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Challenging Poverty in a Healthy Environment: Local Communities Living along Mtwapa Creek, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

A Gallup poll released by the local Daily Nation Newspaper on 20th April 2011 revealed that Kenyans are among the unhappy people in the world with many of them struggling to survive. Out of 124 countries in the world, Kenya was ranked 13th among the countries with the largest number of people who are dissatisfied with their lifestyle. A good number of locals are bracing themselves for the adverse effects of the current high rate of population growth coupled with the results of climate change (that are further worsened by human activities), by attempting to come up with alternative and diversified livelihoods that ensure conservation of the environment. This work outlines a case study of how the youth and women living along Mtwapa creek are working round the ecological clock to fend for their daily basic needs whilst conserving the environment. In this paper, we share the experiences and the results obtained from the authors' personal contact with the local communities backed up by desktop reviews.

KEY WORDS: Mtwapa creek, mangroves, community participation, livelihoods, conservation

Introduction and Problem Statement

Kenya is one of the countries with a wide gap between the poor and the rich. Only 6 per cent of Kenyans admit that they are satisfied with their lifestyle, while almost 80 per cent are struggling to survive and a further 16 per cent living in agony. This problem is further aggravated by the high population growth with the country currently adding almost one million people per year to its already big number. The high population growth rate in Kenya has adversely impacted on the spending on infrastructure, health, education, environment, water, and other social and economic sectors by overstretching their capacities and that of the natural resources that support the development of these sectors. The situation is expected to be graver in the near future with the

predicted impacts of climate change on the environment and the livelihood of communities.

Mtwapa is situated to the North of the Kenyan coast and is one of the towns constituting Kilifi County. Despite the area being endowed with lots of marine and terrestrial resources, the county is a replica of the desperate situation all over the country, with residents being generally poor but surrounded by wealthy tourists and rich golfers flying in and out of the sprawling Golf Estate. Mtwapa boasts a marine park (which extends further North off Watamu and Malindi towns) and the mangrove¹ forests that provide a haven for tourist attraction. Lack of diversification in sources of livelihood has, however, driven the local communities (who are mostly farmers and fishermen) to depend largely on direct exploitation of the available natural resources. It is this overreliance on natural resources that poses serious threats to the sustainability of their existence. The locals for instance depend on the mangroves for their multiple products, both wood and non-wood. In addition, there is clearing of areas in the riparian zones to pave way for development, causing serious degradation of the mangroves. Continued degradation of this ecosystem has in turn resulted in declining fish catches as well as poor quality wood and wood products, which further worsens the problems of local poor communities.

Fighting Poverty whilst Conserving the Environment

Plaza-Moralde (2007) stated that the people's participation in any development project is the major factor that determines its failure or success. With poverty pressure pushing the local communities to extremes, it has become difficult for the Kenyan Government to sustainably manage the ever-decreasing natural resources. Striking a balance between the harvesting of natural resources, to meet human diverse daily needs, and conservation remains a great challenge to the government. During the last decades however, natural resource management in general and forest management in particular have changed in Kenya. Previously, forests were managed for a single commodity and for the general public, but lately more and more emphasis has been put on the multi-functionality of forests. There is a growing consensus that communities living around and deriving the benefits from mangrove ecosystems should be involved in the co-management of the mangrove forests right from the planning phase

¹ Mangroves are trees that grow within the intertidal areas along the coastal strips of the tropics and subtropical regions.

through decision-making to implementation in order to promote a sense of ownership in the management process. The Kenyan government has extensively provided for involvement of local communities in forest management through Community Forest Associations (CFA) as detailed in the Forest Act No. 7 of 2005 and Policy Sessional paper No. 9 of 2005. This was instigated by the realisation that conservation and sustainable management of forests was not practical without the active participation of the local people.

Even with these fine legislative tools, lack of awareness of the multiple benefits that accrue from the mangrove ecosystem and inadequate understanding of the legislation have continued to contribute substantially to mangrove degradation as locals are still focusing on the net economic returns at the expense of ecological and environmental benefits. As a result of training on the values of mangroves and simplification of the legislation, as well as an awareness program by Kwetu training centre and other government agencies, the local community around Mtwapa creek have embarked on fighting poverty by coming up with alternative means of livelihood that would supplement environmental conservation efforts. Two community groups living adjacent to the mangrove ecosystem were targeted on a pilot basis. Both groups had a well-developed constitution as well as a leadership structure that is shown in the organogram below (Figure 1).

