The Impact of Economic Transitions on Poor People's Livelihoods in Coastal Zanzibar

Eva Tobisson

1. The Nordic Africa Institute, Rural and Agrarian Change Cluster, Uppsala, Sweden
eva.tobisson@nai.uu.se

Zanzibar’s economy has undergone considerable transitions over the past two decades accompanying integration into the global economy. From the perspectives of poor women and men in rural settlements on the south-eastern coast of Unguja (the largest island in the Zanzibar archipelago), two of the most significant economic forces that have affected their lives are tourism and commercial seaweed farming. This article focuses on their coping strategies to deal with the opportunities and constraints associated with these two external drivers of change. The tourist boom in the 1990s has been followed by a dramatic decline over the past decade. A major reason for the downward trend has been the Government’s decision to prioritize “high-spending” tourists and large hotel establishments. These priorities have contributed to making Zanzibar a less interesting destination for backpackers who visited the islands in large numbers in the 1990s. The rise and subsequent decline in the tourist business has had negative consequences for many coastal dwellers who invested their labour and capital in the kind of tourist establishments that attracted backpackers and who also benefited from the visitors use of village shops and services. The growing tourist business also gave rise to new forms of land transactions associated with the increasing economic value of land close to the beach. Seaweed production has been on a steady increase since it was introduced in the early 1990s. It is nowadays a crop produced almost exclusively by women. Although it entails hard work for limited cash returns, the crop has become highly significant for livelihood security and also for boosting the women’s empowerment. The women producers can decide how to spend the money from sales of the dried seaweed crop to multinational companies operating in the coastal villages. Although it is typically spent on maintaining and improving general family wellbeing, the income from seaweed cultivation may also provide the economic basis for a decision to divorce a husband. From the perspectives of women who experience poverty, economic diversification is the key to livelihood security while specialization in seaweed entails risks. Sustained agricultural production alongside seaweed farming serves the important function of providing the staple foods to feed the family and hence more secure livelihood options.