

The improvement of living conditions for forest-dependent populations through the fostering of small businesses based on the profitable uses of non-wood forest products in North Africa

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Ensuring the sustainable use and management of natural resources in a context of great social and ecological fragility and at the same time provide quality jobs for rural inhabitants are two of the main challenges facing sustainable development around the Mediterranean Rim. How can non-wood forest products play a role in such development? The authors give an account of a workshop organised on this theme by the Algerian office of the FAO.

Since the United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development, held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the sustainable management of natural resources has been recognised as one of the principal means to be taken into account in the fight against poverty which is ongoing and has to face the high economic and social costs deriving from the degradation of habitats.

Forests and woodlands represent an essential component making up the natural resources of the countries of North Africa. They contribute to secure food supply, to well-being as well as playing a significant economic role.

Amongst the major resources coming out of the forest and to which particular attention must be paid in any plan for land use and development are the non-wood forest products, NWFP, on which a large part of the population remains dependent. These NWFP play a fundamental part in the lives of rural inhabitants because such products form a source of subsistence food and income, thereby contributing to their nutrition and health. Their profitable uses via the promotion of ecologically responsible value chains thus offer an opportunity for the rural populations and other stakeholders involved to increase their income



Figure 1:
Diversity of NWFP
in Maghreb.

at the same time as they participate in the sustainable management of forest and woodland resources and in the preservation of traditional knowhow and customs. Furthermore, the forests of the Mediterranean Rim constitute one of the world's biodiversity hotspots which is shown by the wide range of NWFP used by local inhabitants: we can cite here cork, aromatic and medicinal plants (thyme, rosemary, lavender etc.), fruit (from the marula, baobab, arbutus), gum arabic, turpentine oil, pine kernels, carob, etc.

Despite the potential benefits to be had from NWFP, this economic sub-sector is faced with obstacles formed by regulations, institutions and organisations; these include rigid and poorly adapted regulations and institutions, inadequate knowledge of the resources' potential, unsuitable exploitation due to the lack of insufficient or precise information about the biology and phenology of a large number of the species involved, about scientific methods for their exploitation and regeneration, and about their nutritional value.

As a way of accompanying the different governments in meeting these challenges, the FAO has launched in recent years several projects for the development of NWFP; these include the regional workshop for the profitable use of aromatic and medicinal plants in North African countries (2015), the project for the integrated rehabilitation of productive cork oak landscapes in Algeria (started in 2018), the project for the development of small businesses based on NWFP: here, carob, pine kernels and rosemary (begun in 2019), etc. Associated to such substantial projects are tightly-focused studies and training courses, for example the region-wide programme for training technicians in

grafting the stone pine and the carob tree (2016) and a study on the use of oak acorns in bil ballout couscous, at Jijel (2018), to mention just two.

On 5-7 December 2018, with a view to reinforcing collaboration between the countries of the region and fostering discussion of their success stories, the FAO's Office in Algeria organised in collaboration with its sub-regional Office for North Africa a sub-regional workshop on the topic "Contribution to the improvement of living conditions for forest-dependent populations through the fostering of small businesses based on the profitable uses of NWFP (non-wood forest products)". This gathering, which was attended by five countries from the region (Algeria, Libya, Morocco, Mauritania and Tunisia), enabled the participants to present their experiences and discuss them, both as to their understanding of the potential for these plants and of their biology and phenology and, also, the regulatory, organisational and institutional frameworks which govern their development, exploitation, transformation and profitable use.

Following the presentation by the various countries of their reports, the participants divided up into groups, visiting producers of medicinal plants and of mastic oil both of which have enjoyed great success and have bolstered activity in the forested areas around Cape Negro. The workshop discussions led to the participants drafting recommendations to further the development of the NWFP sector in North Africa. Recommended aspects were improvements to strategy and to the legal, organisational and regulatory framework, fostering the promotion of small businesses and the organisation of value chains, establishment of an environment to encourage an increased contribution by NWFP to nutritional security and inclusive rural development and, also, enhance knowledge about NWFP and an understanding of their varied potential, how to exploit and reproduce them, and their nutritional value.

The results of the workshop were presented to the 6th Mediterranean Forestry Week, held on 1-5 April 2019 in Lebanon, by Mr Nabil Assaf, FAO representative in Algeria and the FAO forester for North Africa.

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