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WILD BOTANICALS FOCUS GROUP SURVEY REPORT

NOVEMBER 2022

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In Georgia 72% of rural inhabitants are designated as employed in agriculture, of whom up to 90% are small-scale farmers operating on a minimal inputs system. In ALCP2 target regions these farmers have up to ten cows, up to two hundred sheep and thirty bee colonies/hives[1], own small parcels of land up to 1.25 ha and have variable access to common pasture. Georgia is famous for its biodiversity and numerous wild botanicals are valued for their medicinal and herbal properties. The picking of wild botanicals, grown naturally in the mountains, forests and agricultural land have been a traditional activity for rural inhabitants, which is still practiced in the regions of Georgia. *The ALCP2 Wild Botanicals Focus Group Survey 2022* [2]was conducted to identify picking patterns, behaviours, related problems, challenges, and perspectives of rural inhabitants who are engaged in picking and sales of wild botanicals. The survey also focused on identifying rural producers' perceptions of climate change and the impacts they have experienced with regards to generating income form picking and sales of wild botanicals.

91% of the focus group participants both male and female rural inhabitants mentioned that picking and sales of wild botanicals is very important for their families and serves as an additional income generating activity which is ensuring household's financial security along with primary income sources from livestock production, potato growing and cereal production.

On average, 38% of the households from surveyed communities tend to collect wild botanicals. 95% uses them for commercial purposes selling to food, pharmaceuticals, or cosmetics producers. Only 14% of the interviewed farmers tend to process the picked botanicals. When it is used for household purposes both food, beverages and medicine are produced by the communities (93%), while in few cases (7%) only food & beverages are made at home.

There are no noticeable differences in perceptions of men and women concerning changes in weather patterns and its impact. Women and men both also expressed similar positive attitudes towards applying new coping mechanisms to changing climate. High satisfaction with selling wild botanicals was equally highlighted by both women and men rural producers.

The opinions of the Azerbaijani and Armenian groups were in line with the perceptions of the Georgian groups. Not knowing the Georgian language however is one of the biggest constraints for women and men in Azerbaijani and Armenian communities. Both groups emphasized that they have language barriers to accessing information from Georgian channels and to communicating with buyers. Available trainings and courses provided by the processors and VET are also only in Georgian not tailored to ethnic minorities living in rural areas.

[1] This is a very generalized statement. Not all farmers own sheep or hives. Characteristics vary between regions. Some farmers have more some less. But it serves as a general benchmark.

[2]Was conducted in line with the *ALCP2 Livestock Producers and Beekeepers Focus Group Survey 2022*

METHODOLOGY

To find out rural producers' perspectives regarding the picking, collection, sales, and use of wild botanicals, the ALCP2 conducted twenty-two gender disaggregated focus groups (twelve with female and ten with male groups) in six regions: Samtskhe-Javakheti (SJ), Adjara, Guria, Racha, Kakheti and Mtskheta-Mtianeti. Seventy-seven rural inhabitants participated in it (forty-one female and thirty-six male).

The geography and the participants of the wild botanicals focus groups were chosen according to one main criteria – connection to wild botanical resources. Most of the focus group participants were ethnic Georgians, a relatively small number were ethnic Armenians in SJ, ethnic Azeri in Gombori community and ethnic Ossetians in Mtskheta-Mtianeti. The minimum age of the participants was 22 and the oldest was 70.

Table 1 Regions, number of focus groups and participants' data

Regions	Number of focus groups	Female	Male
Samtskhe- Javakheti	6	11	12
Adjara	4	10	5
Guria	2	5	6
Racha	4	4	4
Kakheti	2	4	3
Mtskheta-Mtianeti	4	7	6
Total	**22**	**41**	**36**

GEDSI[3] IN WILD BOTANICALS

Picking wild botanicals is an inclusive household activity where all members are involved regardless of their age or gender, see *Table 2* below. The sector is especially relevant in terms of gender and youth. Women, men, youth of age above 15 years and often the elderly[4] are predominantly responsible for picking wild botanicals which are sold to collectors who then sell to either domestic or international markets through factories in Georgia.

