

EUROPEAN FOOD AND NUTRITION CONGRESS & WORLD COLLOID CONFERENCE

October 25-26, 2018
Vienna, Austria

Promoting underutilized species to reduce poverty: Examples from South America

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Underutilized species have the potential to provide small-scale farmers in South America with new opportunities to increase incomes and reduce poverty because of the high adaptation of both species to marginal conditions. Two studies conducted in Cochabamba, Bolivia and Santander, Colombia provides empirical evidence that this is possible. The cactus pear (*Opuntia ficus-indica*) is a species adapted to semi-arid and arid climate, grown in marginal areas in the Interandean Valleys of Bolivia. Cactus pear can be transformed into a wide variety of by-products that can offer additional farm income. The fique plant (*Furcraea andina*) was widely used to make natural fiber sacks in which coffee from Colombia was traditionally exported, but interest in this plant declined greatly when the sacks were replaced by plastic. For the past decades and as a result of this change, fique production in Colombia was almost abandoned. The objective of the study was to analyze the economic potential of both value chains and

to determine the main agronomic and market constraints. Because both species are grown in marginal lands and are adapted to local conditions, the potential to promote the species to increase farm incomes is significant. In Bolivia, 28 cactus pear producers were studied, while in Colombia 25 fique producers were interviewed to collect data on agronomic practices and market potential. Results indicate that there is an untapped potential to process cactus pear in Cochabamba, Bolivia but once the production system is optimized and issues of market access are addressed, it can generate an additional income for rural families. In a rapid market appraisal, consumers indicated a desire for processed cactus pear. In the case of fique production in Santander, Colombia, the results indicate that the hurdles to process and market the natural fiber require a concerted effort from various stakeholders, including policies which would favour the use of natural fibers over plastic.

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