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## Socio-Ecological Significance of Collection and Marketing of Ancient Forest Commodities: The Case of Myrrh and Opoponax in the Dryland Areas of Southeastern Ethiopia

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### Abstract

The objective of this study was to investigate the role of collection and marketing of age-old but still high value gum and resin products, in enhancing livelihoods and ecosystem resilience in the Somali National Regional State, southeastern Ethiopia. Based on the principles of "socio-ecological co-evolution theory" mixed quantitative and qualitative methods were employed to collect the data. Various descriptive and test statistics were used to analyze participation in gums and resins income activities and factors affecting it, and level of income and its distribution, among actors. Six types of gums and resins, namely myrrh, opoponax, frankincense, gum arabic, gum talha and hagar are collected from the dry forests and traded through nine major marketing channels. Some of the channels are considered as illegal since they involve unauthorized cross border trade. Triggered by complex price and non-price related factors, the illegal channels account for up to 40% of the annual marketed volume of all gums and resins and 60% of myrrh. Fourteen major actors engaged in the production and marketing chain of the study products. Producer households reported the growing importance of income from gums and resins in their risk management and livelihood diversification strategies. Income from these products constituted 62.4 and 21.6% of the total forest and overall annual household incomes, respectively. Upward and skewed income distribution patterns were found among actors, indicating unfavourable condition for producer households. Producer households received only 32.2 and 13.1% of the price margin of myrrh and opoponax, respectively, whereas urban merchants got 67.8 and 86.9%, respectively. Despite the age-old gum and resin production and marketing practices and their historical contribution to promote sustainable use of dry forests, product management remains traditional, and the marketing system is disorganised, characterised by weak financial capacity, thin representation of specialised actors and under-developed customary practices that, in turn, led to high rate of smuggling. Policy measures and extension messages that may facilitate the development of pro-poor and inclusive gums and resins value chain and sustainable management of dry forests are discussed in the context of the pastoral and agro-pastoral production systems.

**Keywords:** Agro-pastoral and pastoral communities, Ethiopia, household income, myrrh, opoponax, Somali region, sustainable forest management, value chain