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Tropical forest product markets and addressing adaptation priorities of forest communities in West and Central Africa

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Tropical forest ecosystems hold multiple goods and services that constitute different portfolios for livelihoods, trade and investment at varying levels that should generate wealth for national development and human wellbeing. However, there is a mismatch between the potential wealth and volume of trade in tropical forest commodities and the prevailing level of poverty in those regions raising anxiety if markets pose constraints rather than provide the opportunities for revenue generation crucial for adaptation at the household level. As systems with different drivers, operational levels, and institutional requirements, harnessing markets in forest commodities for adaptation pose major challenges. The nature and use of markets under climate change crisis could influence the direction in the shifts in vulnerability and adaptation of the most vulnerable and poor majority in Africa. This paper examines the roles of markets in forest products (non-timber products), for climate change adaptation by forest users in West and Central Africa. The paper is based on on-going research by the Tropical Forests and Climate Change Adaptation projects of ICIFOR in West and Central Africa. Through dialogue processes and participatory actions, there was the identification and prioritization of forest-based development sectors for adaptation (potable water, bioenergy, NTFP for food (human and livestock) and medicinal products) representing a consensus by the multiple stakeholders and serving as a first step in sharing the risks and responsibilities for adaptation. These sectors were further examined in the types of markets and trade surrounding them and their likely contribution for adaptation now and in the future. Three of the prioritized sectors (woodfuel, NTFP for food and medicinal products) are surrounded by booming markets with varying spatial and temporal scales sometimes linking remote places with urban centers including overseas e.g. bush meat. The largely unregulated markets (e.g. medicinal plant harvest, firewood and charcoal burning etc) could be a constraint for adaptation of the forest through unsustainable practices likely to affect the resilience of the trees and the forest. Prioritization of the sectors was driven by need-bases rather than economic values of the forest goods and services perceived to be crucial for adaptation. Although there are associated markets surrounding some of the prioritized sectors, the generation of revenue which could be considered to be beneficial for adaptation was not the motivation. This could likely be linked to equity and access to the flow and distribution patterns of the resources and revenue. Markets are important but should complement rather than substitute forests roles for adaptation to climate change in tropical forest countries. Capturing the benefits of trade for adaptation is crucial but will require policy reforms and further research addressing the complexity in benefit sharing.