The focus group survey revealed the picking of wild botanicals, grown naturally in the mountains, forests and agricultural areas remains a traditional activity for rural inhabitants in most regions of Georgia. It mostly happens in summer coinciding with the livestock transhumance period when rural producers traditionally take cattle to the summer pastures. These rural producers, mostly women involved in dairy production, are engaged in picking wild botanicals especially in Ajara and Guria mountain pastures, where the most of wild botanicals are widespread. In villages or in nearby village forests, rural women, men, the elderly and often youth pick wild botanicals. It is a labour-intensive process which usually involves all family members. Men are responsible for transportation, finding a buyer, negotiating on price, and sale, while women are more involved in picking, drying if needed and making records. A relatively small number of youth and elderly people are also involved either in the picking or sale of wild botanicals. Ethnic Armenians in villages of Akhaltsikhe, Samtskhe-Javakheti, ethnic Azeri in Gombori, Kakheti and the Ossetian population in Dusheti, Mtskheta-Mtianeti are

[3] GEDSI –Gender Equality, Diversity and Social Inclusion

[4] Except in Ajara and Guria, where their number is considerably low as the collection process happens in the areas difficult to reach

also actively involved in the picking and selling of wild botanicals. Ensuring their equitable inclusion in this market is crucial, particularly in light of the informality of the market related to pickers and new legislation[5] potentially limiting picking and threatening this source of additional income.

Table 2 Gender Division of Roles and Responsibilities in Wild Botanicals

List of Activities	Women	Men	Both	Youth	Elderly
Picking of Wild Botanicals	x		x	x	x
Drying	x		x		
Making records	x		x		
Selling Wild Botanicals		x	x	x	x
Finding buyers		x	x		
Negotiation on price		x	x		

Table 3 Gender Division of Access and Agency (Decision Making Ability) in Wild Botanicals

Roles & Responsibilities	Access		Agency	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Information and TV programmes	x	x	x	x
Knowledge and skills in Wild Botanicals	x	x	x	x
Finances/bank loans/grants	x	x	x	x
Income from selling Wild Botanicals	x	x	x	x

The interviewed male and female farmers mentioned that income received from the sales of wild botanicals are equally distributed between men and women and is usually used for purchasing household items, covering education fees, and medical services, repairing works etc. Youth are motivated to gain extra money and purchase mobile devices or other items interesting for them.

CLIMATE CHANGE

Wild botanicals focus group survey also focused on identifying rural producers' perceptions of climate change and the impacts they have experienced with regards to generating income form picking and sales of wild botanicals.

Both female and male focus group participants have observed a significant change in weather patterns over the last ten years. The most frequently observed climate change patterns are related to unpredictable weather, increased temperature, frost, and drought that are leading to decrease of quantity and quality of wild botanicals. In this regard, women and men have very similar perspectives.

Most of the interviewed female and male rural producers are worried about changes in weather patterns, as it affects the rural population with regards to generating additional income from picking and sales of wild botanicals.

[5] Forest Code of Georgia, which was put in force from January 1st, 2021. The code regulates commercial use of non-timber forest resources including wild botanicals.

Both female and male farmers have noticed that unsteady weather and changes in seasons have significantly reduced the volume of wild botanical resources, and the quality has deteriorated as both quantity and quality highly depends on the climate. The reduction and deterioration of wild botanicals reflected in decreased revenue of rural producers. Below are given several examples named by focus group participants:

- Both quantity and quality of *Senecio Platy Hyllus* depends on the climate. The plant favours humid conditions. For, example last year due to the lack of snow in Guria, the quantity of the plant was 60% less than this year and the stem was short.
- Frequent rainfall in Khulo during the collection period hampered the collection process + increased logistics costs (vehicle repairing costs due to the difficulty of reaching forest), at the same time it caused soil erosion and decreased the quantity of wild plant. Quantity of the wild plant decreased by 40% this year.
- Snow pea is collected during the whole year. So heavy rains may hamper the collection process.
- Due to the changes in seasons, e.g., snow came in March this year in Kakheti, the quality and quantity of wild apples and mushroom has drastically reduced.
- Due to the long droughts in summer, the quality of rose hip has declined in Samtskhe-Javakheti.
- 100% of the focus group participants named climate change as a reason for decline in wild mushroom numbers.

Lack of information and knowledge for applying new practices and coping with changing climate were named as key constraints by both women and men focus group participants.

