Kakamega forest, Kenya: Poverty alleviation, conservation, health and a medicinal plant

Kakamega Forest Reserve is the only surviving rainforest in Kenya. Due to high poverty levels, adjacent communities have depended on the forest for their daily needs and income, leading to its destruction. The Muliru Farmers Conservation Group was formed in 1997 by 30 local community members to conserve Kakamega forest through promotion of agroforestry. The group’s impact was limited due to inadequate financial and technical capacity. In the year 2000, the group formed partnership with advanced research and development institutions to create sustainable, alternative, nature-based means of generating income for improvement of local livelihoods and forest conservation.

Ocimum kilimandscharicum is an indigenous plant traditionally used for treatment of colds, flu, coughs, and for repelling mosquitoes and protecting stored grains. Using modern scientific methods, the community was assisted to develop and register a new medicinal brand of products named ‘Naturub’ for alleviating flu, cold, chest congestion, aches and pain, insect bites and muscular pain. They were also assisted to domesticate and commercially cultivate O. kilimandscharicum. Currently over 360 rural households cultivate it on smallholder farms adjacent to Kakamega forest. In 2005, the group established a facility near Kakamega forest for processing O. kilimandscharicum plant material into essential oil for manufacture of Naturub balm and ointment. The products’ packaging bears a distinctive message on conservation of biodiversity. The products are sold in urban and rural areas in Kenya.

What did we achieve?

A new brand of registered medicines was developed and commercialized based on: an indigenous medicinal and mosquito repellent plant; traditional knowledge and practices; modern science; and partnership between the rural community, advanced research and development institutions and private sector.

Rural community members have attained modern technical and scientific skills in industrial processing and production, and entrepreneurial skills including sales, marketing and management. They own and manage the enterprise.

400,000 pieces of medicinal products named ‘Naturub’ have been produced and sold in urban and rural areas of Kenya. The products have been accepted in the market-place and are competing with major international brands. Total sales stand at US $ 70,000.

Community-based domestication and commercial cultivation of a wild traditionally-used plant was achieved. The plant is now grown as a high-value crop on small-holder farms adjacent to Kakamega forest. Total acreage increased by 700% from 2.6 hectares in 2005 to 20 hectares in 2010.

New employment has been generated particularly for women and youth. Women’s voices and participation have been enhanced. Women comprise 55 % of the participating members. 50% of the leadership of the community enterprise comprises of women.

Alternative income and improved livelihoods have been provided to more than 2000 local community members who used to depend on Kakamega forest products for most of their needs. Income of participating community members increased by up to 300%.

‘Naturub’, the new nature-based medicine produced by the community enterprise, has contributed to improvement of health of over 0.5 million urban and rural people in Kenya and beyond.

Awareness about the value of biodiversity and the need for its conservation has been enhanced. Community attitudes towards biodiversity conservation have improved positively. Dependence on forest resources has reduced. Participation in forest conservation activities and advocacy has increased.

Maridah Khalawa, community member

“We used to depend on Kakamega forest for most of our needs. This initiative has improved our lives. It has provided us with alternative income and made us aware about conservation of the forest. We do not destroy the forest anymore. Instead, we help to protect it.”

What are the Millennium Development Goals?

1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
2. Achieve universal primary education
3. Promote gender equality and empower women
4. Reduce child mortality
5. Improve maternal health
6. Ensure environmental sustainability
7. Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
8. Develop a global partnership for development

Good Governance

Good governance is about how decisions are taken and implemented in a state. Originally, the connotations of this notion included an efficient public sector, accountability and controls, but also decentralization and transparency. Today, good governance means more: it is not just confined to government action alone but also encompasses the interaction between government and civil society.