

EXPERT CONSULTATION ON PROMOTION OF MEDICINAL AND AROMATIC PLANTS IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC REGION

Rama Gardens Hotel, Bangkok, Thailand
2-3 December, 2013

CONCEPT NOTE

Background

Medicinal and aromatic plants (MAPs) have a long history of use rooted in local cultures and traditions due to a range of their pharmaceutical, cosmetic, perfumery, liquor and nutritional applications. At one time, millions of people around the world depended on them for their livelihoods. Even today, they remain crucial livelihood sources of a large population around the world. The collection and trade in medicinal and aromatic plants constitute a major share of the livelihood means of the forest dwellers, forest-dependent people and other people trading in medicinal and aromatic plants. The livelihoods of the majority of the mountainous and indigenous people depend mainly on subsistence agriculture and natural resources. The medicinal and aromatic plants play a significant role in ensuring health security of millions of people globally. In the past, natural resources were the only source of livelihood for thousands of years. However, exploitation of medicinal and aromatic plants as a source of livelihood does no longer seem a viable option due to population pressure, over exploitation, conflict of interests in land use and negative impact of climate change.

Fortunately, the Asian region is very rich in diversity of medicinal and aromatic plants. Any threats to these vital resources will not only jeopardize the livelihoods of millions of people but also the growing global market of medicinal and aromatic plants. Therefore, this sector deserves a renewed thrust to promote medicinal and aromatic plants through cultivation supported by adequate research, development and extension activities in order to ensure their better utilization and conservation.

Non-timber forest products (NTFPs) including medicinal and aromatic plants have always been the most important source of rural livelihoods and healthcare as their collection from the mountainous wild habitats has provided the rural communities with self-employment opportunities. Millions of rural households use medicinal plants in traditional medicines and products. Over 80 per cent of world's population meet their healthcare needs through traditional medicines and products. In some developed countries, medicinal and aromatic plants have moved from essentially unknown, minor agricultural plants to crops that many farmers consider producing as an alternative to usual planting of food and feed crops. The attraction towards medicinal and aromatic plants as suitable farm crops has grown due to the demand created by consumer interests in these plants for culinary, medicinal, and other anthropogenic applications.

Many valuable medicinal and aromatic plants are cultivated in Asia, and therefore, people living in the region can benefit if they are able to take full advantage of growing markets by enhancing their production scientifically and also through value chain approaches. It is also extremely important to conserve the genetic resources of medicinal and aromatic plants in order to save them from extinction, over exploitation and negative consequences of climate change. There is a need for establishing many *in situ* conservatories in different agro-ecological zones of the region. Both *in situ* and *ex situ* conservation methods have to be used to avoid potential danger and existing threats to genetic diversity of medicinal plant species.

With dwindling supplies from natural resources and increasing global demand, the medicinal and aromatic plants will need to be cultivated on a large scale to ensure their regular supply. The growing demand for medicinal and aromatic plants makes them remunerative alternative crops for smallholder farmers. Being underexploited species with promising potential, the medicinal and aromatic plants require greater research attention on propagation methods, harvesting and processing techniques, germplasm collection, genetic improvement, quality control and marketing. Joint forest management and contract farming with drug companies with buyback arrangement can significantly promote cultivation of medicinal and aromatic plants. Integrating medicinal and aromatic plants in the food production systems of farmers could be a viable option to promote these crops. As harvesting from the wild often leads to overexploitation, there is a great need to expand cultivation of medicinal and aromatic plants in order to relieve pressure on wild plants.

In modern medicine, allopathic drugs get preference because active ingredients are packaged in molecules that rapidly participate in metabolic breakdown and deliver the intended effect bringing fast relief to complaints. They come in generic formula and so are easily available everywhere. But they are also known to produce a range of side effects that are difficult to predict at trial stages. In many instances, adverse effects become obvious after a history of clinical use and such drugs are then withdrawn from circulation. Pharmaceutical companies worldwide are exhibiting growing interest in natural and organic products in search of compounds to increase health safety threshold of modern drugs. The use of natural products is also expanding in development of dietary supplements, ingredients of food and beverages, phytocosmetics and other herbal products.

The significance of medicinal and aromatic plants has risen in recent years due to increasing requirements on quality, safety, and efficiency of medicinal and aromatic plants products.

In view of these facts, FAO and the Asia-Pacific Association of Agricultural Research Institutions (APAARI) are jointly organizing a Regional Expert Consultation on “Promotion of Medicinal and Aromatic Plants in Asia and the Pacific region.

Objectives

- To assess the current status of production, utilization and conservation of medicinal and aromatic plants in Asia and the Pacific region and identify future needs of conservation and opportunities for their development.
- To exchange information and share knowledge and technologies available in different countries in the region and learn from each others’ experience
- To create awareness on the value of medicinal and aromatic plants among producers in order to promote cultivation with a special focus to small scale farmers.
- To identify relevant policy options for strengthening the conservation and sustainable development of these resources
- To strengthen regional collaboration and networking and develop a regional strategy for, promotion and sustainable use of medicinal and aromatic plants

Expected outputs

- Country status on medicinal and aromatic plants assessed and future needs of conservation and opportunities for development identified
- Knowledge shared and experiences learnt on the use of improved technologies and tools for production and utilization of medicinal and aromatic plants.
- Awareness on the importance of medicinal and aromatic plants for enhancing cultivation and small holder farmers’ livelihoods promoted

- Policy option for conservation and sustainable production and utilization of medicinal and aromatic plants in different agro-ecological zones/countries identified
- A regional strategy to promote medicinal and aromatic plants in Asia and the Pacific region developed
- A regional network on medicinal and aromatic plants established

Organizers: FAO-RAP and APAARI

Participants

One expert and one concerned policy maker from selected countries will be invited to attend the Expert Consultation. The proposed countries are: Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Myanmar, Nepal, the Philippines, Republic of Korea, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Viet Nam. In addition, one representative from the Pacific region will be invited to participate in the EC. A total of 40-45 participants are expected to attend the Expert Consultation including experts from FAO Headquarter, FAO, RAP and APAARI. Some senior experts/scientists will also be invited to present papers and to facilitate discussions. In addition, representatives of the medicinal plants industry will also be invited to participate.

Venue and Time

The Expert Consultation will be held at Rama Gardens Hotel, Bangkok, Thailand on 2-3 December, 2013.

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