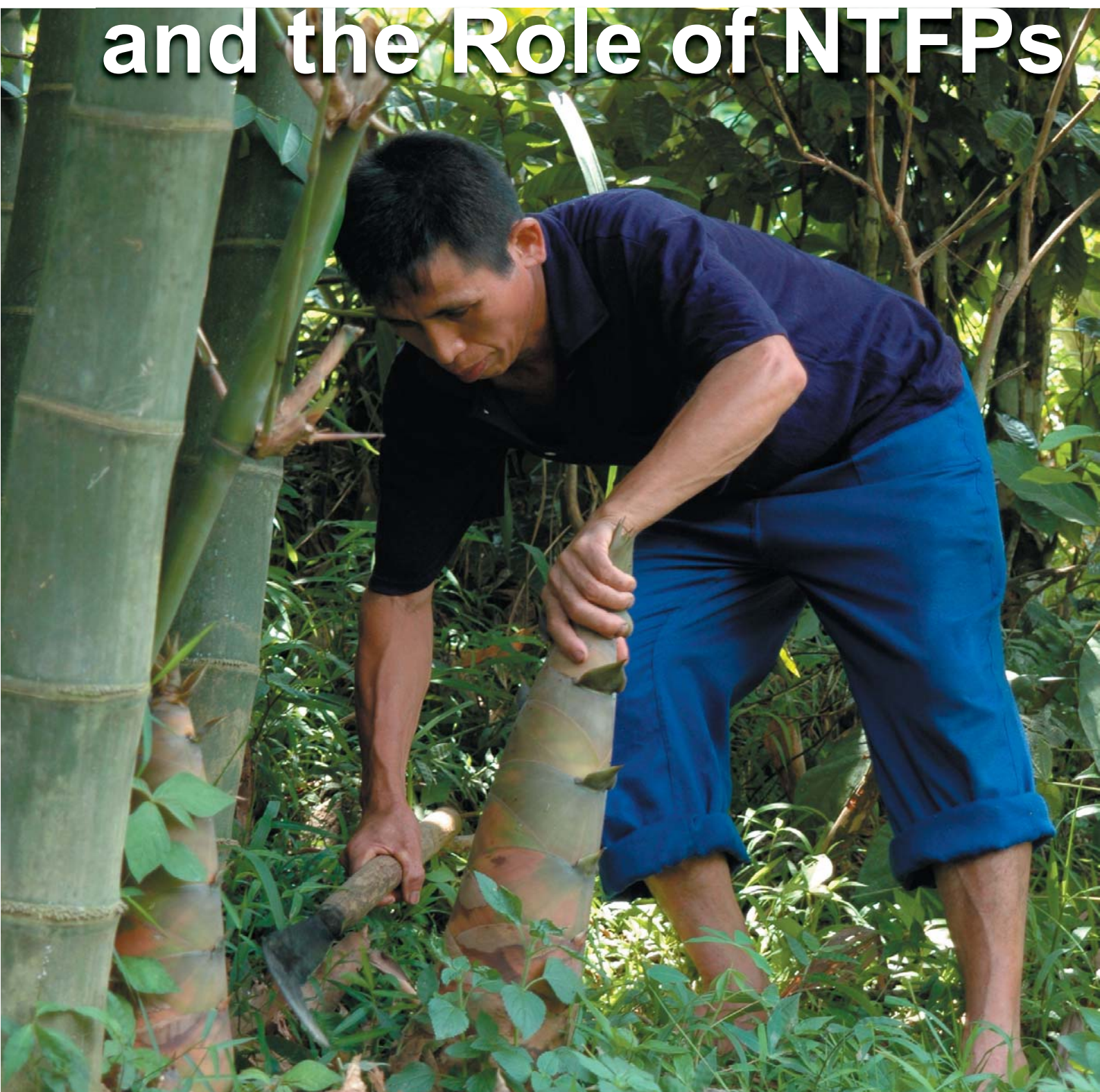


Household Income and the Role of NTFPs



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NTFPs play different roles in the livelihoods of village households, depending on their income level. Forest conservation projects seeking to change the behaviour of forest users need to understand the different livelihood strategies of the households in the vicinity of forests in order to offer appropriate NTFP models.

