



Can Non Timber Forest Products; the life wire of many poor livelihoods in the South West of Cameroon be sustained?

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Many times the importance of non-forest timber products is over shadowed by the somewhat mediatized or business values of their cousin timber forest products. However these products constitute major resources to many livelihoods in forest areas in Cameroon including the Mount Cameroon region, Manyu Division, Central and East provinces. This article however focuses on the importance of these products to poor households living in the forest areas of the South West province in particular. In this area non timber forest products include;

Honey gotten from bees in and around Mount Cameroon which is also a source of financial activities for poor farmers around Buea and Limbe areas, with easier and better access to the mountain. Worthy of note is the fact that these bees are also responsible for much of the pollination of agricultural and other bio-diversity in and around this area hence vital to the Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC) an Agro-industrial giant with extensive plantations bordering the slopes of Mount Fako.

More over many non-timber forest products are used by the local poor populations for food (mushrooms, wrapper leaves, greens/vegetables etc), and medicine and for traditional rites invaluable for Cosmic well being among the native Bakweri living on the slopes of Mount Cameroon stretching as far as the Atlantic Coastline. Other users of the forest include the hunters of forest animals especially around the dense forest section that stretches to the Coast around the Batoke area of Fako Division, basket makers dependent on fibre grass species in the forest or poor people in need of ropes from climbing forest plants as they can hardly afford expensive twines in the markets.

Mean while in Manyu Division non timber forest products are even more important. Traditionally the Bayang and Ejagam communities conserve parts of their forest as sacred shrines for the Ekpe secret society or Monikim dancers which are not to be tempered with by members of the communities or strangers. The other sections of their forest constitute the life wire of their livelihoods.

The “eru” plant is a staple diet in Manyu division. It is used in cooking soup that is eaten with coco-yams fufu or fermented cassava fufu recently (“water fufu”). Most poor livelihoods wander into the forest to get these wild plants every week or daily in some cases for their household needs. Other plants include “tanchot” used in cooking soup with

“bush mango” also gotten from the Manyu Forest and “nkwadek” used for curing skin diseases like ring worms, eczema etc.

More over wild palms are used in making palm wine invaluable in local marriages, funerals or social events and also providing incomes to tapers and their households in Manyu. Worth noting is the fact that palm wine tapping is also an important livelihood strategy among the Bakweri of the Mount Fako forest Area.

However many livelihoods dependent on non-timber forest products may be facing some threats in the South West. The threats include;

New regulations carving out forest reserves on forested land traditionally belonging to many village communities. Examples of such reserves are the Southern Bakundu Forest reserve, the Barombi Mbo forest reserve, Bimbria Bonadikombo forest reserve (Fako) etc in the South West province. While these reserves are doing a great job of conservation, it cannot be dismissed that in conservation many traditional livelihoods dependent on the forest are restricted from using the forest as they were originally trained by custom to use it hence impacting negatively on these livelihoods choices or modifying them.

More over creeping and climbing plants like eru that need a delicate balance of other species like timber products in the forest , are becoming more scarce with increase logging in certain areas exposing plants naturally not adapted to very harsh sunlight to harsher conditions and possible extinction.

Besides continuous exploitation of these natural resources by local poor livelihoods has not been accompanied by a corresponding replenishing of the forest naturally or by man, of the species most needed like eru. Research on domestication of eru by Limbe Botanic Gardens is on the way but has not been translated in to a broad policy to help livelihoods dependent on the more and more scarce plant also harvested and shipped in tonnes across the borders to Nigeria where it is also very needed and scarce and a local staple.

More over knowledge in traditional healing herbs is still based on orality making it difficult to expand it to other communities as finished goods. Despite this draw back and government restrictions on the sale and use of traditional medicines, there are growing traditional herbal packages in the South West markets that range from plants capable of curing malaria, gastritis, impotency to those supposedly capable of curing HIV/AIDS. This trend is supported by arguments that more poor people or communities cannot

afford western medicine and have been induced by the presence of similar Chinese products in the markets to produce locally. The result when traditional medicine has been used to cure ailments it cannot cure, have been the embedding of certain diseases like malaria and HIV/AIDS in some communities hence affecting productive and vulnerable segments like young adult males and females and children in these societies.

More over with recent increase in migrations to forest areas around Fako and Manyu divisions of the South West province from the North West and neighbouring Nigeria, many more people are driven to consume non-timber forest products hence competing with the original community users hence scarcity of valuable food and medicinal products and the threats of extinction of other products like the eru plant and primates including chimpanzees.

With scarcity of natural food types, poor infrastructure like roads, communication channels, schools and hospitals etc in many forested areas, the task of mapping strategies or policies via participatory learning approaches becomes difficult because these communities like most communities in Sub-Saharan Africa are parts of countries embedded in poverty (Bhagavan, 1999) or still developing hence prioritising their investment and interventions to solve urban crises that can easily deteriorate into political and economic chaos rather than on usually powerless communities dependent on non-timber forest areas in some times remote areas of the South West.

