



## Women's views on the contributions of working donkeys to their lives.

### Key findings from research in five donkey owning communities in Kenya.



Working donkeys are the most important livestock for women.



Working donkeys lighten women's burden by reducing their labour and the drudgery of household chores.



Working donkeys support women in generating income that benefits them directly and indirectly.



Working donkeys support women in carrying out social functions and increase their opportunities for community engagement.



Women are the main keepers, carers and users of working donkeys, but they have limited access to training and extension services.

## Introduction

There are nearly 2 million donkeys in Kenya.<sup>i</sup> Around three quarters of them are used for transport of goods and people, and for farming activities, both for household operations and income generation. Agriculture is the backbone of the Kenyan economy and employs 75% of the country's workforce.<sup>ii</sup> Donkey carts and pack donkeys remain the main means of transport for agricultural input and produce as they remain cheap and suitable for rural terrain, as well as poor or non-existing roads in the country.

The use of donkeys is on the increase in many parts of the country and donkey use in peri-urban areas is gaining prominence especially in the transport of water, business merchandise and construction materials.<sup>iii</sup>

Donkeys provide an important support system for women from equine owning communities. They are often the bread winners for women and their families, enabling them not only to buy food and clothing, and to pay for school fees and healthcare, but also increasing women's access to social opportunities such as those found in community self-help groups.

In an effort to bring attention to the links between women and working donkeys, Brooke East Africa and the Kenya Network for Dissemination of Agricultural Technologies (KENDAT) conducted a piece of research with women in order to get their views and experiences on owning and working with donkeys and the difference they make to their daily lives.

This policy briefing highlights the findings of the research carried out in five communities in Kenya. It shows the extent to which women rely on donkeys for support in fulfilling their many roles within the household and the wider community. This includes help with domestic drudgery, providing income, enabling them to play an important role in their communities (thereby enhancing their status), and providing savings by transporting goods, agricultural produce, water, firewood, animal feed and manure.

The briefing also highlights the devastating impact of the loss or sickness of a working donkey on women and their families. It concludes by making a set of recommendations aimed at Kenya's policy makers and implementers as well as development agencies.



The Voices from Women research project was initiated at The Brooke in 2013 to explore the role of working donkeys, horses and mules in supporting the lives of women from the perspectives of the women themselves, and to consider the role of women in the management of those animals.

It aims to give women who live and work with these animals a voice and a platform to tell and share their experiences and opinions, as well as to express their needs and wants.



Nachu, Kiambu

## Key objectives and methodology of the research

The main objectives of the research in Kenya were to understand from the women's perspective:



