



The Nisikohla Sisno Powder enterprise: Promoting a locally rooted NTFP business

(A Case Story)

Sisno Plant.
Photo by RECOFTC

Introduction

Rural livelihoods in the mid hills of Himalayan regions of Nepal are deeply connected to agriculture and forest-related activities. Forests are not only natural resources but also a cornerstone of daily life. Within this context, non-timber forest products (NTFPs) have long been part of traditional practices, supporting household needs, community well-being, and income generation. They are collected for medicinal purposes, consumed as food, and increasingly sold in local markets. NTFPs represent the second most important source of cash income for households in Nepal, with more than 160 species being used commercially (Subedi, 2006). However, many NTFP enterprises face challenges such as weak business models, limited market access, and inadequate management structures.

The present case study focuses on a women-led enterprise dedicated to collecting, processing and commercialising

Urtica dioica, a naturally occurring medicinal plant that thrives at elevations between 1,500 and 3,500 metres and is locally known as sisno. The evolution of this specific case provides an opportunity to learn about the complexities of developing community-based forest product enterprises. By reflecting on both achievements and challenges, it provides insights into the factors that influence the sustainability, resilience, and long-term viability of such enterprises. The lessons from this case can inform future interventions seeking to transform traditional knowledge and locally available resources into sustainable livelihood opportunities.

The activities described in this case study were carried out under the Innovation Lab Nepal project, implemented by the WISONS of Sustainability initiative in cooperation with its local partner, RECOFTC.

Case Description

The Nisikhola Sisno Powder enterprise is based in Nisikhola-5, a ward within the Baglung District of Nepal. The rural municipality is characterized by its rich biodiversity and varied habitats, with altitudes between 800 and 3,000 meters above sea level. The geographical setting provides favorable conditions for the growth of a wide range of NTFPs, including Sisno.

The raw materials for Sisno powder production are primarily sourced from two adjacent forests: the Indreni Community Forest and the Srijana Community Forest. Both forests are managed by community forest groups. Unlike many other crops, Sisno does not require cultivation, as it grows abundantly in forests, along riverbanks, agricultural fields, and barren lands.

Traditionally, communities harvested the tender young leaves of Sisno and prepared them as a dish by combining them with corn flour, timur (*Zanthoxylum armatum*), and garlic. While initially used directly for the preparation of food, the leaves are now mainly dried and ground into a fine, nutrient-rich powder. This powdered form can be easily stored, transported, and incorporated into various dishes, expanding its usability beyond traditional culinary practices. Sisno products are increasingly available through organic markets, restaurants, hotels, and Ayurvedic institutions.



Harvesting of the Sisno Plant. Photo by RECOFTC

The Nisikhola Sisno Powder enterprise was originally registered in 2013. At that time it consisted of 17 women members, who received support to acquire essential equipment, including a drying machine and a disc mill for processing dried leaves into powder. In 2016, the local government supported the construction of a concrete facility for machine handling and product storage. However, the enterprise ceased operations following the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. Wholesale purchasing stopped, individual sales declined, and unsold inventory accumulated, creating financial pressure. As a result, the enterprise was unable to continue compensating raw material collectors and eventually closed.

Beyond the immediate impacts of the pandemic, the enterprise already faced structural challenges. Limited understanding of business record-keeping resulted in unfavourable documentation practices and trust issues among collectors and members. Weak leadership, limited financial literacy, and inadequate management systems further reduced transparency and weakened the enterprise's sustainability.

Within the framework of the WISONS Innovation Lab a series of interventions were proposed with the aim of revitalizing this enterprise by taking advantage of the already existing infrastructures (both physical and organizational) as well as the lessons learned during the first operation phase between 2013 and 2019/2020. Two main insights from that phase were set as starting point for the new endeavour:

1. Sisno holds significant potential to enhance economic opportunities by drawing on traditional practices.
2. Future success required strengthening the business model, governance structure, transparency, and market linkages.

Revised Business Model within the Innovation Lab Nepal

Building on lessons learned from the previous enterprise, a new business model was developed based on Sisno's unique selling proposition: a 100% natural, wild-harvested Himalayan product that is rich in nutrients, free from chemicals, and sustainably collected under community forest permits.

The new business model focused on improving product packaging, strengthening market linkages, and establishing clearer operational responsibilities. Sisno powder was planned to be packaged in three sizes: 100 g, 500 g, and 1 kg, allowing the enterprise to serve both wholesale buyers and retail consumers.

Two primary distribution channels were identified: The first involved contractual agreements with potential buyers such as hotel chains, Ayurvedic clinics, and health-food retailers. The second focused on direct sales through farmers' markets, particularly in urban centres such as Pokhara and Kathmandu, where Sisno is only available seasonally and in few quantities.

