

Reorganizing the market chain of capers in Syria: a multi-stakeholder process

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As part of a pilot study of the market chain of capers in Syria, a multi-stakeholder meeting with actors engaged in the production and marketing of capers was organized in the rural area of Jabal al Hoss on 25 August 2005. The purpose of the meeting was to bring together participants in the market chain to discuss means of further developing the caper market. The results of this meeting enhanced those of the pilot study, and prompted recommendations and follow-up activities based on the participants' views for a strategy for developing a successful caper market in Syria, benefiting the actors at all levels of the chain (from collectors to traders). These elements are very useful for guiding interventions in the caper market development, including efforts aimed at raising awareness among government officials, developing organizations, and the private sector about the value of this biodiversity resource and its economic potential for the livelihoods of rural communities. The process described draws on elements of the methodology of the Participatory Market Chain Approach (Bernet et al., 2005).

Caper as an economic resource for rural communities in Syria

Caper (*Capparis spinosa* L.) is a spiny perennial shrub, which can be found growing wild everywhere in Syria around dry and rocky areas. The caper is adapted to dry heat and intense sunlight. While caper is widely culti-



Children collecting caper buds from a wild shrub in Northern Syria.

vated in other Mediterranean countries, in Syria caper is a wild species and is cultivated only on an experimental level in research nurseries. Unlike in other countries, in Syria caper is not used for food. Its medicinal use is also quite limited. The caper buds, collected before the flowers have formed, are used in Syria as trade items. According to the pilot research study we carried out in Syria on the market chains of selected underutilized plant species (among which the caper plant), the collection of caper flower buds was started only recently in Syria by nomadic communities and represents a secondary source of income (Giuliani and Padulosi, 2005). Collectors are usually young children and women. A chief collector, normally a male, is responsible for a group of collectors in each area and liaises with a middleman, who defines the price. Handling the caper buds involves entire families and consists of mixing the capers with salt and stocking them into plastic containers, without adding any additional value. These caper buds are then collected and stored by the private enterprise, who will sell the capers to traders of neighbouring countries (mainly in Turkey). Finally, the foreign factories bottle the capers, adding preservatives and vinegar and sell them to the European

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market. The market chain in Syria is affected by concentration of high mark-up at the end of the value chain, and great instability in terms of high fluctuation of demand and price for the collectors due to lack of market transparency and trust among the actors. There is a lack of awareness amongst collectors about the final use of the product and no organised community structure dealing with the collection, processing and trade exists. Working conditions are very hard during collection due to the heat (collection is done during the hot season) and the presence of sharp thorns on the plant. The research on caper cultivation practices is lacking and there is as yet no institutional support for the development of a market.

Livelihoods of people engaged in caper collection in the Jabal al Hoss region

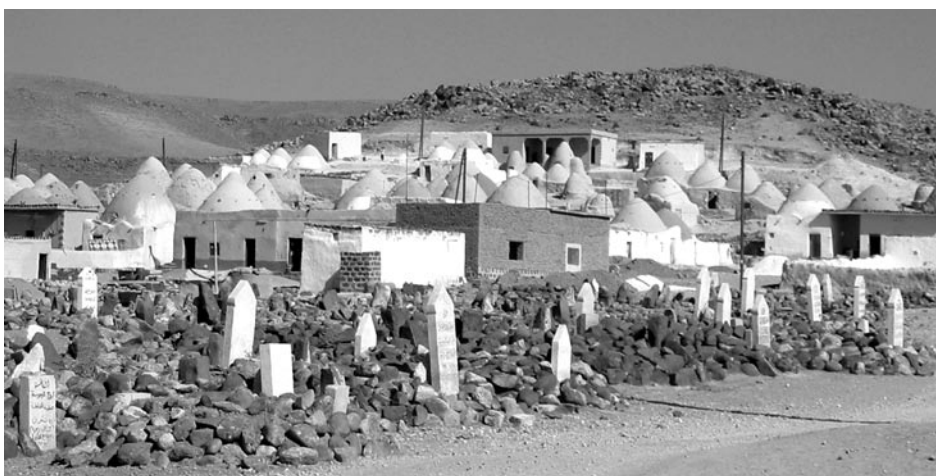
Jabal al Hoss is a typical region where people engage in caper bud collection as a source of additional income for improving their livelihoods. This region is considered to be among the poorest areas of Syria (UNDP, 2000). Jabal al Hoss is an area of 157 villages located 15 km south-east of Aleppo in the north of Syria. The area is characterized by drought and a scarcity of water resources, arable lands and public services. The villages are known for the mud-dome houses in which the inhabitants live. Fifty-one percent of the population is under 15 years of age and the population growth rate is 3.4% per year, with an average household size of 9.7 people. The illiteracy rate is very high, especially among women. Land ownership is rare and there is a lack of financial resources for invest-

