



Tropentag, October 11-13, 2006, Bonn

“Prosperity and Poverty in a Globalised World—  
Challenges for Agricultural Research”

## Improving Livelihoods through Coconut Product Diversification, a Case from Vietnam

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### Abstract

Coconut is a crop of poor land and poor people. Around 96 % of coconut farmers are smallholders tending less than four hectares. These people are marginalised and often do not own their land. Because of limited market opportunities, rural coconut producing families often have little alternative than to sell the raw product, copra, which is a low-value commodity. Diversification of coconut products could reverse this situation coupled with addressing the marketing issues dominating the industry. This research paper deals with a coconut high value product produced by local communities in Vietnam and investigates the marketing chain of gift baskets made from the leave of the coconut tree. The utilisation of the coconut leaves, which otherwise would be a waste product, provides a livelihood opportunity for many rural people in Ben Tre province.

Gift baskets have an important socio-cultural value in Vietnamese society. They are widely used for the presentation of gifts for special events at certain times of the year. The production of midrib, i.e. processing of the main vein of the coconut leave, provides an additional or is sometimes the only source of income, especially for the elderly. It is therefore an important activity in the peoples' livelihood. Basket-producers are experienced craftswomen and men. Due to the proximity of the market, the existence of local traders and their competitive edge of producing high quality baskets, they are able to make a decent living. Although local authorities have expressed their concern about reduced productivity of coconut trees because of excessive leave harvesting, there is no hard evidence available at the moment on what the effect of the various harvest methods practised is on the coconut yield. A study into these effects is highly recommended. This could not only lead to improved harvest practices by the midrib producers but could also provide information to policymakers that midrib baskets and coconut production could go hand in hand and would provide an additional livelihood opportunity for many rural families in Ben Tre province.

**Keywords:** Livelihoods, Market system research, product diversification, sustainability, value chain analysis