Regional expert consultation on non-wood forest products:
Social, economic and cultural dimensions

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Context of the meeting
Objectives of the consultation

It is my pleasure to join Mr. Dong, Deputy Regional Representative, in welcoming you to the FAO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific. It is especially gratifying to finally meet face-to-face with so many of the people that I have been corresponding with by fax, mail, and telephone over the past several months as we put this consultation together! Some of the participants here today are my long-time friends; others, I am looking forward to getting to know better during the course of this week. For all of you, I wish you a productive and enjoyable stay in Thailand.

As mentioned in Mr. Obaidullah Khan's opening address delivered by Mr. Dong, the interest expressed in this meeting has far exceeded our expectations. From the beginning, we had many more requests from people wanting to join the consultation than we had funds to cover. The fact that so many people are here today is attributable to the fabulous support that we have received from a number of collaborating organizations.

I want to very publicly express my thanks to USAID for supporting participants from the Philippines and Indonesia; to the Forestry Research Support Programme for Asia and the Pacific (FORSPA) for funding the participant from Fiji; to CIRAD Forest for bringing participants from Malaysia, and the USDA Forest Service for supporting participants from Nepal and Indonesia.

I also want to acknowledge the contributions of several organizations that have provided out of their own budgets resource speakers to join us this week. They include: the World Resources Institute, the Regional Community Forestry Training Center, The Body Shop, USDA Forest Service, the International Network for Bamboo and Rattan, CIRAD Foret, the World Wildlife Fund, and the International Center for Agroforestry Research. I also don't want to forget my several colleagues here in RAPA who have so graciously put time and energy into preparing presentations for this meeting.

Finally, I would like to offer special recognition to Michael Jensen, Associate Professional Officer, with FAO/RAPA who is responsible for the excellent display of non-wood forest products, and to Berenice Muraille, former FAO staff member and current consultant, who did much of the initial organization for the consultation.

Context of the meeting

This consultation comes at a very good time. Never before has the concern for the future of the tropical forests and the world's biodiversity been at such high levels. The world's natural resource managers are desperately searching for ways to stop the degradation and loss of forests. Simultaneously, development officials are struggling to devise strategies that meet the ever-rising demands of modern societies without jeopardizing the integrity of the natural resource base.

Emerging from the Brundtland Commission, and the more recent UNCED conference, is a consensus that environmental protection and development are mutually reinforcing. Reaching that consensus, and putting it into practice, however, are two different things.

In the forestry sector, non-wood forest products have increasingly been viewed as offering opportunities to "practice what we preach." Non-wood forest products are seen by many people as offering new alternatives to large-scale timber extraction, land conversion, and more destructive forms of forest exploitation, while at the same time providing solid economic benefits to rural communities.
Many questions remain, however. What is really known, for example, about the economics of non-wood forest products production and marketing? How do the values of non-wood forest products really compare with timber values? What is the demand for non-timber forest products now, and what is it likely to be in the future? What are the potential benefits and risks for forest-dependent people as non-wood forest products become more commercialised? Who will have access to non-timber forest resources now, and in the future, when they become more valuable?

And finally, what about the sustainability of non-wood forest products? Non-timber forest products can be over-exploited just the same as timber resources. Is there any reason to believe that we will do a better job of managing non-wood forest products than we have done with timber?

From the development perspective, we are particularly interested in learning what prerequisites are necessary for successful development of non-wood forest products. What can be done by national forest management agencies, NGOs, and communities themselves to enhance non-wood forest products development? What research would be most beneficial at this time? What can FAO and other international organizations do to help?

As one of the consultation organisers, I am licensed to ask these questions without being forced to provide the answers! It is the job of this consultation to, at least partially, answer these questions.

This meeting comes almost exactly three years after another FAO-organised regional meeting on non-wood forest products held here in Bangkok in 1991. That meeting focused on the biological and production aspects of non-wood forest products. From that meeting, we learned considerable basic information on the status of non-wood forest products in 11 countries of the region.

Building on that information, we would like this consultation to delve into greater detail on other issues related to non-wood forest products development, the questions I raised above and others. In particular, we would like to focus on the social, economic, and cultural aspects of non-wood forest products development that were only superficially addressed during the last meeting.

It is important to note that since the meeting three years ago, FAO has considerably expanded its emphasis on non-timber forest products. A new Non-Wood Forest Products and Wood Energy Branch has been created within the Forest Products Division in FAO Headquarters; the organization is now publishing a new newsletter on non-timber forest products, called *Non-Wood News*; several new Technical Cooperation Programme proposals dealing with non-wood forest products have been drafted; and a major Global Expert Consultation on Non-Wood Forest Products will be convened by FAO in Indonesia in 1995.

**Objectives of the consultation**

We have four principle objectives for this meeting:

- Review the status of non-wood forest product development throughout the Asia-Pacific region, with particular emphasis on the social, economic, and cultural aspects.
- Facilitate the exchange of information and sharing of experiences on non-wood forest product development among participating countries.
- Develop a base of information and specific recommendations for use by Asia-Pacific representatives at the upcoming Global Expert Consultation on Non-Wood Forest Products.
- Develop specific proposals and action recommendations for supporting non-wood forest products development at regional and national levels.

From FAO's perspective, the last of these is very important. We very much want and need your collective advice on how to better support non-wood forest products development.