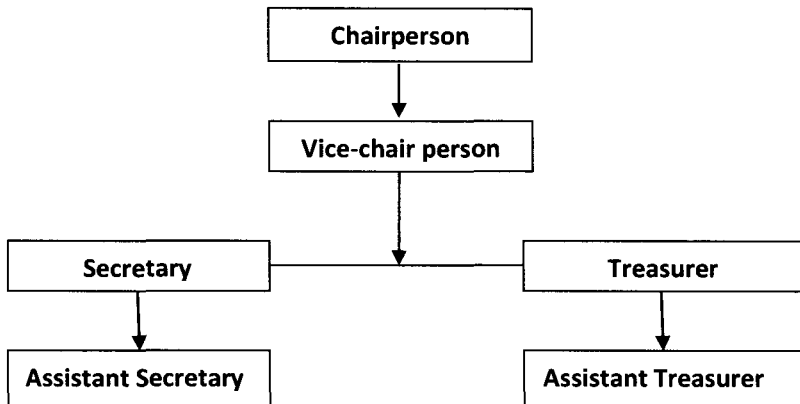


Figure 1. Leadership structure of the community groups

Abent Mangrove Conservation Group

Abent youth group in Mtepeni village has a membership of fifteen people comprising of thirteen men and two women with average age of 25.3 years. The group was started in the year 2000 under Kwetu Training Centre² initiative to raise awareness on HIV/Aids by reaching out to the general community through poems and drama. The group was legally registered in 2001 as 'Abent Youth Group'. The group later split from the umbrella group and was re-registered in 2009 as 'Abent Mangrove Conservation Group' after a section of the members developed an interest in mangrove conservation. Abent Mangrove Conservation Group' diversified their objectives to be three fold; to create awareness of HIV/AIDS, to come up with various alternative livelihood options for the members and to conserve the environment.

Abent Mangrove Conservation Group', engaged in their first planting exercise in 2003 and currently boasts a total of ten thousand mangrove seedlings planted to date. With funding support from UNDP through Kwetu training centre, the group has also been facilitated to engage in bee keeping activities in the mangroves. In addition, the members also carry out small-scale fish farming in the bare tidal flats within the mangrove ecosystem. The group cultures milk fish and prawns in 5 earthen ponds with dykes reinforced using sacked soil. To further stabilise and prevent erosion of the dykes, they plant mangroves on the dyke slope. The members harvest fish products twice a year, which they sell locally. Through the group activities, the youths are kept busy and the minimising of idleness and lowliness consequently contributes towards ensuring a morally upright society.

Even though mangroves can regenerate naturally giving rise to saplings which can potentially form the future forest, the conditions in the bare tidal flats³ are much harsher, thus limiting the success of this process. Even replanting has often failed in such areas as the seedlings become scorched and wilt at a tender age. Moreover, natural regeneration is a relatively slow process and in most cases when an area is deforested, planting is encouraged to facilitate faster reestablishment of a forest. By planting mangroves along the dykes of the fish ponds dug in the bare tidal flats, the group assist mangroves to further colonise

² Kwetu Training Centre for Sustainable Development is a grassroots Non-Governmental Organisation that is involved in initiatives that empower communities to embrace innovative strategies for livelihood enhancement, natural resources management and climate change mitigation as well as safeguarding human rights and dignity.

³ Bare tidal flats are naturally occurring desert-like areas within the tidal flats where mangrove trees are not growing, yet in most cases such areas are surrounded by mangrove trees giving the picture of a playing field in the middle of a forest.

areas which cannot be colonised naturally, hence increasing the forest cover.

Illegal logging of mangroves has proved to be a daunting challenge in Mtwapa owing to the difficulty of surveillance and monitoring in the muddy substrate that characterises the forest as well as the inadequate human, technical and financial capabilities of the Kenya Forest Service⁴. The members of Mtepeni youth group offer security against illegal cutters as they engage in their activities in the mangroves. The Kenya Forest Service has further enhanced community surveillance by authorising the youth group to report any illegal operators to the government. The members have however complained of the licensed cutters misusing their licences due to lack of follow-up from the Kenya Forest Service, hence thwarting their own conservation efforts.

