

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

## Forest Policy and Economics



journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/forpol

# Livelihoods-conservation initiatives: Evidence of socio-economic impacts from organic honey production in Mwingi, Eastern Kenya



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#### ARTICLE INFO

Keywords: Community based livelihoods-conservation initiatives Farmer cooperatives Organic certification Organic honey Rural livelihoods

#### ABSTRACT

Community-based initiatives with a double objective of improving rural livelihoods and conserving forest resources face the challenge of balancing the two objectives without creating trade-offs. Our study investigates the socio-economic performance of a community-based initiative that uses cooperative-driven organic certification of honey producers in Mwingi, Eastern Kenya, to improve livelihoods and acacia woodland management. Data were collected through a household survey of 303 beekeepers from 38 organic certified and 16 non-certified beekeeper groups. More data were collected using key informant interviews, informal conversations, participant observation, participatory rural appraisal, internal document reviews and secondary sources. The survey included questions regarding beekeepers' livelihood activities, organisation involvement, quantity of honey produced and sold, net honey income and welfare perceptions after certification (2015) and before certification (2008), retrospectively. The results showed minimal to no significant impacts of certification on households' incomes, honey quantity or sales prices, as the general development, though positive, followed that of the noncertified households. The lack of impacts stemmed from failure to monitor and technical backstopping of certified beekeepers, a poor cooperative management and mistrust among the members and Mwingi organic cooperative board. The board mainly bought honey from a non-certified middleman thereby undermining the Mwingi organic cooperative's values as well as their own potential niche market. On a positive note, the cooperative's honey market place, receiving customers from afar, has the potential to support the development of a niche organic market outlet. However, this requires reconnection of the cooperative to its members, trust rebuilding and transparent management of the cooperative. The study exemplifies a case of community-based livelihoods-conservation initiative which did not take local community capacity development and more general long-term project sustainability into consideration.

### 1. Introduction

The dual objective of local, economic development and natural resource or biodiversity conservation has been the focus of many studies and the subject of a longstanding debate between conservationists, social scientists and practitioners. Among the many published studies on the topic, a geographical pattern emerges. In Africa, studies focus on community based natural resource management, governance and intitiative evaluations (Dave et al., 2017; Brown and Lassoie, 2010; Chomba and Nkhata, 2016; Makupa, 2013; Matose and Watts, 2010; Nkhata and Breen, 2010; Ouko, 2018; Shephard et al., 2010). In Asia, Harbi et al., (2018), Chou et al., (2018), Beauchamp et al. (2018), Ulambayar et al. (2017), Brooks and Tshering (2010), Ormsby and Bhagwat (2010) and Saito-Jensen et al. (2010) uncover community use of natural resources, their management and obstacles such as elite capture. Other livelihoods-conservation and natural resource management studies draw from the US (Belton and Jackson-Smith, 2010), Australia (Howard, 2010), South and central America (Forcella and Huybrechs, 2015; Rodríguez-Izquierdo et al., 2010; Malkamäki et al., 2016). These cases focus generally on evaluation, detailed understanding of processes of local community livelihoods and achievement of conservation objectives.

The above studies portray experiences, and some suggest best practices for livelihood conservation/ natural resource management interventions. For instance, Shephard et al. (2010) from an evaluation of a livelihoods-conservation community Hippo sanctuary shows local people's livelihoods improvement and reduced threats to Hippos and improvements in other biodiversity species in the area. Forcella and

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.forpol.2018.09.010

Received 12 January 2018; Received in revised form 12 August 2018; Accepted 11 September 2018 1389-9341/ © 2018 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

Huybrechs (2015) indicate mixed results for both conservation and livelihoods and call for a need to balance the social and environmental outcomes. Brown and Lassoie (2010) and Chomba and Nkhata (2016) indicate that the success of the initiatives they studied was constrained by poor institutional structures and elite capture. Makupa (2013) finds many challenges including low community involvement, lack of transparency and accountability among others as key hinderances to fully achieving improved livelihoods and conservation at community level. Matose and Watts (2010) also find that the initiative's goals at community level can be hampered by poor accountability processes. Ulambayar et al. (2017) find no differences in the social outcomes of a community-based rangeland management intervention and indicate a need to achieve livelihood outcomes as key incentives for conservation. McShane et al. (2011) note that it is challenging to balance conservation and human wellbeing and suggests principles that could be essential while thinking about trade-offs. Other studies also highlight the role of the communities in livelihoods-conservation initiatives e.g. (Dyer et al., 2014; Kothari et al., 2013; Ouko, 2018; Shephard et al., 2010; Sunderlin et al., 2005). Many studies report negative outcomes from the initiatives (Brown and Lassoie, 2010; Chomba and Nkhata, 2016; Forcella and Huybrechs, 2015; Krishnakumar et al., 2015; Malla, 2000; Mekonnen, 2000; Ouko, 2018). While a few report positive results (Fomété and Vermaat, 2001; Shephard et al., 2010). Major reasons for successful community based livelihoods-conservation initiatives have been identified (Beauchamp et al., 2018; Brooks et al., 2012; Muriithi and Kenyon, 2002; Ouko, 2018; Scherr et al., 2002; Shephard et al., 2010). They include among others; thoroughly developed project designs, local community capacity building and considering the context of the project areas (Ibid). Based on a systematic review, Oldekop et al. (2016) indicate that livelihoods-conservation initiatives might achieve the dual goals in case the local population benefits.