ment. The main activities are cattle breeding and crop production but the employment is mainly seasonal. The scarce but valuable plant genetic resources, which are very well adapted to this harsh environment, are represented by neglected and underutilized species among which the caper plants. They hold a great economic and nutritional potential if consumed, marketed and exploited in a sustainable way.

Fostering the actors to reorganize the market chain

Given the potential that caper trade may have for the poor collectors in the Jabal al Hoss region and other remote rural areas in Syria, and the obstacles envisaged in the development of this market, the International Plant Genetic Resources Institute (IPGRI) the Rural Community Development Project of the UNDP, the Syrian Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform in Jabal al Hoss (RCDP) and the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA) decided to organize a stakeholders' meeting involving the market chain actors to discuss together possible ways to develop a market. The ultimate goal of the meeting was to start a process that will help organize the market chain of capers and will increase the benefits to the actors, in particular the poorest at the top of the chain. The idea was to discuss how to develop a Syrian product, produced and processed in Syria by local communities' members and then further processed and marketed by Syrian traders and businessmen in Syria or abroad. During the meet-

ing, people who were either potentially or actually involved in the caper market in Jabal al Hoss, could share their interests, problems and ideas. This increased dialogue and trust so that they could develop a more profitable market through better cooperation. Moreover, the meeting served to raise awareness of developing organisations, government officials and private sector of the existence of this natural resource and of the problems and potentials associated with its market.



Rowehab village in Jabal al Hoss, Northern Syria.

Dealing with existing conflicts between the market chain actors

Several participants expressed their concerns about existing conflicts among market chain actors. Some of them even made their participation dependant on the non-participation of another actor. We tried to overcome these general concerns through explaining in detail the meeting process, its focus on sharing interests among stakeholders and the working group's methods according to the participants' interests. A general rule followed through the whole meeting process was that the subject "prices on different levels in the market chain" was always avoided so as not to create conflicts among actors. At the stakeholders' meeting, only the prices of the displayed products were given, showing a big gap between Syrian vs. European final products.

Organization of the multi-stakeholder meeting

At the end, the stakeholder meeting brought together about 45 people from different sectors involved or potentially involved in the caper market chain, such as local collectors (men and women), chief collectors, traders, processors and exporters, national researchers and academics, developing agencies representatives, and representatives of government bodies.

The meeting was organised in Roweheb, one of the villages in the Jabal al Hoss region, in a tent put up for the event in order to be close to the people engaged in the collection of the capers and to their environment. In this way, we ensured that greater number of collectors participated in the meeting, and that some women also took part in the workshop. They would not have attended the meeting if it had been held in Aleppo, or far from their villages.



Participants sharing information during the meeting in Roweheb village.

Sharing of information

The meeting started with sharing and discussing information, with a few presentations on the caper plant and on the market chain from different perspectives, data on the world caper market and some information on successful cases of marketing capers in Italy. Moreover, aspects involving the nutritional and medicinal value of the caper buds and other parts of the caper plant used in Syria in traditional medicine were presented by participants at their initiative. The caper cultivation practices were also documented.

