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Coconut Crisis in Kerala?

Mainstream Narrative and Alternative Perspectives

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Coconut Crisis in Kerala? Mainstream Narrative and Alternative Perspectives

ABSTRACT

India's oilseeds sector, of which the coconut economy is part, experienced drastic changes in the wake of agricultural liberalization in the mid-1990s. A persistent coconut crisis 'narrative' emerged after sharp price declines in 2000-02 in which small farmers in the state of Kerala, India's main coconut producer, were identified as victims from the liberalized importation of cheap palm oil. This paper describes this crisis narrative based on a literature review of academic and official reports, and it challenges its problem analysis juxtaposing it with information from ethnographic research with local farmers and traders. The research indicates that local labour shortages and increased regional competition also had a strong impact on Kerala's coconut development, which varied from region to region. Furthermore, small farmers with their diversified livelihoods did not recognize a 'crisis' as such. Drawing upon the 'advocacy coalition framework', the paper also indicates reasons for the emergence and persistence of the coconut crisis narrative and it points to complex processes of restructuring social space in the age of globalization.

Keywords: Development Narrative; Advocacy Coalition; Agriculture; Globalization; Rural Livelihoods; South Asia

INTRODUCTION

Palm oil is a close substitute of coconut oil. As such reduction in tariffs facing import of palm oil would have direct implications for the coconut economy of India. The coconut economy of the country is now facing one of the worst crises in its recent history... (Harilal, 2010: 24)

The [coconut] business depends on palm oil imports *and a lot of other things*. (Coconut Oil-Copra Trader, Palakkad, 21 September 2007)

We began this research as a case study to examine the manifestations and influences of globalization and liberalization on the rural economy and rural livelihoods in different parts of India. A part of the literature on globalization and agriculture in India argued that trade liberalization policies since 1991, together with declining government support and investments in the rural sector, caused an agricultural

and agrarian crisis¹ (for example, Patnaik, 2005; Reddy and Mishra, 2009). This literature also suggested the edible oils sector, of which the coconut economy is part², has been particularly strongly affected by the opening up of India's economy: 'Perhaps the most dramatic illustration of the impact of import liberalization on domestic sectors in India is edible oils' (Gulati and Narayanan, 2007: 228). The once protected and subsidized domestic production of edible oilseeds has come under severe pressure from cheap importation of substitutes, particularly palm oil from Malaysia, as import quotas were lifted and import tariffs lowered in the course of India's agricultural trade liberalization since 1995 (Chand et al., 2004). As the quote at the beginning of this article indicates, this scenario was explicitly applied to the coconut sector too.

Indeed, after steady increases in area under coconut and productivity between 1960–90, coconut production in India has stagnated since 1995 (Narayana et al., 2006), and there was a sharp drop in the price of copra in 2000–02. The stagnation seems most significant in the south-western state of Kerala, the largest coconut producer in India, whose share has declined at the expense of the other southern states from 70 per cent in 1960 (Narayana et al., 2006) to currently 42.4 per cent of the total production (Kerala State Planning Board [KSPB], 2012). Kerala has the lowest productivity in India, a rate that is 12.3 per cent lower than the national average (KSPB, 2014a). These changes indicate that the coconut economy of Kerala is facing problems but they do not reveal how they affect people's livelihoods on the ground.

Because coconut trees still cover 40 per cent of the net cropped area in Kerala (KSPB, 2014a) and provide at least an additional source of income or subsistence for many livelihoods, we chose to situate our study on the relationships between globalization, liberalization and livelihoods in this state. Ethnographic research soon discovered that cheap palm oil imports are but one of many explanatory factors for the relative decline of coconut production in Kerala. The 'practical knowledge' (Scott, 1998) of local traders and farmers pointed to the additional importance of regional shortages of skilled labour

¹ 'Agrarian crisis' encompasses structural and institutional change, particularly through policy reform from state-centred to market-driven approaches. 'Agricultural crisis' is associated with declining production, access and use of inputs and profitability (Reddy and Mishra, 2009: xix-xx). The agrarian crisis is widely connected with farmer suicides in India, and Kerala in particular, where the majority of deaths have occurred in Wayanad District (Mohanakumar and Sharma, 2006; Münster, 2012).

² The commercially by far most important coconut product is copra (kernel of the nut), from which oil is extracted. Coconut oil is used in cooking and food processing, but also in soaps and cosmetics. Other commercial coconut products include coconut milk, grated coconut, coir (coconut fibre), coconut water and toddy (coconut wine).

to pluck the coconuts, adulteration practices and regional coconut market integration leading to increased competition in south India (Sportel, 2013a). Furthermore, coconut cultivators rarely referred to a ‘crisis’ of the sector. Perhaps most importantly, we came to realize that official discourses downplayed or ignored these additional explanatory factors for the changes in the coconut sector. This prompted us to interpret the discourse on Kerala’s coconut development as a ‘narrative’ (Roe, 1991), and more particularly as a ‘crisis narrative’ (Roe, 1994) that masks alternative perspectives and explanations and attempts to justify urgent intervention based on particular standardized policy recommendations (see also Ferguson, 1990).

The objective of this paper, therefore, is to unmask alternative, nuanced and spatially disaggregated perspectives on changes in Kerala’s coconut economy and to juxtapose them with the common macro-level and sectoral analyses. This is achieved through two interrelated undertakings. First, the article seeks to unravel the persistent crisis narrative related to Kerala’s coconut sector. What is the storyline of the narrative? Who are the actors behind it and what are their possible motivations? Second, the paper attempts to give voice to the diverse and complementary explanations by local traders and farmers that are largely absent in the official discourse. How do different local actors interpret the changes in Kerala’s coconut sector? How do they explain them based on their relevant practical knowledge? The purpose of this juxtaposition is to open policy space for local actors and for imagining alternative development programs and projects.

Through a spatially disaggregated account of Kerala’s coconut economy, we also aim to contribute to the growing body of critical, placed-based studies on globalization in the countryside (see, for example Basu, 2009; Cheshire and Woods, 2013; Murray, 2001; Woods, 2011; Woods and McDonagh, 2011). Thereby we draw upon the concept of the ‘global countryside’ (Woods, 2007) that is based on a relational understanding of space (Massey, 2005) and conceives rural areas in the contemporary era as a space characterized by the interconnectivity of rural localities and marked by the uneven geography of rural globalization within and between the global north and south. This relational view sees globalization as a process of ‘negotiation, manipulation and hybridization, conducted through but not contained by local micro-politics’ (Woods, 2007: 487); it helps avoid opposing and oversimplified popular, political and academic discourses on globalization as domination or as the saviour of rural economies (see Woods and McDonagh, 2011).