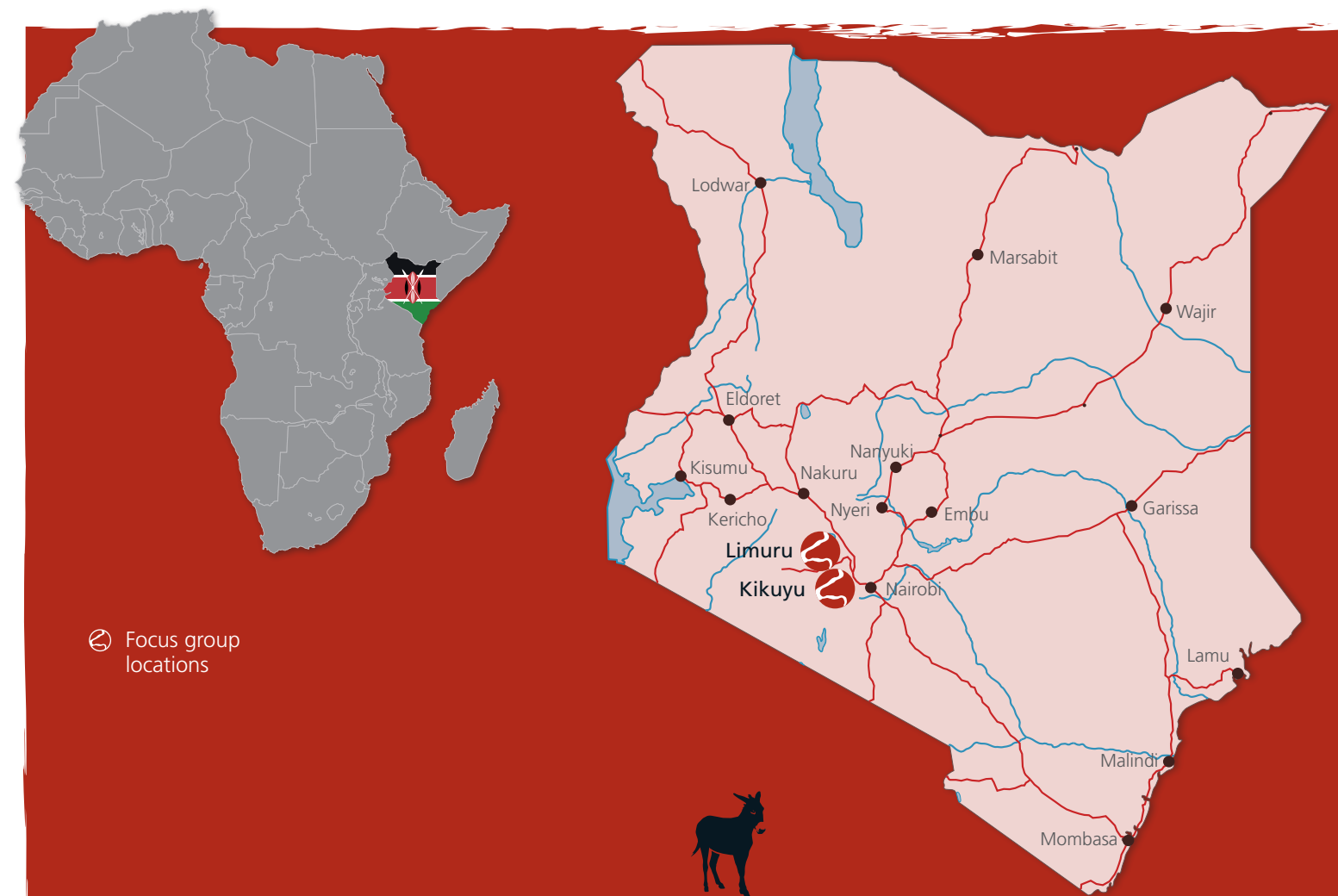
The specific roles which working donkeys play in supporting women's lives;



The role of women in the use and management of working donkeys;



How the welfare status of working donkeys affects the support they provide to women.



## Use of working donkeys by women participating in focus groups in Kenya and type of income generated

### Kenya

#### Location and profiles of communities

The study was carried out through Focus Groups Discussions (FGDs) and individual interviews in the counties of Kiambu, Kirinyaga and Nyandarua in June 2013. Five women only FGDs and four case studies were conducted in the regions where KENDAT operates. Groups included participants from both female and male headed households.

The main means of livelihoods for communities living in the research locations were subsistence farming involving both livestock (goats, sheep, cattle and chickens) and crop production (rice, maize, beans and other food crops). The use of donkeys for household purposes in the research locations varied between 80% and 100%.



Transport of people for a fee



Transport of construction materials



Transport of agricultural produce for a fee



Transport/sale of firewood/water



Hire



Foal rearing and selling

**Direct**



Transport of agricultural produce (to market)



Transport of grains to/from milling houses



Transport of milk to cooperatives

**Indirect**



Fetching water and firewood for own use



Transport of goods/household items from market



Transport of animal feed for household livestock



Transport of construction materials for own use



Transport of manure to field

**Saving**



# Key findings:

**“Even if someone says that I look like a donkey, I will just be happy and even be willing to buy them a present, for I know the benefits and profits I get from the donkeys.”**

*Phyllis Wanja, 37, Kamuchege, Mwea*

# 1.

**Donkeys are the most important livestock for women from equine owning communities.**

When asked to rank their livestock - including donkeys - all the groups we spoke to ranked donkeys first. Women across all groups gave similar reasons for this ranking. The primary reason was to do with the income generation role of the animals, in particular the regular - often daily - income brought home by them. Women also observed that many families buy other farm animals, especially cows (which are more expensive than donkeys) using money earned by their donkeys.