The enterprise required investment in repairing and complementing equipment, safety materials, packaging and branding materials, legal procedures, and training. The total projected investment was NPR 438,310, including existing equipment. The investment aimed to ensure that the enterprise could process, package, and market Sisno powder while meeting quality standards.

The production plan initially targeted 500 kilograms of Sisno powder in the first year, increasing gradually to 700 kilograms by the third year. Initial market analysis estimated the price of Sisno powder at around NPR 700 per kilogram.

Revised Governance Structure

In the framework of the Innovation Lab Nepal, the Sisno enterprise was established as a community-based micro-enterprise. This structure enables the organization to apply for financial support from local government programs and ensures community ownership of the business.

The renewed enterprise aims to harness the traditional knowledge of rural women, contribute to community income generation, create local employment opportunities, and improve livelihoods.

The enterprise is governed by a nine-member Executive Committee composed entirely of women, elected by the general membership. The committee is responsible for financial oversight, resource mobilization, strategic decision-making, and management of the enterprise's operations.

The general assembly serves as the highest decision-making body, reviewing financial reports, approving budgets, electing committee members, and making decisions related to investments, business expansion, partnerships, and profit distribution.

The Executive Committee manages the entire Sisno value chain, including sustainable harvesting, processing, and commercialization. Raw materials are collected from community forests and other available areas using sustainable harvesting practices. The leaves are washed, dried, processed into powder, packaged, and marketed according to established quality standards.



Members of the women-led community-based micro enterprise.
Photo: RECOFTC

Implementation Process

The intervention followed a sequence of activities between 2024 and 2025:

Initial desk reviews and market analysis identified the potential of Sisno powder, existing challenges, and key areas requiring improvement. The analysis identified opportunities to diversify products using the existing

processing infrastructure, including dried vegetables and other local organic products.

To address the shortcomings in the commercialization capacity of the previous enterprise, RECOFTC Nepal engaged Raithane Agriproducts Nepal to support institutional development, production, promotion, and market linkage activities.

A capacity development training was conducted from February 2–4, 2025, targeting ten local women entrepreneurs and the newly formed Executive Committee. The training focused on institutional development, record-keeping, enterprise management, and technical and legal aspects of operating the Sisno Powder Enterprise.

Following the training, the enterprise developed a business plan, adopted its constitution, and registered as a community-based microenterprise under the Small and Cottage Industries category at Nisikhola Rural Municipality. The enterprise was officially recognized as “Nisikhola Laghu Uddham Sisno Powder Udhayog” and completed administrative requirements, including opening a bank account and getting certified by the “Department of Food Technology and Quality Control” by January 2026.

In November 2025 RECOFTC Nepal, in collaboration with Raithane Agriproducts, organized a multi-stakeholder meeting in Kathmandu to promote Sisno powder among potential buyers. Different organic product stores, food manufacturers, and traders participated, and the enterprise presented product samples. Several stakeholders expressed interest in supporting the business once production increases.

Results and Progress Status by June 2026

After the intensive support period, the project team maintained communication with the chair person of the executive committee and the founder of the enterprise to track progress and provide support when needed. Administratively, the enterprise is recognized as a legal economic entity with an elected Executive Committee and an agreed constitution defining member responsibilities. And operationally, the enterprise possesses the necessary mechanisms, equipment, and machinery to collect, process, and package Sisno powder. However, several challenges remain regarding full-scale production and market expansion.

The enterprise started production in November 2025. Until June 2026 only around 100 kg have been produced, of which approximately 50 kg were sold through different channels, including Raithane Agriproducts, local markets, and overseas sales. In terms of market linkage, Raithane Agriproducts has committed to purchasing 100–150 kg of Sisno powder annually and supporting distribution through its networks. The product has also been introduced through weekly markets and demonstration events. However, formal agreements with larger institutional buyers, such as hotels and Ayurvedic institutions, have not yet been established.

The remaining unsold stock has created uncertainty among the women members regarding additional production. Limited marketing activities, seasonal harvesting constraints, and internal team dynamics have affected the enterprise's ability to achieve its production target. The monsoon season further delayed harvesting because Sisno leaves became too wet for collection and processing.

These difficulties exacerbated mistrust feelings among some of the members of the enterprise, which were linked to the previous experience of the enterprise. Moreover, while the aim of reviving the business model was supported by all members and motivation seemed to be given, real commitment and leadership was difficult to secure. The new committee seemed to have doubts if this team would successfully establish the markets to earn expected profits. This doubt resulted in poor performance as a team.

