



Women producing shea butter in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. Photo: Henry-Noël Bouda

Stimulating dialogue on Africa's dry forests

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The dry forests of sub-Saharan Africa cover over 40 per cent of the continent and they are home to over 230 million people. Many of the poorest people on Earth live in and around the forests, and they depend on them for their survival and their meagre incomes. Over much of Africa, dry forests are suffering from over-use and severe degradation, and this makes it even harder for rural communities to lift themselves out of poverty.

During the past three years, CIFOR's Dry Forests Project has sought to stimulate dialogue among a wide range of stakeholders. Besides alerting policy-makers, resource managers and the international community to the importance of dry forests, the project has been strengthening research capacity within Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Tanzania and Zambia in order to promote sustainable forest management and enhance local livelihoods.

According to forester Daniel Tiveau, CIFOR's regional coordinator for West Africa, it is high time we paid more attention to Africa's dry forests. "Over the past decade, world attention has tended to concentrate on the destruction of tropical rainforests, even though worldwide degradation and conversion of dry forests is far more advanced than that of wet forests," he says. "They provide construction material for farms and homes, dry-season fodder for Africa's vast livestock populations, as well as wood fuel, medicinal plants and many other products."

The role which dry forests play in supporting hundreds of millions of people is described in a

Forest Livelihoods Brief – *The wealth of the dry forests* – published by CIFOR in 2006. Among many other outputs, three reports focused on particular aspects of dry-forests management and husbandry in Zambia, Burkina Faso and Malawi.

There are thought to be some 20,000 beekeepers and 6,000 wild honey hunters in Zambia. Between them, they probably produce 1,500 tonnes of honey a year. Much of this is made into a local beer, *mbote*, but important quantities – perhaps a third – are either traded internally within Zambia as honey, or exported, as honey or beeswax, to Europe.

The Case of Honey in Zambia, by Guni Mickels-Kokwe, looks at the significant role which beekeeping plays in supporting rural livelihoods in Zambia, and it analyses the trade in honey and beeswax, production methods, the role which pollinating trees and forests play, and current government policies towards beekeeping. Beekeeping not only earns much-needed foreign exchange, it has contributed significantly to economic growth in some parts of Zambia, especially in North-West Province, and it has helped to reduce poverty.

Mickels-Kokwe's study suggests that current policies and institutional arrangements are not conducive to further growth of the industry, and that most of the achievements during the past 15 years have been a result of private sector initiatives and support from non-governmental organisations. The study suggests a number of measures which could be taken – not just by government, but by

beekeepers and aid agencies – to encourage the growth of the industry.

Mickels-Kokwe highlights the importance of establishing beekeeper producer organisations in Zambia. Evidence put forward by another CIFOR-commissioned study suggests that producer organisations are vitally important for other resources as well. According to Louis Sawadogo, the author of a study on the sustainable management of dry forests in Burkina Faso, the most organised management system in the country is that of wood fuel because user groups are responsible for the management of fuel-wood production and sales and get technical backstopping from the forest service.

The main products derived from Burkina's forests are wood fuel and livestock fodder. The forests are also important for hunting, and to a lesser extent for tourism. Sawadogo's study suggests that the lack of formal management of both grazing and hunting has meant that most of the profits have gone to wholesalers, transporters, hunting concessionaires and the government. To a lesser extent this is also true for wood fuel. The people who have gained least have been peasant farmers, who also stand to suffer most when forestry resources are degraded.

The report makes a number of important recommendations. It suggests that local people should be involved in the evaluation and management of natural resources, and that user groups should be identified in every area. What is urgently needed, concludes Sawadogo, is the political will to transfer decision-making powers from the centre to the lowest levels. Burkina Faso has now embarked on a decentralization journey, but if this is to be a success capacity building will be tremendously important. CIFOR hopes to contribute with its experience of decentralised forest management from a number of countries.

All too often, the contribution which dry forests make to the welfare of the rural poor is ignored by policy makers. So is the clear link between forest degradation and worsening poverty. They would do well to consult Janet Lowore's short essay, *Miombo Woodlands and Rural Livelihoods in Malawi*. She cites a study of 36 farming households which revealed that during a period of 25 months, local people collected 37 different species of leaf vegetables, 2 species of root vegetables, 21 species of fruit, 23 different species of mushroom and 14 species of caterpillar.

Between 1946 and 1996, Malawi lost 2.5 million hectares of woodland, most of which was converted into farmland. The loss of woodland means many things for local people. Women must walk further and spend more time searching for firewood. Households have to buy wood for construction, and as a substitute for tree fibres they must buy sisal, or use the wire from old car tyres. Without the forest, they must also go without wild game, caterpillars, medicinal plants, fruits and many other things.

Lowore stresses that it is impossible to come up with the simple blueprint of recommendations for improving dry-forest management. However, her study confirms that Malawi's miombo woodlands are vitally important, both as a resource which satisfies the subsistence needs of the rural poor, and for the many environmental benefits which they provide.

CIFOR's Dry Forests Project has highlighted the key role that producer organisations can play in improving livelihoods. CIFOR is currently assisting Burkina Faso to draft a national non-timber forest product strategy and Zambia to come up with a honey and bee keeping policy. These policies will help poor people to benefit from the production and trade of dry-forest products.



Carrying firewood in Malawi.
Photo: Janet Lowore



Gum Arabic, harvested from acacia trees, is an important product in Burkina Faso.
Photo: Daniel Tiveau