Livelihood diversification: The role of charcoal production in southern Malawi

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Africa’s charcoal sector generates an income for millions of rural and urban households involved in its production and trade. Aside from an economic contribution however, there has been little attention to how the sector contributes to broader livelihood components. Benefits to individual producers are one of many positive aspects of the charcoal industry that are poorly understood and overlooked in favour of environment arguments. This study focuses on the pathways to prosperity theme, as a better understanding of producers’ livelihoods is required if charcoal policies are to benefit the rural poor. 75% of urban growth across Africa is expected to occur in small urban areas, with populations of less than 1 million; yet there is little evidence to suggest that their markets are comparable to larger cities. Here we examine the livelihoods of charcoal producers who supply Zomba, a small city in southern Malawi. Drawing on data from 4 focus group exercises from 3 case study villages and 42 semi-structured interviews, we identify direct (e.g. financial) and indirect (e.g. improved access to goods and services, opportunities for livelihood diversification) benefits that contribute to reducing producers’ vulnerability and improve their livelihoods. Under certain conditions, women were more dependent on charcoal production than men as they had fewer alternative income generating options available to them. Livelihood benefits were dependent on resource availability, but their longevity is uncertain given there is currently no management of charcoal resources in the region. Enforcement activities, exacerbated livelihood risk and vulnerability, which undermined market and livelihood security and the overall environmental sustainability of the sector. In addition to contributing new empirical data to the largely under-developed charcoal-livelihood literature, this study also generates new information on the charcoal markets of small urban areas, and produces important local-level data on charcoal in Malawi.