Kenyan coastal communities have traditionally relied on the extraction of inshore fisheries resources for both their subsistence and commercial welfare. Over the years the open access nature of Kenya’s inshore marine fisheries has led to a severe decline in these resources, resulting in diminished incomes for the numerous artisanal fishing communities, coupled with the associated food insecurity. Achieving food and nutritional security for all is one of the four objectives contained in Kenya’s “Big 4” agenda – a plan to guide the country’s development strategy over the next five years. Seaweed resources can contribute to food security either directly as a nutritious food source (acceptance of seaweeds as food may take a while in Kenya), or indirectly as a source of income to purchase food. Just as importantly, seaweed farming as a livelihood can be effective in reducing the excessive pressure exerted on Kenya’s rapidly dwindling inshore marine fisheries by coastal communities.

The purpose of this survey was to establish the impact of seaweed cultivation on the incomes of seaweed farmers in Kwale County in Kenya’s South coast region. By virtue of the simple tools and techniques required to establish and maintain a seaweed farm, seaweed cultivation is considered a viable and suitable alternative livelihood for coastal communities. A descriptive, cross-sectional survey design was employed in the study. In June 2018, seaweed-related socio-economic data was collected from 78 active farmers in three seaweed farming villages, viz: Kibuyuni, Funzi and Nyumba Sita, by means of a Semi-structured questionnaire. Two Focus Group Discussions were also conducted in Kibuyuni and Funzi. Data was entered, cleaned and analysed using Excel and SPSS software. The survey revealed that for 95% of the respondents seaweed farming had produced a positive impact on their incomes. The first recorded earnings from seaweed cultivation were received in 2010 and averaged Kenya shillings (Ksh) 4,319, with a kilo selling at Ksh 18. Most farmers received their last earnings from seaweed sales in 2015, at which time the average selling price for a kilo of seaweed was Ksh 21. Average earnings for the farmer at this time was Ksh 6,768. The highest earnings received during this period was Ksh 31,000. These earnings had benefited the farmers and enabled them, among other things, to construct their own houses, pay for their children’s education, provide food for their families and meet medical expenses. The government of Kenya, through the recently concluded Kenya Coastal Development Project (KCDP), was able to provide some infrastructure to seaweed farming communities in Kenya, including seaweed drying racks and a seaweed storage facility in Kibuyuni. The farming communities have also benefitted from training in seaweed value addition techniques.

Of foremost concern to the farming communities has been the absence of a steady and reliable market for the seaweed product. This has meant that seaweed incomes have been few and far between. Immediate and concerted efforts must be made by relevant government agencies to ensure that a stable market is identified and secured. The inability of farmers to access credit to enable them acquire vital inputs was also mentioned as significant constraint to their livelihood. The necessary attention and resources must be devoted to the mentioned constraints if at all this livelihood is to help alleviate pressure on inshore fisheries resources and enhance the socio-economic status of participating communities.