Growing demand for *ejiao* – a gelatin produced from donkey skin and used in traditional Chinese medicine and beauty products – is putting global donkey populations at risk and threatening the livelihoods of millions of people that depend on them. While Africa remains the primary source of both legally and illegally-sourced donkey skins to China, the trade is spreading across the globe. This Brief explores the global impact of the donkey skin trade. With a spotlight on Kenya – where the donkey population has depleted to critically low levels – it calls for policymakers and influencers to address this urgent issue that is destroying lives and livelihoods across the globe.
INTRODUCTION

Donkeys are working livestock and are critical to the livelihoods of millions of people throughout the developing world. From providing access to water to strengthening agricultural supply chains, working livestock make vital contributions to the realisation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). 1

China’s donkey population has rapidly reduced over the last decade due to increasing demand for ejiao, 2 which is used in beauty products and traditional medicine. Donkeys are difficult to breed on a large-scale due to their low-reproductive rate, and as a result China has turned to global markets to fuel its demand for donkey skins. Africa is the current epicentre of the donkey skin trade with insufficient regulation, inhumane slaughter, donkey theft and cross-border smuggling creating a crisis across the continent. While some countries have responded by banning the export of donkey skins, in others where slaughter is legal, the escalating rate of depletion is now unsustainable and donkey populations are in decline. 3

The impact of the trade is not confined to Africa. The trade in donkey skins poses a threat to various countries in South Asia, such as Pakistan, where illegal trade is life, and a number of abattoirs in Latin America are also licensed to export donkey meat and skin. 4 This global, unsustainable slaughter of donkeys is threatening livelihoods.

“In most households I visit, donkeys are a key pillar of family life. They carry water from rivers, public pumps and wells; they transport farm produce from the field to the home or market; and they help move heavy building material to and from construction sites. If a human were to perform these tasks, it would take an enormous amount of time and effort.”

Laura Kavata, Brooke East Africa

REPORTS FROM RESEARCHERS, MEDIA AND NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS (NGOS) REVEAL THE SCALE AND SPREAD OF THE GLOBAL DONKEY SKIN TRADE

GHANA

An abattoir opened in Waaleale in 2013 and was widely blamed for fueling donkey thefts in the region. Although the Abattoir closed in 2017, illegal lospholes allow trade to continue through bush slaughterhouses. 5

NIGERIA

Currently a hub for both legal and illegal donkey slaughter, receiving stolen and smuggled donkeys from across the region. The government is taking steps to follow the example of other West African countries and ban exports 6

ETHIOPIA

As donkey slaughter is illegal (due to cultural and religious norms) donkeys are being stolen and smuggled across Kenya’s porous borders. 7

BRAZIL

Following pressure from advocacy groups, a holding facility in Itapetinga was temporarily closed due to animal welfare concerns. Three other abattoirs in Bahia state are licensed to export donkey meat and skin. 8

BOTSWANA, BURKINA FASO, MALI, NIGER, SENEGAL AND UGANDA

All have banned donkey exports to China but there are no penalties for offenders and illegal trade still occurs in some counties. 9

ETHIOPIA, SOUTH SUDAN, TANZANIA AND KENYA

Live donkeys are transported long distances to Kenya for slaughter and export.

KENYA

Bilateral trade agreements between China and Kenya make it easier for Chinese-owned donkey trading companies to be registered in Kenya. 10 As the donkey population has dwindled, smuggling from surrounding countries has become rife.

ETIOPIA

According to the Ministry of Trade and Industry, Chinese demand has also created a black market for donkey skins in Egypt. 11

PAKISTAN

Formerly a key exporter to China, imposed a ban on exports in 2015. However, illegal trade continues. Government In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province plans to export 80,000 live donkeys to China in three years as part of China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project. 12

AFGHANISTAN

Reports have been received of donkey skins being smuggled into Pakistan for suspected export to China. 13

EGYPT

Government authorities set an export quota of 8,000 donkey skins for annual export in 2012, which was increased to 10,000 by the Ministry of Trade and Industry. Chinese demand has also created a black market for donkey skins in Egypt. 11


The impact of the global donkey skin trade is particularly felt by women, children, and older people.

Millions of women across the world depend on working donkeys to support them in crucial domestic tasks, such as fetching clean water each day. Without donkeys, many women have no choice but to walk long distances to fetch water, which they must carry home on their backs. The achievement of SDG 6 (water and sanitation for all) by 2030 will be threatened if women lack the means to transport clean water back to their homes.

Often the decision to sell a family’s donkey falls with members of the household. Without working donkeys the burden of domestic chores and unpaid care work significantly increases for millions of women. The additional time and effort required in fetching water, firewood or food limits their capacity in other areas such as attending community gatherings or seeking paid employment. With less influence over community-decisions, women are further disempowered and progress towards gender equality (SDG 5) will be hindered.

