

PROMOTING A HIMALAYAN 'SUPER FOOD'



In households across the HKH, women have been unknowingly seasoning their chutneys with what may be the world's next 'super food'. But perilla – an herb high in vitamins and heart-healthy omega-3 – could be much more than that. The hearty and easy to maintain herb could also be a source of supplemental income for rural women living in the HKH, many of whom are already stressed for time and taking on new responsibilities as an increasing number of men migrate for work.

Under the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development's (ICIMOD) AdaptHimal initiative, action research is exploring ways to transform this common household crop to a competitive mountain niche product. As a first step, the project identified the different varieties of perilla growing in the Himalayan midhills, then lab tested them to determine which variety had the highest omega-3 content, as well as the most marketable form – from readymade chutney to omega-3 capsules. Of the five varieties identified, the top two were grown and tested in pilot sites in Uttarakhand, India. From the pilot study, a package of practices to aid local farmers has been developed for the cultivation of perilla, and market linkages are being established.

Ginger in Myanmar

The upland villages near the Myanmar tourist hub of Inlay Lake had been left out of its growing economy. ICIMOD's Himalica initiative identified ginger farming as one path to help them out of poverty, but a key ingredient was missing: water. Ginger doesn't require much water, but when there's only a single pond left during the dry season and it's already crowded with buffalo, farmers don't have many options.

ICIMOD's first step: Address the water problem through rooftop rainwater harvesting, new ponds, and better management. The idea proved so popular that households not involved in the pilot began building the water systems themselves. The concept spread to five additional villages, with USAID and Winrock replicating ICIMOD's pioneering work and doubling its impact.

With improved ginger farming underway and farmers producing more consistent quality and quantities of ginger, the next step was to help ginger producers take a more active role in the ginger value chain. ICIMOD linked ginger producers in three villages to a single trader through the development of community collection centres. Now, during ginger harvesting season, over 300 farmers deliver ginger produce to a trader at the local collection centre each week, saving them the time and money needed to haul produce to the local market. This also helps farmers fetch a higher price through bulk sales and builds trust with the trader. Based on this experience, discussions are underway to expand the agreement to other agricultural products, and the trader has agreed to provide seeds, fertilizer, and a guaranteed market for the farmers' products.

