



# WILD FOODS, BIODIVERSITY, LIVELIHOODS

Towards an outlook of inclusive  
food systems in Asia to 2030

## BRIEFING NOTE

### Background

Inclusive food systems consider forest foods and wild foods as important components for subsistence, food security, nutrition, and livelihoods, especially for indigenous peoples and local communities who rely on traditional foods and food ways for their dietary needs. The intangible aspects of wild food are deeply related to the culture and identity of indigenous peoples and local communities.

Nature provides food in abundance in areas where biodiversity is rich, intact, and vibrant. These areas are usually found in areas conserved and managed by indigenous peoples and local communities who rely on traditional food sources, and who possess knowledge on systems and practices that enable them to consume these food safely and sustainably. Harvesting and utilizing wild foods requires knowledge on identification and processing of plant and animal foods. Such information is often passed down across generations in both active and passive ways.

It is therefore important to strengthen capacities and support the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities on tenure and natural resource management for food security and community-based conservation. A conducive environment that supports sustainable management of biodiversity and enlivens communities of practice is important in achieving the 2030 goal of more inclusive food systems.

### WHAT ARE WILD FOODS?

- Wild foods are edible non-timber forest products (NTFPs) usually uncultivated plant species, fungi, and animals that are not consciously domesticated but collected from the forests, or on the edges of forests, and also on traditional gardens and agricultural lands
- They are customarily included in the diet of local communities in different ways or forms.
- Some examples of wild food are leaves, seeds and nuts, shoots and stems, root crops, fruits, flowers, fish, meat, and insects

***"A conducive environment that supports sustainable management of biodiversity and enlivens communities of practice is important in achieving the 2030 goal of more inclusive food systems"***





# Common threads across the region regarding food systems and wild foods



- **There is much knowledge about wild foods among indigenous and rural peoples.** Most of them use wild foods to supplement their diets; many foods as well as their methods of preparation, storage or harvesting techniques are a part of their identity and culture
- Alongside, **there is an overall decline in the knowledge regarding wild foods.** The reasons can be traced to national policies that affect foods grown and their harvest (mainly due to import policies and subsidies), as well as an official oversight about the role of wild and traditional foods in rural diets; the expansion of monocultures, and other changes in land use, is a further reason
- **Mainstream agriculture has delinked food from nutrition and culture/identity.** Both of the latter are important components of indigenous food ways
- Across the region we **need to establish and publicize the links between food and health.** Statistics on health are easily available within government agencies and the FAO, and other sources. What needs to be done is to **examine the correlations between wild food and the access and consumption**
- It is important to **include all food ways prevalent in the region,** including rotational farming, gathering, fishing, trapping, food gardens and cultivation. Even some of these traditional systems focus on non-mainstream crops. **Their strengths and vibrancy should be known better in the local contexts, as also the threats that they face**
- **Our work requires continuous updating,** with new foods and the knowledge/status around them documented; this also includes the gaps in knowledge observed within communities during workshops and the appropriate interventions to be designed to fill them; and also to make clear to the traditional users the link between food and their nutritional values
- It is also the time to **link our field work and observations to various other predominating issues** (biodiversity, climate change, food summits, tenure rights)
- **We need to speak from a position of strength** and not have the need to validate indigenous knowledge by science; of course this requires much discretion and discernment





# Concerns, challenges and threats to wild foods and indigenous food ways

## • Sustaining community practice

- The sustainable consumption of wild foods necessitates the passing on of traditional knowledge, mainly through actual practice
- However, due to economic constraints, sustaining wild foods extraction and consumption is challenged by livelihood shifts, changes in cultural preferences, and the decreased willingness of people to spend time to collect or hunt wild food

## • Environmental destruction

- Wild foods are significantly found in forests and other natural environments. Thus, activities that cause destruction of natural environments or limit people's access to their natural resources negatively impact the availability and consumption of wild foods
- Such activities include deforestation, mining, monocropping, chemical inputs, and infrastructure projects

## • Tenure issues

- Tenure ensures food security, especially for indigenous peoples. It ensures people's access to wild foods and in making community-based management plans for their forests
- Tenure related problems, such as lack of recognition of ancestral lands and commons, land grabbing and encroachment endanger food security