Picking/Supply of the Wild Botanicals

Species of collected wild botanicals, picking time, organization of picking and seasonality of sales

Wild mint, common ragwort, dandelion, Dwarf Everlast, primrose, wild garlic, Caucasian evergreen azalea, immortelle, blueberry leaf, hawthorn flower, poppy, wild plum, walnuts, blackberries, Caucasian lily, blueberries, Cornelian cherry, now pea, danewort, nettle, rose hip, sea buckthorn wild apple and Goat's beard are commonly collected wild botanical by rural inhabitants.

Rural inhabitants start picking of wild botanicals in April and continue until November. However, it mostly happens in summer coinciding with the livestock transhumance period when farmers traditionally take cattle to the summer pastures for a whole season and where mostly women and their children are present.
In most cases (82%) the collectors call and tell rural producers which wild botanicals they want and how much and negotiate on price rather than farmers having to find the buyers after picking (18%). Similarly, most often (86%) collectors go to the village to collect them, instead of rural producers delivering the products themselves (14%).

77% of the interviewed focus group participants tend to sell wild botanicals and they do it all year round. The only exception is winter when only 14% of farmers sell wild botanicals. Active selling season starts in spring (59%) and is continuous till the end of autumn (82%).

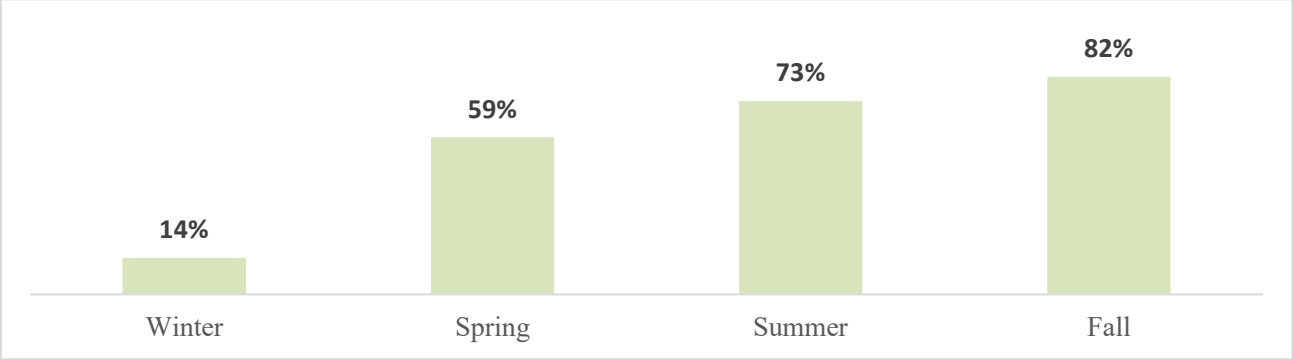

Figure 1: Seasonality of sales

PICKING AREAS, COMPETITION

Most of the wild botanicals like mint, common ragwort, dandelion, Dwarf Everlast, primrose, wild garlic, Caucasian evergreen azalea, Immortelle, blueberry leaf, hawthorn flower, poppy, wild plum, walnuts, blackberries, Caucasian lily, blueberries, Cornelian cherry, Senecio Platy Hyllus grow in the mountains, forests, and agricultural areas (villages) and rural inhabitants usually go there for picking every day. As for snow pea, danewort, nettle, rose hip, sea buckthorn wild apple and Goat's beard they are usually collected locally in the village, at the roadside or in nearby woodland scrub.

Both male and female focus group participants mentioned that they pick wild botanicals either within the village (66%), or in the next village (34%) and try not to go far for picking. This way they save the additional cost of transport to reach the designated area of collection and to bring collected wild botanicals from mountain/forest to the village. They also mentioned that there is also a rising competition between farmers, the one who finds the plant spot first, he is the one who picks it.

WHAT RURAL PRODUCERS PICK AND HOW THEY ARE PICKED

Picking of wild botanicals is a labour-intensive activity and takes hours sometimes from morning to evening. Picking is performed by hand, using knife for cutting down, or gloves in the case of Snow pea and using pruning shears in the case of sea buckthorns. Rural producers pick either the *leaf* such as mint, nettle, peas, Evergreen azalea, blueberry, the *flower* such as primrose, poppy, immortelle, dwarf Everlast, the *fruit* such as rose hip, wild apples, sea buckthorn, blueberries, danewort and cornelian cherry, the *roots* such as Senecio Platy Hyllus[6] or *entire plant* such as wild garlic and dandelion. Two of the latter tends to be a harmful practice damaging a plant and creating a risk for its extinction. Only 32% of focus group participants mainly women said that they look after and protect the areas where they pick wild botanicals e.g., women are cleaning the territories where the wild botanicals are picked, and men are protecting them from the cattle.