Donkeys were also ranked first compared to other livestock for their role in helping with household chores and caring for other livestock, as they carry fodder and water for other animals.

# 2.

**Working donkeys lighten women’s burden by reducing their labour and the drudgery of household chores.**

Working donkeys provide physical and psychological relief to women by supporting them in carrying out household chores.

**“Donkeys help us live a “digital” life. It gives us peace of mind. This is because it facilitates so many chores making them easier to handle, faster to implement and**

**simpler to do. We do not have to go the analogue way for example fetching water from the river on our backs or carrying firewood on our heads.”**

*Mercy Nyawira, 43, Mutithi, Mwea*

**“When a donkey is sick, I put myself in its shoes and cannot give it as much work as when it is normal.”**

*Dorcas Wanjiku, 42, Nachu, Kiambu*

**“Having a donkey gives me peace of mind, as I know I can comfortably handle all household chores with the support of the donkey. I am also able to live comfortably from the income brought by the donkey. I feel young and do not want to grow old as life has so much to offer!”**

*Joyce Ndegwa, 24, Kamuchege, Mwea*

# 3.

**Working donkeys support women in generating income that benefits them directly and indirectly.**

All groups emphasised the importance of working donkeys for income generation and the provision of regular (daily) cash which enables them to meet most of their basic needs including food, shelter, clothing and access to medical care.

**“Previously I could not even afford to feed my family. Now not only can I feed them but I can afford a balanced diet, thanks to the donkey.”**

*Teresia Wangari, 43, Kamuchege, Mwea*

**“The donkey affects each and every aspect of my life as a woman. I hire it out and it brings in income on a daily basis that I use to buy flour for the evening meal. In other words, I eat, drink, dress, live off the donkey and more so as a woman and one not employed, I work hand in hand with the donkey. Basically the donkey is like me but to put it plainly, the donkey is me.”**

*Lucy Waititu, 23, Kamuchege, Mwea*

## CASE STUDY

PHYLLIS WANJA, 37, KAMUCHEGE, MWEA

Phyllis has been working with donkeys for the last 10 years. Initially with her husband they used to do casual jobs in their neighbours’ farms earning Ksh 70 (US\$0.80) each per day which could not cater for their basic needs. On seeing that people with donkeys were doing well and that everything in the community concerning transport depended on donkeys, she managed to persuade her husband to save some money to buy a donkey.

They first used it to carry manure to their farm then started using it for income by transporting water for a fee, which became a booming business, enabling them to buy a second donkey so as to be able to serve all their customers.

Currently with three donkeys they manage to fetch ten drums of water by 8:00 in the morning. They make an average of Ksh 40,000 (\$473) a month. The money they get from donkeys has enabled them to purchase two plots of land for farming. They also bought a second donkey cart thus serving many customers at the same time, which in turn helped Phyllis make many friends.

**“I am short of words to describe all the benefits of a donkey. It has reached a point where I will just say the way we tell God, ‘This far it’s through your power and will’, for donkeys mean a lot in my life.”**

Some groups also mentioned the importance of the daily income for saving, which women use for emergencies such as hospital bills, recurrent bills such as school fees and future investments such as purchase of land and other farm animals.