A survey conducted by the NTFP Sub-Sector Support Project to assess the impact of the project models and activities on the sub-sector goals of biodiversity conservation, poverty alleviation and national development has provided interesting insights into the role of NTFPs in household livelihood strategies.



An NTFP trader in Bong Am Commune, Son Dong District, Bac Giang Province

Upper income households

Well-off households typically do not spend much time collecting or growing NTFPs. However, they are often the main NTFP traders in the locality and they may hire others to grow NTFPs on their land. For them, NTFPs represent a type of good like any other tradable commodity. They will trade them as long as they remain profitable and turn to other commodities when they are less profitable.

Upper income households are thus the least dependent of all on NTFPs. However, by providing essential marketing services and jobs, they create opportunities for their poorer neighbours to use their labor productively in the collection, growing and processing of NTFPs. They are most responsive to project inputs focused on marketing and capital intensive processing of NTFPs, which may have a trickle-down effect on poorer households.

A Well-Off NTFP Trader in Dong Tra

Mrs. Hoa is one of 3 NTFP traders in Dong Tra. Her main products are ba kich, song, heo, ngau, snail, gecko and cam cam. She and her husband are Dao and both have a secondary school education. They have 5 sao of paddy land and 5 ha of forest land for which they expect to get a Red Book next year. The income from trading, is supplemented by her husband's salary of VND 160,000/month, a small shop that brings in 30,000/month and about 8 million annually from farm crops and livestock. They hire women laborers for planting and about 70 days/year for weeding their forest land, where they have planted Keo and Thong and have added rattan, ba kich and tram on 1.6 ha with the help of the Forest Enrichment model.

Ms. Hoa started trading 2 years ago. She pays out about 5-6 million VND over a 1-2 month period buying NTFPs from collectors who always sell to her (rattan and song from men, ba kich from women). She travels 17 miles to town to sell the ba kich, but the other products are bought directly from her house by larger traders. Trading is easy because her house is located next to the road at the front of the village, but the other two traders in the village buy more NTFPs because they are located closer to the watershed area. One of them is poor and other has limited land.

Middle income households

Middle income households collect NTFPs as part of a more diversified livelihood strategy and are often quite responsive to project activities involving domestication, ex situ cultivation and processing of NTFPs.

For the middle income households, NTFP are a source of supplementary cash income to cover shortage in the household economy. The greater the shortage, the more important the role of NTFPs. Middle income households may have several supplementary employment activities which give them sufficient income for their living. Their time has a certain opportunity cost. When NTFP collection in the forest becomes too difficult, time consuming or risky, many of them stop collecting NTFPs and turn to more productive employment opportunities in order to compensate for the lost NTFP income, or simply survive within the remaining income from other sources.

Analysis of household behaviour points out that middle income households will find it easier to adopt project pilot activities in NTFP cultivation and processing. However, this group of households is not the main target group of project interventions aimed at biodiversity conservation.

NTFPs that are often collected from forests in the Project area:

1. White Canarium Fruits
2. Bo khai Vegetable
3. Bamboo Shoot
4. Thanh mai Fruits
5. Rattan
6. Gecko



Poor Households

Poor households living near forests are typically the most dependent on the forests resources and the most active collectors of NTFPs (apart from illegal commercial operations). Because of their poverty and the negative impact of their collection activity on forest resources, poor forest dependent households are often the main target group in the design of NTFP projects seeking to conserve forests and improve livelihoods. However, staff often shy away from this group during the project implementation because they are often the hardest group to work with and slowest to benefit from project inputs.

For poor households NTFP collection from the natural forest is a means of coping with food and cash shortages. Lack of allocated forest land and insufficient or low productivity agricultural land are often one of the underlying reasons for a high degree of forest dependency. When a household's farmland is only capable of supplying a few months of food, NTFP collection may help them get through the hungry period by providing food for direct consumption or cash to purchase food and other necessities day to day.