[6] Uprooting of this plant was mentioned by focus group participants only in Khulo. In other municipalities, they said that the plant is mostly cut without the root.

INFORMATION

The focus group survey revealed that both female and male rural inhabitants lack knowledge and information about resilient climate practices and sustainable management of public natural resources. The networks already created (media, academia, industry associations, ICCs, and online platforms for farmers) still have low capacity and experience to serve a rural audience regarding climate change, environmental inclusivity, and the sustainable use of natural resources as well as lack tailored programmes for ethnic minorities living in rural areas[7].

The main source of agricultural information for focus group participants regarding wild botanicals are other farmers: 73% of them mentioned that they receive information from neighbours and friends. Also, 55% stated that they get information from social media e.g., Facebook or other websites and 50% - from TV[8] e.g., Public Broadcaster and Adjara TV. As for the information related to the collection of wild botanicals collectors and processors were named as the main and most reliable sources of information.

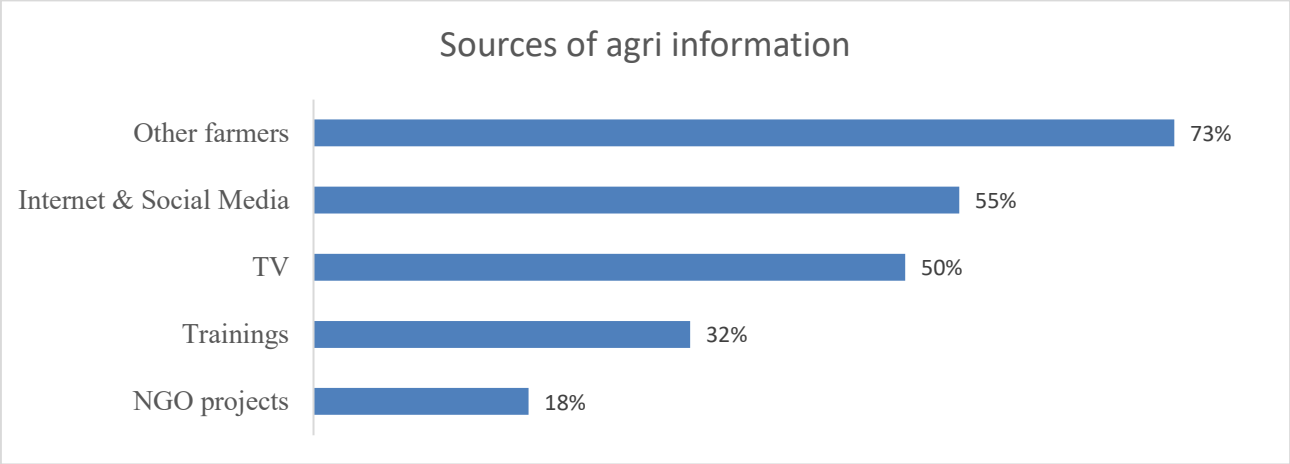

Figure 2: Sources of Information

KNOWLEDGE ABOUT WILD BOTANICALS

Both men and women have some knowledge about wild botanicals, they know their common names, can identify them, know the picking periods, some rules of picking, their unique properties, etc. They also know their health, culinary and medical uses, and benefits. This knowledge was passed down to them verbally or through the collectors. However, they lack awareness of good collection practices and international guidelines related to picking of wild botanicals which potentially can lead to increased knowledge and awareness, sustainable picking, increased engagement of rural producers in the value chain and safeguard and create the opportunity for additional income.

[7] Local universities, professional colleges, and other informal educational institutions like Adult Education Center in Akhaltsikhe have authorized vocational training programs in agriculture however only few offer trainings and courses about wild botanicals. Most of them offer courses in forestry, Agri mechanization, veterinary, etc. which are not tailored to ethnic minorities and women.

[8] Focus group participants in Kakheti on the Gombori range stated that there is no internet connection available in their village, therefore TV is the main source of information for them.