In addition, children often assist with domestic chores and the impact of a lost or stolen donkey places a bigger burden on young people. Many children are forced to miss school in order to support their parents at home and the reduction in household income that results from losing a donkey means many families can no longer afford to pay school fees. These factors hinder progress towards SDG 4 – inclusive and equitable quality education for all.

Brooke commissioned research in Kenya revealed that older people are often targeted by donkey thieves as they are unable to provide adequate protection for their animals. The research demonstrates that certain vulnerable groups within communities suffer most from losing a donkey:

"My three donkeys were stolen in July 2018. One [donkey] was pregnant. My neighbours helped to trace them and unfortunately we found them slaughtered in a bush. Since then, I have been struggling to feed my family. I used to sell water to local schools and [use my earnings to] pay school fees for my children. I am now unable to continue with this".

Mother of three children, Miguni, Kitui County, Kenya

CRISIS IN KENYA

Kenya is at the centre of Africa’s escalating trade of donkey skins to China, with four export slaughterhouses licensed from 2016–18. The country’s donkey population has declined by a third over the last nine years and is currently projected to be further depleted by 2022. Analysing the current situation in Kenya is crucial if policymakers are to understand the potential impacts of the trade elsewhere.

Brooke East Africa commissioned Kenya Agriculture and Livestock Research Organisation (KALRO) research, published in June 2019, which assesses the implications of the trade on community livelihoods in Kenya. Through a large–scale survey across seven counties and consultation with donkey owners, traders and slaughterhouses, the study found that:

- Donkeys play a crucial role in households across Kenya and are ranked as the most important domestic animal.
- Around 60 donkeys a week were stolen from owners in Kenya in 2017.
- Half of donkey users could not raise the capital to purchase replacement stock after losing their donkey.
- The economic benefits of slaughterhouses employing local labourers do not outweigh the loss in income experienced by donkey owners who lose or sell their donkey.
- Kenya will have lost an estimated 28.3 billion shillings from April 2016–December 2019 through donkey skin trade.

The growth in China’s demand for donkey products has pushed up the price of donkeys in Kenya by 50–100% since 2016. Although some donkey owners are attracted by the short–term cash injection from selling their donkey, the long–term loss to their livelihoods is far greater. High prices mean most rural community members are unable to replace their donkeys. As their most prized livelihood asset, many respondents depended on their donkeys for generating income from selling water, accessing hard to reach areas and transporting those that are sick.

With the situation in Kenya at a crisis point, Brooke is calling for a ban on the export of donkey skins and associated products from Kenya and a crackdown on cross–border smuggling of donkeys into Kenya.

SUMMARY

The scale and rapid global spread of the donkey skin trade to fuel China’s demands for ejiao is unsustainable. The trade is already having devastating consequences for donkeys and their owners in countries such as Kenya, which are felt most keenly by vulnerable people in poor communities.

By jeopardising people’s abilities to secure a strong and sustainable livelihood and by hindering food security, gender equality, access to water, healthcare and education, the donkey skin trade is threatening the achievement of a number of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals. The spread of both legal and illegal trade within existing countries and into new trading partners means these impacts are escalating. Stakeholders must work together to take urgent action – both within and across countries – recognising that each country will require a bespoke response.
RECOMMENDATIONS

Donkey owning communities and individual owners must:

- Protect their donkeys against theft through using such legal measures as are appropriate for them.
- Ensure that the whole community understands the value donkeys bring in terms of long term improvement to livelihoods and community resilience.

Policymakers in affected countries must:

- Introduce legislation to ban all trade in donkey skins for the production of ejiao and to take measures to enforce such a ban (including illegal cross border trade).
- Reinforce and uphold bans and other legal sanctions on the trade in countries where they already exist.
- Acknowledge the life-long value of working donkeys as a livelihood asset by explicitly including them in national livestock surveys and policies, taking tangible steps to safeguard them.
- Improve the health and welfare of donkeys in slaughterhouses, transportation and holding facilities through the application of OIE standards.²⁷
- Strengthen the resilience of local communities to donkey theft through supporting protection initiatives. These must be community driven and politically backed to encourage local buy-in and ensure measures are sustainable and practical.

Global policymakers and influencers must:

- Recognise the threat posed by the donkey skin trade in rural communities that rely on working donkeys as key livelihood assets, providing draught, traction and transport as a significant development concern.
- Lobby and support counterparts in countries affected by the trade to impose legal sanctions to curtail the impact of the donkey skin trade.

NGOs and community organisations must:

- Empower local residents to lobby their governments to act on this issue and support a ban on the export of donkey skins and associated products or maintain and reinforce an existing ban.
- Work together to raise awareness of the donkey skin trade, share research and best practice, and collaborate to bring the issue to the attention of global policymakers.

Researchers must:

- Develop evidence and understanding on the global donkey skin trade that informs policy change and facilitates global conversations on the issue.
- Expand research into South Asia, recognising that the livelihood impacts of the trade go beyond Africa. This includes assessing the impact of the current ban on trade in Pakistan and Afghanistan being lifted.
