AGFAX

Interview: Kate Schreckenberg

Research Fellow, Forest Policy and Environment Group, ODI
Overseas Development Institute
interviewed on behalf of the Forestry Research Programme, DFID
(Department for International Development)

Suggested introduction:
A collaborative programme in the humid zones of Cameroon and Nigeria has been assisting farmers cultivate improved types of wild fruit trees. The project has identified the value of indigenous fruits as a source of income and household nutrition, and the quite considerable scale of planting by farmers.

Susanna Thorp was also interested to know if the same work could be done in drier areas, and what kind of markets farmers could develop from cultivating fruit trees on-farm. She spoke to Kate Schreckenberg of the Overseas Development Institute, who explained the potential for these agroforestry trees but who went on to emphasize the need for improved support from extension advisors.

TAPE IN “We are talking about . . . .
TAPE OUT . . . . that might not be appropriate for that area”
DURATION 4’58”

Closing announcement: Kate Schreckenberg emphasising the need for effective extension for agroforestry in promoting the improved use of on-farm fruit trees.

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Transcript

Berg We are talking about Dacryodes edulis which is African Plum and Irvingia gabonensis, Bush Mango and they're both important because they provide food for local people and they are a source of income. Taking African Plum, for example, it's a very convenient food and it comes at a time at the beginning of the agricultural season when women don't have time to do a lot of cooking. So it's ideal for them at that time. In terms of income, it's a very important source of income for many households particularly in terms of the timing of the income. It comes just when they need to pay for school fees and school uniforms and so on when they haven't got any other source of income to fill that gap.

Thorp Now with these trees, how are they grown on farm, are there just a few scattered here and there or are there quite a number planted?

Berg The trees are grown predominantly in the Cameroon case as companion crops for cocoa and coffee plantations. In the Nigerian case we found them to be more in the home gardens. As companion crops for cocoa and coffee they are extremely important, they provide shade for the crops and they provide an alternate source of income so that when the market for cocoa and coffee is poor and farmers are not earning an income from these cash crops they can fall back on the fruit income from the trees.

Thorp Now this presumably has been quite important in the last few years when commodity prices particularly for small-scale farmers, it's hit them really quite hard?

Berg Certainly in the Cameroon case other research has shown that in spite of falling prices farmers haven't just uprooted their cocoa and coffee bushes and put in annual crops instead they've left those plants, they haven't really maintained them but as prices come back they will go back to the coffee and cocoa bushes and revitalise those plantations. And we feel that the fact that the fruit trees have been in those plantations and have provided an additional income has been a main reason for farmers not to have just got rid of their whole plantation when the prices were down.

Thorp So the key factor is that they are able to have a diverse source of income from their farms and not just concentrating on one or two areas?
Berg  Yes that's exactly it. I mean the way for small holder farmers to survive is to have a very diverse source of income and in addition these fruit trees also provide them with food if they can't get the products to market.

Thorp  Going on to the markets how much do these trees feature in the regional or local markets even?

Berg  Very highly. Our data for 1999 show that the African Plum alone in Cameroon probably had a national market of over seven million dollars. The income is divided with wholesale mostly being done by men and retail mostly being done by women. But regardless of what kind of trader they are their weekly profits are well above what they would get as a minimum wage. And a lot of the profit, about 75% of the final value of the product, gets back to the producer so that's actually quite a good amount of value getting back to the small holder farmers.

Thorp  Growing these trees on farm presumably farmers have been doing this for quite some while but if they are looking to improve the system what sort of advice is there for them to look at the way in which they are managing or growing their trees?

Berg  Very little at the moment. Of the farmers we talked to practically none had actually ever seen an extension agent. Certainly none had seen an extension agent that could give them help on fruit trees. And this is an area that we think is definitely worth taking forward in the future. The importance of these trees on farm highlights the fact that they generally fall between the remits of agriculture and forestry departments. So there's nobody who's specifically focused on providing information about them. In the case of Cameroon there's been a development now that the extension service is being integrated to provide extension advice on livestock, agriculture and forestry and this provides an opportunity to train extension staff in providing help that's appropriate to trees on farm. Going into villages and seeing what farmers are already planting and what help do they need, is it help in trying to actually improve the varieties they've got of those trees or in getting organised to do, improved marketing. These kind of questions need to be addressed by extension services.

Thorp  Now this system you have been looking at in the humid zones of both Cameroon and Nigeria. Is there potential for this sort of system to be used in other areas?

Berg  We certainly think so it wouldn't be exactly the same. In drier areas of Cameroon for example you'd have very different species that are of interest to farmers there. But really in any system you have there are niches on the farm that are suitable for trees and these could be physical niches as in where the trees are planted within hedgerows or as companion crops for particular agricultural crops. And part of the training that we are going to be giving to extension agents in Cameroon is to enable them to go into a village and see well what are the trees that people are already planting and how can we help people get greater benefits from the trees they are already growing rather than trying to introduce them to completely new species that might not be appropriate for that area. TAPE ENDS