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Agricultural Development Within  
the Rural-Urban Continuum

# Himalaya Nettle

## Reflections on a Promising Business

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### Product

#### Himalaya nettle

*(Girardinia diversifolia)* grows in remote hilly areas of Uttarakhand, India. Traditionally farmers used the plant to make ropes, slippers, and bags.

In 2009, during the International Year of Natural Fibres, the state government decided to promote nettle, having a potential for value adding. The production of textiles was envisioned as a "business"-opportunity for mountain farmers. As a first initiative the Forest Department allowed the collection of wild nettle from protected areas.

### Approach

#### Value chain concept

was implemented in consultancy with GIZ. Women of Bhotia tribe, having skills in weaving and trading wool, were approached as producers and trained for a maximum participation in the nettle's value chain. The various steps converting bast into yarn included: collection, breaking, washing, drying, cutting, carding and spinning. Finally the ladies wove shawls, scarfs and cloth.

The state government supported the initiative through a minimum support prize for the fiber. Partial mechanization was assessed. Hereby GIZ recently sponsored a motor-operated carding machine to enhance the professionalization of the process.

### Results

#### Nettle textiles

are of precious eco-friendly quality. Nevertheless selling the final products resulted difficult. Potential Indian as well as international clients viewed them with curiosity, claiming the material to be "interesting, but too scratchy".

The reaction caused disappointment among the producing women. Already overloaded with the intensive manual work process they felt disillusioned regarding the promise of a "big future business" with nettle. The participating institutions diagnosed "marketing" as the final problem to be solved in the value chain. Research in design to cater for urban tastes was announced as a solution.



### Conclusion

#### Adding local culture

seems a necessary step towards an effective implementation of this value chain. Seen from an anthropological perspective the nettle case clearly shows that focusing on urban elite conceptions of trade is little fruitful.

Though the nettle processing seems effective in creating a consistent value chain, the producers' daily rhythms and duties as well as their imagination of "business" need be considered to meet expectations and avoid weak results.

I would argue that for a truly successful "business"-concept in rural communities an understanding of the local work culture among the actors is necessary at the initial stage of any value chain approach. Studying, acknowledging and integrating conventional economic practices is a crucial step towards flourishing new "business"-opportunities.



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