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Social Science as a Catalyst for Participatory Planning in Natural Resource Management - the Case of Kakamega District in Western Kenya

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Abstract

The Kakamega District in Western Kenya is only one of many remote areas in Eastern Africa which has to cope with a host of environmental, economic as well as social challenges. It is the most densely populated district in Kenya with over half of its people living below the poverty line. Although livelihoods are highly diversified, agriculture predominates. Income from main crops and other on-farm use of household assets barely suffices to sustain rural households. Food insecurity is a common feature for many of them, hunger one of the most mentioned shocks badly affecting households across income strata, and remittances sent by family members working abroad are mostly used for compensating poor harvests in terms of buying additional food and caring for essential household needs.

In trying to cope with and adapt to this fundamental challenge, people put heavy pressure on Kakamega rainforest by extracting fuelwood and timber and by using it as a grazing ground for their cattle. In addition to that, the land use in forest adjacent communities is partially changed to other on-farm income generating activities like agro-forestry or bee keeping practices. But not all rural households do have the individual adaptation capacity to re-direct their activities. In an effort to stimulate self-assessment of problems and potentials, participatory land-use planning workshops were conducted in several communities near Kakamega Forest. Starting with an assessment of assets and resources at household as well as community level, people went ahead identifying alternatives and options in line with their needs and capacities. They started to discuss and develop community-based projects which serve the double purpose of income generation and natural resource protection. The paper gives an insight into how social scientists can assist to re-frame socio-economic conditions for sustainable management of land resources while acting as an intermediary between local communities, regional administrations, and international partners.

Keywords: Adaptation capacity, food insecurity, participatory land use planning, pressure on forest