**“If my child who is less than a year would speak, she would narrate her life as a child of a donkey. The maternity fees I paid while pregnant came from income brought by the donkey. When I delivered my daughter, I was able to pay for the statutory National Health Insurance Fund from the donkey which catered for all delivery fees. My child eats, dresses and lives off income from the donkey!”**

*Lucy Waititu, 23, Kamuchege, Mwea*

## CASE STUDY

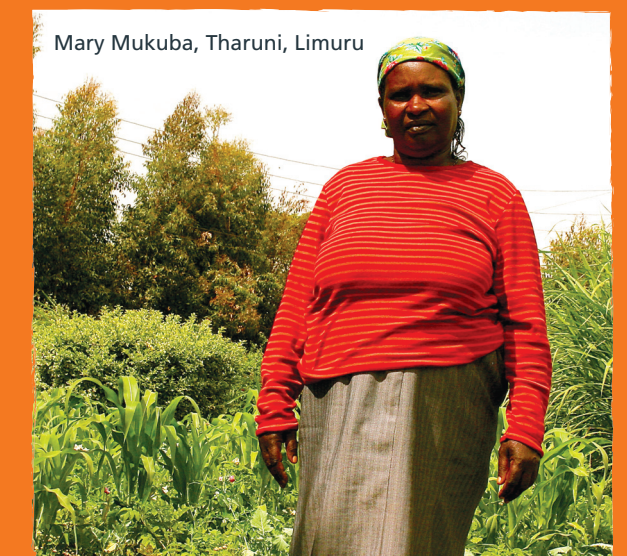
MARY MUKUBA, 54, WIDOW, THARUNI, LIMURU

Mary owned a donkey for over 12 years but it died in 2006. She used it to fetch feed for her cows, as well as to transport water and wood and carry manure from the homestead to the farm. She also used it to harvest and carry produce from the farm to her home for storage and to the market.

The loss of her donkey has had a massive impact on her life. From an income point of view, she used to be able to save around Ksh 600 (\$6.95) per day as her donkey carried the wood and animal feed she needed for free, whereas now she has to spend over Ksh 350 (\$4.05) per day to buy grass from neighbours for her cows. She also has to buy firewood that costs over Ksh 250 (\$2.90) per day. She has continued working however with tremendous strain.

She has to get the support of her son who has a family of his own and her daughter who is in college. During harvest she gets the assistance of other women to load her cart. She then pulls the cart from the front while the other women push from the back up until they get home.

The heavy duties have taken a heavy toll on her health, resulting in leg and back injuries. She now walks with a limp. She has been in and out of hospital for these issues as well as mental stress, but there is hope as she is saving to buy another donkey, more than 7 years after hers died.





# 4.

Working donkeys support women in carrying out social functions and increase their opportunities for community engagement.

The research revealed that working donkeys’ support extends beyond individual households. Donkeys provide help to the larger community and strengthen relationships between women. Women lend them to other women who do not have a donkey; they also lend their animals for social functions and events such as transporting tents and chairs for community or women’s meetings, weddings, and funerals. Donkeys are also used by the wider community in difficult times for example to transport people to inaccessible areas during heavy rains.

**“Having a donkey and contributing to social work makes us noticeable and accepted within social circles. For instance in case of death in the village, we volunteer our donkeys to assist with transport e.g. the tent, chairs, water, food, etc. This makes our role socially acceptable due to owning a donkey.”**

*Participant from Mutithi Women’s Group, Mwea*

Donkeys also play a key role in enabling women to join or form local women’s groups or farmers’ groups as the money they earn is used to pay for membership.

As a result of the help and support they provide to other women and the community, women who own donkeys are respected.

**Donkeys assist women to get a better social status, because the income we get from their services enables us to join self-help and working groups. In addition, when the community needs help and we are able to contribute through lending our donkeys, it makes us respected in the community.”**

*Participant from Kamuchege Women’s Group, Mwea*

However, the loss of a donkey means that women often have to end their membership of social groups or find alternative sources of income.

**“With no source of income I have also had to terminate my membership from some social groups as I could no longer pay the**

**membership fees. I used to be a member of three groups but now I only belong to one. Sometimes I cannot raise enough money to pay for the monthly membership so I have to do some menial jobs to raise the money. Belonging to a group is important to me as it helps in savings.”**

*Pauline Wachira, 39, Tharuni, Limuru*

# 5.

Women are the main keepers, carers and users of working donkeys but they have limited access to training and extension services.

In the areas where the research was conducted, women are the main livestock keepers and in many cases, are the ones making decisions about livestock, particularly in the case of donkeys. In Mwea, women told us that a donkey is often one of the first things a woman gets as a gift from her husband immediately after marriage.