We draw from social geography to conceptualize this process as a ‘restructuring of social space’³ (Scholte, 2002). This process is closely interlinked with shifts in patterns of production and consumption; governance and politics, knowledge and identity; as well as resource extraction and conservation (Scholte 2002; see also Lefebvre 1991; Massey 1994). While the restructuring of social space manifests itself in less obvious and more indirect ways in rural areas of the global South than in urban areas and centres of industrial growth or decline, its implications on place-making and dependence on global processes are arguably of similar importance. To uncover these manifestations of globalization and their articulation with socio-economic, political and cultural characteristics of specific localities in the ‘global countryside’, Woods (2011) calls for grounded empirical analyses. This paper, therefore, examines globalization processes at the regional level and the emerging spatial patterns in connection with the coconut economy.

The body of this paper proceeds in six parts. In the following section, we introduce the concept of ‘narratives’ and link it to the ‘advocacy coalition framework’ (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993) to better explain why some explanations become reproduced while others remain ‘nonstories’. In the methodology section, information on the methods of data collection and analysis and on the study sites is given. What follows are two empirical parts. First, we briefly discuss the ‘coconut crisis narrative’ with reference to the official discourse and related academic literature. Then, we juxtapose the narrative with evidence derived from literature and ethnographic study, demonstrating alternative perspectives on Kerala’s coconut development by local actors. The discussion section triangulates information from different sources to provide a more nuanced account of the developments in Kerala’s coconut sector and attempts to explain the emergence and reproduction of the coconut crisis narrative. The conclusions summarize the inaccuracies and erroneousness of the coconut crisis narrative and point to complex spatial restructuring processes in the ‘global countryside’.

DEVELOPMENT NARRATIVES, ADVOCACY COALITIONS AND NONSTORIES

Roe defined development narratives as ‘stories—scenarios and arguments—that are taken by one or more

³ ‘Social space’ here is shorthand for socio-economic, political, cultural and environmental spaces.

parties to the controversy as underwritten (that is, establishing or certifying) and stabilizing (this is, fixing or making steady) the assumptions for policymaking in the face of the issue's uncertainty, complexity or polarization' (1994: 3). Development narratives are either scenarios with a beginning, middle and end, or arguments with a premise and a conclusion that frame problems in particular ways, leading to particular solutions (Roe, 1991). They can include both real and manufactured aspects that tend to ignore local actors and institutions in favour of those in power (e.g., Mehta, 2001; Nagothu, 2001; Blaikie et al., 2007), and lead to a fixation on particular community groups at the expense of others (e.g., Badami, 2014). Roe (1991, 1994) argues that narratives drive and sanction most rural development projects and policies in developing countries; they are an important aspect of policy formation. Furthermore, they often take the form of *crisis* scenarios that reinforce the idea that local people are unable to steward their own resources and thus require external assistance from experts (e.g., government officials, donor agencies, transnational non-governmental organizations) for efficient resource management (Roe, 1995).

Narratives persist because of their very nature as simplifications that help to bring order to complex development situations and thus render policy making and interventions possible (Roe, 1991). Crisis narratives, for instance, have been proven useful to stabilize policy making within highly complex and uncertain contexts for a limited time (Roe, 1995). However, the application of generalized remedies to problems, which were analysed in a reductionist way, more often led to development failures. Inaccurate narratives caused actual crises to occur or intensify (e.g., Hoben, 1995; Rocheleau et al., 1995). As narratives imply specific standardized solutions, moreover, they exclude alternative interpretations and interventions thus reducing 'policy space' (Sutton, 1999). Development narratives are therefore inherently political; they inform both policy and public perception and in turn influence the very 'story' they represent.

Yet, development and crisis narratives do not exist in isolation. While they are relatively stable and persistent, and while their origins and producers tend to be opaque, narratives need to be formed and reproduced by political actors in particular political contexts. Radaelli (1999) therefore suggested reinterpreting policy narratives in the 'advocacy coalition framework' (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993), a suggestion we extend to include development narratives. Relatively stable coalitions of governmental institutions, corporate interest groups, scientists, etc. generate narratives, which in turn also provide and communicate the 'core beliefs' that help hold together the coalition. Furthermore,

narratives are formed within the wider policy environment (Radaelli, 1999). For example, India's liberalization-globalization-privatization policies since the early 1990s provide a new context for the emergence and reproduction of development and crisis narratives. Finally, narratives are enhanced through policy forums, where the diverse stakeholders of an advocacy coalition meet and discuss (Radaelli, 1999).

The advocacy coalition framework also refers to opposing coalitions of political actors. 'Winning' and 'losing' coalitions may both form and use narratives; in the case of the losing coalitions, these can be interpreted as 'counternarratives' or 'counterstories' (Roe, 1994). However, other arguments and scenarios may never be picked up and propagated by an advocacy coalition; they remain 'nonstories' (Roe, 1994), whether or not they are more accurate than the development or crisis narrative. Obviously, alternative explanations by local actors such as farmers, labourers or petty traders rarely become reproduced as narratives but remain nonstories. Nevertheless, it is widely accepted among development scholars that such local or 'practical' knowledge is invaluable for a holistic understanding of development processes (Chambers, 1983). Their accounts, therefore, are juxtaposed in this paper with those of the narrative to gain a more complete picture of coconut-related developments in Kerala.

METHODOLOGY

The examination of development narratives and of nonstories related to changes within Kerala's coconut sector necessitated two principal approaches to data collection and analysis: (1) text analysis of government reports to discern the policy narrative and key actors of the advocacy coalition and local government officers, and (2) ethnographic fieldwork (open-ended and semi-structured interviews, and household surveys) *by the first author* to identify the usually silenced nonstories of local traders, processors, farmers and local government officials. The text analysis was complemented with interviews with a few members of the advocacy coalition.

To identify political narratives and coconut-related policy initiatives, we examined eleven reports from the Government of Kerala, including the *Economic Reviews* of 2001–12, and the *Report on the Commission on WTO Concerns in Agriculture* (Government of Kerala [GoK], 2003). We also reviewed thirteen reports from the Government of India, including the *Kerala Development Report* (2008), a report on the *Production and Marketing of Coconut in India* (2008) and the *Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices Report on Price Policy for Copra* for the 2000 and 2002–2012 seasons.

In addition, the website of the Coconut Development Board (CDB) was examined through content analysis (Krippendorff, 2010). The information from these texts was compared with insights from relevant academic literature and interviews with local government officials.

To initially identify the key actors of the advocacy coalition related to the coconut sector we researched the online archives from 2000–11 of The Hindu Business Line due to its accessibility and the fact that it relies on key players of the industry, including traders, processors and government officials (yet not academics). Key informants within the coalition were also found through the snowballing method. Access to academics was through the Centre for Development Studies, Trivandrum and discussions with local community members and officials. Interviews were conducted with members of the advocacy coalition through briefer visits, in the city of Kochi, Ernakulam District and in the town of Irinjalakuda and its surrounding villages in Thrissur District. Semi-structured interviews provided insight into the advocacy coalition and their ‘core beliefs’. In total ten interviews were conducted with different coalition members (traders, state and national government officials, a non-governmental organization and other key informants). We were limited in our inability to conduct ethnographic research within these networks and thus relied upon these interviews and supplementary literature. While drawing from this analysis to inform our research our emphasis is on the voices of situated actors and the micro-level analysis to juxtapose the narrative with ethnographic realities on the ground.

