



Tropentag, September 16-18, 2026, hybrid conference

“Towards multi-functional agro-ecosystems
promoting climate resilient futures”

Socioeconomic changes and local communities' attitudes and practices towards forest use in the zagros, Iran

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to analyse the consequences of recent socioeconomic changes on the behaviour and attitudes of forest dwellers towards their traditional forest territory in the northern Zagros forests of Iran. We also examined the extent to which local livelihoods depend on forest-related products compared to previous years. Data were collected from 42 households in the Armardeh forests using semi-structured interviews with family heads. Current household income was compared to 2012 values after adjustment to constant prices. Results showed that most respondents were aged 30–40 years and had elementary-level education. Animal husbandry accounted for the largest share of household income (47.8%), followed by labour work (25.5%), forest-related products (18.6%), and agriculture (8.5%). Among forest products, edible and medicinal plants contributed the most (22.6%), while tree fodder, forest floor fodder, and forest farming followed. Comparison with 2012 revealed that forest-related income increased significantly, from 6.5% to 18.6% of total household income. Despite this rise, respondents perceived that overall forest utilisation had declined. They emphasised continuity in their attitudes toward traditional practices such as Galazani (traditional forest management regulating forest mainly to produce fodder from oak trees), controlled grazing, and forest farming. Cutting was limited to dead trees, and households expressed willingness to participate in government-supported conservation and restoration programs, citing both material and cultural values of the forest landscape. Our findings show that the share of forest-related income in household livelihoods has nearly tripled since 2012, reflecting a growing reliance on forest ecosystem services. While this strengthens rural economies, it also creates a dual challenge: sustaining livelihoods while preventing overexploitation and degradation of the Zagros oak forests. Strengthening community participation in forest management will be critical to balancing economic reliance with long-term sustainability. Social forestry initiatives that regulate forest–people relations can integrate traditional practices with modern conservation strategies, ensuring both livelihood security and ecosystem health.

Keywords: Community participation, ecosystem services, forest-related income, livelihood dependency, Zagros forests