RULES OF PICKING

Both female and male farmers mentioned that they follow traditional rules of picking which does not harm the population of the species. For example, according to male farmers in Shuakhevi, the more you pick Senecio platy Hyllus the more it grows, as it is wild growing plant. But it is important to consider picking rules of not touching the roots of the plant. According to focus group participants in Samtskhe-Javakheti at present they do not collect roots or entire plants and try to protect and preserve the areas where these plants grow because of bad past practices and experience[9]. Other traditional rules include picking plants in clean sites, picking them in the afternoon when the dew dries up and collecting them in cloth sacks. If drying is needed it happens in a room protected from sunlight. On average, drying takes up to 10 days. However, they sell most of the wild botanicals raw[10], except for haw flower and Caucasian Lilly which they sell only dried, as for dwarf Everlast and mint they sell both raw and dried. Focus group survey revealed that rural producers still lack knowledge about other important rules for sustainable picking such as:

One specific path should be chosen to enter and exit the picking area and picking should be started from the bottom of the slope.
During harvesting, the soil should not be compacted, harvesting should not be done in rainy weather, nor when the soil is wet.
Picking of the leaves of bushes and trees should be done gradually – from the outer layers to the inside.
Picked plant materials should not touch the ground.
Plastic bags or containers should not be used as they contribute to heating and spoilage of picked wild botanicals.
Crushing and compressing the picked wild botanicals should be avoided as they soon turn brown and lose the main desirable characteristics.
Leafy and above-ground parts of the plant should be picked at the very early flowering period.
Flowers should be picked in the highest stage of flowering.
Fruits and seeds should be picked usually at full maturity.
Roots should be picked as the plant ages, when the above-ground parts are already dead.

REGULATIONS

Rural inhabitants are not well informed about rules and regulations or restrictions/quotas on the collection of wild botanicals. Only 23% (men mostly) know that such rules and restrictions exist. They lack instructions on all issues relevant to the protection of the environment and the conservation of plant species for long and sustainable sourcing. They do not know if the plant to be collected and the area have legal restrictions or not. However, it should be noted that in Kakheti and Samtskhe-Javakheti [11]the rural producers who pick primrose, dandelion, nettle, wild mint, etc., went through trainings about the collection organized by a processor and they

9 During the research, the respondents in Iveria Village of Aspindze municipality recalled that rural inhabitants had been actively collecting wild snails for sale. The snails are looked for in the roots of the milk-vetch (Astragalus caucasicus) bushes which is a Georgian, endemic variety of plant grown on the mountain slopes. Collectors often strip the roots so that the plant withers. This practice led to the disappearance of both the unique plant population of the local flora and the Meskhuri variety of snails in their village.
10 due to lack of drying facilities at the rural producers' level.
11 Where wild botanicals are picked through brigades of rural inhabitants organized by large scale processors like Geo Flower Ltd and Kakheti Bio LLC

are informed in advance where wild botanicals should be picked[12]. Ensuring rural inhabitants' equitable inclusion in the market is crucial, particularly in light of new legislation potentially limiting picking and threatening this source of additional income.

OVER PICKED WILD BOTANICALS

36% of the focus group participants mainly women noticed that some wild botanicals are over picked. Common ragwort, rose hip, wild apples, nettle, sea buckthorns, mushrooms were named among the most frequently over picked plants by the focus group participants. They consider picking in large quantities[13] and disregarding the rules of picking[14] as main reasons for decrease in their numbers[15].