Sunderlin et al. (2005) Identify three major areas for further research related to livelihoods-conservation initiatives: i) geographic location of poverty and remaining natural forests; ii) the potential role of forests in poverty alleviation, and iii) possibilities for compatibility of forest-based poverty alleviation (FBPA) and forest conservation. Filling in these gaps would enable an understanding of the extent to which forests and their resources can contribute to poverty reduction and of the compatibility of the objectives of FBPA and forest conservation. Almost a decade later, Wunder et al. (2014) note that there is still need for research moving beyond annual income measurements to comparable temporal data that could contribute to further understanding of livelihoods-conservation initiatives and their contribution to poverty reduction. Opportunities that result from FPBA for smallholders often include some form of certification of forest product, which provides for a niche market. Angelsen and Wunder (2003) note that it is vital to understand these niche market potentials for certified forest products and more broadly, market-based livelihoods-conservation approaches. Angelsen and Wunder (2003) also called for better understanding of the conditions required for poor households to capture such opportunities in the face of market liberalisation and globalisation.

Forest niche markets and certification of forest products is a path that has been trodden previously world-wide and has been mainly driven by foreign aid in the developing world. Forest certification, for example, was a response to the degradation of forests and deforestation globally, especially in the tropics (Auld et al., 2008). The certification targeted the private sector as most international forest policy negotiations had failed (ibid). Forest certifications originally focused on timber but now include non-timber forest products-NTFPs (Mallet, 2001; Pierce and Laird, 2003). It also includes certified crops grown adjacent to forests, such as shade coffee (Takahashi and Todo, 2017). Recent studies on forest certification show how forest certification schemes in Tanzania have improved livelihoods and forest biodiversity (Kalonga et al., 2016; Kalonga and Kulindwa, 2017). Regarding NTFPs certification, four main certification schemes have been fundamental; Organic, Fairtrade, product quality and forest management (Auld et al.,

2008; Mallet, 2001). As a way of improving smallholders' livelihoods and conservation of resources, organic farming was introduced in main stream development. Within the forest-livelihoods arena, organic certification involves NTFPs to enable communities living adjacent to forests obtain premium prices from the certified NTFPs or products they obtain from or adjacent forests such as honey, brazil nuts etc. (Ayuya et al., 2015; Duchelle et al., 2014; Girma and Gardebroek, 2015). For instance, Duchelle et al. (2014), in a study of three certification schemes involving Brazil nuts, found that organic certification was associated with better post-harvest handling and higher prices. Girma and Gardebroek (2015) indicate higher prices received by organic beekeepers involved in the sale of honey in Ethiopia using contracts. The authors further note that partnerships with various agencies including cooperatives, donors, government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are essential to maximize participants' benefits from such livelihoods-conservation initiatives. On the other hand, such partnerships can also proliferate undesired results such as over dependency of beneficiaries on partners which creates a dependency syndrome within local communities that might affect the sustainability of the initiatives (Ayuya et al., 2015; Brown, 2001). Even more complex is when the livelihoods-conservation initiatives use multiple instruments to improve their success for the beneficiaries to reap such as cooperative and organic certification forms. Such complex forms would often involve a range of actors besides the certified producers, such as NGOs, public authorities and other operators in the value chain. All these hold a stake, which may influence the socioeconomic and environmental benefits accruing to the producers (Klooster, 2006). There are great prospects of such market-based livelihoods-conservation initiatives to yield positive environmental and livelihoods improvements (Scherr et al., 2002). However, there are still mixed results which necessitate further studies (Ayuya et al., 2015; Girma and Gardebroek, 2015; Lowore et al., 2018; Lowore and Wood, 2014; Raina et al., 2009).

In unravelling the livelihoods-conservation linkages in initiatives where cooperatives and organic certification are part of the impact pathway, it is crucial to understand what influences and facilitates poor households' opportunities for benefit capture at the local level (Angelsen and Wunder, 2003; Sunderlin et al., 2005). This paper attempts to contribute to the current discourse on livelihoods-conservation initiatives and their impacts on the livelihoods of communities living adjacent to protected areas (forests and game reserves). The overall aim is to advance the understanding of the status and impacts of locally certified organic beekeeping on the livelihoods of the certified smallholder beekeepers living adjacent to protected areas and within acacia woodlands as forest buffer zones. A further objective is to understand the factors that influence the ability of smallholder beekeepers to benefit from such an organic honey production and marketing system. As such, the study advances the understanding of outcomes of livelihoods-conservation initiatives by exploring the local circumstances of Mwingi organic cooperative and its members and factors which might have underlaid the observed conditions. This is done through a case study of acacia woodland organic honey production and marketing from Mwingi, Eastern Kenya formally known as Mwingi honey marketplace, hereafter Mwingi organic cooperative. The Mwingi organic cooperative was itself developed from a donor funded programme aimed at reversing the problems of forest resource loss (Chapeyama, 2008). The programme was based on the assumption that the management of the national forest reserves would be strengthened due to improved incentives for collaborative forest management with communities. In Mwingi, the programme activities involved organic beekeeping for honey production and butterflies for silk meant to improve people's livelihoods thereby incentivizing forest conservation (Chapeyama, 2008). Our study finds that there is minimal to no significant impacts of organic beekeeping on households' incomes, honey quantity or sales prices. Though there is a general positive development trend in terms of honey prices, honey sales and total income of the households, the non-certified households slightly outperform the

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