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Effect of COVID-19 on forest dependent households in Kenya: Does access to forest resources act as a safety net?

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Abstract

The disruption of COVID-19 on livelihoods globally has been undeniable, especially among marginalised groups. While existing evidence from SSA shows that forest communities are disproportionately affected by shocks, the understanding on how they were affected by COVID-19 and their corresponding coping strategies remains limited. We use a panel dataset of rural forest dependent households obtained from two survey waves during 2018–2022 (746 households) in Western Kenya to assess the effect of COVID-19 on livelihood activities and resultant coping strategies. We then analysed the data using descriptive and econometric techniques. Results show that COVID-19 negatively affected household livelihoods, including loss of wage employment for household members, decreased agricultural incomes, restricted access to farm inputs and agricultural markets. Households experienced a decline of household incomes from KES 104,305/annum in 2018/19 (\$802) to 39,588 (US\$ 304) representing a 37% drop. Key reactions of households in the study area to COVID -19 shocks include; extracting forest food products such as vegetables, honey and wild fruits, reducing household expenses, subsistence agricultural production, taking up odd jobs, borrowing from relatives and use of household savings. The proportion of households that extracted forest products increased by 6% from 2018–2022. Our findings show that the use of forest products helps poor households in cushioning against the effects of COVID-19 shocks. Forest products collection aids consumption smoothing while protecting asset depletion in the wake of covariate shocks. This makes the availability of forest resources a critical safety net. These findings suggest the importance of promoting sustainable resource extraction as a form of sustaining and cushioning households against future unforeseen occurrences.

Keywords: COVID-19, forest communities, Kenya , resilience, vulnerability