The importance of rattan cane for livelihoods in West and Central Africa: Implications for community-based forest management and national legislation

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Introduction

The Problem:
It is argued that rattan and other non-timber forest products:
• make important contributions to livelihoods, particularly of poorer groups, for the inhabitants of West and Central Africa;
• may form the largest part of small eco-farm enterprise employment;
• may be less ecologically destrucitve than timber harvesting and can therefore provide a suitable basis for sustainable forest management.

However, until recently, information on the contribution that rattan and other NTFPs makes to livelihoods and their site-usage in West and Central Africa was scant.

Socio-economic research by the African Rattan Research Programme; in Cameroon, Ghana and Nigeria, which is still in progress, aims to provide a more comprehensive and socially differentiated view of the contribution that rattan makes to rural livelihoods. Our research is attempting to quantify and further contextualise the harvest and use of rattan.

Research Areas:
Areas where rattan are abundant in this part of Africa are patchy even in within the lowland humid forest zones. Hence our research is focused on three major areas where rattan palms are particularly common. Accordingly, our findings relate to the contribution of rattan to the livelihoods of the inhabitants of areas within each target country where rattans grows, rather than to the general rural population of the three target countries.

Methods

Southwest Province, Cameroon, Cross River State, Nigeria and Western Province, Ghana were identified as the areas for our main research activities. Three different zones within these geographic areas were selected to cover the variations in accessibility to roads and local and cross-border markets. Within the three different zones, one or more settlements (depending on their size) were chosen as study sites: our sample was three different zones within the 3 administrative areas of each target countries (giving a total of 9 study-sites).

Socio-economic fieldwork in the above study sites was undertaken over the last two years (2003-2005) by the PhD and Masters students in Cameroon (Stella Asaba, Ghana (Raub Malleron and Dr. Nii Opoku) and Nigeria (Imabong Upe and Martins Egot). During this time the research work concentrated on carrying out general reconnaissance of the study areas, participatory mapping and participatory wealth ranking exercises in each study settlement. In addition, formal surveys were undertaken of household size, composition, assets and income in a sample of households in each of the settlements studied (320 households per zone). Further surveys are also currently being undertaken of the day-to-day use of rattan cane, specialist rattan enterprises and income-generating activities (multi-annual surveys) in a sub-sample of households in the settlements concerned.

In addition to these rural surveys, urban and marketing surveys were also undertaken in each country, carried out at least ten urban centres in each. These were designed to determine the production-consumption system for rattan, as well as the amount and value of the trade. The policy environment in which the sector operates was also assessed.

Table 1. Summary of study sites by country and zone

Table 2. Summary of 80 characteristics by country and zone

Table 3. Contribution of Rattan to Income - Some General Characteristics of Income-generating Activities by Settlement Type

Discussion & conclusions

• The proximity to and ease of access to markets greatly influences the contribution that rattan makes to rural livelihoods both in terms of everyday use and farming activities.

• Rattan contributes significantly to the livelihoods of a small proportion of relatively poor elderly, often infirm, men in remote settlements in the form of incomes from basket weaving. However there is little potential to expand these enterprises as baskets and other low value items made with rattan cane are increasingly being substituted by cheaper and/or more comfortable alternatives.

• In more accessible road-side and border settlements, rattan contributes significantly to the income of some relatively wealthy young and middle-aged men through furnishing-making enterprises. Demand for relatively high value furnishing made with rattan cane appears to increasing, and there appears to be some potential to expand such enterprises. However these enterprises require relatively costly inputs that may prevent relatively poor individuals from becoming involved.

• Some relatively poor, young men in more accessible road-side and border settlements may be involved in harvesting rattan cane to supply urban rattan artisans. However, supplies of rattan cane are dwindling.

• A significant amount of raw rattan cane is harvested by organized groups of young men, who are often migrants around more accessible off-road and border settlements. Currently, communities benefit little from such enterprises. There does appear to be some potential for to communities to benefit from such enterprises by developing a formalised system where harvesting goes pay communities according to the quantity of rattan harvested. However to be effective such system must be applied throughout the production area.

• The ethnic composition of a community has serious implications for the management of forest resources (see ethnically heterogeneous settlements (Moake, Cameroon; Cross River, Ghana)).

• National and international political and economic factors may drastically change the current situation and may have significant implications for the even the most remote settlements. The construction of a road into remote areas, such as Takamanda may open up opportunities to develop the trade in cane for example. Political conflict between neighbouring countries or changes in the value of a currency may open up or close down the cross-border trade of raw cane.

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