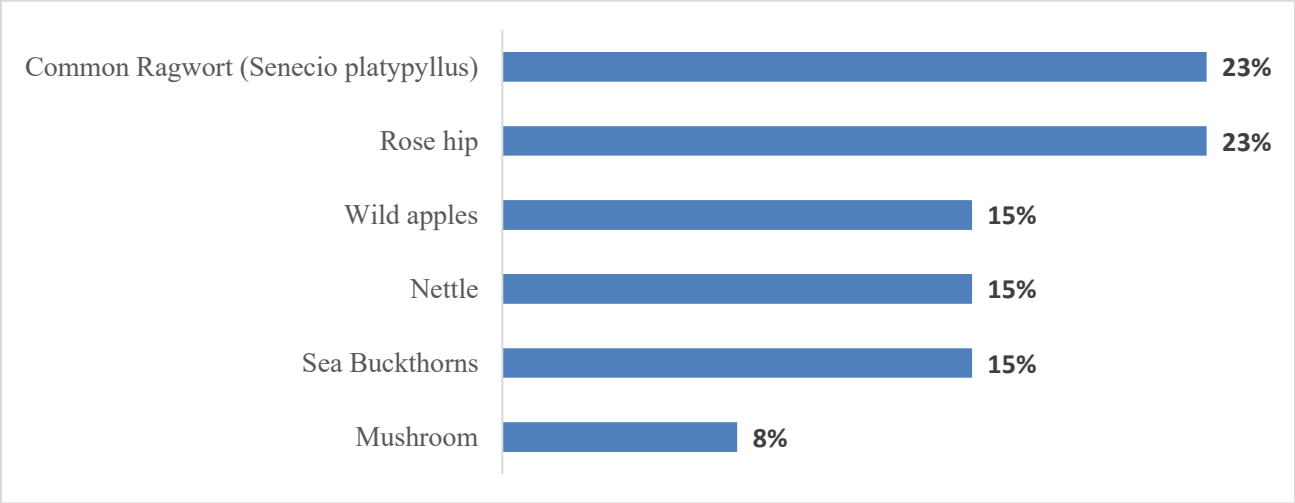

Figure 3: The most frequently named over picked Wild Botanicals

ACCESS TO SERVICES REGARDING WILD BOTANICALS

The survey revealed that services related to wild botanicals are accessible for both male and female rural producers. They fulfil orders daily or weekly (95%). Most of them work on collection daily or weekly (78%) and transportation is also available daily or weekly (73%). See Figure 4 Frequency of the services for wild botanicals

[12] Kakheti Bio Ltd, the enterprise who buys the collected Primrose from farmers, has a bio-certificate and the collected Primrose also has a bio-status. The bio-certificate is valid for the specific area of Gombori range.

[13] The interviewed rural producers in Tsnisi village of Akhaltsikhe municipality mentioned that the collection of a large amount of snake ivy (vinca herbacea) for pharmaceutical companies years ago led to the disappearance of the population of this plant in their village and surrounding areas.

[14] Rules of picking includes identifying the plant species that can be picked for commercial purposes, following the percentage of the plant species that can be picked, knowing part of the plant to be picked, timing of picking, selecting proper areas for picking and applying for permits/license for picking whenever needed.

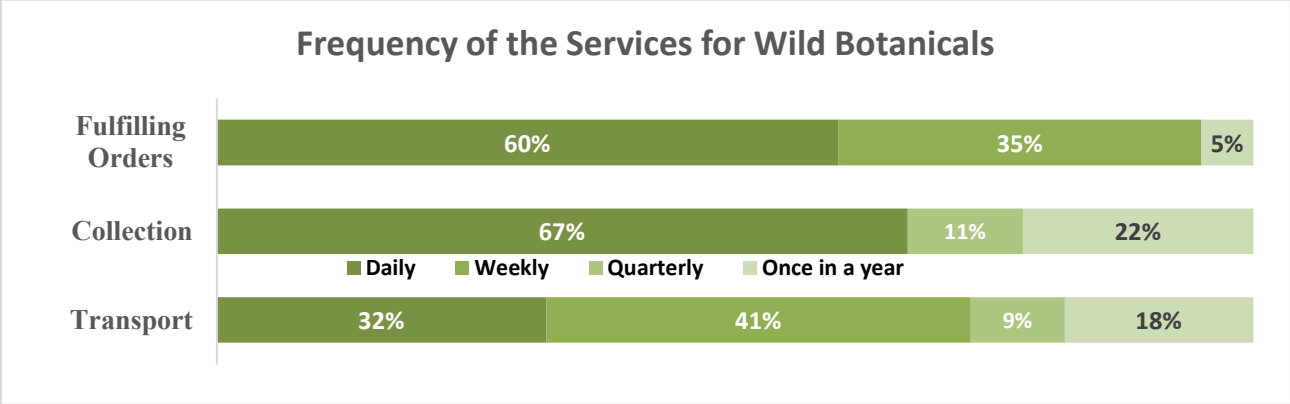

Figure 4 Frequency of the Services for Wild Botanicals

COLLECTION VOLUMES, PRICES AND INCOME GENERATED FROM THE SALES OF WILD BOTANICALS

According to the wild botanical focus group survey common ragwort is a plant sold in the largest quantities 7.3 tons per season, followed by wild apple 2 tons per season and wild plum 1.5 tons per season. In relatively small quantities they sell: Cornelian cherry 0.8 tons per season, walnuts 0.7 tons per season, rose hip 0.7 tons per season, Sea Buckthorn 0.6 tons per season, nettle 0.5 tons per season and pea 0.5 tons per season. The other volume of other wild botanical species which rural households sell vary from 0.02 tons to 0.5 tons by each.

