

Household Income, Inequality and Poverty Outcomes for Uganda's Migrant Pit-saw Loggers

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Abstract

Throughout the tropics timber is harvested by both local and migrant loggers who identify forestry as one of their most important livelihood strategies. In the tropical high forests of East Africa the majority of timber harvesting is undertaken by artisanal pit-saw loggers. These skilled laborers are hired to fell merchantable timber and to process it into sawn wood at the location where trees are felled. Relatively little is known about the socioeconomic lives of East Africa's pit-saw loggers. They generally work in remote locations far from roads, and because the majority of East Africa's timber trade is illegal, it is difficult to locate and interview pit-saw loggers at the point of production.

The Bakiga of southwestern Uganda dominate the timber trade throughout Uganda taking up a variety of positions along the sawn wood value chain. They are best known for their role as skilled laborers or *fundis*, adept at felling large trees and sawing them into boards. Throughout the year *fundis* temporarily migrate from southwestern Uganda, one of the most population dense and land constrained places in sub-Saharan Africa, to areas with significant tracts of tropical high forest to harvest timber. There is very limited information about the contribution of this activity to the rural livelihoods of the Bakiga of southwestern Uganda, and the motivation for spending several months of the year away from home undertaking a very difficult and risky job.

In 2008 we conducted a household level survey in southwestern Uganda over a three week period. Our data collection coincided with the final break of the year before pit-saw loggers migrate north, or to the Ssesse Islands to complete three month contracts prior to their December holiday. Our sample includes households with active migrant pit-saw loggers (N=81), and households without migrant pitsaw loggers (N=99). Our aim is to understand the relative importance of this activity to rural livelihoods, including the sociocultural determinants of participating in this activity. We test several hypotheses regarding the reasons for Bakiga pit-saw loggers to engage in this livelihood strategy including: extreme land scarcity in southwestern Uganda; lack of assets and capital; lack of alternative livelihood strategies in their home region; high profits from working as a pit-saw logger; and social or cultural values that define their role as skilled laborers in the forestry sector.

We find that pit saw logging has a significant positive impact on the income of households in Kabale District. We find that migrant pit-saw logging is an important economic activity for the lower income quartiles of the income distribution, and that participation in this livelihood strategy reduces inequality among households in the region. The addition of pit-saw logging to income portfolios lifts approximately half of the lowest income quartile households into the middle income quartiles. We also explore the determinants of a household's choice to participate in migrant pit-saw logging. Having a large number of adult males in the household, having a relatively young household head, and owning relatively few assets are among the determinants of choosing pit-saw logging as a livelihood strategy.