

Role of women in sustainable utilization of forest resources: A success tale from Western Ghats, India

Biodiversity International has proved that participatory and gender-responsive research approaches can stimulate social learning among participants together with livelihood improvement of forest dwellers. It is sure that the participatory activities have triggered social and economic changes among local communities. The other productive utility of the program is that people gaining knowledge on conservation of tropical biodiversity, taught through sustainable harvest of native tree products. The main reason for the success of the program lies in the unity among traditionally unconnected groups of communities. Apart from creating a confidence among forest-based livelihoods, the program also extended its support on women empowerment.

Ms. Nagaveni Hegde is the leader of a newly formed women self-help group in Western Ghats area of Karnataka in India. The group named as 'Matrabhoomi Women's Group', formed in 2013 at Sirsi (Karnataka) is an association of collectors and processors of non-timber forest products (NTFPs). As Ms. N. Hegde celebrated one year of the group's formation, she shared her experience with Biodiversity International Scientists M. Elias and R. Jalonon together with a researcher Narasimha Hegde from LIFE Trust, a NGO based in Sirsi, India. It was after the Gender Responsive participatory Research Program initiated by LIFE Trust and Biodiversity International in 2013, the idea to form a women association to process non-timber forest products (NTFPs) was kindled.



Ms. Nagaveni Hegde - Leader of Matrabhoomi Women's Group

The Group enabled women from different ethnic communities (backgrounds) to come together, gain knowledge through discussions and obtain inputs from facilitators. To earn income it was decided to begin processing and marketing of forest-based products. Initial focus was towards making of *kokum* concentrate, a sweet product obtained through processing of *Garcinia inidica*, a native fruit tree of Western Ghats. Especially the fruit rinds are used for making beverages and slimming products. During last year, the group was able to sell 350 litres of *kokum* juice and in fact ran out of stock as it received a good response. Besides, plans are there to market other forest products such as jackfruit chips, spice mixtures and mango slices. In total they have made seven products in small quantities. These products could be processed at different times of a year according to season and further they are planning for improved quantity in the coming year.

The leader admits that they faced numerous initial challenges. The most prominent encounters were lack of labours and shorter timeframe available for women as they have to look after household activities. Later it was realized that by working together in communities some of these shortages can be rectified and could concentrate on increasing the products. Another major hurdle is the distance between the houses located in the area. Ms. N. Hegde narrated that 'Our village landscape is very hilly, the houses are scattered and women move around and headload their goods on footpaths. Some have to come from many kilometres away to process their products. We have poor communication lines and access to roads and we can't work late in the evenings since we have to get home to prepare dinner and tend to our households and families and should not walk home alone in the dark'. Their final problem was finance. Since their association is not yet officially registered, they have to advance money themselves to finance their activities by individually taking loans from the [farmer] cooperative society.



Processing of kokum fruit (*Garcinia indica*), a native fruit tree

For starting new self-help groups, the strong suggestion rendered by Ms. Hegde is the unity among the different members of the group. She further insisted that members should also be given incentives through selling of products, so that an assured income will keep the participants more active and motivated. Ms. N. Hegde's team has gained a lot of confidence during the past year and looking forward to achieve things much better in future. Let us wish them all success.