



Enhancing the Contribution of Non-Wood Forest Products to Food Security in Central Africa (GCP/RAF/479/AFB)

1. Introduction

Forests and trees outside forests are important for the livelihood of rural communities living in Central Africa. They provide food, fuelwood, fruits, leaves, medicinal products and construction materials. The contribution of forests and trees to food security and nutrition has always been overlooked in government policies and in international debates. This situation needs to be changed to better demonstrate the complementarities between the forestry sector and the other sectors from the perspective of rural development.



Forests and trees contribute to food security in several ways:

- On the supply side, the contribution can be described as the direct harvest/use of fruits, leaves, nuts, insects, bush meat for consumption, thereby providing the necessary nutrients to human beings. In the Netherlands, edible insects are currently sold in supermarkets because of their high nutritional content. In Chad, in September and October, many insects are sold at the Dembe market in Ndjamena. Fodder is used to feed livestock in order to get healthy animals which will at the end be consumed by human beings. Fuelwood in the other hand is used to cook food which is consumed to enhance the food security and nutrition of family farms. In addition, an important portion of the populations of Central Africa use medicinal plants to cure common ailments since they cannot afford the cost of using modern medicine. Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that agroforestry and environmental services contribute to the well-being of rural populations of Central Africa;
- On the demand side, the contribution results from the sales of forest products to purchase food, pay for school fees, improve family health and purchase clothes with the income received.

2. Political will for a greater contribution of forests and trees outside forests to food security and nutrition in Central Africa

Recognizing the importance of forests and the need for their preservation, in March 1999, the Central African head of states expressed in the Yaoundé Declaration their will to create a unique political and technical authority, the Central African Forests Commission (COMIFAC), to orient, coordinate, harmonize and facilitate decision making in the Central African context of sustainable management and conservation of forest and savannah ecosystems. COMIFAC's Convergence Plan adopted in February 2005 by the head of states and its review being just completed, defines common strategies for the development intervention of states and partners in the framework of sustainable management and

conservation of forest and savannah ecosystems. The revised Convergence Plan 2015-2025 adopted by the Council of Ministers of COMIFAC has six priority axes and three cross-cutting ones aimed at improving the livelihood of populations, contributing to the economic development of the different countries, and contributing to the ecological equilibrium of the planet. To better contribute to the new Convergence Plan, COMIFAC, with the help of its partners, has elaborated a program on forests for food security and nutrition in Central Africa.

3. Importance of NWFP and markets in strengthening food security and nutrition in Central Africa

Among the important resources from forests and trees outside forests are Non Wood Forest Products (NWFP), which popularity has increased since the cocoa crisis of the 1980s. As a result, family farms have increased their dependency on these products in order to diversify their sources of incomes. It has been shown that important NWFP such as *Ricinodendron heudelotii* (Njansang) are richer in lipids, carbohydrate and calcium than tomato, bush meat, fish and beef. This implies that their processing and consumption should be encouraged to increase the level of food security and nutrition of the populations of Central Africa.



For countries belonging to COMIFAC, it can be said, as an illustration, that in Cameroon, in Equatorial Guinea and in Gabon, bush mango (*Irvingia gabonensis*) and safou or atanga (*Dacryodes edulis*) are important NWFP for the food security of populations. In Congo, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Central African Republic *Gnetum* spp. (Fumbwa or Koko) is important for the food security of the populations. In Chad and Sao Tome & Principe, fruits and leaves of baobab (*Adansonia digitata*) are important for the food security of the populations. In Burundi and Rwanda, honey, mushroom and the fruits of maracouja are important for the food security of the populations.

Local markets play an important role in enabling rural communities to get a significant part of their cash income through sale of NWFP thereby contributing to their food security. Increased urbanization (as a result of rural to urban migration) is a significant factor that expands the size of local NWFP markets. Several traders, mainly women are engaged in the commercialization of NWFP. The incomes they obtain are reinvested to enhance the well-being of the family.

4. Threats and opportunities to strengthen the contribution of forests and trees outside forests to food security and nutrition in Central Africa

Over the years in Central Africa, there have been many pressures on forest resources due to clearance for slash and burn agriculture and industrial plantations, increased urbanization, market development and unsustainable harvest practices. These factors have increased the distance local communities have to travel to collect or harvest forest products and particularly NWFP that used to be closer to farm compounds. In order to reconcile livelihood improvement and conservation of the rich forest resources in Central Africa, participatory domestication became necessary to preserve the superior characteristics of the tree species thereby increasing supply at a significant level.

According to the World Agroforestry Center (ICRAF), participatory domestication encourages the effective participation of local communities and other stakeholders and integrates their views in the design of the technologies. The experience gained by ICRAF has enabled communities to produce high quality planting materials thereby increasing productivity in terms of quality, size and quantity of fruits, quantity of barks, abundance and size of leaves. Besides, early fruiting and off-season planting materials have also been developed. All these efforts have improved food and nutrition security in Central Africa.

5. Necessary actions to strengthen the contribution of forests and trees outside forests to food security and nutrition in Central Africa



The following actions are necessary to further improve the contribution of forests and trees outside forests to food security and nutrition:

- Ensure that local people have secure access to the resources by regulating use rights, paying particular attention to women. In Central Africa, women are important users of forests and forest resources;
- Empower women to be more involved in the valorization of NWFP. The more women are empowered, the more likely the family welfare will be enhanced. This means that investing in women is positively correlated with improvement in household well-being;
- Promote the development of small and medium forest enterprises, through access to finance and capacity development;
- Include forests in national food security and poverty reduction strategies;
- Improve political, legal and institutional framework guiding the forest resources by internalizing COMIFAC sub-regional guidelines on NWFP;
- Promote better land use planning.

Improving forests and trees outside forests for food security and nutrition goes beyond the forest sector and requires inter-sectorial collaboration and multi-stakeholder approaches including all institutions and stakeholders involved in rural development.

DEFINITION OF FEW IMPORTANT CONCEPTS

Food security: According to FAO, food security is assured when all individuals at all times have economic, social and physical access to enough food, which satisfy their nutritional and food preferences for an active and healthy life. Food security has four pillars: availability, access, utilise and stability. The nutritional aspect is embedded in the concept of food security.

The availability of food is related to the supply side of the food security equation and it is determined by the levels of food production, needs and net trade.

The access of every individual to resources in order to acquire the food necessary for an adequate food intake remains a major goal. Important elements are monetary resources and necessary access rights to produce food. The concern about sufficient access to food has brought a major focus on income policy, spending, market and adequate prices of food items in order to achieve food security objectives.

The use refers to the way human body optimizes the different nutrients available in food. Good practices related to care and diet, preparation of food, diversity of food intake and the distribution of food within the household provide adequate energy and nutrients.

Stability means that access to food by the population cannot be jeopardized by any natural or economic disturbance.

Food insecurity: According to FAO, food insecurity refers to a situation where there is no guaranty of access to healthy and nutritious food to bring about growth and development. Food insecurity is among the major causes of bad nutritional status at the same level as health problems, bad sanitary conditions and inadequate habits in terms of good care and diet. Food insecurity can be chronic, seasonal or transitory.

Food sovereignty: According to the definition of Via Campesina, food sovereignty designates «the right of the populations, their States or Unions to define well adapted agricultural and food policies for their populations without having a negative impact on the populations of other countries».