



Tropentag, October 5-7, 2011, Bonn

“Development on the margin”

## People, Forests and Rural Development: Re-discovering the Neglected and Underutilised Ethnobotanical Heritage of Northern Thailand

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### Abstract

The uplands of northern Thailand are inhabited by numerous agricultural communities of high ethnological interest, whose indigenous knowledge and tribal culture are rapidly eroding. Increased population pressure, coupled by depletion of genetic, soil and water resources as well as climate change challenge the region's food and nutrition security. This has an apparent effect on the formerly rich forests and indigenous cultures of the area, which are actively degrading.

This puts at stake the livelihood basis of many rural communities, which largely depend on wild, naturalized or non-cultivated plants that provide a means of social security, mainly in the form of food supplements, herbal medicines, fuel, low-cost building materials, agricultural implements, as well as sources of income. Several forest plants are linked to spiritual rituals and beliefs, while economically important species provide a buffer against unemployment during economic depressions. This is particularly important for women and landless people, which generate a significant income through collection and sale of wild plant resources.

Many of these species are nutritionally superior to most of the conventional agricultural crops and are adapted to local climatic conditions and low input agriculture. While such crops can potentially improve nutrition levels, incomes and environmental health, they remain inadequately characterised and neglected by research and conservation. At the same time, they are largely unknown to international markets which can potentially direct financial capital to the region's least developed areas, through the development of value chains for quality nature products.

This research documents the ethnobotanical knowledge of two communities of the Karen and Black Lahu tribes of northern Thailand, following an approach that involves local traditional plant experts, farmers, biologists and social scientists. Systematic collection of biocultural data, supported by voucher herbarium specimens, forms the basis for an extended inventory of more than 350 native wild plants. This is complemented by free lists and cultural domain analyses, land-use maps, seasonal calendars, matrix rankings and market surveys for the prioritisation of selected species according to their ecological, cultural and economic attributes. The results provide inputs for innovations in the field of agricultural diversification through optimal utilisation of local genetic resources.

**Keywords:** Biodiversity-based productivity, ethnobotany, genetic resources, livelihoods, neglected & underutilised species, participatory research, sustainability, traditional knowledge