Participatory analysis of potentials and constraints in the market chain

The second part of the meeting consisted of participatory discussions about potential and constraints in the development of a market for capers in Syria, using ranking and flash cards given to the participants to indicate their opinions.

Cultivation was considered the most important potential. The reason for this might be that through cultivation the benefits for collectors or farmers can be increased, work conditions may be improved, and at the same time the quality of the product, as indicated by uniformity of the buds and timely harvest can be improved. The increase of awareness on the use of capers in Syria was identified

as a major opportunity to develop a local market, while quality processing in Syria involving a certification of the product was considered a potential for the export market.

The major constraints identified by the participants were the collection difficulties due to thorns in the plant and the heat during the harvest season (summer months in Syria) as well as the lack of marketing knowledge, storing facilities and any kind of coordination and/or organization among collectors and with other market chain actors. The low prices and their great fluctuation, as well as the existence of hindering export regulations, were other constraints that were pointed out by the participants.

Working groups and results

Following the identification of the potential and the obstacles to the development of a caper market benefiting all the actors involved, and in particular the more vulnerable at the top of the chain, participants discussed in working groups the policy support needs, the cultivation opportunities and the organization of a wealthy market chain. The working group results were discussed in plenary and combined with the opportunities and constraints. They can be summed up as the outcomes of the whole process in the following way:

Cultivation: the greatest constraint to the development of the caper market in Syria is the lack of cultivation and lack of knowledge about cultivation practices. There was general agreement that with a selected quality and spineless cultivar, problems in collection and supply would be overcome. Control and certified organic production is an important option that has to be considered to obtain higher prices in export markets.

Research: Research studies on the best cultivar of caper for Syria in terms of agronomic suitability and orga-



Cultivation experts, farmers and traders discussing in working groups.

noleptic properties and taste of the flower buds should be promoted and supported by the national research organisations and universities.

Regulations: The cultivation of caper plants also implies a revision or clarification of the laws that regulate the use of products from wild forest plant resources. Furthermore, the use of state land at the border of the Badia that might be used for caper cultivation should be taken into consideration for establishing caper cultivation.

Market organisation: Improved cooperation among market chain actors could help in achieving better market access and higher market power for collectors, as well as enhanced market transparency. It could also improve trust among actors so that traders could rely on a stable and timely supply. If the creation of farmers' groups is envisaged, this process should be supported by local development agencies within the frame of their programmes (ex. RCDP in Jabal al Hoss expressed interest in including the creation of caper producers' organisation in their community development project). The need to develop a quality control product for the export market was emphasised by the participants, but awareness of quality control has to be improved to make such a product work.

Local consumption: Local consumption should be promoted given that the caper buds are an accessible biodiversity resource in harsh environments, and are very rich in nutrients. Hence, food fairs could be effective in raising awareness on the use of capers in local traditional cuisine.

Conclusions drawn from the multi-stakeholder process

Engaging in a multi-stakeholder process to reorganize the market chain of a specific product and bringing the different actors together is a very challenging task. Considerable commitment and consistency is needed by the organizing organisation. Market chain actors often try to protect their knowledge and are not necessarily willing to share it with other actors as they fear diminishing profits or even being ruled out. It is therefore important to build on the potential of a product and as a first step to identify a common ground of interest that can be used to stimulate the will for co-operation. The results of the meeting clearly show the potential of such a multi-stakeholder process for market chain reorganisation.

Further information on the caper market chain and livelihoods of Syrian rural communities engaged in this activity can be found in the IPGRI brochure "The caper in Syria: Nature's gift to Syria's resource poor" (building the market chain series), also available on line at http://www.ipgri.cgiar.org/publications/pubfile.asp?ID_PUB=1075 <http://www.ipgri.cgiar.org/publications/pubfile.asp?ID_PUB=1075>



Chief collector from Roweheb village displaying his caper products.

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