THE HONEY INDUSTRY IN MALAWI

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Development of a commercial honey sector in Malawi was started in the late 1980s by the German Agency for Technical Cooperation, (GTZ)-sponsored Malawi German Beekeeping Development Project (MGBDP). Before that, honey was sourced from wild colonies and from local style hives such as log hives, bark hives and clay pots. Honey was used at home, bartered with other items, or sold by the spoonful to neighbours or passers-by. The MGBDP project concentrated activities in the northern region of Malawi and over ten years, promoted the adoption of top-bar hives, facilitated the organisation of clubs, gave training in production and processing, and helped establish revolving funds for equipment purchase. The Beekeepers' Association of Malawi (BAM) was set up to facilitate marketing and to enable beekeepers to negotiate better prices for their honey.

Unfortunately BAM collapsed - just a year after its inception - due to mismanagement, and this had a severe negative impact on beekeepers' access to markets. In recent years a number of traders and consolidators have stepped into the vacuum created by the collapse of BAM, but other challenges remain.

It is estimated that the honey industry in Malawi comprises 5,000 small-scale producers owning 10,000 hives (75% of which are of local style). The volume of honey which is formally traded (and can therefore be measured) is 75-80 tonnes. It is estimated that the northern region produces around 60% of honey produced in the country, and this is attributed to the efforts of the MGBDP. The national demand for honey - estimated at 200 tonnes per year - is not met.

The current average farm gate price for honey is €0.9; US$1.2/kg. The most common marketing system is for processors and consolidators to collect honey from designated collection points, established by clubs and associations. Processors incur high costs associated with transporting raw honey and packaging materials, as well as the finished product, which means the retail price is beyond the reach of an average Malawian. Besides transportation costs, it is generally felt that farm gate prices in Malawi are higher than the market can sustain. Furthermore, while the bulk of the honey is produced in the northern region, the biggest market is in the central and southern regions.

A number of initiatives are being undertaken by government, NGOs and the private sector, intended to increase the supply of honey to the market. One such initiative is the Community Partnerships for Sustainable Resource Management (COMPASS), a USAID-supported project whose purpose is to enhance household revenue through community-based natural resource management initiatives that generate income as well as providing incentives for sustainable resource use.

One challenge COMPASS is addressing is the need for good beekeeping extension work. It was realised that although the MGBDP had laid a foundation for beekeeping development, there was no committed extension service delivery system. In most project sites, competent extension workers, mainly from the Department of National Parks and Wildlife, are available, but are unable to perform their duties due to resource constraints such as no transport. Instead of simply providing resources to these officers, COMPASS introduced what is considered a more sustainable way of delivering extension services to beekeepers. The approach involves private service providers working with beekeepers on a fee-for-service basis. Having been used to donations and handouts, communities do offer some resistance to this system, but slowly the rationale is being appreciated. This is a sure way of reducing donor dependency and making communities self sufficient.

To date 150 beekeeping technical service providers have been trained country-wide. Some of the private extensionists have already started training beekeepers at a fee, and so far encouraging results have been achieved.

Other COMPASS interventions include linking the beekeepers to sources of finance (banks and microfinance institutions) to help them access funds for the procurement of equipment. To improve product quality, COMPASS has also been working with the Malawi Bureau of Standards to develop national honey standards for the country. COMPASS is working with private-sector service providers to address the problem of limited business management skills. Some local honey processors are also providing embedded services to beekeepers, such as the supply of hives, bee suits and other equipment on loan. The honey processors are in the process of forming a body that will oversee the operations of the sector.

(left) Tapika honey
The initiatives mentioned above are likely to culminate in the supply side of the equation being increased, and it is anticipated that farm gate prices will, as a result of this, stabilise at somewhere below €0.7; US$1 per kg. If, for some reason that does not happen, Malawi may experience an influx of honey, in bulk or retail packs, from other countries, which would spell doom for local producers. In recent times there have been efforts to sensitise and convince beekeepers to adopt top-bar hives. These hives are made from local plantation timber planks and need waterproof roofing felt that has to be imported. Due to this cost element, few beekeepers in the country can afford to buy top-bar hives. 75% of hives currently in use are local style. The cost of each top-bar hive varies from €11-18; US$15-25 per hive. These hives are 4-5 times more expensive than the local style hives, but fail to give 4-5 times more honey. This factor alone points to the need for hive designs that are low-cost but at the same time are more productive than the local hives.

BEEKEEPING IN MZUZU

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The Malawi-Germany Beekeeping Development Project was mainly carried out here in the northern region of Malawi. Only a few people were trained by the project and many of these staff members have nowired or died. The few that are acting as trainers are those that have interest to assist beekeepers. For instance, where beekeeping started, around Nyika National Park and Vwaza Marsh Wildlife Reserve, there are more than 100 beekeeping clubs, but since 2005, when one of the trained and experienced officers died, production has dropped. At the Mzuzu Nature Sanctuary our role is public awareness of wildlife conservation and environmental management. Our activities include provision of demonstrations at an apiary site, where we have kept ten Malawi standard hives since 2002. The Sanctuary continues to receive requests weekly for technical assistance from aspiring beekeepers on how they can start or improve their practices.

I worked as an Extension Officer in Nyika National Park with the beekeeping clubs and had on-the-job training from the beekeeping officers. Since then, I have developed an interest in beekeeping, although I still feel inadequate in some areas of the trade. BID Journal 82 arrived in March 2007 when I was just back from our monthly apiary inspection. What I saw that day inside one of the hives was a shock: lots of small and large beetles on the combs together with bees. We removed the beetles, but some remained in the hive due to the poor equipment we used. The colony was not as strong as compared with when we were harvesting in December 2006.

Thank you for BID Journal. These assist me personally and the other officers, as well as the 30 beekeeping clubs. The students from wildlife clubs who visit us for environmental education programmes are also assisted with information on bees.