Fieldwork was conducted during seventeen months (two extended field trips in 2007 and 2008, two short revisits in 2009 and 2010), and mainly comprised two approaches: open-ended and semi-structured interviews (n=93) and household surveys (n=569 households, n=2,711 individuals). Conducting comparative research within the primary study regions necessitated consistent research methods. The ethnographic studies were primarily situated in two *gram panchayats* (village-level elected councils) in two different *taluks* (sub-districts), one each in Chirayinkeezhu Taluk, Thiruvananthapuram District and Chittur Taluk, Palakkad District (Figure 1). Additional interviews were conducting with small-scale traders and processors in rural parts of Kollam District adjacent to the Thiruvananthapuram district border, and in the town of Kangeyam Taluk, Tiruppur District, Tamil Nadu. In total forty-two interviews with traders of coconuts, copra and coconut oil, twenty-three conversations with coconut farmers, and eighteen interviews with local government officials and other key informants were conducted. Responses often diverged from the official discourse. Interviews were analysed with particular attention to the most commonly stated alternative explanations of the ‘coconut

crisis' .

The survey was jointly designed to capture household details (demographics), livelihood activities, livelihood sources, assets and community affiliations with specific focus on the coconut industry. Vulnerability and change was assessed over periods of 5 and 8 years between 2000 - 2008. These time frames were chosen to capture possible livelihood change and vulnerability caused by the purported coconut 'crisis' and to ensure good recall. While there are between 15-20 wards in each panchayat, the study was limited to just a few. The survey was administered in a purposeful sample of three of 15 or 20 wards of each panchayat reflecting the social and economic characteristics of each location and capturing the various livelihood strategies in (but not limited to) coconut production, processing and trade.

Figure 1: Map of study locations in Kerala and Tamil Nadu, India

[Figure 1 about here]

Cartography: JJ Venkiteswaran. Political boundaries in the map are from Hijmans et al (2011).

In order to assess regional variation in developments of the coconut economy within Kerala, we selected the primary study sites in two districts with different agro-ecological, social and historical formations. The Thiruvananthapuram panchayat is largely 'rurban' and resides in the rolling hills of Kerala's southern midlands. Despite the importance of remittances from migrants in the Persian Gulf and service-sector activities, about 60 per cent of the population was recorded to derive (a part of their) income in 2001 from agriculture and allied activities (KSPB, 2002). Agriculture is generally small-scale (two to four acres), of low intensity but highly diversified. Coconut trees have been grown here for generations, on homesteads and small groves covering a large proportion of the landscape. Indeed, the Thiruvananthapuram panchayat is relatively 'typical' of low- and midland Kerala. In contrast, the Palakkad panchayat is flat, distinctively rural and located near the Tamil Nadu border. Here, agriculture is of higher intensity with coconut, mango and paddy as major crops. Regardless of the state land reforms, landowners (present and absentee) have managed to maintain large landholdings of 40-60 acres. Yet, large-scale coconut production is a relatively new phenomenon in Palakkad; coconut cultivation, processing and trade have expanded over the last thirty-five years in response to difficulties

faced in paddy production, a trend observable all over Kerala (see further below).

THE ‘COCONUT CRISIS’ NARRATIVE

The roots of a ‘coconut crisis’ narrative can be traced to the state government’s Commission of WTO Concerns report (GoK, 2003), after a sharp price decline for copra and coconut oil in 2000. The report refers to a crisis in the coconut economy of ‘unprecedented proportions’ (p. 83). During the same time period the Commission for Agricultural Costs and Pricing (CACP, 2003, p.60) indicates: ‘The main reason for the sustained decline in the prices of coconut oil was, of course the unabated large scale imports of a variety of edible oils, which are cheaper substitutes of the former...’ Following Roe’s framework (1991) the central line of argument, reproduced in the texts mentioned in the methodology section, can be summarized as follows: (1) In the wake of the WTO Agreement on Agriculture of 1995, India removed import quotas and reduced import tariffs in the oilseeds sector leading to the increased importation of cheap edible oils, particularly palm oil (‘the beginning’); (2) cheap imported palm oil substituted for coconut oil resulting in declining demand and prices for domestic coconuts, copra and oil (‘the middle’); (3) declining prices increased the vulnerability of small and marginal farmers in Kerala (the ‘land of coconuts’) (‘the end’). The next three subsections illustrate the parts of the coconut crisis narrative with representative quotes from the reviewed government documents, followed by an appraisal of their veracity by referring to the academic literature and to our own survey data. Then we describe some discontinuities (or ‘cracks’) in the narrative, its main actor components and policy implications.

The Beginning: Liberalization of the Oilseeds Sector

Being the major cash crop producing state in the country, Kerala is perhaps the most affected by agriculture related trade policies adopted by Government of India....The domestic agricultural products have to compete with cheaper imports due to increasing liberalisation of import regulations (KSPB, 2004: 29).

The economic literature indicates that the beginning of the coconut crisis narrative is not wrong. Prior to ratification of the Uruguay Round Agreement on Agriculture in 1995, oilseeds were one of the most protected and subsidized product groups in India. The sector benefited from import substitution policies since the 1970s, including high import tariffs and non-tariff trade barriers, leading to growth in oilseeds

production from 10 to 21 million tons from 1980–94. During this period the domestic price of edible oils was 60 per cent higher than the world price (Gulati and Narayanan, 2007). Palm oil imports were irregular and on a small scale.

Trade liberalization reversed this trend placing increasing pressure on the domestic edible oils sector. Domestic prices of edible oils and oilseeds began to decline as they converged with the international market prices. The successive reduction in import duties (from 65 to 15 per cent from 1994–99 on crude edible oil, for example) and the massive devaluation of regional currencies in the wake of the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997 encouraged more substantial edible oil imports, particularly those of palm oil from Malaysia but also soybean, sunflower and rapeseed oil. As a result, India's self-sufficiency in edible oils declined from 97 per cent in 1993 to 55 per cent in 2001 (Gulati and Narayanan, 2007).

The Middle: Imported Palm Oil Affected the Coconut Sector

The relatively low price of palm oil led to some extent of substitution of palm oil for coconut oil. During the globalisation period [1996-2003] massive imports of palm oil have depressed coconut oil prices, the effect of which was also reflected in coconut prices. (Government of India [GoI], 2008a: 160)

The middle of the coconut crisis narrative is supported only partially by the economic literature, which mentions an increasing pressure on domestic prices in the coconut sector due to economic liberalization and global-market integration (Lathika and Kumar, 2009; Narayana et al., 2006; Varma, 2004).

