



Participatory- and Functional Diversity of NTFP Communities in the Southwestern Amazon Region

As a research project combining different disciplines and knowledge holders, PRODIGY aims at understanding the connections between nature, economy, and society in the southwestern Amazon region between Peru, Brazil, and Bolivia.

Our research is based on the idea that diversity in ANY system increases resilience to disturbances. Therefore, we study functional diversity not only in the soil or ecosystem, but across ALL components of the southwestern Amazon region, including local communities, decision-making processes, economic activities, values, and norms.

Alongside the fall of the international prices of rubber, the creation of protected areas limited the type of economic activities in which the settlers living in the southwestern Amazon could engage, causing major transformations in their livelihoods at the beginning of the 21st century.

In cases such as the northern part of the Bolivian Amazon, national authorities granted titles to these families under the assumption that they would follow conservationist guidelines. The state thus seized some of the proprietors' power by establishing military authorities, exerting control over the extractivist communities that eventually adapted to the new institutional framework. They also learned to coexist in the unique environment of the rainforest, carrying out mainly subsistence activities such as harvesting and fishing, while dedicating the first three months of the year entirely to collecting, drying, and peeling the *Bertholletia excelsa* or Brazil nut.

Even though the global demand has grown, the harvesting communities within the protected areas are highly dependent on Brazil nuts and thus vulnerable. Given that this is a very intense process in terms of human capital, it involves the whole family: both women and children participate in the value chain that transforms in-shell nuts into shelled nuts. Their labor capacities equally form part of the supply chain of any Brazil nut that is exported to major global traders and consumers in Europe, the United States and South Korea.

Although these harvesting families benefit from ecosystem services in a sustainable way, there are structural economic and infrastructural conditions that pose significant hurdles to secure dignified livelihoods for these communities. For example, as they still do not have basic infrastructure such as internet access, they are in a disadvantageous position when negotiating with external buyers and important resellers e.g. allocated in Germany. Likewise, most of them lack information regarding the processes of organic, halal, fair trade, kosher and other relevant certifications obtained by export destination countries, as they are a source that adds considerable value over the initial product that is finally added in the destination country.

A number of extractivist families, particularly young women and men, seek to widen their economic income by diversifying into other ecological cycles with respect to NTFPs such as açai (*Euterpe oleracea*), whose harvesting continues after the Brazil nut harvest. This is also the case through the management of other tropical products such as cacao, which coincides with the Brazil nut harvest, enabling communities to be more resilient whilst continuing to carry out sustainable economic activities in the forest.

The Brazil nut has been portrayed as an example of a tradeable good that can bring a sustainable economic development to the Amazon region without the major negative impact on the rainforest ecosystem that other crops or uses would have. What is needed to integrate and ensure greater participation of local and indigenous populations in decision-making processes on the management of forests? How can these extractivist communities, particularly women, use their agency and knowledge to better represent the interests related to the territories they live in and have protected for years? These are some of the key issues raised in my research.

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