

NON-TIMBER FOREST PRODUCTS: THE WAY FORWARD FOR RURAL WOMEN?

Gendered roles and responsibilities

In the forest communities of Africa, a division of labour has long been clear among men and women. Women in Cameroon's forest-dwelling communities have typically been in charge of feeding the family through the cultivation of food crops and the collection of non-timber forest products (NTFPs), which they processed into culturally valued dishes. Men, in turn, helped to clear the food crop plots and concentrated on the cultivation of cash crops, such as cocoa, and on hunting. Agricultural crops and NTFPs were mainly reserved for household consumption.

But gone are those days! The opening up of remote areas, better access to urban markets and new income-generating opportunities have motivated women as well as men to be actively involved in the sale of NTFPs and agricultural products to earn more money.



Plantain, a man's crop in Cameroon

Gendered access to and use of forest resources

Research on gendered knowledge, skills, interests, access and control of forest resources conducted in the East and South regions of Cameroon shows that men and women have a similar access to NTFPs such bush mango (*Irvingia gabonensis*), moabi (*Ricinodendron heudelottii*) and njangsang (*Baillonella toxisperma*) in the wild, with restrictions occurring only on plots of land under cultivation or in fallows, where in general the land owner and close relatives have exclusive access to these products.



Sample of non-timber forest products used by women and men in Cameroon



Cassava, a woman's crop, drying on house

Gendered preferences and priorities

The men and women who participated in the participatory research expressed different preferences for forest products. Women were more interested in NTFPs such as bush mango, which is used for food or medicinal purposes, and which they themselves gather, process and sell.

Fewer men are involved in this activity but they are more actively involved in other forest-related activities such as bush meat hunting and small-scale logging.

Gendered livelihoods

Although revenues earned from NTFP sales are increasingly important to rural communities, Ms Ndimba, a Bulu native from village the South Region of Cameroon states that "we cannot rely solely on NTFPs for our survival. We can't eat only NTFPs every day, we need to add variety to our diet and moreover, money from NTFP sale is not enough to provide income for the family throughout the year. As a result, we have expanded our agricultural activities, primarily for subsistence and secondly as a means of raising income for the household."

Due to the increasing cash flow from NTFP gathering and food crop cultivation and sale, men are becoming interested in these 'women's businesses'. When asked why, Mr Menguele Jean, replied: "Cocoa produces just once a year and before production we need money for farm maintenance and family upkeep. We therefore decided to open larger plots to produce more food crops—mostly plantain and cocoyam—for sale."

This new drive for income over time has led to more labour for the women who are expected to cultivate larger plots while maintaining their demanding daily agricultural, gathering and household chores.

Ms Adrienne: 'What women need'

Ms Adrienne recently married into Melambo village, located in Cameroon's East Region. She laments that although she labours more for money, she earns less than she thought she would.

She explains that, "We the women, who do most of the labour, remain small-scale retailers of NTFPs and food crops with very little profit, but the men - natives and non-natives alike - have become involved in wholesale and are enjoying most of the profit without labouring as much as we do."

As a result, she concludes, the respective share from the sale of NTFPs and agricultural products that goes to men and women needs to be renegotiated.



Woman doing household chores in Melambo village



Research participants from Melambo village

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