Women are also the primary and traditional care givers for livestock, mainly within the household compound but also tending to production livestock such as cattle and goats outside their homes. All of the women we spoke to highlighted their role as care givers to donkeys, providing feed and water, and cleaning shelters, as well as providing first aid and home-based care when donkeys are sick.

**“A man can never use a donkey when I am available. He will not take a donkey and go fetch water, that is my role.”**

*Margaret Njoki, 50, Kenton, Nyandarua*

Women’s role in caring for donkeys extends outside their homes as they are often responsible for taking them to graze alongside other livestock. This is commonly done in Kenya where donkeys help with household chores such as fetching water and firewood and collecting feed for other animals. The research showed women to have a strong voice when it comes to advocating for their donkeys. Some groups we interviewed said that they do not allow animals to be worked when they are sick, until they have recovered, or challenged their husbands if they beat them.

**“I always recognise if anything wrong has been done to the donkeys. If they have been whipped a lot or are tired, they are immediately released from their harnesses and they come to me, which makes me notice that something is wrong. I will then talk to my husband and tell him politely to either stop whipping them or to give them a day of rest.”**

*Mercy Nyawira, 21, Mutithi, Mwea*

Despite their primary role in caring for and using donkeys, women told us they have limited access to information and training. Most groups listed Brooke East Africa’s partner KENDAT’s Heshimu Punda (Respect the Donkey) training and educational programme as the main source of knowledge and education, followed by some very basic information from government livestock workers and local animal health service providers. Women are mainly engaged through self-help or equine groups that are either mixed or female only. The groups get training on equine management and husbandry practices.

**“I have learnt so much from Heshimu Punda and although I may not have the strength to work with the donkey, my mind and knowledge on handling a donkey are much stronger and I can impart this knowledge to others.”**

*Mary Wanjiru, 67, Kenton, Nyandarua*

## Recommendations

# 1.

The Government of Kenya should consider donkeys as critical and valuable livestock for people’s food security and livelihoods.

Working donkeys are the cornerstone of millions of families’ livelihoods in Kenya and provide a support system for women. Therefore donkey health and welfare needs should be adequately addressed by government policies and programmes alongside other livestock at both national and county level. This includes allocating sufficient budget for equine drugs, including working donkeys in vaccination campaigns and other livestock initiatives, and providing training on donkey health and welfare for government vets and livestock technicians.

## Conclusion

The research sheds light on the critical importance of donkeys in women’s lives and the extent to which they rely on them for support in fulfilling their many roles within the household and the wider community.

For women from equine owning communities, the health and welfare of these animals are essential. A sick or a dead donkey will have negative consequences for women and their families. Some women compared losing a donkey to losing a limb.

Donkeys in poor health are impaired in their ability to benefit women optimally, be it because they are overworked, suffer wounds or foot problems, or are not provided with adequate harnessing and access to nutritious food, shelter and water. Therefore good equine welfare is not a luxury but a necessity for women and their families.

Without the help of donkeys, women’s burden increases, income goes down and women are less able to support their livelihoods and perform social functions, which in turn affects their status in the community.



# Recommendations (continued)

## 2.

The Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Fisheries at national and county level and donors should give greater priority to ensuring women's access to extension services.

Appropriate emphasis should be put on increasing the number of women being trained and employed as "agents of change". Training and information related to livestock keeping must take women into account and specifically incorporate donkey health and welfare, including husbandry.

## 3.

The Government of Kenya should enact and implement animal welfare friendly policies and legislation.

This should include targeted and accessible awareness campaigns aimed at owners, users and carers. These awareness campaigns should specifically include women as women are often the primary carers of donkeys and can be powerful advocates for their welfare.



healthy working animals  
for the world's poorest communities

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## 4.

Community based organisations and non-governmental organisations working on gender and livestock related issues should initiate a dialogue to better understand and explore the opportunities and benefits of collaborating on their mutual agendas, including working equine welfare.

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