

CASE STUDY: DONKEY DEPENDENCY FOR A FAMILY'S LIVELIHOOD

Zachary Ndichu Mirugi, 58, is the sole bread winner for his eight children. Three daughters are married and the rest live with him at home. His wife Martha is a housewife who takes care of the young ones at home while carrying out other household chores.

Ndichu and his wife did not get the opportunity to obtain formal education as both of their parents were not well off enough to pay for the education that well-off children had during the colonial era. They both grew up labouring in other people's farms. Ndichu hopes to change this cycle and therefore does his best to educate his children. He consistently uses his donkey to fetch and ferry water to his home, as well as to his neighbours and traders within the village.

Ndichu is from Rironi village, which is within Limuru Division and has well over 8,000 donkeys, used for both commercial activities in the peri-urban areas and for domestic chores in the villages. The division is a high agricultural potential area, with a population of around 200,000 people. The residents rely mostly on production of crops and livestock for their livelihoods. Much of the on-farm transport services are carried out using donkey-drawn carts, which ferry the goods to market and collection centres. Apart from farm produce, donkeys are also widely used to transport water within the peri-urban centres.

The life expectancy for these donkeys is estimated at 20 to 25 years. The donkeys are largely used for transport, mostly in pulling carts, and the majority of these animals are in a poor state.

Ndichu's donkey, Tyson, has been with the family for the last three years, since being purchased from a donkey merchant in Limuru at the age of two years. He was slowly trained to pull a cart and this he has continued to perfect ever since. By the help of Tyson, Ndichu is able to make 300/= (\$5) a day to feed his family. This may vary with demand.

Despite the many negative myths that are prevalent within the area, some of which support overworking and overloading the working donkeys, Ndichu ensures that great care is provided to his donkey to the extent his knowledge and practice allows.



Six months ago Tyson got injured. While he was injured, Ndichu's sons Josiah, 15, and John Boro, 10, had to find ways of delivering water to the villagers, with assistance from their mother and father. The rest of the available children were too young to carry buckets of water.

During this time Ndichu's sons were not able to attend school regularly and this greatly affected their performance. It was difficult for Ndichu to accept the fact that Tyson required rest for the period the vet demanded, to enable faster healing.

Tyson's injury was a malicious cut above his right rib. Ndichu was greatly upset and he delayed reporting the incident to the Brooke vet until the wound was getting septic. The wound was about 10cm long and about 1cm deep, and took about two weeks to heal.

The malice leading to the cut of the innocent animal came about as Ndichu's neighbour claimed that the donkey had consistently fed on his maize. Ndichu acknowledged the fact that his son Josiah had mistakenly left the donkey on its own while grazing, to answer a call from his grandmother who was metres away from the grazing area. Josiah did not know the damage that Tyson would cause to the neighbour's plantation. Ndichu and his son were later advised by the Brooke Community Development Officer to always ensure that their donkey was properly restrained. This could be done by building a shelter for the animal or by safely tying the animal by the neck with the use of a natural fibre rope.

During the final visit by the Brooke vet, Ndichu said: "My life and that of my family revolves around Tyson. I am able to put food on the table through his assistance. Any day without Tyson would mean hunger to my wife and children. Tyson is all we have got. The state of his welfare touches directly on our welfare as well. It is our duty to ensure that we keep him alive and well to be able have our lives and that of our children whole. I hope one of my children learns to be like a Brooke vet."

Ndichu's younger son John concluded by saying: "I find it fun riding on Tyson's back after school. It gives me a lot of pleasure to play with him. I pray that our neighbour will not cut him again as this greatly affects his moods."

The current state of Ndichu's donkey has motivated his neighbours to seek help from the Brooke vet whenever they notice a need to do so in their animals. They have joined a community group where donkey handling and other issues are taught to them.