Therefore to sustain livelihoods dependent on non-timber forest products in the South West and Cameroon in general the following measures must be put in place:

Firstly, ways of domesticating certain wild species like eru or even some forest herbivores like deer and antelopes must be introduced to these communities. This will in time serve the purpose of conservation without disrupting livelihoods dependent on the hunting of forest animals. Other plants like wild mushrooms used in the cooking of soup and “tanchot”, wrapper leaves etc should also be domesticated not only to reduce the burden and movements of poor people including women and children into the forest to get them but also as more effective income bringing tools. These products if domesticated and made more available can also be supplied to urban markets in Limbe and Kumba from Manyu Division noted to supply “bush mango” seeds and animals sometimes unsustainably around Manyemen to other parts of Cameroon. Other areas that can benefit

from domesticating non-timber forest products like animals include Batoke in the West Coast of Fako in the South West where the hunting and trading of “bush meat” (forest animals) is one of the main income bringers of poor households. With proximity to a populous country like Nigeria, marketing domesticated non-timber forest products is likely to thrive because of a huge demand for these products hence profitable.

Besides more studies and workshops between policy makers and poor forest communities must be stepped up to identify the needs of the latter or to design holistic policies for forest conservation and sustaining of these livelihoods based on informed data rather than previously practiced top-down classical interventions considered by modern development managers to be failing (Gow and Morss, 1988) and without prospects of effectively guaranteeing beneficiary participation, partnership and ownership.

More so interventions to document traditional knowledge systems in curative medicine must be stepped up by both government and civil society. Healing plants based on ancient community practices and with relevance to modern medicine must also be patented by government or the civil society, so that these non-forest timber products can bring royalties to their communities or expose them to researchers, ecotourism etc.

Besides, more forest land can be carved out to villages as community forests noted to be more sustainably managed than land tenures in conserved forest areas. This will boost community ownership of these resources and instigate better management policies and the prevention of waste borne out of unsustainable practices like wildfires etc used in tracking honey in the Mount Cameroon forest areas for instance or from “slash and burn” farming practices still being used in many parts of Manyu, Cameroon resulting to more fallow and uncultivable lands in already destitute societies.

Also, more infrastructures like schools, hospitals, roads and communication networks must be built so as to mainstream these livelihoods into national and regional or global platforms of the development debate. Education will help to diversify local strategies for income bringing and force women, active youths to other professions hence reduce the overexploitation of non-timber forest products. More hospitals will help in the cure of embedded diseases in livelihoods mostly dependent on traditional medicines for their sustenance. It should be noted, that this article does not infer in any way that traditional medicine should be replaced with modern medicine. It intimates the usage of the latter

when the former has not been proven to work in communities dependent on them as a proactive measure of solving issues via holistic approaches only. Good roads might facilitate rural urban exchanges and vice versa incidentally facilitating mobility of labour (both occupationally and geographically) hence vital in stepping up the capacity of communities to diversify incomes from non-timber forest products to other sources. Better communication channels will expose these communities to policy makers, researchers, funding organisations, mobilise capital within and outside these communities and link them to international networks resulting to more interventions aimed at poverty reduction in these areas.

Also concerted efforts by forest communities, government and civil society towards understanding power relations in these areas and in solving conflicts between indigenes and settler populations on issues about non-timber forest product exploitation or access are invaluable in developing sustainable policies for empowering the people, poverty reduction or alleviation in the area. Understanding power relations is considered by modern social policy as a tool to understanding stakeholders, environments and in identifying the most vulnerable and marginalised in any given society (de Haan and Zoomers, 2005).

Even with these measures, dependence on non-timber forest products is not expected to shrink dramatically in Cameroon because most processes to reduce dependence on this livelihood strategy are on-going and do not cover most areas dependent on it. It also necessitates very costly operations and learning approaches which like most processes take time. Besides poor people consider it their life wire and this consideration is intricately merged sometimes with ancestral, cultural or cosmic visions, that diverting or changing the people to other options is not bound to be welcomed without resistance. Besides the option, has been proven to sustain them from generation to generation hence tested. This reiterates the point that policy designs to reduce poverty or sustainably manage non-timber products in the South West and Cameroon may only succeed if they are poor focussed, participatory, partnerships, flexible, accountable and ensure beneficiary ownership on exit. If not the people will consider their threatened life wire even more threatened and retract from supporting interventions that could in many ways also assist in sustaining it. Therefore livelihoods dependent on non-timber forest products

can be sustained in Cameroon with inclusive policies, bottom-top designs for empowerment of communities that depend on them to sustainably manage them or to diversify their incomes where it is appropriate. All this can only work if infrastructural needs identified above are provided and there is political and communities' will to protect their livelihoods strategies from positive threats including macro-economic pressures within and outside these communities.

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Girl seller, of wild grass-cutter along busy highway in the South West of Cameroon. Picture is courtesy of Arrey Ivo. ©2006 Arrey Ivo. All rights reserved.