

Market access for Cameroon honey: challenges and opportunities for Cameroon honey to access European markets

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Abstract: *Natural resource dependent communities have more often than not been coerced to conserve their surrounding resources by introducing alternatives for income and employment. In this respect, honey production has developed extensively in Cameroon as a conservation-based Non-Timber Forest Product. The honey sector already provides income in rural areas for the resource dependent communities, employing a cross-section of the population including older men, women and youths. Exploiting this position further is only possible by expanding market channels to enable the honey producers to walk their way out of poverty. Potential for income generation and employment in the honey sector can be enhanced by raising product awareness and setting commodity standards. In this light developing standards and a Residue Monitoring Scheme for export of Cameroon honey to Europe could benefit potential exporters as well as give the sector a boost, given that the sector can competitively produce export quality honey.*

Keywords: *honey, market channels, commodity standards.*

Introduction

Cameroon, often described as a picture of the whole of the African continent, has a market for honey and bee products which is equally diverse. Since 1990, beekeeping has been encouraged as a strategy for conservation of vegetation. The number of hives owned by a majority of bee keepers is generally few (5-15), though there are a few beekeepers with hundreds of hives. Honey and bee products market chain development are increasingly gaining grounds as having impact on income and employment. Honey supply comes from a range of geographical areas with large variations in demand and supply. There equally exists diversity in product packaging and distribution strategies. Honey potential for income generation and employment can be enhanced by raising product awareness and setting commodity standards. In this light developing standards and a Residue Monitoring Scheme for export of Cameroon honey to Europe could benefit potential exporters as well as give the sector a boost. This paper seeks to address the challenges of small holder beekeepers in Cameroon in accessing export markets for honey such as the EU market with strict standards. In other words, how can the sector be organized such that both non state actors and government are able to work towards putting in place standards that enable small holder bee keepers to market their produce at the international level?

Methodology

A sector wide analysis for honey was undertaken based on a review of secondary data. This gave insights into the information and knowledge gaps in honey and bees products marketing. There was therefore the need for a survey of the Cameroon honey market. The undertaking of a honey marketing survey in 2005 had as aim to gain a clear knowledge on the national market for honey and bee products, assess competitiveness of honey from various regions of Cameroon in terms of price, packaging, product quality and promotion. Following this survey was a honey promotion event organized at the end of 2006 involving all stakeholders in the honey sector. The principal outcome of the Cameroon honey marketing forum was the existence of unexploited potential in the sector. Trajectories for the exploitation of this potential were identified.

Outcome and discussions

The Government of Cameroon has portrayed recognition of the importance of the bee farming sector in poverty alleviation, notably with the creation in 2006 of a department in the Ministry of livestock in charge of bee farming and other non-conventional livestock. However, concrete action in the development of the apiculture sector is still to be undertaken. The development of this sector therefore still depends on the efforts of the civil society. At national level, a honey exporters union has been created to work with the Government Ministry towards submitting an application for a honey residue monitoring plan as a requirement for honey exports to the European Union.

With support from national and international development organizations, honey actors are being organized towards revitalizing the hitherto moribund National federation of bee farmers. A well organized bee farmer's movement will facilitate mobilization of large volumes of honey to supply export markets as well as putting in place a traceability system. Quality is an important pre-occupation both for producers and consumers. Producers want to ensure that honey sold in the market is consistently of high quality, while consumers have fears and preconceptions about the purity of some honey sold in the market. Honey collectors ensure the water content of the product is acceptable by measuring with a refractometer. Farmers are also trained on good practices to have good quality honey such as when to harvest, how to process and transport. However, for export to the European Union, chemical analysis is required to determine various residue limits. The absence of an accredited laboratory in Cameroon requires that for honey residue monitoring scheme, European based laboratories have to be contracted to analyze honey samples from Cameroon. This is a costly process for small producers and potential exporters who want to venture into honey export. As such, the bee farmers would have to lobby with development organizations to mobilize funds to pay for the sample analysis.

Honey production in Cameroon is mainly organic. This means that the product can access organic and fair trade markets. There are several actors interested in the honey export business. However, the absence of a national honey residue monitoring scheme as well as organic and fair trade labeling means that this export market opportunity is not being exploited by bee farmers in Cameroon. Improvements in the quality of wax extraction is however creating scope for export of bee products as there are no requirements with respect to certification in the export of wax. Bee farmers are now increasing their income with the clustering and selling of good quality organic wax to exporters. In 2007 forty tons of wax was exported from Cameroon to the European Union.

Honey currently employs approximately 20,000 farmers in Cameroon, generating an annual income of about 4,000,000 Euros. The contribution of the sector to the national economy can be further enhanced if the Government of Cameroon is fully engaged in supporting the development of the sector, both economic and conservation value. As such, bee farmers will be more engaged in conserving the natural forests so as to continue carrying out the bee keeping. Trajectories for development in this sector include the putting in place of a viable national association of bee farmers that will work with the government to set up a honey residue monitoring plan for Cameroon and quality assurance towards producing honey that meet the requirements of the export market.

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