However, some of these studies reveal flaws in the line of argument of the narrative. Despite increasing palm oil imports since the mid-1990s, for instance, prices for coconut oil remained high until a sharp drop in 2000 (Narayana et al., 2006). After the recovery in 2002, there has been no trend of declining or increasingly fluctuating coconut prices; prices generally increased but at a slower pace than prices for non-agricultural goods.

Furthermore, Varma (2004) and Narayana et al. (2006) argued there is no evidence large imports of palm oil cause declining prices of coconut and coconut oil in the Indian market. Declining and instable prices are rather a result of an increasing integration of international and domestic *coconut* markets (Varma, 2004), and loss of India's comparative advantage due to stagnating productivity in coconut

production and lack of diversification into value-added coconut products (Lathika and Kumar, 2009). As member states of ASEAN and SAARC⁴, the major coconut-producing countries (Indonesia, the Philippines and India) have reduced trade barriers so that coconut has become one of the most globalized commodity markets. A key feature of such integrated markets is the co-movement of prices and vulnerability to external shocks; prices in Kerala are thus strongly influenced by the supply in Indonesia, the Philippines and other Indian states. In contrast, there is no evidence to indicate that large quantities of palm oil brought down the Indian coconut price. Palm oil does not seem to be a strong substitute for coconut oil (Narayana et al., 2006).

The End: The Victims – Small Farmers and the ‘Land of Coconuts’

The human dimension of the crisis directly affected the livelihood of nearly one million of the farm households, representing almost 20 per cent of total farm holdings of the state, and indirectly another two lakhs households, who solely dependent on the processing coir, a by-product of coconut, for their livelihood. While majority of the coconut farmers affected are small and marginal owning less than one half to one hectare of coconut gardens, the affected workers in the coir sector largely belonged to the [below the poverty line] group. (GoK, 2003: 83-84)

In view of the fact coconut provides employment to nearly 35 lakh farmers and that coconut is the single most important crop in the state, there is a strong case for mitigating the hardships faced by farmers... (CACP, 2008: 10–11)

Most reviewed reports reproduced the higher number of affected farm households (e.g., KSPB, 2001, 2006, 2009) without giving evidence or referring to sources or making reference to mainly non-farm households. Indeed, the end of the coconut crisis narrative is the least supported by academic literature. The official reports (wrongly) assumed that the primary source of income of ‘small and marginal farmers’ is coconut production while our own village studies show that most of these smallholder households combine a large number of agricultural and increasingly non-agricultural livelihood activities, and thus it is inadequate to refer to ‘farmers’. Our ethnographic data also indicates that the

⁴ ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) is a political and economic organization of ten Southeast Asian countries, and SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) is an economic and geopolitical organization formed in eight countries primarily located in South Asia or the Indian subcontinent.

current state of the coconut economy does not represent a crisis in the eyes of the majority of small farmers and that coconut prices are not the main factor for changing land-use and agricultural practices (see below).

Cracks in the Narratives

Attention to declining coconut prices is central to the narrative although additional structural factors are mentioned in passing as contributing to declining coconut production and productivity (e.g., old and senile palms, root wilt, overpopulation in holdings, younger non-bearing palms, small holdings) (KSPB, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2011). However, no connections are made between these factors, on the one hand, and declining prices and farmer vulnerability, on the other. On the contrary, the CACP (e.g. 2003, 2006) argues that declining productivity and supply would help stabilize the prices of coconut with positive impact on survival of the coconut economy. In more recent documents, we start finding references to the cost and scarcity of agricultural labour in Kerala (CACP, 2009; KSPB, 2011), and later the Cochin Oil Merchants Association (COMA) and CACP (2011) point to adulteration of coconut oil, yet stressing this was made possible/beneficial due to cheap palm oil imports.

Despite these cracks, the coconut crisis narrative is fairly consistent and fixated on externally induced economic change that puts small farmers in Kerala in peril. Furthermore, one reason for the narrative's persistence is its local appeal and embeddedness: Independent from its (declining) economic importance, coconut maintains its cultural significance as Kerala's tree and claimed root of the state's and region's name. Moreover, the advocacy coalition was based on a broad socioeconomic spectrum (see below).

Main Actors Behind the Narrative

Through the review of newspaper articles and identification of key informants through the snowballing method we were able to identify key players of the coconut crisis narrative and their engagement with one another. The most important actor of the coconut advocacy coalition was the State Government of Kerala, particularly through representatives from the Kerala State Planning Board (KSPB). The narrative was further strengthened through support from private organizations with vested interest in Kerala's coconut market, such as COMA and to a lesser degree the First Commodities Exchange of India in Kochi. One large miller and key member of COMA and the Commodities Exchange told us

that they regularly interact with government officials who visit their mill as a successful example for senior bureaucrats, politicians and other dignitaries.

Less important actors included the central government Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices and the non-governmental organizations, Peekay Tree Crops Development Foundation and Swadeshi Nalikera Mission. Both organizations engaged in promoting ecological agro-forestry and coconut-based integrated farming and were key organizers of two International Coconut Summits in 2003 and 2006 with contributions from, and participation by, members of the GoK, COMA, CDB and industry (see Vasu and Thampan, 2003; Thampan and Vasu, 2007). In 2007 a national level Coconut Festival (Coco Fest) was held with the inaugural address given by the then Kerala Finance Minister Dr. Thomas Isaac, a past member of the KSPB. Key representatives in attendance were from KSPB, CDB, CACP, Kerafed and Marico (a leading manufacturer of consumer products containing coconut oil). In the same year, the CDB director was honorary guest of the COMA annual meeting.

A further constituency of the coconut advocacy coalition were Indian scientists, particularly economists from Kerala. For instance, the membership of the Commission of WTO Concerns in Agriculture, whose report evoked the coconut crisis first, was a mix of scientists and senior civil servants. K. N. Harilal (see quote at the beginning of this paper) was both a member of KSPB and an Associate Professor at the Centre for Development Studies in Thiruvananthapuram. His co-authored study with colleagues from the centre (Narayana et al. 2006) was sponsored by the CDB. (Yet, the nuanced arguments of that study (see above), although representing a crack in the narrative, were unable to alter the overarching coconut crisis narrative.) Farmer groups and associations and cooperatives, however, were absent from the advocacy coalition and its meetings and forums.

Links to Policy

Crisis narratives include and are oriented toward the remedies (Roe, 1994). This is confirmed in our document review that reveals a strong link between the problem analysis and the policy recommendations, which had largely remained the same since the Commission on WTO Concerns reported: ‘The only immediate strategy to make coconut production to promote sustainable livelihood for the producers is appropriate intervention in the coconut oil market by regulating the import to maintain remunerative price to the domestic producers. The medium and long-term strategy should be management of production to bring down cost of production, where the government policies can play a

critical role' (GoK, 2003: 85).