Some young new member(s) have showed high levels of motivation and commitment during the interventions. However, the leadership of such younger member(s) seems to be not fully legitimized within the group. This is due to prevailing social norms, that people do not tend to trust young ones' capabilities. Also, having young people in the leadership position became challenging because they would also hesitate to direct/command their elders. This challenge due to societal norms led to the inability to make decisions and act in unity within the team. These uncertainties and inconsistencies within the team created more risks to establish their business and have commercial relations with buyers in bigger markets such as Pokhara and Kathmandu.

Other than this, the women in this area are trapped in a vicious circle of time poverty. They are dependent on agriculture and livestock rearing as their major livelihood source. In this context, engaging in the enterprise for alternative income was a matter of spending some of their dedicated time in the enterprise operation (raw material collection, powder production, record keeping), affecting their subsistent livelihood. Hence, though they had motivation to revive the enterprise, time management became a challenge for these women in the long run to successfully operate the enterprise.

Lessons Learned

The Sisno enterprise project has provided **several important lessons** for future interventions.

1. Genuine motivation and ownership are essential to ensure **long-term commitment**, i.e. that local actors are able to keep making efforts needed to face the different types of difficulties that can arise on the way towards the goal of building a functioning business.
2. The existence of **previous experiences should not be directly rated as a favorable situation** for securing ownership. While such a situation can provide a good basis for strengthening existing capacities, a more profound reflection of

the local actors about the lessons learned and a more detailed assessment of their motivation is needed in order to really take advantage of those previous experiences.

3. Before providing support, it is essential to **understand internal leadership dynamics, team composition and community motivation**. This assessment can help design appropriate strategies and anticipate potential challenges.
4. Having a **dedicated focal person** for communication between the community and implementing organizations can strengthen accountability, monitoring, and trust-building. Reaching a good level of trust and fluent communication is important in order to provide punctual but strategic support during the first 6 to 12 months in which the local enterprise is expected to rump-up its business model.
5. The **seasonal nature of Sisno** harvesting highlights the importance of product diversification. Exploring other local products with similar value chains, such as Timur and turmeric powder, could help maintain year-round operations and improve economic returns.
6. Capacity-building efforts should go beyond the delivery of training by ensuring ongoing support for the practical application of business management, record-keeping, financial literacy, governance, and market development skills. Training was provided across these areas, but translating the knowledge and skills gained into improved enterprise performance and stronger market linkages remained challenging. Future support should therefore place **emphasis on application, mentoring, follow-up, and facilitation of market linkages**.
7. Similarly, **engaging multiple private-sector partners and value-chain actors** can increase product visibility, improve market competition, and create stronger business opportunities.
8. Finally, **legal procedures** such as registration, product testing, certification, and labelling **require significant time**. Future interventions should incorporate these processes into project timelines from the beginning.

Conclusion

The presented case is an example of a community-based enterprise that aims at building economic opportunities for local people by using a non-timber-forest-product (Sisno) and combining the traditional knowledge and practices for its use with new technological options for its processing. Already during its first phase (from 2013 to 2019/20) the experience of this enterprise highlighted the multidimensional challenges of such an endeavor. From the onset, our project adopted an integrative approach that considered not only the processing capacities of the enterprise, but also the governance structure, administrative skills as well as improving marketing and access to commercialization channels. However, the

discussed results illustrate the importance of taking into consideration also the social dynamics within the target communities, associations or groups, when designing interventions aiming at promoting such local business.

Rural communities in Nepal possess rich traditional knowledge related to forests, native plants, and their uses. This knowledge has cultural, ecological, and economic value. Developing community-based forest product enterprises based on the sustainable use of such knowledge and natural resources offers significant potentials for increasing the economic development possibilities of rural populations. All interested and relevant actors – from the local communities, through civil society organizations, private companies up to governmental agencies at all levels – should embrace a holistic perspective when aiming at promoting locally-rooted NTFP business. One that ensures not only genuine participation and ownership by the local actors, but also that starts by building understanding about the social dynamics within the local organizations involved in those endeavors.

This case study is part of the series “Sustainability Solutions for Mountain People and Landscapes,” developed within the WISIONS Innovation Lab Nepal. The aim is to promote an integrated approach to strengthening the livelihoods of people living in mountain communities. Each factsheet provides information on specific sustainability solutions in the fields of energy and landscape management that have shown promising potential or improving the livelihoods of mountain people but have a low level of adoption in Nepal and other mountain regions. The information is tailored to the specific context of Nepal’s mountain landscapes and offers practical insights and guidance for scaling up the application of these solutions. Additionally, it presents an integrated approach that begins with an understanding of the opportunities and challenges faced by mountain communities, enabling the systematic deployment of synergies between solutions from the energy and landscape sectors.

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