

Trading forest products to increase food sovereignty in Liberia

Big business in the forest

As in most parts of the world, women are the ones primarily responsible for household food security in Liberia. Although Liberia is blessed with an abundance of fertile land and forests, rural populations have few rights in decision-making. The strongest parties – primarily male illegal loggers – seize the most profitable opportunities. Within this context, development organisations are addressing women’s immediate food needs through group formation and training.

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Liberia is a country still recovering from 14 years of civil conflict. Poor infrastructure, limited educational possibilities, undefined rights of rural communities and an underdeveloped economy have stifled the country’s ability to develop. Foreign development organisations, meanwhile, continue to pour aid into the country, in an attempt to raise agricultural productivity, promote international trade and raise health and educational standards.

Giving rights for sustainable forest management

In 2005, Liberia’s forests covered 33 percent of the country, or 3.15 million hectares. Today, it still represents the largest remaining portion of the West African Upper Guinea Moist Forest ecosystem. But Liberia, like many West-African countries, does not have well-established forest tenure rights for communities. Typically, in a situation where rights are not clearly defined, the strongest party takes the most profitable



Photo: Frederick Johnson

Women collect wild snails and other protein-rich food from the forest.

opportunities, which in this case are uncontrolled logging and poaching. This has resulted in deforestation and loss of biodiversity. Yet, local forest users can hardly be blamed: they engage in illegal activities in the absence of rights and incentives to sustainably manage the forests. Over the last decade, communities have been increasingly persuaded to conserve and protect their forest resources, yet they also need economic alternatives.

A new Community Rights Law addressing forest use is nearly approved and will attempt to promote sustainable management. It will offer communities the right to participate in the sale of timber concessions or carbon credits. It will take months (or longer), however, to effectuate the devolution of those rights to the community level and, for now, more immediate incentives are needed. The development of non-timber forest product businesses is one such incentive. These businesses place greater value on forest products and therefore raise awareness on the importance of sustainable management of forest resources.

Recognising women’s role in forest management

Communities are dependent on the forests for firewood, spices, rattan for furniture, and thatch for homes. Wild game, snails and fish from the forests are a source of protein that complements staple foods from farming. Women, in particular, have the difficult task of putting food on the table every day, and edible forest products are a welcome addition. Moreover, non-timber forest products can improve food security by increasing household income to purchase food.

As the forest is typically managed as an open resource, people engage in a race to harvest or hunt as much as they can. For them, sustainable forest use has little meaning. Only when people obtain legal rights to harvest forest products will there be an incentive for sustainable forest management. Having some



Photo: Adam Norikane

Some forest products are for home use, while others can be sold on the market. Sustainable use plans allow farmers to receive extra food and income.

basic rules to regulate the harvest of non-timber forest products by local communities is a first step. It can provide a more structured environment from which to design small-scale forest management plans.

The Land Rights and Community Forestry Project, funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), was initiated in December 2007 to assist the Liberian Forestry Development Authority in devolving rights and responsibilities to the rural communities. The project is working in the Nimba and Sinoe counties and helps communities to establish forest management plans and to build capacities of producer groups. Many of the rural forest communities do not have the necessary business skills for profitable marketing of their products. In Liberia, women make up approximately 60 percent of the agricultural workforce and do an estimated 80 percent of the trading. They are the main resource and food acquisition decision-makers. It is mostly women who harvest firewood and collect fish and snails, spices and oils for home consumption. If forests disappear or prices of forest products fluctuate, there is a direct impact on women's sovereignty over household food security. The project thus showed that it is crucial to strengthen the capacity of these women to make intelligent, sustainable business decisions that lead to forest conservation, poverty alleviation and food security.

Business training workshop

In March 2009, the project developed a non-timber forest product business training workshop entitled "Community Forestry as a Business". Incorporating simple business concepts of group organisation, planning and cost savings, this workshop helped both men and women in the communities to turn their use of non-timber forest products into real business. They are trained in the structure and framework of businesses, learning how working in a group can reduce their operating costs and how they can expand their marketing opportunities. Incorporating a value chain approach, the training gave forest users some tools to examine opportunities for economic growth, from the harvesting stage to processing and all the way through to consumer sales.

Illiteracy in rural Liberia is a staggering 70 percent. The training curriculum, therefore, was designed to facilitate learning through active discussions and the use of real-life examples. Although the business training required some literacy and numeracy, the material has been trimmed down to a manageable level for the predominantly non-literate people. This is particularly beneficial to women, who have a lower literacy rate than men.

Male domination of the most profitable products

During a pilot of the Community Forestry as a Business workshop in the Sinoe county, women would often allow the men to dominate the discussions, as often happens in participatory workshops. But what proved successful was splitting the group into separate men and women groups, to make sure women's voices were heard. The selection of non-timber forest products was a defining factor in women's participation. Women hardly commented when "typically male" activities were discussed, such as the processing of rattan into furniture. The discussion of forest products such as wild palm oil, spices or snail harvesting encouraged a much greater involvement. Targeting such products can make or break the successful inclusion of women into business trainings.

There is always a risk that men will appropriate all of the business: they have a tendency to wrest control of household assets from women, regardless of whose labour produced them. In many business activities, such as marketing of maize or timber, there is a long tradition of male dominance and it

can be extremely difficult for women to participate. But forest management is a relatively new field, and non-timber forest products hold great potential for empowering women. Turning these products into businesses provides a unique opportunity to build and strengthen women's positions. For this, trainers must be able to adapt their training and focus on female-dominated forest product enterprises in order to elicit greater female participation.

Training alone is not enough

The Community Forestry as a Business workshop, however effective in building business skills, will fail to achieve its objectives if forest resource rights and autonomy are not devolved to the communities, and specifically to the women relying



Photo: Adam Norikane

Men have traditionally profited most from forest products, but training will give women more opportunities.

on the forest for their families' sustenance. The international development community and the government of Liberia need to act on this. Women, as the primary food providers for the household, need opportunities to grow and develop their businesses and thus increase their household food security. But being successful in business means not only having the skills to manage promising forest resources, but also having the rights to them. Users' rights to non-timber forest products for women are the first step to community autonomy over forest resources.

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