

The importance of non-timber forest products to people's livelihoods in the High Forest Zone

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Despite rapid deforestation and biodiversity loss in Ghana's High Forest Zone, non-timber forest products (NTFPs) still contribute substantially to people's cash and non-cash incomes. However, the over-exploitation of forest resources and a lack of local management will continue to lead to forest degradation and lost species. This poses several challenges for forest governance.

An MSc study was carried out in two villages bordering the Tano-Offin Forest Reserve: the admitted village of Kyekyewere in the middle of the reserve, and Kunsu Dotiem on its border (Figure 1). Plant NTFPs extracted from both research sites include pestles, canes used for roofing, drying mats and fish traps, herbs, spices, chewing sticks and wrapping leaves. Animal-based NTFPs, such as grasscutters, snails, antelope and rats, are also much used. NTFPs are vital in daily use and consumption, whether as tools, construction materials or food. Their importance for trade appears to be less, mainly because the communities rely on crops they plant in their admitted farms (Kyekyewere) or on their Modified Taungya plots (Kunsu Dotiem).



Fig. 1 Study area

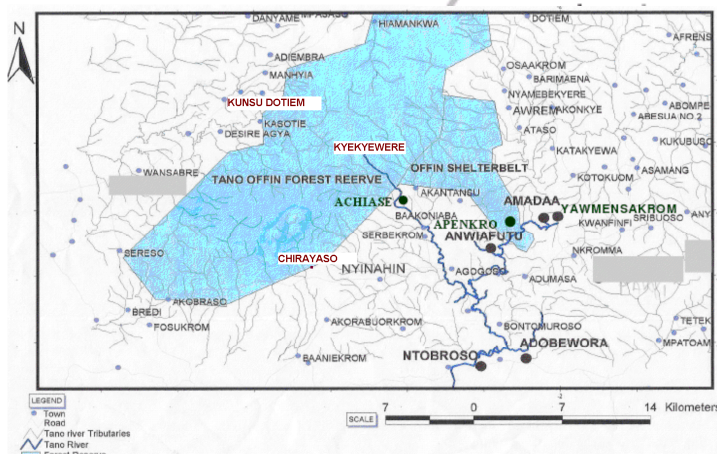
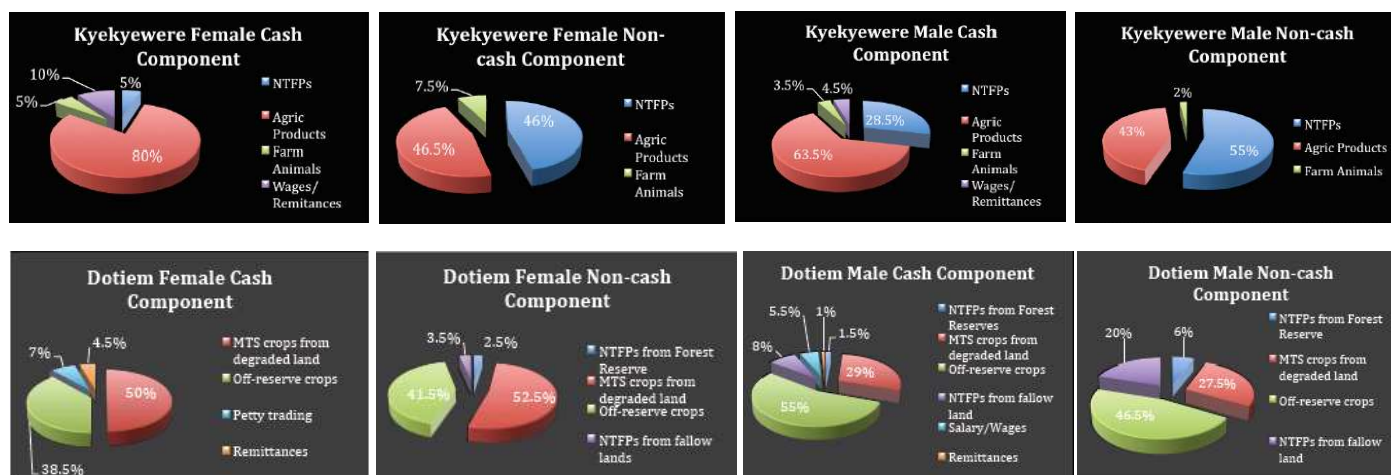


Fig. 2 Cash and non-cash contributions by NTFPs to people's livelihoods in two villages in Tano-Offin forest



NTFPs are an important non-cash component for women in Kyekyewere, but less so for the women in Kunsu Dotiem which is further away from the forest. In terms of cash income, NTFPs play a modest role in women's livelihoods, but in Kyekyewere, where exploitation is physically demanding due to steep slopes, they contribute substantially (28%) to male cash income (Figure 2). In both villages people rely predominantly on farming for their cash sources of income. NTFPs contribute mainly to people's daily consumption. The villagers stressed that many of the NTFPs have been gradually disappearing.

Governance challenges

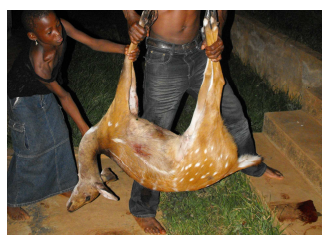
For commercial NTFP extraction from forest reserves, the permit system is the main policy that regulates NTFP use and trade. Villagers living inside a forest reserve have an admitted right to collect NTFPs without a permit when it is for domestic use; otherwise people have to visit the forest district office for a permit. There is no formal policy that controls NTFP use and trade in off-reserve areas, but there are some community conservation mechanisms in place, such as restricted hunting seasons for certain types of bush meat.

The permit system does not really hinder people to access NTFPs for their livelihoods because it does not function properly. In the long run, however, the dysfunctional system will hinder people's ability to access NTFPs

since over-exploitation and a lack of local management will continue to lead to dwindling resources and lost species.

Policy recommendations

- There is a need for a thorough review of the current permit system and more research into its effectiveness amongst forest-based communities.
- More staff of the Forests Services Division is required to patrol forest reserves. Many respondents indicated that forestry officers rarely come by to check and enforce the permit system.
- It is recommended to consider the feasibility of a registration system for certain NTFPs (such as for leaf gatherers elsewhere in Ghana). A registration system requires people to go through the process of getting permission to extract NTFPs far less often than they do under the permit system.
- It would be interesting to test how receptive communities are to community-based natural resource management for NTFPs. Much of the NTFP collection by rural communities takes place off-reserve in fallow lands, where no permit is needed and people extract NTFPs at any time without proper resource management.
- In order to reduce pressure on forest reserves, alternative livelihood strategies such as snail rearing, pestles planting and grass cutter farming, need to be introduced in the communities.



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