International trade policies are not under the jurisdiction of any of the major partners in the coconut advocacy coalition, but the GoK and CDB consistently lobbied the central government, and COMA the GoK, for the reinstatement of tariffs on coconut and palm oil imports and a ban on imports of palm oil, at least into the port of Kochi. Their advocacy efforts were indeed successful: The central government's Director General of Foreign Trade enacted a ban of palm oil imports into Kochi referring to 'public interest' in 2007. Under its own jurisdiction, furthermore, the GoK removed the value added tax (VAT) for copra, coconut oil and tender coconut in 2007 using the narrative of ailing coconut farmers. This mirrored conclusions of a study commissioned by the CDB (*cf.* CACP 2006: 10).

Other coconut-related policies and programs have a much longer history in Kerala and in India, but are now justified in reference to the crisis narrative. For instance, policies such as the setting of an annual minimum support price (floor price) and the implementation of a monopoly cooperative procurement system for copra when prices fall below the support price are referred to as measures to protect coconut farmers from volatile prices and exploitative intermediaries (CACP 2006, 2007; GoI, 2008b). While this measure has continued to be supported, the CACP (2009) more recently established a minimum support price for green/de-husked coconut, which has been strongly recommended by the Government of Kerala (*cf.* CACP 2010). Similarly, the state government and the CDB continued programs to increase coconut production and productivity (since 2008 also through public-private partnerships) and to reduce production costs through rejuvenating coconut plantations, particularly replanting diseased coconut palms, adopting improved cultivation technologies and support for value-added production.

Generally, coconut policies and programs pursued by Kerala's centre-right United Democratic Front (UDF) governments and the Left Democratic Front Government (LDF) were similar with clear connections to the narrative. Policy remedies are centred on market interventions: trade policies, tax exemption and production-oriented policies. However, the LDF governments focused more strongly on protectionist strategies, including price support systems, than the Congress-led UDF governments that were more closely aligned with the liberalization-friendly government at the national level from 2004-2014.

ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVES AND NONSTORIES

In this section, we discuss alternative perspectives on recent developments in Kerala's coconut economy as local traders and farmers in Thiruvananthapuram and Palakkad – but also some local government officers and other key informants diverging from the mainstream discourse – have narrated them to us. These alternative perspectives have not found corresponding advocacy coalitions and therefore remained 'nonstories' that both expand on and diverge from the coconut crisis narrative. They are thus crucial in qualifying the crisis narrative, providing more nuanced and region-specific explanations, and perhaps suggesting alternative policies in the 'policy space' hitherto silenced by the narrative.

Did coconut oil become substituted by palm oil?

Many respondents affirmed that palm oil has increasingly substituted coconut oil in commercial food production (e.g., in restaurants and for snacks) because of its longer shelf-life but coconut oil remains important for domestic use and in industrial products (e.g. cosmetics). Local nonstories qualify the claim that palm oil is a ubiquitous and direct substitute for coconut oil. Changes in the consumption of coconut as a traditional cooking oil in Kerala would not only be a function of comparative prices but also of social status, prestige and cultural choice, which contribute to restructuring social space. As the following statement by a local government official indicates, these factors may not translate in the same way between social groups and across space: 'Ten or fifteen years back ... we started to import palm oil. Palm oil is now extensively used by the lower income groups in Kerala... One great problem is that, other than Malayalees ['people from Kerala'], nobody else uses [coconut oil] for cooking and there is a limit to how it can be sold as hair oil.'

People who grow coconut, whether they own 10 or 100 trees, will also consume their own nuts and retain a portion of their production to dry copra and process it into oil for household use. Furthermore, the choice of cooking oil is dependent on its use, as a local businessperson explained to us: 'Palm and coconut oil are used for different things. If we make products such as snacks or chips with coconut oil, they will only keep for five days. But if we use palm oil, they may last for one month. If the price of either of the oils increases or decreases does not matter... Whoever uses oil in bulk, like hotels, they use palm.' By contrast, most households in Kerala prefer coconut to other oils given the choice, particularly for traditional dishes that can only be prepared with (the generally very strong tasting) coconut oil.

Palm oil seems to be a more likely substitute for coconut in cosmetic and other non-food industries

(where almost half of the copra produced in Kerala is used) (also see Narayana et al., 2006). Despite some unique properties of coconut oil for the industrial production of soaps, a farmer explained: ‘In the past, coconut oil mostly went toward soap making. Now, the large companies use soybean oil, palm oil and sunflower oil.’ Several of our respondents confirmed this, for example this trader and mill owner from Palakkad: ‘Soap and perfume companies used to buy coconut oil but now they use other oils like palm oil. They also use coconut oil but mix it with other oils.’ The two oils are not perfect substitutes; ‘unique properties of coconut oil make it less substitutable in many of its industrial uses ... in traditional regions like Kerala where coconut oil is the preferred cooking oil, palm kernel oil is taken as inferior oil’ (Narayana et al., 2006: 43).

Did imported palm oil affect the coconut sector?

The power of narratives is of course that they become unquestioned and ‘received wisdom’ (Leach and Mearns, 1996) that percolates down to society. Most of our local interviewees were informed about the issue of cheap imported palm oil through government sources or the media. Some of them reiterated the narrative with uncertainty. For example, a large coconut farmer told us: ‘*Some people say* that palm oil imports are another reason for the falling coconut price.’ The respondents rarely made a direct link between long-term trends in coconut prices and the generally liberalized trade regime. Rather, some of them saw a connection between short-term price changes and the landing of ships in the port of Kochi, like the farmer cited above: ‘Just a few months ago, the price per nut was six rupees and this had decreased because a ship of palm oil came to Kochi.’ However, the majority of the respondents did not single out cheap palm oil imports as the main factor for problems in the coconut economy. Some even denied any causal relationship between prices and palm oil imports. A miller-cum-trader explained: ‘The palm oil tariff has been decreased by the government. This should affect the market. But *because coconut production has decreased*, no affect has been felt.’ This remark suggests that important reasons for the decline in coconut production need to be found elsewhere (see below), and point to a more complex manifestation of globalization in the countryside. Other respondents also reiterated the assertion by Narayana et al. (2006) that an increasingly globalized coconut market, rather than palm oil imports, is setting the prices in Kerala.

However, interviewed traders pointed to issues beyond price pressure when discussing palm oil imports. One of them reported: ‘When the oil imports started to come from foreign markets, our

business decreased. At that time, whoever sold original coconut oil at the shop could not maintain their business because others sold adulterated coconut oil [at a lower price].’ Blame was often put on oil millers in Tamil Nadu who ‘smuggled’ adulterated coconut oil into Kerala. This would also have led to the closure of many oil mills in Kerala during the 1980s – prior to the substantial liberalization of the oilseeds sector and at a time when palm oil imports were irregular and too small to influence prices.

