

Forest user groups moving for international markets that care sustainability

Providing medicinal plants and non-timber forest products as ingredients for the international herbal and health care industry often causes destruction of forests and forest communities in remote regions of the world. In small villages of the Nepal Himalayas, for example, medicinal herb traders encourage the poorest people living in the forests to harvest as many medicinal plants as they can, pay them the lowest prices for the herbs, and abandon the community when the plant supply (also known as non-timber forest products) exhausts. These herbs may then end up in herbal medicines that western consumers buy from the pharmacies or health food shop paying very high price. The result is that the poor become poorer and end up destroying their only source of livelihood- the biodiversity rich forest.

A unique alliance (the Nepali Non-timber Forest Product Promotion Alliance) of corporations, government, and non-profits was formed with the goal of combating this crisis of biodiversity loss in Nepal and preserving sustainable rural life by establishing responsible business practices by educating business users. ANSAB (Asia Network for Sustainable Agriculture and Bioresources) coordinated the alliance and took lead role in order to develop methodologies for sustainable collection of medicinal herbs and other non-timber forest products (NTFPs) from the forest and to enhance their marketing. Forest certification was realised to be essential to achieve the goal of conserving medicinal plants and non-timber forest products as well as alleviating the economic life standard of the people. Amongst many options of forest certification, ANSAB in coordination with the alliance chose the most practical option, the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification that supports environmentally appropriate, socially beneficial and economically viable management of



the world's forests and promotes responsible forest management. FSC also promotes responsible forest management by evaluating and accrediting certifiers, by encouraging the development of national and regional forest management standards, and by providing public education and information about independent, third party certification as a tool for ensuring the world's forests that are protected for future generations. FSC has certified over 50 million hectares of forests around the world in 76 countries so far.

The FSC certification initiative in Nepal took extensive efforts from capacity building of relevant stakeholders to the different technical accomplishments as per the requirements of FSC guidelines. After the necessary criterions were fulfilled, Rainforest Alliance/ SmartWood awarded the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification to the Federation of Community Forestry Users Nepal (FECOFUN) provided, that its members supply medicinal plants and NTFP ingredients to the international herbal and medicinal products industry. The certified medicinal plants and NTFP ingredients include jhyau (*Parmelia* sp.), majitho (*Rubia manjith*), pakhanved

(*Berginia ciliata*), dry chiraito (*Swertia chirayita*), satuwu (*Paris polyphylla*), padamchal (*Rheum australe*), bhutkesh (*Selinum candollii*), guchchhi chyau (*Morchela* sp.), sugandhawal (*Valeriana jatamansi*), kutki (*Picrorhiza scrophulariiflora*), jatamansi (*Nardostachys grandiflora*), atis (*Aconitum heterophyllum*), dry lokta bark (*Daphne* spp.), argeli whiteskin (*Edgeworthia gardnerii*), machhino leaves (*Gaultheria fragrantissima*) and dry allo fiber (*Girardinia diversifolia*).

For such medicinal plants and non-timber forest products, Nepal is the first country in Asia and fifth in the world to obtain FSC certification. Moreover, this certification is the first in the world for handmade paper as well as the variety and quality of medicinal plants and non-timber forest products.

Making the certification process a success in Nepal had been a challenging work for ANSAB and the alliance. Since certification was quite a new subject in Nepal, it took larger efforts to bring awareness among the relevant stakeholders. Community forest users groups (CFUGs) were strengthened, assessment was carried out and eventually 11 CFUGs of Bajhang and Dolakha districts were

brought to the pool of certification which covered 10,500 ha of forest land and 2,754 households.

The certification awarding is part of a larger effort of the alliance to combat destruction of forest and forest communities. The alliance includes representatives from the Nepali government; Nepali non governmental organizations (NGOs); private companies active in the herbal products industry, including Aveda; an FSC forest certification organization - Rainforest Alliance; community forestry user groups, represented by the Federation of Community Forestry Users, Nepal; and donors, including the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Ford Foundation, and the Netherlands Development Organization (SNV). This is the first time industry, government, NGOs, communities, and forest certifiers have combined expertise to make commercial trade of non-timber forest products in Nepal sustainable.

Moreover, because of such efforts of the alliance like the promotion of responsible buying practices among industry in the West through industrial symposiums (sponsored by Aveda) has attracted buyers ready to partner with

the alliance and buy the Nepal FSC products. The pilot phase objectives were achieved despite a challenging civil situation in many areas of Nepal. This has generated significant cash benefits to CFUG community members as well as has improved the governance of FECOFUN and targeted CFUGs. In the program's second full year, the alliance's activities contributed to sales of 602,865 kg of raw and processed NTFPs with a value of Rs. 35,130,254 (about US \$500,000). Alliance activities have generated 1,209 direct NTFP processing and marketing jobs and benefited 5,334 households. Industry coaching has resulted in the development of a wide range of products including pain relief oil, personal care products, herbal teas, and hand made papers in 14 enterprises.

The alliance also had governance and civil society achievements that exceeded members' expectations in the resulting positive working model for community forestry governance and relations with the government. FECOFUN's services to its CFUG members and relationship with the government has been improved because of the alliance. Before the alliance, FECOFUN did not offer services

or even promote enterprise development activities among its CFUG members. FECOFUN did not have a uniform protocol for advising CFUGs on developing its operational plans (OP) and constitutions. The training from ANSAB and the FSC certification process provided a uniform protocol for advising CFUGs. FECOFUN has also noted that its relationship with the government has improved dramatically and they now feel more respected and able to represent the CFUG's interests. A total of 11,209 grassroots participants received technical assistance on sustainable forest management that will allow further groups to join the FECOFUN FSC certification.

There are over 13,000 forest user groups (people living in or near the forest) across Nepal that include almost a third of Nepal's population and cover 25% of the biodiversity rich forests. For most of these communities, medicinal plants and NTFP trade is the only livelihood besides subsistence agriculture. Nepal receiving this certification is groundbreaking and hopes to be a model for the rest of the world.

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