1.3 Increasing sales and internal ownership: a basis for collaboration, Suriname

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Introduction

Gathering and processing non-timber forest products (NTFPs) provides income for villagers from tribal communities in the interior of Suriname. The demand for NTFPs is growing, and many products previously used exclusively on a subsistence basis are now sold in both domestic and export markets. For communities to benefit from these opportunities, producers need to understand that capacity building and appropriate organizations are key requirements.

In 2009, as part of its programme on promoting community forestry, the Centre for Agricultural Research in Suriname (CELOS) began working on the sustainable use of NTFPs. CELOS works on projects in close cooperation with local stakeholder groups and non-government organizations (NGOs) to establish sustainable producer organizations that become engaged in NTFP market opportunities.

The work began with traditional oil producers in the indigenous village of Apura and the Maroon village of Pokigron. It very soon became clear that protecting forest resources and their vast wealth of NTFPs against other competing land uses can be achieved only once the economic value of the products is understood. The organizational structure of producer organizations and the way that internal ownership is manifested differs in the two villages, and this affects the success of the business.

Research began in Pokigron. The village has a population of about 500 and is about 200 kilometres (km) from the country's capital, Paramaribo. The local partners were the Foundation for Reconstructing and Developing Pokigron (Stichting Wederopbouw en Ontwikkeling Pokigron, or STIWEPO), and the women’s organization, Akatta. Pokigron had shifted from a highly subsistence existence towards a more cash-based economy, but

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neither forestry nor agriculture were a large source of cash income (Zito 2009). The community forest is about 12,000 hectares (ha). CELOS provides assistance to women who gather fruits from the maripa palm (*Attalea maripa*) and amana palm (*Astrocaryum aculeatum*) and process them into edible palm oils. Most of the oil is used for subsistence, but women now produce small quantities for sale as well. CELOS studied the possibilities for improved processing technologies, and for assisting local producers in improving their business and marketing skills (Playfair and Esseboom 2012).

In Apura, with around 2,500 mainly indigenous people and located about 325 km from Paramaribo, about 40 micro-entrepreneurs produce carapa oil, a therapeutic product from the seed of *Carapa guianensis*, using traditional methods. The community has rights to a community forest of about 19,000 ha. Local livelihoods depend mainly on agriculture, logging and paid labour in the timber and mining industries. The local partner is the women’s organization UJEMA (“Women help each other”). Carapa oil producers have a long history in commercializing their oil, and some producers have ties to local cosmetic manufacturers. CELOS worked to safeguard traditional knowledge related to carapa oil production, and to increase income by improving marketing and business skills.

The role of producer organizations for community development

NTFP producer organizations are relatively new in the interior of the country. Traditionally, tribal chiefs functioned as local executive counterparts to the central government. In the aftermath of the armed conflict between the tribal community and the government (1986–1992), special development funds were allocated for poverty alleviation. Few of these community development projects were successful, however, and relics of failed projects such as abandoned rice and cassava mills remain as witness.

The chiefs were responsible for dealing with the government and NGOs. In the period after the armed conflict ended, the government also considered creating administrative resource centres to assist in the development and maintenance of the wide range of outside relationships each village has to deal with. But because of the low educational and literacy levels of tribal chiefs, an alternate proposal was made for training to develop their skills, especially in economic areas. At one point, the largest donor — the Netherlands government — demanded that funds for the development of the interior should not be managed by the government alone, but also by civil society (Kruijt and Maks 2001); as a result, local communities were encouraged to establish their own community-based organizations (CBOs).
Local community organizations

The common definition of a CBO is a not-for-profit organization that provides social services at the local level, based primarily on volunteer efforts. Most villages have several formal or informal CBOs, formed primarily from church, cultural, youth and women's organizations. Since the 1990s, these socially-oriented organizations have been complemented by groups whose sole objective is the development of local communities. These groups are often poorly organized and lack well-defined goals. In general, if organizations are clear about their goal, management strategies, techniques and processes can all work better together to achieve it.

In many villages, women's organizations are the most active groups, although both men and women are engaged in the production of various NTFPs. In Pokigron and Apura, NTFP producers are organized through their respective women's organizations. In Pokigron, palm oil production is exclusively a women's activity (Playfair and Esseboom 2009), but in Apura, carapa oil production is a family activity, where men are assigned specific tasks (Esseboom and Playfair 2012).

Pokigron's CBO, STIWEPO, was established in 1991. It is based in Paramaribo, which gives it easy access to NGOs and government institutions. STIWEPO supports local organizations in and around Pokigron, including Akatta, as well as traditional authorities; both types of groups are represented on their board. Akatta’s goal is to increase women’s resilience and community development, with activities that concentrate on facilitating various training courses, and coordination of festivities and sports.

Apura does not have a development organization, but people feel represented through the local government and their traditional authorities. The women’s organization UJEMA was established in 2007, making it a relatively inexperienced group. Its goal is to look after the material and socio-cultural interests of women in Apura and the surrounding area, and stimulate women’s self-confidence. A place is reserved for a member of the traditional authority on the board of UJEMA.

Community organizations must have legal status in order to receive assistance or funding from external sources. Local organizations can choose to form an association, cooperative or foundation to achieve legal status. A foundation led by a board is the most popular organizational form, for its ease of establishment and administration, and all of the three CBOs mentioned above chose this structure.

Internal ownership: the position of stakeholders

The level of participation in organizational activities depends on the group’s sense of being involved — their “ownership” — although a distinction should be made between stakeholders and so-called “constituents.” Stakeholders are those who care about an organization and consider it their own, whereas constituents are those who directly
benefit from an organization’s work, the people it serves, advocates for, or organizes (Minieri et al. 2005).

