



Conservation and restoration of indigenous plants to improve community livelihoods: the Useful Plants Project

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Kew's Millennium Seed Bank partnership (MSBP) is one of the largest ex situ plant conservation initiatives, which is focused on saving plants in and from regions most at risk, particularly in drylands. Seeds are collected and stored in seed banks in the country of origin and duplicated in the Millennium Seed Bank in the UK. The MSBP also strengthens the capacity of local communities to successfully conserve and sustainably use indigenous plants, which are important for their wellbeing. Since 2007, high quality seed collections and research information have been gathered on ca. 700 useful indigenous plant species that were selected by communities in Botswana, Kenya, Mali, Mexico and South Africa through Project MGU – The Useful Plants Project. These communities range from various farmer's groups and organisations to traditional healers, organic cotton/crop producers and primary schools. The information on seed conservation and plant propagation was used to train communities and to propagate ca. 200 species that were then planted in local gardens, and as species reintroduced for reforestation programmes and enriching village forests. Experimental plots have also been established to further investigate the field performance (plant survival and growth rate) of indigenous species, using low cost procedures. In addition, the activities support revenue generation for local communities directly through the sustainable use of plant products or indirectly through wider environmental and cultural services. This project has confirmed the potential of biodiversity conservation to improve food security and human health, enhance community livelihoods and strengthen the resilience of land and people to the changing climate. This approach of using indigenous species and having local communities play a central role from the selection of species to their planting and establishment, supported by complementary research, may represent a model for other regions of the world, where similarly biodiversity conservation and restoration should be integrated with improved human wellbeing.

Keywords: Useful plants, Local communities, Seeds, Propagation, Vegetation reestablishment, Drylands.