

# Bees for Development's Symposium on Research in Beekeeping and Sustainable Development

Tom Timberlake, UK Collaborative on Development Sciences

Eighteen years on from their last Symposium in 2000, in March the beekeeping and development community gathered from various corners of the world for **Bees for Development's Second International Symposium on Research in Beekeeping and Sustainable Development**.

This two-day event, organised in co-operation with the University of Reading's Global Development Division, brought together business owners, development practitioners and researchers to discuss the role of beekeeping in sustainable development. Speakers from Belgium, Brazil, Denmark, Ghana, India, Kenya, Uganda, and a range of UK institutions and organisations shared their research and practical experience from a wide range of projects around the world.

Dr Nicola Bradbear described how much has changed since the last Symposium. Beekeeping has become an increasingly common component of development projects, and for good reason. The practice allows communities to diversify their income and livelihoods with very little financial investment or risk. By simply managing a colony of bees, a beekeeper can harvest abundant nectar resources from natural habitats and crops, reaping the rewards with minimal effort. The resulting products – honey and beeswax – are easy to store and transport and can fetch a high value, if marketed effectively. Farmers in the area can also gain a number of additional benefits from the enhanced pollination of their crops.

Through a series of presentations, workshop sessions and informal events such as honey tasting, many of these topics were shared and discussed. What are the best practices for beekeeping in development projects? How can products such as honey and beeswax be marketed to obtain the best value for developing communities? What role does beekeeping play in the pollination of smallholder farmers' crops?

*Speakers and delegates at the Second International Symposium on Research in Beekeeping and Sustainable Development*



Does beekeeping really offer a pathway out of poverty? Lessons from years of practical experience and action research in these topics were shared amongst the participants.

In a keynote speech, David Wainwright shared his experiences of 25 years of marketing African honey in the UK. In 1983, he began buying forest honey from local beekeepers in North West Zambia and selling to markets in the country. This soon expanded to a business which now imports hundreds of tonnes of organic honey to the UK each year. His business has provided income and livelihoods to countless rural communities across the region, as well as providing a strong incentive for conserving native forests.

Income generated from beekeeping can also have several important economic spin-off effects, as both Janet Lowore from **Bees for Development** and Professor Adrian Wood from the University of Huddersfield explained. Their research has shown that extra money derived from beekeeping is often used to invest in new agricultural products or technologies, educate their children or expand an existing business, helping to lift people out of the 'poverty trap'. In this sense, the development impacts may reach far beyond a bit of extra income.

We also learnt from Dr Kwame Aidoo of **Bees for Development Ghana** that keeping hives in cashew orchards can more than double nut yields in Benin and Ghana. When income from honey production was also taken into account, this translated into a two-three fold increase in a farmers' annual income. Dhara Patel from Under the Mango Tree, India echoed these findings when talking about their successful beekeeping and

crop pollination projects across India.

Tom Timberlake from the UK Collaborative on Development Sciences followed this up with an overview of how pollination in its broadest sense can contribute to international development. By understanding and managing pollination services, farmers in developing countries have the potential to substantially increase their crop yields and income, as well as safeguarding micronutrient supplies from foods such as fruits, nuts and vegetables. This has important implications for food security, poverty alleviation and global health. However, the limited pollination research across many developing regions limits our ability to understand and manage pollination. Tackling this geographic knowledge bias, addressing knowledge gaps and building capacity in this field may provide progress towards several important UN Sustainable Development Goals.

One of the main aims of this Symposium was to bring together many collective years of experience and reach some consensus on best practice for beekeeping in development projects. A clear conclusion from these discussions was that frame hives, preferred by beekeepers in Europe and North America and used by many development NGOs, are simply not effective in sub-Saharan Africa. Aside from being expensive and complex to use, they are not appealing to endemic African honey bees. The local-style log or basket hives, which have been used for generations and can be made at almost no cost from local materials, are far more effective.

Summing up, it was agreed that in the past human development has often come at a high cost to the planet. We know that this will not be sustainable in the longer term. Already we are experiencing widespread environmental changes such as climate change, soil erosion, over-fishing and pollinator loss which are all likely to negatively impact upon communities in developing countries.

It is important that development and environmental outcomes are more closely aligned, ensuring their long-term sustainability. The topics discussed in this Symposium – beekeeping, pollination and ecological farming - are approaches which can unite these two important goals of international development and environmental protection.

A suggested output from the Symposium was to communicate this knowledge to the wider development community to prevent further waste of funds and failed beekeeping projects.

There was also agreement that beekeeper training delivered by NGOs needs to be far more participatory, with longer-term follow-up support to unsure success.

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