

Forests as a source of wealth

Innovative approaches for the sustainable and profitable use of non-wood forest products

by Gisa MARGGRAFF

«Local communities, in particular on the Eastern and Southern Rim of the Mediterranean Basin, often depend on forests for their livelihoods.»

The session «Forests as source of wealth», was organised during the IVth Mediterranean Forest Week in Barcelona. The objective of this session was to summarize and highlight the potential of forest products for local development, and to present some methods and practical examples of their profitable use. The aim was to show good practices of a sustainable and equitable use of forest biodiversity and an integral and sustainable approach to the management and utilisation of forest products, along the added-value chain.

Mediterranean forests play a key role in the well-being of both rural and urban inhabitants and constitute a unique natural heritage. They provide a very diverse range of goods and services, including wood and non-wood products, water conservation, control of erosion and desertification, fixing carbon and preserving biodiversity.

The subsistence of local communities, especially to the south and east of the Mediterranean Rim, is highly dependent on forests and woodlands. Forest products are often the only source of income for such communities, notably for women. The sale of forest products can enhance opportunities for jobs and income and at the same time contribute to furthering conservation goals.

However, not all non-wood forest products (NWFP) offer good economic potential. The development of certain products can take years and necessitate big investment (BELCHER and SCHRECKENBERG, 2007). For example, a technical analysis detailing a product's biochemical properties and therapeutic benefits etc. may be a prerequisite for successful sales. Another limiting factor is the size of NWFP. The areas of production of most NWFP are scattered around and availability of both quantity and quality varies (BELCHER and SCHRECKENBERG, 2007). When a NWFP is a commercial success, back-up stocks i.e. the quantities available within the requisite delivery time, can be a problem (BELCHER and SCHRECKENBERG, 2007). Equally, rising demand can result in severe pressure on natural resources, thus threatening the

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basis of the rural population's livelihood as well as endangering the species used and the local ecosystems. To ensure the sustainability of the sector, forestry administrations are faced with an enormous challenge: how to preserve biodiversity and protect the natural resources of Mediterranean forests while at the same time creating the conditions in which local communities can obtain sustained income from the exploitation of NWFP.

The knowhow and experience concerning the sustainable use of NWFP remain inadequate, a situation representing in itself a serious risk of compromising the long-term sustainability of the products. Forestry administrations and logging and mill companies are faced with legal, regulatory and management difficulties which hinder the sustained profitability of the products and, thus, inhibit a positive dynamic in the sector. Long-term effective sales of NWFP require a favourable legislative framework defining quotas and harvesting protocols, stipulating rights of access to forest resources and guaranteeing the rights of the local communities.

Such a framework will also ensure the equitable sharing of the profits earned from the use of NWFP. There is a growing demand for pharmaceutical products based on plants as well as for natural cosmetics and remedies. For this reason the pharmaceutical and cosmetic industries are interested in the biological resources harboured by Mediterranean forests as well as by the traditional knowledge possessed by local communities about the natural products obtained from forests and their applications. Yet there are fears that these communities and countries which possess such genetic resources do not reap the profits generated by the use of their knowledge and of the plants in the development of new pharmaceuticals and cosmetics. The provisions of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) concerning access to and sharing of related profits have been formulated with the aim of ensuring a just and fair sharing of such benefits by generating compensation, financial or otherwise.

The aim of Access and Benefit Sharing (ABS) is to generate profits with the purpose of reducing poverty and conserving nature, to create an economic incentive for the sustainable use of resources, in particular those of forests, and to foster the reinforcement of

capability for the transfer of technology, knowledge and skills (BMU/BMZ, 2012).

The challenge lies in implementing these principles through policies and regulatory framework at a national level as well as practical measures which together will permit the generation of real advantages for the countries and communities which supply the genetic resources (BMU/BMZ, 2012). It is necessary to provide the practical guidelines on how the ABS approach can be applied to non-wood forest products and the way of getting the utmost out of traditional forestry knowledge so as to ensure significant profits to local communities that depend on their forests.

In short, turning NWFP to advantageous use can succeed provided the activity is sustainable, profitable and equitable with a positive impact on the living conditions of the forest and woodland population as well as on the preservation of biodiversity and natural resources. This appears to be a big challenge but it is doable, as several examples show (amongst others, *Commercialisation of Non-Timber Forest Products: Factors Influencing Success* or the case studies by the CIFOR).

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