A change of mindset: policies that involve communities in the management of forests improve conservation of fruit diversity

People living in the forests of the Western Ghats traditionally have been dependent on forest resources to meet their multiple end needs such as food, fuel, fodder, fibre, construction materials or inputs to subsistence agriculture. Moreover, wild fruits collected from the forest have gained substantial market value as they contain high value metabolites such as hydroxycitric acid that is used for weight loss products in the pharmaceutical industry. Consequently more and more fruits are collected from the wild and sold as a commodity by the collectors. Among them, fruits like *G. gummi-gutta* and *Garcinia indica* play now a vital role in generating family income of many poor households and thus in shaping their livelihoods. Typically over 40 percent of the indigenous communities, who traditionally gather Non Timber Forest Product (NTFP), are solely engaged in the collection of fruits of *Garcinia gummi-gutta*. It is estimated that each such household earns on average Rs. 35,000 (about 770 US $) per year solely from such collections (Narasimha, 2010). Other species of Garcinia such as *G. morella*, and *G. xanthochymus* are also important to the NTFP harvesters which contribute significantly to their income. The fruits are usually harvested from so-called ‘betta lands’ located at the periphery of the protected forest.

“Before, it was a wasteland” said Ms. Deepa when she first described betta lands. “People collected the fruits from their favourite trees and they became over-collected.” Betta lands are montane fields owned by the government where local communities have century old customary rights to harvest the fruits and collect firewood, grasses and leaves for non-commercial use. These privileges were sanctioned by the British and have long, already since Independence, been disputed. Many of the betta-lands became over-used and degraded because of a complexity of reasons. Policy rules and regulations and ownership rights were often not well governed or clarified for people. Some farmers lacked the knowledge on how to best maintain the lands and cleared the natural vegetation. With little other means for income, farmers sometimes sold the fruits. While governmental regulations are meant to protect these lands, local leaders claim that they had the opposite results.

Several local leaders such as Shri Ananth Hegde Ashisara, the chairman of the Western Ghats Task Force of the Government of Karnataka are joined by the College of Forestry at Sirsi to bring modifications to the government regulations over the betta land. These leaders want to fix several flaws in the regulation by giving more incentive to the farmers. Under the current regulation, farmers are unable to receive subsidies to grow tree crops on betta lands. Farmers are only allowed to “Cut and Grow”. They are not allowed to plant additional tree crops of
interest. These factors contribute to a sense of detachment that farmers have towards the betta lands. “Since they’re not the owners, they have this attitude that the betta lands do not belong to community and sustainable management practices are not their responsibility. We hope that by giving them more privileges, they will have more incentive to protect the lands,” said Dr. Vasudeva, faculty of the College of Forestry in Sirsi. These leaders propose allowing farmers to harvest for commercial sales if they accept responsibility to conserve the betta lands. If they have a sense of involvement and ownership over the forests, communities and families will want to protect their income source.

Local Village Forest Committees (VFC) are also demanding the right to bid on the forest lands surrounding the betta lands. Before, the government auctioned the right of harvesting to a few well-connected traders. These traders then paid the communities a low price to harvest the fruits and made exorbitant profits from selling. All efforts seem not to have fallen on bare land as in 2011, for the first time, the right of harvesting was auctioned directly through the VFC’s. This is a first success and major step forward in the recognizing of the role and rights of local communities, explains Dr Vasudeva.

While communities in the past had systems of managing their forests, these regulations disappeared with increasing population pressure. In Manador, the community still recognises specific auspicious and religious places in the forest where no harvesting is allowed or wood can be collected. The place is marked with old trees and scenic rock formations including a very old carving of the God Hanuman. Local leaders want these traditional practises to be strengthened and embedded in the current policies. To combat the degradation of the forest, the VFC are now involved in practical training on sustainable harvesting. The VFC has also been recognized as partners by the government due to their enforcement of good forest management.

“[If] all these new policy changes are accepted and fully implemented, the betta lands will turn from a wasteland to a productive, diverse forest”, assures Dr. Vasudeva. “It is clear that the old policy was not working, the only way out is by allowing people to have a semi-commercial interest and levy more responsibility towards the forest” he says. These changes in government regulations improve the livelihoods of the communities and encourage the villagers to grow and maintain the diversity in the forest and in turn indirectly protect rare bird species such as hornbills. Fruit trees provide the hornbills with food and nesting places while the hornbill spread its seeds. Such ecosystem services and co-existence are often ignored.

“This short story gives a good insight into the value of agricultural biodiversity, how it is maintained and used successfully in the field, and how it contributes to the livelihoods and well-being of many rural households. The UNEP/GEF funded project identified these policy changes and the efforts and active role of the Village Forest Committees as a ‘good practice of diversity management’ that is selected for further strengthening and dissemination.”

(Compiled by Sarah Ho, Narasimha Hedge, Hugo Lamers and Bhuwon Sthapit)