The price paid for wild botanical ranges from 0.2 to 25 Gel/ per kg. Collectors pay more for dried wild botanicals, but selling raw wild botanicals is more common due to lack of drying facilities at the rural producers' level. The existence of collectors and processors in the value chain is important because it means receiving orders in advance and being paid in full for the entire amount collected.

According to female and male rural inhabitants selling of certain wild botanical generates on average 1,250 Gel/annually for each rural household. Most rural households pick and sell more than one plant. Sales of wild garlic was named as being the most profitable, on average each household earns 7,500 Gel/annually from its sales. See Table 4 A list of wild botanicals identified through the focus group survey. It gives information about picking periods of each wild botanicals, what part of plant is picked, where they are picked, average weight (kg) collected by each household, how it is sold (raw or dried), who are the buyers and what is an average price (GEL/kg). Some species of wild botanicals might also be missing here as focus groups were organized in six regions and covered only 77 rural inhabitants.

Table 4 A list of wild botanicals

#	Latin Name	English Name	Picking Period	What part is picked	Where are they picked?	Ave. weight collected (kg)	How is it sold?	Who are the buyers?	Ave. Price (Gel) per kilo
1	Rosa Canina	Rose Hip	Aug-Nov	Fruit	Village, neighbouring Villages	682	Raw	Collectors/ Intermediaries	1.1
2	Malus Orientalis	Wild apple	Sep, Oct	Fruit	Village, neighbouring Villages	2003	Raw	Collectors/ Intermediaries	0.2
3	Hippophaë rhamnoides	Sea Buckthorn	Sep, Oct	Fruit	Village, neighbouring Villages	617	Raw	Collectors/ Intermediaries	1.2
4	Mentha arvensis	Mint	May, Jun	Leaf	Village, forest	236	Dried	Collectors/ Intermediaries	1
5	Senecio Platypyllus	Common Ragwort	Jul, Aug	Stem	Forest, Mountain field	7333	Raw	Processors	0.9
6	Urtica dioica	Nettle	May, Jun, Jul, Aug	Leaf	Village, neighbouring Villages	526	Raw	Collectors/ Intermediaries	0.4
7	Taraxacum officinalis	Dandelion	Apr, May	Flower, entire plant	Village, forest	360	Raw	Collectors/ Intermediaries	2
8	Helichrysum italicum	Dwarf Everlast	Jul, Aug	Flower	Forest, Mountain field	375	Dried & Raw	Processors	3.4
9	Vaccinium myrtillus	Blueberries	Sep, Oct	Fruit	Village, Mountain field	73	Raw	Collectors/ Intermediaries	15
10	Primula vulgaris	Primrose	Apr	Flower	Mountain fields	283	Raw	Collectors/ Intermediaries, Processors	3.8
11	Sambucus ebulus	danewort (elder)	Sep, Oct	Fruit	Village	150	Raw	Processors	1.5
12	Pisum sativum	Pea(s)	Whole year	Leaf	Village	523	Raw	Processors	2.5
13	Cornus mas	Cornelian cherry	Sep, Oct	Fruit	Village, forest	800	Raw	Collectors/ Intermediaries	1
14	Allium ursinum	Wild garlic	Feb-May	Entire plant	Forest	300	Raw	Consumers buying from the village, Collectors/ Intermediaries, agri market	25
15	Rhododendron caucasicum	Caucasian evergreen azalea	May	Leaf	Village, mountain field	20	Raw	Consumers buying from the village	5
16	Helichrysum	Immortelle	Sep, Oct	Flower	Village, forest	5	Raw	Agri market	3
17	Vaccinium myrtillus	Blueberry leaf	Sep	Leaf	Village, forest	4	Raw	Consumers buying from the village	2
18	Crataegus	Hawthorn flower	Oct	Fruit	Village, forest	2	Dried	Collectors/ Intermediaries	7