Palm oil has primarily been used for adulteration, but when its price reigns higher than coconut oil, traders noted that liquid paraffin or refined coconut oil from solvent extraction units is also used. Our own visit to a large solvent extractor in Thrissur was met with hostility. While provided a tour and a short interview, we were not permitted to record the interview, nor were our questions answered about where their product is sold or its use. Our suspicions about the use of solvent extracted coconut oil as an adulterant was further substantiated when we were refused an interview at a medium-size oil processor in Thiruvananthapuram. We were told by the above-mentioned mid-sized processor (who has also been refused at the gate) and an adjacent petty shop owner that they adulterated their oil and received regular lorry shipments from the solvent extractors. Traders also opined that the ban on palm oil imports through the port of Kochi in 2007 was futile, as imported and domestic palm and other oils reach Kerala by road and rail from other states. There are no longer restrictions on such inter-state trade.

Indeed, local nonstories pointed to spatial reorganization with the primary importance of an increasingly integrated market in south India for Kerala’s coconut economy. This has made it difficult to anticipate price changes based on local seasonal production. For example, a trader-cum-miller stated: ‘We can no longer only understand the market trend of Kerala. Now we need to know about the [coconut] production in the next state or other states.’ A large trader in Palakkad told us: ‘[Even] during the main production season [in Kerala], nuts are still imported from other states and this decreases the demand [and prices for the coconuts produced in Kerala].’ Our respondents highlighted the importance of Tamil Nadu where the production of coconuts, copra and oil expanded rapidly over the past thirty-five years. There, coconut cultivation was more profitable because of lower labour and transportation costs; subsidized fertilizers, water and electricity; and better agricultural extension services.

Furthermore, copra and coconut oil processing shifted in part from Kochi to the small Tamil town of Kangeyam, where the climate allows drying operations practically throughout the year without electric

or wood dryers. Production costs were further lowered through the widespread use of unskilled migrant labour, hosted in quarters by the mill owners. In the recent past, trade connections between Tamil Nadu and Kerala had become stronger, particularly along the state border in Palakkad. The regional market integration, increased supply and lower production costs in Tamil Nadu (rather than cheap palm oil imports) then resulted in increased pressure on coconut and copra prices in Kerala. These changes across space cannot be directly attributed to the top-down articulation of globalization (or liberalization) in the countryside.

Did declining prices motivate farmers to shift away from coconut cultivation?

The sharp decline of coconut prices in 2000–02 seems to have encouraged some farmers to shift away from coconut cultivation, particularly when they had old trees, as this statement of a farmer in Thiruvananthapuram district demonstrates: ‘We had coconut from my share of the family land. But as the market price decreased seven years ago [in 2000], we sold it. For three years ... we had more expenses than income. So I sold the land and deposited that amount in the share market.’ Furthermore, coconut prices recovered after 2002, and farmers reported other primary factors adversely affecting the profitability of coconut cultivation, including high input and labour costs and widespread diseased and ageing coconut palms.

Farmers in Thiruvananthapuram district highlighted the problem of a shortage of skilled coconut pluckers. Climbing coconut trees and harvesting the nuts requires specific skills; it is not an activity that anyone can do. Skilled pluckers also know how to maintain the trees as to avoid the spread of diseases. If not plucked timely (that is, after every 45 days), falling nuts are hazards for local residents. A retired professor and coconut grower explained the increased shortage of skilled pluckers as follows: ‘Earlier there was one caste [to pluck coconuts], the underprivileged caste, the *Thandan*. There is stigma associated with this job. If they do this work, they will be seen as the underdog. So, at the first opportunity itself, they will quit this occupation. So we cannot blame them. But this is directly affecting the coconut situation here.’ Another farmer put it less prosaically: ‘You have to worship the lord before you can get a chap to climb the coconut tree... My mother-in-law endlessly asks once in two months when he will appear.’

In Palakkad, agricultural wage rates were comparatively lower than in Thiruvananthapuram and labourers had fewer non-agricultural livelihood alternatives. Nevertheless, farmers and traders

expressed concern about the relative shortage of labour, specifically pluckers. A coconut farmer echoed his counterparts in Thiruvananthapuram: 'It's very difficult to get a plucker... The new generation are not doing this work.' Furthermore, feudal agricultural labour arrangements were disintegrating in Palakkad (later than in other parts of Kerala): 'In the past, if the mother was working, the daughter would come [too]. If the daughter came, the daughter-in-law would come [too]. But now they are going for factory work even though the salary is lower'.

However, the large traders in Palakkad (who were often also large coconut farmers) typically organized plucking labour for the smaller farmers. They also arranged the transportation of the coconuts from the farm gate and dried copra in their yards. While this resembles interlocked markets, the small farmers did not view the intermediaries as 'exploitative' (as the narrative did). Rather, they were dissatisfied with the government procurement system, which was running in some periods during our field research (i.e., in 2007 and 2009) in Palakkad. The cooperative procurement of copra failed to bypass the traders because it could not offer the same services of arranging labour, processing and transportation; copra of a particular quality was only accepted; there were too few collection centres and it implied delayed payments. Furthermore some farmers indicated that they received greater remuneration selling directly to traders. For example, one long-term, medium-scale farmer indicated: 'The government price is a loss because we would need to pay plucking and transportation charges. I got a better rate from [a local trader-cum-processor] after the plucking and transportation charges because the coconuts from my land are big... It is very difficult to bring the nuts to the society. If they sell them to trader he will do everything and we do not have to worry.'

Indeed, if the coconut economy posed a problem for the growers in Kerala, it was one related primarily to labour rather than to stagnating market prices and exploitative intermediaries. Changing labour relations were also a major reason for recent crop shifts in Kerala (Sportel, 2013a) (see following sub-section).

Was there a coconut crisis at all?

It is important to note that for most small landowners and coconut growers in Thiruvananthapuram district, as in most parts of Kerala, agriculture no longer represented the primary livelihood activity. People have become increasingly disinterested in farming. As the above-cited retired professor stated:

‘Most of the farmers are small... They are not commercial producers. Subsistence farming is mainly carried out by the coconut farmers in this region, not for the market but for their consumption... Twenty or thirty years ago, coconut cultivation formed a very important component of our lives. That scenario has changed, especially because of migration [to countries in the Persian Gulf].’ The majority of households expressed declining interest in agricultural cultivation and changing aspirations, particularly for younger generations. Many growers recounted the preference of their children to work outside of agriculture, and the majority of households surveyed relied on multiple livelihood activities.

