

Potential of the Congo Basin Forest Foods, to Address Food and Nutrition Security

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Forest food products make a major contribution to household food and nutrition security among the forest communities the Congo Basin countries. However, to date, forest foods are overlooked by governments in the policy guidelines addressing human problems related to nutrition and food security [1]. Forest foods should be promoted as important components of food needs of forest populations, diversifying their household diets and generating income by selling off the excess food. Studies have revealed that forest food products in Africa, either substitute the common and imported foods or complement these foods in several important ways. As result forest foods enhance nutrition and food security, by providing important macro and micronutrients that may be lacking in diets of rural people. For example, Fungo., *et al.* [2] reported that 200 g of the fruit of the African pearwood (*Baillonella toxisperma*) or the nuts of the African Oil bean (*Pentaclethra macrophylla*) if consumed in adequate amounts, can supply 100% of the daily requirement of iron and zinc for a 1-3-year-old child.

Despite the potential forest foods poses, more than 80%forest communities in Cameroon suffer from food insecurity and malnutrition [3]. The high food and nutrition insecurity, is as a result of majority of the forest populations sell off forest foods to buy basic items such as soap, rather than consuming these foods, lack of complementary protein sources (for example meat, fish, eggs and dairy products) and low awareness levels regarding forest foods' nutritious capabilities. For instance, about 70% of the forest communities in Cameroon, do not know that forest foods can improve the health of their children. Poor perceptions towards forest foods reflect cultural attitudes, and whether they are tastier than conventional foods. However, those in most need turn to forest products more often, the Cameroonian study by Fungo., *et al.* [1] unearthed. The poorest households, which suffer the effects of chronic illness or even death related to malnutrition relied more on forest resources for food and medicine. Fruits of the *Baillonella toxisperma* tree and the nuts of *Pentaclethra macrophylla* tree - nutritious forest foods, with high proportions of bioactive ingredients, micronutrients and vitamins, become highly coveted for, when there is a young ill child or a pregnant or breastfeeding woman in a household.

Therefore, an environment rich in wild foods does not automatically correlate with knowledge, a positive attitude and full use of forest foods to complement the diets of forest dependent communities. Also, food security does not directly translate into nutrition security, as even diets that provide enough calories do not provide a balance of needed nutrients. In order to change the negative attitudes and perceptions towards forest foods among the communities of the Congo Basin, it's important to raise awareness of the value of nutrient rich forest foods. Furthermore, "given the importance of forest foods, it is imperative that the forestry sector is included in the formulation and implementation of policies for food security and nutrition, poverty alleviation and rural development. Governments should encourage community ownership of policy guidelines, by engaging vulnerable groups, such as indigenous people, local communities, women, youth and the disadvantaged men, in the development of tenure, governance, use and management of forests".

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