THE IMPORTANCE OF HONEY PRODUCTION FOR LIVELIHOODS

Worku Abebaw Asressie, Save the Children UK, PO Box 176, Woldiya, Ethiopia

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Honey production has long been an integral part of the subsistence economy of rural communities in Ethiopia. Traditional beekeeping is usually a complementary farming activity with diverse socio-economic importance. Ethiopia is the ninth highest honey producing country in the world, with a total production estimated at 44,000 tonnes valued at US$76.6 (€57.6) million (FAOSTAT, 2007) and is the largest producer and exporter of honey and beeswax in Africa. This means that bee products are very important as a source of foreign currency (MOARD, 2003).1

Increasing honey production

Government attention in Ethiopia has focused on producing greater quantities of quality honey and improving marketing as part of the drive to increase GDP. This approach has become part of the national poverty reduction strategy, expected to contribute to increased household incomes and improved household food security (MOFED, 2002).2 Since 1984, beekeeping projects have been supported by the government and NGOs. As a result honey production has become an increasingly important income-generating business. Our study area3 is known for its abundant, naturally white honey known as Sekota/Var. This is a particularly drought prone area so the study endeavoured to quantify the role of honey production and beekeeping practices on the livelihoods of resource-poor farmers, and particularly in cushioning household incomes from natural shocks.

Ninety four households were surveyed, and our findings show that beekeeping plays a very significant role in the dietary, socio-cultural and economic life of rural people. Most significant survey results

Project beneficiaries have been beekeeping using donated frame hives provided by the government extension service, targeting the poorest households with least food security. Three production systems were identified, based on the type of hives used: local style, transitional and frame hives. 86% of honey production came from local style hives, with the remaining 14% of production from (more recently introduced) frame hives. Beekeeping was practised by a substantial minority of households (28.6%), with over 19,000 honey bee colonies. On average, frame hives generated 13 kg of honey while local style hives produced 5.5 kg. Annual honey harvest per household of 37.5 kg generates a mean annual income of US$77 (€56), and with larger producers earning up to US$486 (€366).

Honey production provides a sustainable income source requiring only low-cost investment and using the natural resource base. Most people (87.2%) sold their honey immediately after harvest to pay for family clothes, tax and other contributions including children’s schooling costs and food.

The survey revealed that the contribution of honey sales to livelihoods was substantial, on average providing 13% of household income. To put this into context, the sale of the honey crop provides enough money to buy almost 20% of the annual cereal consumption of a five-member household.

Some of the respondents have been so successful that they have constructed new houses or changed from huts with grass thatching, to iron sheet roofing. Thus their social status has also increased due to an increase of income. However, external support for hives, in the form of revolving loans or hive donations, is required if frame or top-bar hives are being promoted.

Uses of honey

Most honey is used for brewing tej, the popular Ethiopian drink often served in tej houses and at weddings. Women brew tej and selling it gives them a personal cash income as discussed by Bradbear (2003). Nevertheless, there were concerns among tej consumers that these days sugar is replacing honey in tej.

Conclusion

Beekeeping projects have a positive impact towards achieving livelihood security among the poorest community members, while not negatively impacting other community members. Market-oriented activities like honey production are being integrated into the current productive safety net programme (PSNP5) which aims to assist resource-poor households. These initiatives enable people to escape from abject poverty by diversifying their livelihoods, earning cash, and building assets. This is the first step for resource-poor people to break through dependency syndromes such as external food aid, and to develop confidence in their own efforts to move out of poverty.

Frame hives provided as project support to resource-poor farmers

Market Promotion Day for Yewag Wollela, the local brand name for pure and white honey harvested in the Sekota Area, North Ethiopia
While the value of beekeeping for household income is frequently mentioned, this is often done as a logical assumption rather than using empirical evidence. This academic study adds quantitatively to our knowledge of the valuable role of beekeeping in rural livelihoods. The introduction of modern technology and improved management through capacity building (skill training efforts) is often based on an inherent assumption that these will improve yields. However, without external support, frame hives and accessories are not affordable to resource poor farmers. These hives are not easily available in rural areas. Hives need to be made available free of charge, or interest free with revolving loans. Local style hives by contrast are freely and cheaply available.

MOARD = Ministry of Agriculture & Rural Development
MOFED = Ministry of Finance & Economic Development
Sekota Woreda, Wag Hemira administrative zone in Amhara State
Sekota Mar is the Amharic term for honey from that locality
Productive safety net programme (PSNP) is a government programme aimed to provide a more constructive form of aid, so that chronically food insecure people are able to save and invest towards a food-secure future (USAID).

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References

Worku Abebaw Asressie studied at Bangor University, UK. This article is an extract from his MSc thesis (2009).

WHITE HONEY GROWS SCARCE AS BEES ABANDON ETHIOPIA'S PARCHED PEAKS

Drought forces bees into valleys in search of flowers, meaning they produce yellow honey. Rare white honey from Ethiopia's highest peaks is in danger of disappearing, according to beekeepers in the Tigray region. "No rain for the flowers," said Ashenaf Abera as he stood on his rocky, parched slope in the northern Ethiopian region whose farmhouse inspired Bob Geldof to stage Live Aid in 1985. "The bees need high-altitude flowers for the white honey. When they cannot find them, they go to other plants and produce yellow honey."

Abera is paid US$96 (€75) a month to look after 270 colonies for the Asira Metira monastery, one of 12 religious centres in an area whose 4th Century rock churches are among the wonders of the world. "We know about bees," said honey seller Sheikh Mohamed Ahamedin. He grips a large screwdriver with both hands to ladle a dollop of thick and lumpy white honey out of a plastic bucket. It is snow-white, tastes sweet and is waxier than yellow honey.

"The price is the highest it has ever been because of scarcity," said Ahamedin who sells white honey for US$11 (€9) per kg. Last year he charged US$7 (€8). Ethiopia is Africa's biggest honey producer and the world's fourth biggest beeswax exporter. After coffee, gold and cowhide, bee products are major contributors to the economy, especially through exports to Italy, where white honey is considered a delicacy.

Bee products are the only export item produced by Tigray's impoverished 4.6 million people, whose region is said to be one of the world's worst hit by climate change. Such is Ethiopians' love of honey that apitherapy clinics offer treatments for many ailments. The region's bee population is also in decline, with climate change and deforestation to blame. 150 years ago Tigray was a wealthy, lush region when its King, Johannes IV, brought a carpenter from Italy to fashion his imposing throne from local juniper wood. Wars with Egypt, Italy, Sudan and neighbouring Eritrea led to deforestation. "Without the trees, the rainwater - which seems to be declining - does not run off the limestone in a useful way. That is why we end up with a landscape of rocks and little else," said local water expert Leul Fisseha.

Alex Duval Smith, The Observer 18 April 2010