Upendo⁵ Women's Group

Gender disparities are widespread in access to and control of resources, in economic opportunities, in power, and political voice. Women and girls bear the largest and most direct costs of these inequalities and their contribution in many areas of development has often been described as “invisible”. A study in Samal island among the Barangays on participation in a mangrove rehabilitation project, indicated that women had limited participation especially in decision making and planning but did most of the work in establishment and maintenance of the new mangrove stands. However, the inclusion of women's perspective in development has been instituted in the past few decades. The women of Mtomondoni have gone against the odds to make the lives of their families better by diversifying their livelihoods. Upendo Women's Group is a group of women living in Mtomondoni village along Mtwapa Creek. This group started in 2004 and was legally registered in the year 2007. Upendo women's group has twenty-six members (twenty women and six men). The female members have an average age of 40.2 while the age of males could not be ascertained since the men were not available for interview. The women are mainly the head of their households due to widowhood, jobless husbands or minimal earning from husbands who are mostly farmers or fishermen.

⁴ Kenya Forest Service is a State Corporation established under the Forest Act 2005 to conserve, develop and sustainably manage forest resources for Kenya's social-economic development.

⁵ Upendo is a Swahili word which means love.

The group was initially formed as a merry-go-round⁶ to give credit facilities to its members through a campaign dubbed, 'savings for change', with technical assistance from Pact Kenya⁷. Latter the group incorporated other objectives that included 1) to, achieve communal unity in doing conservation work together, 2) to learn from one another various life skills and techniques and 3) to diversify on the means of earning income by the members. During an interview with the members, it emerged that the women were more co-operative in performing the group's activities than the male members of the group. However, the women were reluctant to send away the men from the group stating that they could probably assist in providing security to their group projects.

The group is currently involved in the farming of maize, small-scale vending of basic products, rearing cattle and small-scale organic farming. They have taught each other skills such as soap making, basketry and cake baking that generates funds to sustain the group activities. They offer credit facilities to each other when in dire need and the repayment is done at reduced and affordable interest rates. The women established terrestrial tree nurseries to provide planting stock for a home-to-home tree planting exercise. In order to boost their revenue base, the extra seedlings are sold to the willing customers, who include home-owners and school clubs. The planting of terrestrial trees is intended to reduce pressure on the mangroves through provision of the wood products needed. The women also venture in bee keeping in the mangroves to maximise returns from the mangrove ecosystem without necessarily cutting the trees. These activities have boosted the women's confidence in the face of a society that still consider them inferior. Most of them boast of being the main providers in their families and being able to participate in conserving the environment, which they are well aware of the need to project.

The Missing Link

The undertakings of these groups have however not fallen short of challenges with financial constraints, poor leadership skills and inadequate government support. Lack of cooperation by some members

⁶ A system in groups where individuals contribute money and give to one member and this is done for each of the members in turn a row after which the cycle is repeated.

⁷ Pact Kenya is a Kenyan NGO whose mission is to enable citizens and communities in Kenya and neighbouring countries to live a life of dignity by strengthening individuals and organisations to be effective agents of positive change.

of the groups was also reported as a major drawback to the realisation of the groups' objectives. This was more conspicuous among the Abent youth group than in Upendo women's group who seemed to show much more solidarity even whenever a member was bereaved. However, with the women still regarded as the minority in the community, Upendo group reported more problems anyway. Most women lack confidence amongst themselves due to public intimidation by men and this led to others quitting the group. Others have left due to impatience resulting from the slow rate of returns or discouragement from members who have quit. Moreover, some men do not allow their wives to get involved in such activities, claiming that they create favourable conditions for immorality to spread. Illiteracy among the local women also hinders maximum development as they lack management, team building and financial management skills.

Apart from the fact that the activities of these groups have impacted positively on the lives of the members' families, it is becoming increasingly acceptable that the future of Mtwapa mangrove forest could be in the hands of such community conservation groups. However, it is not an easy task to convince the local communities of the indirect benefits derived from conservation of the environment and this has limited the perimeter within which the impact of the group's activities can be felt. Conservation of a resource requires the involvement of all, whether benefiting (directly or indirectly) or not. More groups therefore need to come on board and more awareness needs to be created in all the villages around the creek.

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