

The bitter side of honeybush: exclusion and inequality in South Africa's honeybush tea industry

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Honeybush (*Cyclopia* spp.), a plant endemic to South Africa, has gained international popularity in recent decades for its health benefits, particularly as a tea. Linked to the Khoi and San peoples (Indigenous Peoples of southern Africa who were living in the area before Bantu-speaking agropastoralists), who hold traditional knowledge related to its use, honeybush has been a source of livelihood for generations. Despite their vital role in developing this knowledge, these communities are excluded from the commercial boom. Why? The answers are rooted in South Africa's systemic inequalities.

Commercialization for whom?

Historically, honeybush was traditionally processed at home for household consumption or local sale, but since the 1990s the industry has shifted towards more formalized commercial structures. This shift has excluded local communities from value-added stages of production. Communities of traditional knowledge holders are only involved in the first stage of the supply chain: the wild harvesting of the plant. The harvested raw material is then sold to processing facilities where it is processed, packaged, and marketed. Without access to resources such as capital and technology, these communities are unable to process and market the tea themselves, leaving them with only a minimal share of the final product's value.

The story of the Zoar community

The village of Zoar is located in the Kannaland Municipality in the Western Cape province of the country. The story and challenges of commercializing honeybush in the Zoar community mirror the complexity of natural resource governance in rural South Africa. Within the community of Zoar, traditional leaders – who exist alongside state authorities in many rural villages of South Africa – play a key role in the governance of honeybush. They claim control over who gets access to communal lands, where wild honeybush is harvested, and how the benefits from its sale are distributed. Community members who are not part of the traditional authority can only benefit from honeybush harvesting by selling their labor as wild harvesters during harvesting season.

Governance issues are further complicated by the overlap and competition between two different authorities: the local Communal Property Association and the village's traditional

authority. In rural villages undergoing land restitution, South African law permits the creation of Communal Property Associations (CPAs). These are legal entities that can be democratically elected by community members and their primary purpose is to manage communal land on behalf of the community. However, under customary law—recognized by South African legislation—land administration is the responsibility of traditional authorities, who have historically fulfilled this role in rural villages. This situation leads to an overlap between the roles of the two institutions and creates a permanent power struggle. In Zoar, while communal land has been transferred to the CPA, traditional leaders claim their role as decision-makers in local resource governance. This conflict raises questions about which institutions can be considered legitimate and accountable for local resource management, such as the one of honeybush.

Government solutions fall short

Confronted with such inequalities, the South African government has recognized the importance of integrating marginalized communities into the commercialization of biological resources, such as honeybush, through initiatives like Access and Benefit-Sharing (ABS) agreements. These agreements are intended to ensure that local communities receive a fair share of the benefits resulting from the commercial use of biological resources, particularly when traditional knowledge is involved. However, the implementation of ABS agreements faces significant challenges.

One of the key criticisms is that the negotiation process for ABS agreements often favors more powerful, organized actors, leaving out less-recognized communities or individuals. In many cases, these agreements are negotiated between the industry and traditional leaders, who may not represent and be recognized by all knowledge holders. This situation risks perpetuating inequalities within communities, as those with less access to power or resources are excluded from benefiting from the industry.

Inequalities rooted in the country's colonial and apartheid history

A major issue with ABS agreements is that they do not address and challenge structural inequalities in access to resources such as land, capital and technology. By leaving power relations unchanged, they do not enable the development of community-based or -owned businesses.

The barriers to equitable inclusion in the honeybush industry are deeply rooted in South Africa's colonial and apartheid history. These historical injustices have entrenched patterns of exclusion, through land dispossession and inequitable resource distribution, which continue to hinder communities' access to the resources needed for meaningful participation in the development of a biodiversity economy.

A way forward

The commercialization of honeybush might offer economic potential for local communities in South Africa, but this can only be realized if deeply rooted inequalities are addressed. On one hand, reliance on traditional authorities for resource control and negotiations risks sidelining marginalized groups or individuals. On the other hand, mechanisms like ABS agreements fail to tackle the structural inequalities that underpin exclusion from the industry. A more inclusive approach to honeybush commercialization is needed – one that empowers communities through improved access to resources, supports community-owned enterprises, and ensures equitable governance structures.