

Rising demand for herbal medicine can increase cultivation of medicinal trees

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Formalizing trade in herbal medicinal products has the potential to increase the demand for on-farm grown raw material and raise the level of cultivation of medicinal tree species in smallholder farms.

A study carried out by the World Agroforestry Centre (ICRAF) in Kenya shows that trade in herbal medicinal products is rising in the [urban areas](#) and formalization in terms of better hygienic packaging and labeling of the products is likely to increase cultivation of these tree species.

Traditional medicine is practiced in in many [rural areas](#) in the [developing world](#). The World Health Organization estimates that about 80% of Africans rely on traditional medicine, a great proportion of which is herbal, to meet their health needs and this could increase because of the rising acceptability of natural therapies.

The study published in the scientific journal, *Forests Trees and Livelihoods*, says that In Kenya, the majority of [traditional medicines](#) are sold as wild plant parts, but in urban areas, demand for traditional medicines is rising and this is leading to increased formalization of the market, with traditional medicines now found in powders, liquids and creams.

Jonathan Muriuki, lead author of the study and research scientist at ICRAF, believes that as lifestyles improve, consumers demand better quality. "This opens up greater opportunities for trade in medicinal tree

products among actors in the value chain, such as collectors, producers, healers, processors, manufacturers and even exporters," outlines Muriuki.

Muriuki and co-authors set out to learn where medicinal plant traders in Kenya sourced their raw materials and to determine if formalization of the market could provide more opportunities for cultivation.

"Cultivation would not only provide a sustainable supply of medicinal products but also increase the incomes of poor smallholder farmers while addressing current problems of over-harvesting and resource degradation which have reduced the abundance of wild materials."

Their research revealed that 49 per cent of traders in herbal medicine sourced materials from farms and the demand was rising. However, 69 per cent of traders expressed a preference for materials sourced from the wild mainly because they perceived these plants would have higher potency than farm-grown material. Such perception is based on the expectation that wild plants will have grown to full maturity and in rich soils with less interference from human activities such as chemical application.

Those who preferred farm-sourced material said this was because of expected higher quality from good crop husbandry, increasing scarcity in the wild, and for some, a deliberate choice to conserve wild resources.

"While these types of formal enterprise are fairly recent in Kenya, we found that they are all experiencing annual growth and demanding more uniform raw materials which cultivation can provide," says Muriuki.

The study reveals that most farmers sell timber and fruits from their trees but are not selling medicinal tree products because they do not have access to markets "Farmers stated they would sell medicinal products if

they had access to market opportunities," says Muriuki. "Access to markets for other tree products has led to increased [cultivation](#) of tree species providing these, so it would be fair to assume the same could be applied for medicinal trees".

To improve the market in traditional medicines, the study recommends linking traders to farmers in the form of grower groups, especially women, which could initially focus on the most traded species as alternative crops are recommended.

Provided by World Agroforestry Centre (ICRAF)

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