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Evaluation of non-timber forest product species as potential elements of agroforestry systems in West Timor farming communities.

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Eastern Indonesia’s high biological and cultural diversity is reflected in diverse and dynamic agroforestry systems. Systematic evaluation of non-timber forest products which can be produced from agroforestry systems is necessary to identify those which will generate returns that will lift rural families out of poverty. What are the characteristics of “winning products”? Which of these can link to Fairtrade or certification in reaching selected markets? These are important questions at a time when on-farm income is in decline not only in West Timor, but in Nusa Tenggara Timur (NTT) as well, for a variety of reasons, including technological change, low commodity prices and globalization.

Although on-farm income is in decline, income from agriculture or agroforestry is still the main source of total household income to rural households, followed by income from marine resources. On drier islands, agriculture contributes a much smaller component of household income. Two off-farm sources are crucial to many households. Firstly, income from the processing and sale of non-timber forest products (such as from different palm species, kutulak and woven textiles) and secondly, remittances from labour migrancy from men commonly travelling to work in Malaysia, the Middle East (particularly Saudi Arabia). Income from handicrafts is proportionately much higher on drier islands, such as West Timor, Sumba, Lembata and Rote.

Commercial trade in highest value non-timber forest products in NTT, such as sandalwood and Aquilaria resin (guhuru) has a very long history, often characterised by overexploitation of wild populations and market control by well-connected traders. In some cases, species have been added to agroforestry systems, for social, economic and cultural reasons. Selecting “winning” species for agroforestry systems in West Timor not only needs to be based economic values, but also on cultural and social context, strong tenure, extent of possible local value-adding, market security and on lessons from the past.