As a result, cultivation was generally continued in Thiruvananthapuram but at a low intensity (few inputs, irregular maintenance, delayed replanting, longer gaps between harvests, etc.) and with often declining productivity. For example, one woman from a traditional agricultural family indicated: ‘Now we primarily cultivate coconut since my husband was transferred to Alappuzha for work. Because my children have professional salaried employment in Bangalore, and have no intention of returning home to maintain the family’s agricultural land, I am replacing the [senile] palms with hybrid seedlings. These seedlings will produce nuts in three years and have a shorter lifespan than the traditional palms.’ Yet an assessment of cropping patterns in the studied panchayat reveals that coconut continues to be the most commonly grown crop (followed by banana, jackfruit, mango and tapioca) and remains an important contribution to the household.

The situation in Palakkad was different. The general importance of agriculture for the livelihoods of producers and labourers is telling of the rural landscape. The majority of coconut producer households surveyed derived their primary livelihood source from agriculture with coconut as the primary crop (followed by banana, mango, neem and yam). Here coconut production has actually been increasing since the 1970s. At the time of our field research in 2007–10, farmers were shifting to coconut cultivation from the more labour-intensive paddy and groundnut cultivation. One farmer told us: ‘We shifted to coconut because it needs less attention than paddy and will still produce.’⁵

Although coconut cultivation is expanding in Palakkad, many producers (especially marginal and small-scale) expressed vulnerability in terms of access to formal credit. Coconut producers are

⁵ The shift from paddy to coconut and other perennial crops is a process that took place in most parts of low- and midland Kerala (1975–1976 and 1995–1996) but generally earlier than in Palakkad (see GoI, 2008a; Narayanan, 2003; Véron, 1999).

commonly tied and indebted to traders and loans are recouped at the point of coconut sales. Many producers indicated that this arrangement was beneficial in the absence of alternative support. These relationships have been forged and trust built over a number of years. Furthermore, they were not interested in. However some large-scale producers have been able to access particular state bank loans with the purpose of enhancing paddy production. Instead they used the paddy loan to establish coconut cultivation without any sanctions from government officials.

Despite declining profit margins (due to increased input costs), the interviewed farmers agreed that coconut cultivation remained profitable in comparison with most other agricultural crops, and Palakkad offered them very limited opportunities for non-agricultural livelihood activities. However, farmers in Palakkad diversified their products from coconut palms to reduce their vulnerability to output markets. In particular, they contracted out their trees for toddy tapping (local palm wine production). One large farmer told us: ‘We maintain our coconut cultivation through the help of income from toddy tapping... Previously the [nut] production was high [but] the [coconut and copra] market went down... Then we escaped from these things...Everyone gave their trees for toddy tapping, and this in turn caused the production [of coconuts] to decrease.’

Farmers responded to the decline in coconut and copra prices in 2000–02 and their consequent relative stagnation by diversifying their agricultural and non-agricultural livelihoods. From the interviewed coconut farmers’ perspective, there was no real crisis; coconut remains profitable and a valuable contribution to their household needs. For most agricultural landowners in the Thiruvananthapuram panchayat, cash income from coconut was not important enough for copra prices to trigger a crisis. Coconut farmers in the Palakkad panchayat diversified their production so that coconut cultivation remained relatively attractive and profitable compared with the cultivation of other agricultural crops.

DISCUSSION: JUXTAPOSING LOCAL FINDINGS WITH THE CRISIS NARRATIVE

Our data shows that the evocation of a crisis in relation to the state of Kerala’s coconut economy has to be put in perspective with farmers’ own interpretations and regional differences in changes related to coconut cultivation. The crisis narrative extrapolates increased vulnerability among smallholders from an analysis of declining or fluctuating profitability of copra and coconuts. Additionally the narrative represents an inadequately narrow sectoral view. Far from being passive victims of external influences,

coconut growers in Kerala are actively diversifying their livelihoods. The majority of (small) coconut growers have diversified livelihoods and not depended solely (nor even heavily) on the coconut economy, nor even agriculture. This trend is in line with recent data published by the KSPB (2014b) that indicates a declining share of the workforce in agriculture in tandem with increasing growth in service sector activities (e.g. communications, tourism and construction).

Furthermore, the decline of coconut production and productivity is not ubiquitous in Kerala; in some regions and for some types of growers growing coconut trees remains attractive. These variations reflect how social space has been restructured. The narrative also ignores other livelihoods in the coconut sector, including those of labourers, traders and processors, and masks the varying effects of the crisis on different community groups. For example, in Thiruvananthapuram community groups of higher social status are generally moving out of agriculture, including coconut production, while in Palakkad groups of similar status have transitioned out of paddy or groundnut cultivation and into coconut production. Palakkad in particular seems to have an agro-ecological advantage in the coconut sector through its relatively flat landscape and agrarian structure, including large landholdings. It has also a spatial advantage due to its proximity to Tamil Nadu to where the centre of coconut production and trading is shifting (Sportel 2013a, 2013b).

Of course, this is not to argue that Kerala's coconut economy is not facing problems. The liberalized import of cheap palm oil is certainly one, but it is mitigated through the fact that palm oil is not an ideal substitute for coconut oil (see also Narayana et al., 2006). The integration of international and especially regional (trans-state) coconut and copra markets seems to have a bigger influence on demand and price movements in Kerala and therefore represents an important challenge for millers, traders and growers in Kerala. While millers and traders may be able to revert to cheaper raw materials from neighbouring states, coconut growers are faced with an acute problem of labour shortage. While shortage of (skilled) agricultural labour is a general issue in Kerala, the absence of skilled pluckers not only delays harvests and reduces productivity but also affects the proper maintenance of the palms that is needed to avoid the further spread of diseases. Only recently the CACP recognised this issue stating '[c]oconut tree climbers lend a very vital link to the production chain,' and indicating '[i]t seems that new generation is disinclined to take up this traditional profession of climbing coconut trees which impinges on yield rates, especially in Kerala' (CACP, 2011, p.19).

As most development narratives, Kerala's coconut crisis narrative represents an oversimplification of a complex reality, reflecting a certain dominance of economics in development policy (Kanbur, 2002). The large-scale importation of cheap palm oil after the liberalization of the oilseeds sector in the mid-1990s, along with other and largely more important factors such as the general reorientation to non-agricultural livelihood activities, shortage of skilled plucking labour, increased market integration and competition with other coconut- and copra-producing south Indian states, oil adulteration practices and diffusion of tree diseases, has to some extent adversely affected the relative attractiveness, profitability and productivity of coconut cultivation in Kerala. The narrative also overlooks key components to Kerala's diminishing position within the coconut sector in India, such as the state's agro-ecology (particularly the typical undulating midland hills) and fragmented landholding patterns that are ill-suited for commercial large-scale coconut production. And it does not account for regional differences within Kerala: Palakkad, for example, with its flatter landscape, dryer climate, larger landholdings and different social historical context than most other parts of Kerala has shown a distinct coconut development path.

