



Tropentag, September 9-11, 2020, virtual conference

“Food and nutrition security and its resilience
to global crises”

Commercial Agriculture, Multidimensional Poverty and Well-being in East Nepal

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Abstract

Numerous governments of low-income countries foster commercial smallholder agriculture to combat poverty and to achieve food security in rural settings. However, research has shown that the risks and benefits of agricultural commercialisation are often distributed unequally among the rural population. This research investigates the impact of commercial cardamom production on rural people's well-being in East Nepal using a mixed methods approach.

The qualitative findings presented at last years' Tropentag (“Commercialisation and the 'good life': Agricultural and social change in East Nepal”) suggested that most people benefitted from cardamom production in some way, but that inequality might have increased as a consequence of commercialisation. Now we add a quantitative layer, drawing from a panel survey with about 400 respondents in 2015 and 2018 to better understand the poverty and well-being dynamics in the study area. The sample includes women and men, farmers and labourers and covers a range of different ethnicities.

We are currently undertaking the data analysis and hence cannot give conclusive insights into the results at this point. Preliminary findings suggest a strong link of cardamom production with asset ownership but not with subjective well-being. Other variables we look at include food security, social trust, decision-making power and multidimensional poverty (an adapted version of the MPI with a focus on living standard). Changes in inequality seem less pronounced than expected, both regarding asset inequality and gender inequality.

The study exemplifies the value of mixed methods approaches: the qualitative findings enabled us to view agricultural change from the respondents' “hardship perspective”, while the quantitative analysis grants insight into the broader socio-economic dynamics. The next step will be to dovetail both strands into a holistic analysis of agricultural change.

Keywords: Commercial agriculture, mixed methods, multidimensional poverty, well-being