Food security and poverty reduction in rural communities among the poor is one main agenda promoted by the Smallholder Market Project (SMLP). The beekeeping Value Chain is one of the core values of the SMLP. Farmers continue to be trained on the importance of beekeeping as it adds value in improving livelihoods and towards biodiversity conservation. Communities under the project have been sensitised on the interrelationship between biodiversity conservation and this has enabled most communities to become custodians of the flora as it enhances the benefits, they get through bee keeping.

Starting in 2016, the project now involves roughly 461 beekeepers that produce for the market in various communities. The results have been encouraging since community members have been able to raise household income and improve their food security. Working together the project has also brought the community closer together, dispelling the local myth ''you cannot live with bees, but must destroy them'', and ensuring bees are no longer an overlooked ecosystem service.

The project continues to train farmers on the beekeeping value chain as communities have since realised that with beekeeping their livelihoods are beginning to improve and this is why they warm up to the idea of turning into practical and sustainable business farmers.

Beekeeping not only produces a nutritious and high value chain that generates income, but it also creates employment opportunities. To date the project has been able to train farmers in the three regions where the SMLP operates in and many have realized this as a business.

 Nduku Lukhele and three other beekeeping farmers of Hlathikhulu in the Magele Chiefdom are amongst the farmers that have been trained by the SMLP. During this honey flow season, they have every reason to smile as they have harvested about 265 kilograms of honey. Being a team of four, each has expanded the business from only two boxes and to date they have a total of 56 boxes collectively. According to Lukhele, the breakthrough came after attending three weeks of intensive trainings that are conducted by ESWADE under the SMLP. The SMLP is funded by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the Global Environmental Fund (GEF). The training and capacity building included practical training on beekeeping, honey processing, business management and marketing.

“We are very grateful for the opportunity that has been availed to us by ESWADE. Beekeeping has always been something that is looked down upon in the community, says Lukhele. He also goes on to mention that this kind of business has always been seen as something that is associated with the poor. This is because communities lacked knowledge that through this business one can generate an income. Nowadays people look up to us as changemakers for we are now able to make a decent living through this business. The most incredible thing is that beekeeping does not require expensive startup material and also does not take up much land. Another advantage that we have realized as a community is that beekeeping promotes conservation. It makes us happy to realise that community members now know the importance of preserving trees as we were losing exotic species. Tody, there are no longer irresponsible fires that ravage the bushes in our community and we are all grateful to ESWADE for the continuous teachings.

 With the money generated from the 56 boxes, they have been able to take care of their families by affording them a decent living. Lukhele goes on to say that the money has enabled him to renovate his house, buy household furniture and send his kids to school.

“Another advantage is that we do not have to search for the market because ESWADE has linked us to formal markets such as Eswatini Kitchen and Bulembu honey which are both formal markets, he says”. Before the intervention of ESWADE he says they would sell by the roadside and would not be able to make much money since they were not able to realise the profits that they are making today. After the training ESWADE provided us with material to construct the beehives and a complete beekeeping startup kit with a beekeeping suit, smokers, knives and brushes and from the we have made history.

One other intervention is the Magele youth in action which is a youth group that consists of 20 individuals aged between 18 and 35 years old. Formation of this youth group came in 2019 after they were selected by the Magele Chiefdom and this was based on their capability and willingness to learn. This was during the MTN 21 days of yello care where a partnership with ESWADE was formed to help promote the youth to kickstart businesses. The youth has had to wait for a full year for the successful harvesting of their first ever honey produce.

“They say patience is a virtue and this is what we have had to exercise as the youth, said Nelisiwe who is the deputy chairperson of the group. “We have had to wait for a full year and we are ecstatic today that we are conducting our first harvest of four boxes. There have been several challenges as some members have had to drop out due to various reasons that include migration as some have had to further their knowledge in tertiary institutions and some have been offered employment in the country’s cities (urban areas).

The Magele youth in action also foresees a future in the planting of fruit trees. Fruit trees are known to provide pollination for the bees to be able to produce more honey. The SMLP has supported the youth group with about 180 trees that include avocadoes, pomegranate and peaches. This is done to support pollination as bees forage … . Through this the youth will be able to support their income as they will secure markets to sell the fruits. “With the sales obtained from the honey, the plan is to deposit the money into the bank. “As a group we already have formed an association and the proceeds that we will yield will go straight into the association’s account, said Nelisiwe”. For future interventions the youth looks at rearing indigenous chickens for commercial purposes.

smallholder farmers in Vikizijula Chiefdom, in the east of Swaziland, are turning to beekeeping as a new income-generating activity. The project is part of the Lower Usuthu Small Holder Irrigation Project of the Global Environmental Facility (LUSIP-GEF, which is financed by IFAD and the Global Environment Facility, and implemented by the Ministry of Agriculture and the Swaziland Water and Agricultural Development Enterprise.

Before the project, the community faced poverty, unemployment and drought. This led to many young people moving away from the Chiefdom in search of employment leaving families divided and a lack of people able to carry out hard manual labour.

The project covers both practical and theoretical aspects such as hive construction and honey processing. The keepers also receive raw materials to construct beehives and other resources such as protective clothing.

Following the training the farmers were responsible for the beekeeping with regular supervision by project staff and a refresher course every three months.

Results

Starting in 2016,the project now involves roughly 600 beekeepers and their families in the community. The results have been encouraging. Community members have been able to raise household income and improve their food security. Working together the project has also brought the community closer together, dispelling the local myth ''you cannot live with bees, but must destroy them'', and ensuring bees are no longer an overlooked ecosystem service.

The people of Vikizijula Chiefdom now refer to the bees as the' insect of hope'. The bees have created income from goods such as honey, which in turn contributes to school fees and home improvements for families in the community.

The average income per hive is USD 30 per harvest. Harvesting is done 4 times per season (which lasts for 4 months) with roughly 15 hives per household. This gives an average of USD 1 500 per household per season.

“Bees are not just a business to me, they are my life. I have been able to process and sell honey by-products such as floor polish and candles from the bees wax. We share the experiences learnt from this business with other families around the community. This has improved the income of my family and my community,” says beekeeper Mrs Thandi Mkhabela.

As beekeeping expands into other communities, it is creating a thriving economy. There are now specialist businesses established for the keepers such as beehive constructors and protective clothing tailors.

Together the community has overcome challenges such as beehive theft and stigma around bees themselves (traditionally they are associated with witchcraft) by forming the Honey Council. This council consists of one representative elected from each community to look at threats and issues that keepers might be facing. It provides a platform for the keepers to ask any questions or voice concerns they were facing as well as share knowledge with other beekeepers.

Success in this project has been attributed to several factors. Firstly beekeeping does not require much start-up capital, secondly it can be managed by children as young as twelve, the elderly and women. Thirdly, beekeeping has brought the community together. Struggling beekeepers were assisted by others to overcome challenges. The bees taught the community that if they work together they can fight poverty and hunger. It is the willingness and cooperation of the community in the Vikizijula Chiefdom that ultimately made the project a success.