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“Development on the margin”

(No) Future for Rice in Wayanad: Exploring the Social-ecological Transformation Processes and its Impacts on Marginalised Farmers in South India

ISABELLE KUNZE¹, LYDIA BETZ¹, PRAJEESH PARAMESWARAN PRAJEESH², SUMA SUMA T.R.²

¹*Leibniz Universität Hannover, Institute of Environmental Planning, Germany*

²*M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation, Kalpetta, India*

Abstract

Agrobiodiversity is a complex resource that demands the interaction of actors and environmental resources for its maintenance. It is understood as the part of biodiversity involved in agriculture and food production. The decline of agrobiodiversity on a global level is linked to the loss of ecological knowledge and decreasing food security on a local level.

This research examines the social-ecological impacts of land use change at the case of rice cultivation in Wayanad, Kerala, South India. Wayanad district – the land of paddy fields – is an ecological and cultural (bio)diversity hotspot in which around 17% of the population belong to tribal communities who have traditionally been involved in rice cultivation systems. However, changes in land use associated with the replacement of traditional rice varieties by banana and other cash crops as well as real estate modify agricultural systems and affect small scale farming communities. This results in the loss of crop related diversity on the one hand and the loss of local agricultural knowledge on local rice systems on the other.

The interdisciplinary research aims to investigate the social-ecological linkages of agrobiodiversity at the case of paddy cultivation in Wayanad. We are particularly interested in social-ecological changes happening in tribal community hamlets and how these influence agrarian relations and the agro-ecosystem as a whole. In order to grasp the complexity of agrobiodiversity, we argue for the need to foster interdisciplinary research and integrate insights from both ecology and rural development.

Two main research interests are at the centre of this inquiry: first, ecological knowledge and management practices and second, the multiple meanings of social-ecological transformation processes in Wayanad district in Kerala. Data were collected in three tribal communities in three different geographical locations. Thereby, we describe the interdisciplinary research process while focusing on the research design, participatory mapping and interview techniques as well as preliminary results. This research offers an initial response to social-ecological uncertainties which marginalised farmers currently face in Kerala.

Keywords: Agrobiodiversity, India, land use change, participatory methods, rice, social-ecological research, tribal communities