Furthermore, the crisis narrative fails to view changes in the coconut sector since 2000 in the context of general adjustments in Kerala's agricultural economy since the mid-1970s. Agricultural transformations in the mid-1970s and 1980s were marked by a shift from seasonal food crops (particularly paddy) to annual cash crops (e.g., coconut, rubber) (Narayana, 1990), sometimes misinterpreted as agricultural stagnation. Apart from ill-conceived water management and land development policies (Kannan and Pushpangadan, 1988) and a range of additional factors, including fragmentation of operational holdings, changed agrarian relations, increasing absentee landowners and ineffective crop-specific development boards (see Viswanathan 2014), and remittances from the Persian Gulf increasingly led to higher land prices and the movement of land and labour out of agriculture (Harilal and Joseph, 2000; Balakrishnan, 2002). As a consequence, Kerala's agricultural sector has transitioned toward commercial crops while the economy has been transformed into a predominantly non-agrarian one (Kannan, 2011; KSPB, 2014) and social space  restructured.

CONCLUSIONS

The Kerala coconut narrative is a simplification of a complex development situation (Roe, 1991, see also Ferguson 1990), leading to generalized remedies to difficulties experienced in the coconut

economy, and reliance on relatively unchanged, standardized policy solutions. It would be an overstatement to argue that the narrative caused ‘actual crises to occur or intensify’ (e.g., Hoben, 1995; Rocheleau et al., 1995), but it has led to ineffective policies to address and ameliorate key issues. In some aspects the coconut crisis narrative is also outright wrong. Particularly, the portrayal of (small) coconut farmers in Kerala as victims of liberalization-induced change is misplaced. First, the majority of (small) coconut growers have diversified livelihoods and do not depend solely (nor even heavily) on the coconut economy (Sportel, 2013b). Thus, farmers have not really experienced a crisis when coconut prices collapsed in 2000–02 and stagnated later, especially in Palakkad where coconut production is expanding and an important livelihood contribution. Coconut cultivation has also remained relatively attractive compared with the cultivation of other, more labour-intensive crops. Second, the narrative’s fixation on farmers as a cohesive category masks the varying effects of the crisis on different social classes producing coconuts and working in the coconut sector, including different types of labourers (pluckers, loaders, mill-factory workers, etc.), middlemen, petty and large other traders, small and large mill processors and owners. This generalizing narrative, in addition to discussions on agrarian crisis in India (Lerche, 2011), ignores differences within communities and across space.

The reasons why the constituents of the advocacy coalition behind the coconut crisis narrative (i.e., officials of the GoK and the CDB, representatives of oil merchants, and some small non-governmental organizations) have highlighted the lot of farmers is a moot point. However, the narratives’ scientific foundation in macro-economic sectoral analyses, rather than in micro-level studies taking people’s livelihoods as their starting point, seems to have facilitated the fixation on farmers and coconut production and productivity targets. This ignores changing labour relations and effaces the wider socioeconomic and cultural transformation occurring within Kerala. These changes translate into shifting and diversifying livelihoods, not only for economic advancement, but as a means of shedding traditional caste identities. For example, Thandan pluckers are accessing the modern education system and alternative employment in order to shed their derogatory image and improve their social position (Sportel, 2013a).

Because of its ancient trade with spices and colonial plantations, Kerala has for a very long time been a ‘global countryside’. Interestingly, our study shows that it is not just a global countryside but one characterized by new regional linkages, and new regional divergences in Palakkad and Trivandrum. Recent agricultural liberalization has not simply and uniformly strengthened the state’s global

orientation. Rather, reforms of the domestic market in India in the wake of international trade liberalization (e.g., implementation and harmonization of the value added tax, lifting of restrictions on movements of goods within India) have facilitated market integration at the regional scale, in the case of coconut between the south Indian states. Apart from (or because of) an increased exposure to global and regional coconut markets, furthermore, coconut producers also re-localized particular economic activities: the coconut growers in Thiruvananthapuram district have since the 1980s increasingly focused on copra production for home consumption; coconut farmers in Palakkad have rented out their palms for toddy tapping since the early 2000s to local processors that produce palm wine for local consumption. This happened at the expense of overall copra productivity and thus of the non-local commercial production of coconut oil.

Because of such trends of 'regionalization' and 'localization', it is more accurate to speak of 'restructuring of social space' than of 'globalization' in regard to developments in Kerala's coconut economy. Distinct places are linked to the global economy but are restructured in complex ways that are 'conducted through but not contained by local micro-politics' (Woods, 2007: 487). Restructuring social space is a more open concept, and thus more apt. This more nuanced understanding avoids an oversimplifying globalization discourse of rural economic change at the hands of an unstoppable external force shaping static and isolated rural areas (Woods and McDonagh, 2011) Furthermore the approach recognizes the articulation of structural constraints and the agency of local actors, which in turn influences development policy and the effectiveness of its outcomes (see Woods and McDonagh, 2011).

Finally, the nonstories of farmers and traders also point to weaknesses of the implemented policies related the coconut crisis narrative, particularly the protectionist policies aiming to bolster domestic coconut and copra prices and to bypass allegedly exploitative middlemen. In the eyes of local farmers, the ban on palm oil imports into the port of Kochi remained ineffective and the benefits of the cooperative procurement of copra at minimum support prices failed to reach the small cultivators in Kerala. The Government of Kerala's consistent use of standardized policy recommendations, focusing on market intervention policies, has distracted resources and attention away from the real issues of changing livelihoods and wider cultural transformations. More regionally-tailored policy that accounts for different community groups is needed⁶; without providing actual support to small-and medium-

⁶ Research by Williams et al. (2012:1000) on the politics of poverty in Kerala questions the

scale farmers, and addressing the needs of labourers, the coconut economy will remain vulnerable. To do justice to their complexity, however, we will have to discuss these policies and their varied impact in another paper.

Lastly, uncovering nonstories could also open policy space hitherto silenced. Debates in the development literature on bringing voice to marginalized knowledge have primarily focused on local indigenous technical knowledge. However this knowledge is specialized and not held equally by all situated actors (e.g. Jewitt, 2000). Alternatively our study shows that local, modern everyday knowledge adds value to understanding the lived experiences of agrarian and wider social change. These nonstories, or explanations of change and outcomes from within the Kerala coconut economy, suggest the need to adjust programmes to regional and local characteristics and to focus more on labour issues. More broadly, focusing on people's livelihoods as a starting point could result in more effective agricultural policy that avoids generalised assumptions (e.g. Forsyth, 2007). Kerala with its history of decentralized planning (Véron, 2001) might be a fertile ground for this, and very recent initiatives to render coconut plucking labour socially more attractive give reason for hope. However potential for positive change is not without constraints. Coconut farmers are weakly organized and state funding closely tied to nationally funding schemes and programs.

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effectiveness of poverty alleviation policies for their inability to reach those most in need. They argue that economic relationships in Palakkad and Wayanad reproduced poverty because they are not tailored to context and they do not address 'caste-based prejudice, the dominance of politically-connected groups, and the marginalisation of those seen as out-side 'the mainstream' of rural society'.'

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