19	Papaver	Poppy	Apr, May	Flower	Village, forest (bio certificated area)	150	Raw	Collectors/ Intermediaries	1
20	Prunus divaricata	Wild Plum	Jul, Aug	Fruit	Village, forest	1500	Raw	Collectors/ Intermediaries	0.5
21	Juglans	Walnuts	Sep, Oct	Fruit	Forest	700	Raw	Consumers buying from the village, Intermediaries, agri market	5.5
22	Rubus caucasicus	Blackberries	Sep, Oct	Fruit	Forest	25	Raw	Processors	9
23	Lilium monadelphum	Caucasian lily	May	Leaf	Forest	20	Dried	Collectors/ Intermediaries	10
24	Aruncus dioicus	Goat's-beard	May	Leaf	Village	20	Raw	Collectors/ Intermediaries	20

Table 4: A list of Wild Botanicals identified through the Focus Group Survey

THE MAIN CONSTRAINTS RELATED TO WILD BOTANICALS

Lack of awareness of good picking practices, national laws/regulations and international guidelines related to sustainable picking of wild botanicals by pickers, collectors and processors and lack of drying and storage facilities, equipment, and transport, high transaction costs and wastage, lower quality with less added value potential are the main constraints at the collectors and processors level. In addition, lack of information and knowledge for applying new practices and coping with changing climate was named as a key constraint by both male and female focus group participants.

Absolute majority of focus group participants have positive attitude towards picking and sales of wild botanicals: 91% stated that picking wild botanicals is an important activity for them. 73% are satisfied and 91% want to collect more. Both female and male farmers think that there is a future in selling wild botanicals and they are going to continue.

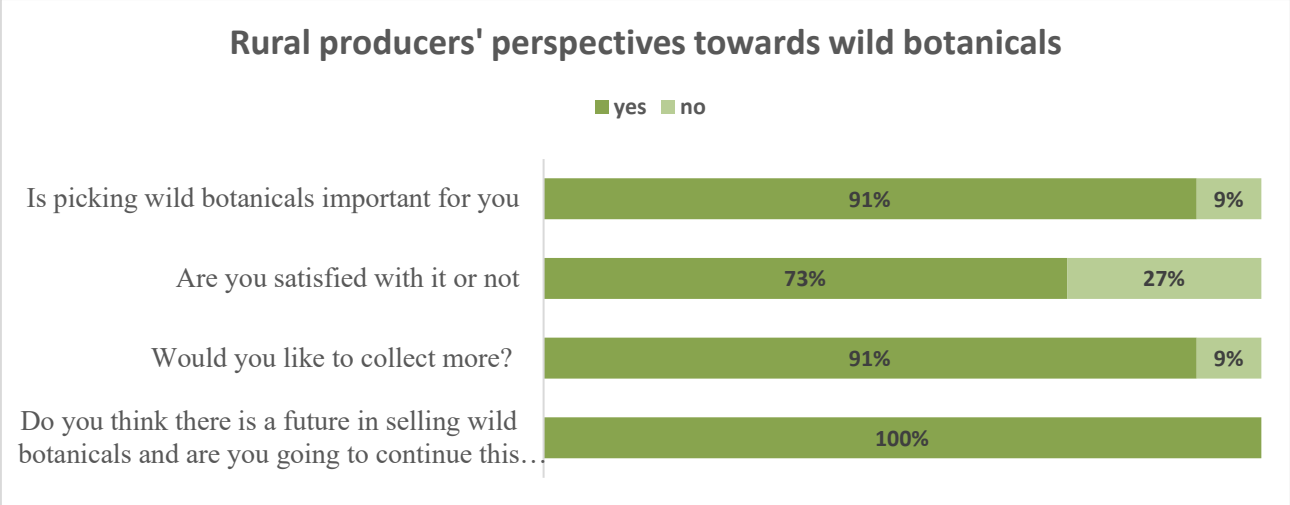

Figure 5: Rural producers' perspectives about wild botanicals

Focus group participants mentioned that they can diversify the wild plant picking and sales in the case of demand. It was also revealed that rural producers need tailored trainings and courses about the sustainable collection practices of wild botanicals. They also have enthusiasm for and are interested in learning more about environmentally sustainable farming techniques and sustainable natural resource use practices which will allow them to cope with a changing climate. They believe that increased knowledge and awareness about these issues will result in increased efficiency, sustainable picking and safeguarded increased income.