



Lucy Muke, a farmer in Mbalmayo in south-central Cameroon displaying processed and bottled liquid pepper, ginger and garlic. Photo Credit: Elias Ngalame.

Non-timber product earnings spice up forest conservation in Cameroon

By Elias Ngalame

LUCY Muke, a farmer in Mbalmayo in south-central Cameroon, points happily to the pile of processed and bottled liquid pepper, ginger and garlic in front of her door, which she plans to supply to supermarkets in the capital Yaounde.

The 36-year-old mother of three belongs to a group for rural women farmers who have benefited from a government programme called AGROPOLE.

The programme, launched in 2014, seeks to promote small and medium-sized agricultural enterprises in rural areas.

It provides training and funds for farmers to process and market spices and other forest-grown

plants, to boost incomes and jobs, while conserving trees and limiting climate change.

Muke says the project, introduced in her region in 2011, has enabled her to make more money, with which she can send her children to school and feed the family.

This season she harvested and processed a dozen 10kg bags of pepper that sold for 600,000 Central African francs (\$975).

A bag of fresh pepper fetches 20,000 CFA francs, but when processed into a liquid and bottled, farmers get as much as 50,000 CFA francs for the same weight.

In the past, Muke and her peers lost much of their fresh produce through spoilage due to hot tropical conditions.

But processing and packaging a range of spices is becoming more popular here and in other parts of Cameroon, as it helps small-scale farmers beat the heat.

“Now we can preserve our harvest for weeks and months without any damage,” says Martin Nkili, another Mbalmayo farmer.

AGROPOLE national coordinator Adrian Ngoó Bitomo said the programme had helped more than 400 farmer groups in the last five years, four-fifths of them in forest communities, distributing about 22 billion CFA francs (\$35.7 million) in grants.

The programme tackles food security, forest conservation and climate change.

The support it provides includes farm inputs, processing equipment and start-up funding, he added.

The development of a market information system is also helping to balance supply and demand by providing a channel for buyers and sellers to communicate on prices.

Each group of at least 10 members gets start-up financial support of 10 million CFA francs or more, inputs for planting, training, a grinding machine and a digital weighing scale.

Rich Resources

In February, some 10 forest community groups showed off an assortment of their processed and packaged products in Yaounde at a week-long international trade exhibition, the country's largest, that takes place every two years.

"The government support has made us see the rich resources in our forest," said Helen Ojong, coordinator of Mas Provence Spice Enterprise, a group of more than 60 women producers based in Mamfe, southwest Cameroon.

Others have specialised in making herbal remedies, and selling leaves and flowers for decoration, she added.

Forestry officials said the project had improved livelihoods for those communities, especially women and young people, and helped them understand the need to care for their environment.

"Indigenous forest people are better-placed to protect their forest, not just because they love trees and other resources therein, but because it is very important for poverty reduction," said Bruno Mfou'ou, director of forests at the Ministry of Forests and Wildlife.

The new skills they have acquired in processing herbs and spices mean they no longer have to rely on the charcoal or bush meat trade to make a living.

Strengthening rural livelihoods with alternative sources of income is part of the government's efforts to protect forests and biodiversity.

"Once communities understand the value of their forest, they become its "voluntary guardians", helping the state to curb illegal activities such as logging," Mfou'ou said.

"That, in turn, curbs climate change by keeping trees standing as stores of planet-warming carbon."

Limited Land

Locally produced spices now fill

shelves in supermarkets, restaurants, hotels and schools in Cameroon and neighbouring countries because of their original quality, officials said.

"By consuming locally processed spices and other food items, we help promote our agriculture and empower our farmers financially," said Delor Magellan Kamseu Kamgaing, president of the Cameroon League of Consumers.

Bitomo, the programme coordinator, says training farmers has not been easy, with many lagging behind due to high illiteracy.

"Lots of patience and longer time is needed to help them catch up," he says.

The farmers also face challenges in expanding their output because of limited cultivable land - most have only one or two hectares - in addition to a lack of finance.

Bernard Njonga, coordinator of the Cameroon-based Support Service for Local Development Initiatives, which aids rural communities, blamed the barriers holding farmers back on a lack of opportunity for them to shape agricultural policy.

"Any measure aimed at addressing agricultural challenges must involve farmers to achieve maximum success," he said.



Processed and packed liquid pepper, ginger and garlic. Photo Credit: Elias Ngalame.