NTFP collection may be part of the main wage labor strategy or supplementary to it, as when a household collects NTFPs for home consumption or independent marketing. It is part of a wage labor strategy when they work as hired labor collecting NTFP's for other households that process or trade them. As hired labor they are assured of at least a minimal wage at the end of the day and don't have to worry about finding a market for what they collect.

The seasonal selling of household labor is a favoured livelihood strategy of poor households because it provides a steady income and is less risky than investing in agricultural activities that may fail because of drought or other factors beyond the family's control. The poor receive a low but stable wage, and sometimes they can borrow money in advance and collect NTFPs latter. The trouble with accepting credit for future work is that the household may fall into the "debt bondage" trap and end up being little more than a perennial source of cheap labor for their creditors. One indication that this may be occurring is when the main creditor is also the main NTFP trader and shopkeeper in a village.

Increasing scarcity of NTFPs forces collectors to go further into the forest, spend more time and put more effort into collection because they may have no other employment opportunity and are always in need of cash to buy food. As a result of the additional intensity of collection, NTFP resources become more scarce, and so on in a vicious cycle.

Implications for sector strategy

The most direct way out of the cycle of poverty and forest degradation is to remove the cause by offering poor forest dependent households better ways to use their labor.

It is difficult to influence behaviour of the poor group because participation in project activities requires households to invest scarce labor in risky activities that cannot realistically substitute for immediate daily income from NTFP collection and/or wage labor. For this reason, it has been recommended that action learning be accompanied by a comprehensive poverty reduction approach to strengthen short-term benefits for households and help them build a minimum acceptable standard of living (Vu and Bui 2005). The best alternatives would seem to be quick yielding, low land requiring NTFPs, family nursery businesses, handicraft making, other NTFP processing, and building the capacity of upper and middle-income households to support the wage-labor livelihood strategies of their poorest neighbors by providing new wage labor opportunities in NTFP enterprises.

References

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A Poor Forest Dependent Household in Dai Lang

Mrs Trang and her husband are Dao people with 3 children in a household with a wealth ranking of 4 (poorest category in the research sample). They have no farmland or forest land, having relocated to the village in 1995 as refugees from Lang Son during border war with China, after agricultural land had already been allocated. As illiterate newcomers to the village who did not understand much of what was happening, they also missed out on forest land allocation.

In order to survive they have unofficially reclaimed 5 sao of abandoned paddy land, which yields enough rice for 7-8 months. They also have 20 chickens and the 3 children have a contract from a well-off village family to raise buffalo, which gives them one calf every 3 years.

For cash to buy food during the 4-5 months of rice shortage the household depends mainly on NTFP collection from the natural forest. Mrs. Trang goes to the forest about 5-10 days per month and the husband about 15 days. They concentrate mainly on gecko, rattan, fruits, ba kich, rang rang and snail, which brings in about VND 20,000/day.

The 135 program supplied an iron frame for house building and the family collected rattan to make the walls. "If we can get 2 million VND we will buy cement for the floor, but this is a dream" said Mrs. Trang. In 2000 they borrowed 3 million VND from the Bank for the Poor at an interest rate of 0.7% per month, but her daughter was in an accident and they had to use the money to pay the hospital bill. As of 2006 they are still trying to pay off this debt to the bank.

"Because we are so poor my husband is very unhappy and he drinks too much. Sometimes he stays home from the forest for half a month, and if he gets money from NTFPs he uses it to buy wine," said Mrs. Trang. "I have to work very hard to buy food. Now my first daughter has dropped out of school. She loves me very much and wants to help me earn money."

The NTFP project helped by giving Mrs. Trang thanh mai seedlings to plant in her homegarden. She wanted also to get rattan seedlings to plant a fence around the perimeter of her 200 sq.m. compound, but she wasn't allowed because she already had the thanh mai model. However, she did also participate in the rattan handicraft training class and she sees this work as her best hope for income in the future.

