A policy briefing note for governments in the African humid tropics region

COMMERCIALISING INDIGENOUS FRUIT FOR POVERTY ALLEVIATION

The Problem – Helping Farmers Diversify their Way out of Poverty

In the West and Central African region, there are 60 million poor people. Cameroon's Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (2003) states that 40% of the population is below the poverty line, with farmers particularly hard hit. The recent economic 'crisis' triggered new interest in diversification as a basis for more sustainable farm livelihoods. A key element is the inclusion of indigenous fruit trees such as 'Bush mango' (*Irvingia gabonensis*) and 'Safou' (*Dacryodes edulis*) in the farming system. Between 1999 and 2002, research was carried out in the humid forest zone of Cameroon and Southeast Nigeria to find ways of overcoming the constraints faced by farmers trying to cultivate indigenous fruit trees as new crops.

The Key Constraints

Indigenous fruit trees make a variety of contributions to farmers' livelihoods. Direct consumption of the fruit has nutritional benefits while fruit sales are an important source of income, particularly for women. The trees themselves provide a range of environmental benefits and contribute to the development of permanent fruit agroforestry systems. But a number of constraints prevent farmers from obtaining the full potential benefits from their trees:

- *Lack of official recognition.* The annual value of the safou trade in Cameroon ranges from US$1.5 million to US$7.5 million. In spite of their important contribution to farmer livelihoods and the national economy, governments are not yet providing adequate support to indigenous fruit tree activities. In particular, trade regulation is often inappropriate with no distinction made between wild harvested and farm-cultivated products, and inadequate extension support for farmers and traders.

- *Poor market intelligence.* Indigenous fruit are not included in any official market information systems. Yet farmers can double their income through group marketing or by selling their fruit at a different market.



Photo by J. Kengue

A safou tree producing consistent yields of good quality fruit can provide US$150 per year, compared with just US$20 for a less productive individual.

Monthly developments in safou prices (1999)



Prices for late-season safou fruit are much higher than during the main harvest.

- *High marketing costs.* Poor road infrastructure and numerous road-checks can delay getting fruits to market. Poor market security can prevent women from moving from retail to the more profitable wholesale trade.

- *Inability to meet specific market demands or add value.* Farmers are unable to supply fruit with specific characteristics such as size, taste and out-of-season production (see graph). Furthermore, few fruit are processed locally (other than drying) and many have a very short shelf-life (5 days for safou).

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Recommendations to Increase the Benefits Farmers Obtain from Indigenous Fruit Trees

Clarifying the status of indigenous tree crops

- Governments need to recognise that many indigenous trees are now grown on farm for a range of products including fruit, medicinals and timber. Their on-farm exploitation does not pose a conservation threat and should therefore be regulated in the same way as that of more conventional farm crops.
- Cross-border trade enables farmers to capitalise on the different growing seasons in neighbouring countries. Governments in the region should work together to stimulate regional trade by harmonising policies related to the exploitation, transport and import/export of indigenous tree crops.
- Government statistical services should include production data for indigenous fruit products as a first step to valuing their contribution to the national economy.

Improving market intelligence

- Indigenous fruit tree crops need to be included in existing market information systems, such as those supported by agriculture ministries.
- Extension services should be trained to help farmers develop and use market information systems, including developing group approaches to marketing.

Reducing marketing costs

- Improvements in road infrastructure would benefit trade in all perishable products. Transport typically makes up more than 70% of marketing costs of indigenous fruit.
- Municipal authorities should invest more in improving market infrastructure (security, electrification, storage). This would particularly benefit women traders.
- National and local authorities should eliminate unnecessary road-checks and clarify permit requirements for indigenous fruit. If traders can save money here they can hand on more of the value to the producer.

Supplying specific markets and increasing capacity for value-adding

- Governments should support researchers and extension services to work with farmers on participatory domestication of indigenous fruit trees to create cultivars that meet a range of market requirements (e.g. early- and late-season fruiting).
- Governments should promote research on post-harvest storage and processing of indigenous fruit crops.
- Governments and development organisations should work together to promote cottage industries related to indigenous fruit for the benefit of small farmers, rather than large-scale entrepreneurs. This might include the development of new products such as Bush mango and Safou oils, pastes and biscuits.



Photo by O. Ndoye

Women dominate the retail trade of most indigenous fruit, including bush mango. Better lighting, storage facilities and improved market security would enable them to engage in the more profitable wholesale trade.

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