In many foundations in Suriname, it is the board, the governing body or more often just the chairperson who decides on and directs activities. There are occasional stakeholder meetings to discuss upcoming or ongoing activities. With UJEMA and Akatta, participation in meetings goes beyond that of board members, but the level of participation tends to depend on the interest that people have in the matters to be discussed.

Analyses of these two local organizations show that in Pokigron, women identify with Akatta, their women’s organization. The group’s regular activities have been at the heart of the community for more than twenty years, and women are familiar with them and understand them. On the other hand, Akatta’s efforts as a producer organization that serves commercial interests are new and not fully known or accepted in the village. Another hindrance for Akatta is that even with external assistance, the group cannot yet fulfill the urgent requirements of NTFP producers. Neither the need for improved processing technologies or having easier access to markets could be met, which meant that people lost interest. STIWEPO’s task was to link Akatta with CELOS, but it also continued to be involved in project activities, since women are not direct stakeholders in STIWEPO.

The situation is different in Apura. Through its relationship with CELOS, UJEMA has embraced the role of becoming a development agency to improve carapa oil production and marketing. UJEMA changed from being engaged only in women’s group activities to serving its entire target group by coordinating the external relationships necessary for expanding businesses.

When constituents participate in an organization, they help to ensure that the solutions it puts forward are relevant and effective (Minieri et al. 2005). Karabasjee, a producer working group established within UJEMA, shows that such a sub-group is an effective way to focus activities. UJEMA is increasing the sense of ownership of some of their constituents in the organization (the carapa oil producers) and strengthening their position as stakeholders.

One of the strategies for encouraging stakeholder participation and internal ownership is to connect around deeply held cultural or spiritual values. With UJEMA, these are linked to their collective heritage of traditional knowledge on carapa oil. Indigenous women in Apura take pride in this and want to preserve it. In Pokigron, people feel that palm oil quality depends on the particular skills of an individual producer, and place less importance on the recognition and protection of collective traditional knowledge.
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Economics also matter

The interest that people have in their organization seems to be linked to the commercial value of the NTFP, and is related to the opportunity to generate household income. Carapa oil is sold in national markets, whereas maripa and amana palm oils are barely known outside the production region. The demand for carapa oil is rising, while palm oil is only slowly receiving recognition as a specialty product in the local market.

Producers in Apura, where the remoteness of the village hampers people’s access to markets, noticed that joint efforts could help them overcome their problems. Important activities of UJEMA include facilitating the organization of marketing and establishing a brand name and standardized products that distinguish them from similar products in other regions. Participation levels in meetings on these subjects are high. Of the 40 registered carapa oil producers, about 10 volunteered to take seats on the steering committee of the newly formed working group. In Pokigron, 15 of the 29 producers registered by CELOS participated in a workshop to discuss business requirements in the NTFP industry.

Organizational life cycle and market readiness

Other important aspects of internal ownership are the pressures and threats that arise at various stages in the organizational life cycle. In general, organizations experience four overlapping phases: start-up, emerging growth, maturity and revival (Jawahar and McLaughlin 2001). Since the carapa producers are building on individual market experiences and are now expanding with a degree of success, this means that Ujema is in the maturity stage.

This stage is characterized by stabilizing production and product reliability, and matching these to rising demand. Common problems at this stage are maintaining cash flow and formalizing the organizational structure. The carapa oil producers from Apura have established a working group within their women’s organization. In this model, a collective (umbrella) brand name was chosen and labels and bottles were sold to producers; a small amount was returned to UJEMA to cover management costs and contribute to community activities. It was agreed that every entrepreneur who wants to use the label would sign an individual contract with UJEMA.

Akatta, the women’s organization of Pokigron, has existed for longer than UJEMA, but individual palm oil producers have experience only with the local market. According to criteria used by Dodge, Fullerton and Robbins (1994), Akatta is still in the start-up stage as a NTFP producer organization. Entering the marketplace is one of the group’s dominant concerns, and its most critical needs are start-up funds, cash flow and customer acceptance. During marketing training with palm oil producers in Pokigron, it was seen that
participants were not aware of the value of their oils and could not explain it to potential customers (Brunst 2013). Specific marketing tasks include the establishment of customer contacts and definition and assessment of target markets. The palm oil producer group should devote more time to exploring new marketing opportunities.

**The way forward**

Although no member of the UJEMA board was a carapa oil producer, every member of the newly formed Karabasjee working group has a direct interest in oil production. This will allow carapa oil producers to have more decision-making power in this forum, where they can discuss matters related to production and livelihoods. Being under the umbrella of UJEMA helps the women deal with administrative and legal issues, and they receive secretarial assistance and financial administration from UJEMA. Furthermore, UJEMA remains the point of contact with other local organizations, local authorities and external institutions, and will work at a policy level on issues such as access to the forest, traditional knowledge and intellectual property rights.

A big setback was that under the present legislation, carapa producers cannot protect their traditional knowledge. Since they want to retain their collective rights regarding the oil they produce and do not want to be swallowed up by a CBO, the only way to protect their knowledge would be to confirm their intellectual property rights to specific localities, but it is not possible to register this at the IPR bureau in Suriname.

To increase the scale of their operations, Pokigron palm oil producers need to strengthen their organization around technological improvements in processing. Entering external markets will require them to improve individual marketing skills or establish a professional marketing body. Having a specific marketing organization, as Apura does, will be complicated by the fact that producers of individually processed and marketed oils want to protect their distinctive identities.

**Lessons learned**

Having producers in the decision-making structure of organizations promotes involvement and improves performance. Umbrella organizations can help by coping with administrative and legal issues, especially for less advanced groups. Understanding and taking pride in the value of cultural heritage adds to the cohesion of producer groups and the whole community, but the government’s role in providing enabling policy is also vital.
References


