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NTFP in Tropical Forestry — Disappointed Expectations, Undervalued Resources

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Abstract

Expanded and improved commercialisation of non-timber forest products (NTFP) will increase cash incomes of rural households in tropical countries, thereby motivating local actors to conserve natural forests. This expectation has recurrently been raised by environmentalists and development professionals over the past 15 years.

Notwithstanding the scarcity and erratic nature of data on NTFP extraction, on NTFP business in individual countries and on trade at the global level, there is evidence that NTFP indeed represent an impressive economic asset. However, more and more researchers question the viability of NTFP economies and their contribution to the conservation of tropical forests. Some of the sceptical arguments in this context are:

- Once NTFP become high value goods on national or international markets, there is the risk of resource base overexploitation.
- Successful NTFP face competition from plantation products and other substitutes.
- The bargaining power of rural households tends to be weak, so that they are deprived of lucrative NTFP resources by external actors or only receive a meek share of added value.
- Producer-to-consumer-chains of NTFP often are weak, so that NTFP commercialisation fails to be successful. Deficits are identified especially at the early steps of the chains, where rural households are directly involved and where improvements are difficult to be realized.

The paper reflects these arguments against the background of recent empirical research. It concedes that many of the expectations connected with the mobilization of NTFP, as formulated at the end of the 1980s, definitely came out to be unrealistic. Undoubtedly, however, the extraction of NTFP from natural tropical forests, their processing and sale still offers prospects for improving the income of numerous rural households, at least during certain phases of regional development. There is the unchanged challenge, though, to improve NTFP extractive economies in a way that rural households involved participate in the benefits of change. Systematic analysis of NTFP case studies helps to identify promising approaches on this way.

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