## • Market-driven economy

- A market-driven economy can cause over-exploitation of wild foods for selling or abandonment of wild foods in favor of cash crops or commercial species

## • Unfavorable laws and policies

- The lack of policies that enable the tenure of indigenous peoples and local communities to their lands poses challenges to the sustainability of wild foods. Supportive policies can empower people to manage their lands and capitalize on their resources for food security

## SOME FACTS AND FIGURES

- Of the 6,000 plus plants cultivated for food, fewer than 200 contribute to the global food output
- Of these 200, just 9 of them account for 66% of the crop production in terms of weight:
  - sugarcane, rice, maize, wheat, cassava, potato, sugar-beet, oil palm fruit, soya bean
- Of the 4,000 recorded wild foods, 24% are decreasing in status
- An average indigenous forest village may list up to 400 wild foods found in the area

### References:

FAO. 2019. *The State of the World's Biodiversity for Food and Agriculture*, J. Bélanger & D. Pilling (eds.). FAO Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture Assessments. Rome. 572 pp. (<http://www.fao.org/3/CA3129EN/CA3129EN.pdf>)

Ramnath, M. (2021, September 9). *Exploring wild food and related matters [Conference presentation]*. NTFP-EP India.

# The way forward: Outlook and recommendations



Given the situation, it is important to strengthen and sustain wild foods practice, traditions and knowledge through local and global action. Likewise, the need to establish and publicize the links between food and health should be made a priority. Co-relations between wild foods and access and consumption need to be further examined.

As we envision a more inclusive food system, it is important to keep in mind all food ways prevalent in the region as part of the conversation. We need to continuously exchange notes and learn from each others' experiences to contribute to the documentation of the knowledge and status of wild foods, as well as addressing gaps and needs identified from our field work and studies.

Shared below are insights from participants of the Wild Foods, Biodiversity and Livelihoods group discussions on how to sustain wild foods and advocate for more inclusive food systems toward 2030:

## LIVELIHOODS

- Revival and strengthening of traditional food systems to sustain livelihoods and strengthen food security
- Provide support for capacity building and enhancement of IPLCs, including entrepreneurial skills development
- Build up local economies
  - Organize local groups for them to have their own economic identity
- Safeguard IPLC's sovereignty and exercise caution on how wild foods are promoted
  - Understand the risk of too much promotion and hype
- Sustainable trade and market engagements
  - Sustainable farming, aquaculture, wild foods conservation and revitalization



## RIGHTS, COMMUNITY AGENCY AND VOICES

- Prioritize protecting indigenous peoples and local communities' rights and health
- Uphold community consensus and respect community's aspirations
- Secure land tenure rights so as to secure biodiversity – tenure will bring back the integrity of forests
- Work towards more inclusivity; Let women and youth lead
- Create spaces for traditional knowledge to be passed on – inter-generational knowledge transfer and awareness-raising
- Increase youth interest in wild food through philosophical and physiological experiences – youth are potential torch bearers if we work with them and encourage and support them
- Need for better & stronger messaging, especially when it comes to encouraging engagement of the youth (to counter-message other influences)
- Bottom-up/locally-based strategies and solutions to address challenges and sharing these in appropriate and strategic platforms
- Speaking from a position of strength and affirm indigenous knowledge on environmental management and conservation
- Nurturing the agency of communities so their voices are heard and they understand the policy arenas that impact their lives
- Supporting and upholding traditional systems and recognizing their contributions

## COLLABORATION AND SYNERGIES

- Adopt a holistic approach to policy work and sustainability
- Mainstream biodiversity in the food and agricultural sector
- Linking our work to post-2020 Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) discussions, climate change, food summits and tenure rights
  - It is important to include wild foods in the dialogue so it isn't "missing from the picture"
- Forging partnerships and exploring multi-stakeholder and multi-platform avenues for interventions
  - Utilize wild foods network to bridge communities, policy makers, private sector
- Create of alternative discourses and narratives that make wild food themes visible
  - Explore linkages between wild foods, health, and well-being
  - Put nutrition back in food systems
- Engaging in future research and action that encourages co-production of knowledge
  - Involving communities and letting them lead these actions
- Advocacy and joint actions for better policies



For more information and resources, visit:

**wildfoodsasia.com**



non-timber  
forest products -  
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