small NWFP-based enterprises, especially those managed by women. Women are often responsible for the collection of fodder and fuelwood, and they contribute to family income by harvesting and processing NWFPs. In the production of honey in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, for instance, women play a major role in securing revenues, planning post-harvesting activities and transporting beehives. Men tend to be responsible for the harvesting of wood and wild meat.



Case study

Mobilization and strengthening of capacities of small and medium enterprises for the production of non-wood forest products in Central Africa (GCP/RAF/408/EC)

The challenge

Community-based forest management encompasses the management of forests by local people for commercial purposes or household use. In the project area, most of the people engaged in the collection, processing and trade of NWFPs are women from disadvantaged rural groups. Gender issues and their relation to inequality in poverty are decisive socio-institutional components in the evaluation of NWFP market chains.

FAO's response

The Central African countries involved in the project are Cameroon and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The project targets local people directly involved in forest management and the use of forest products, the majority of whom are women. Hence, women have been identified as direct beneficiaries of the project, which also aims to encourage the professionalization of local people. The market analysis and development (MA&D) approach used in the project assists people living in rural communities to develop enterprises through a gender-balanced process. The leading principle is the active participation of local, forest-dependent people in the identification and planning of forest enterprises and the sustainable use and management of the forest.

The project pays special attention to women as key actors in community economic systems. The MA&D approach provides a flexible framework to guide entrepreneurs, individuals and groups in planning and developing their forest-product-based enterprise. It provides suggestions for including both men and women in a fully participatory process.

Women should be full participants in the MA&D process. However, their involvement is not always straightforward since they may be less well educated than men, have heavy household workloads or be constrained by social norms from taking part in some activities. In the MA&D approach, women have opportunities to discuss – among themselves and with men – the major issues affecting the community and to advocate for their own priorities. The project implementation locations were selected among other reasons because of the pre-existence of informal women's producer groups, which could be further empowered with access to new income-generating activities.

The impact

The project resulted in NWFP-based enterprises that are gender-sensitive with numerous economic and subsistence opportunities for women. More women are involved in NWFP enterprises in Cameroon than in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). However, this could be attributed to a higher level of political stability in Cameroon and less violence against women in remote forested areas rather than to a lack of interest. In the DRC, gender-disaggregated data show that women made up 71 percent of participants in training provided by the project. Forty percent of the small and medium-sized enterprises assisted by the project are managed by women.

Women's forest-based associations are more inclined to invest in collective action, which is essential to increasing their overall income (up to a 40% gain when compared to individual income). They also contribute to the reinforcement of social relations and cohesion as well as foster mutual trust within small and medium forest enterprises, community forest-based associations and indigenous forest-based groups.

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