



THE DONKEY
SANCTUARY

DONKEYS IN GLOBAL TRADE



**STOLEN DONKEYS, STOLEN FUTURES:
THE IMPACT OF EJIAO ON AFRICA'S
WOMEN AND CHILDREN**



A working donkey in Ethiopia

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Donkey Sanctuary offers sincere thanks to its network of friends, partners and colleagues around the world who contributed information to this report. **Emily Reeves, The Donkey Sanctuary**

All donkey owner quotes included in this report are taken from referenced research and have been anonymised to protect the individuals.

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FOREWORD

ANNE ODARI ONDITI

Treasurer, Association of Donkey Owners in Kenya (ADOK),
Donkey owner to Kidero, Grace and Mather

“To be a friend to the donkey,
is to be a friend to women.

My donkey Grace is the key to my home – ploughing, carrying goods to market and saving me time, money and, in the end, my health.

For so many families across Kenya and Africa, donkeys are more than animals – they are our partners in work, our means of earning a living, and our hope for a better future. They help us fetch water, access the health clinic and ensure our children can attend school.

When donkeys are stolen for the skin trade it brings immense suffering to our communities,

especially to women and children. A family loses its livelihood, and women are left to carry heavy burdens alone. It is heartbreaking to see how quickly our donkeys are disappearing and how deeply this loss is felt.

This report by The Donkey Sanctuary shows the need for strong action. I call on governments and leaders across Africa to protect our donkeys and the people who depend on them. We must end the donkey skin trade to ensure that the future of our communities is not stolen.



The welfare of donkeys and women in Africa is deeply connected

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is the third in the *Donkeys in Global Trade* series. It reveals new research undertaken in Kenya in late 2024 by the Africa Centre for One Health-One Welfare Research, Innovation and Sustainable Livelihoods and Maasai Mara University that exposes the true cost of the USD\$6.38 billion ejiao industry.⁵² Commissioned by The Donkey Sanctuary, this research supports a growing body of evidence exposing the devastation the donkey skin trade causes to African women, children and donkeys, and highlights the threat to One Welfare and the Sustainable Development Goals.

This report makes a series of recommendations to governments, global institutions, the transport sector and the ejiao industry – all of which are designed to prevent the negative impact of the trade on millions of lives.

Donkeys have played an indispensable role in people's lives for millennia. They serve as dependable partners and help sustain households across Africa and beyond. For many women, a donkey is a lifeline, a co-worker in the daily challenge of providing for their families. Donkeys are sensitive, intelligent animals who form strong bonds with their human companions and co-workers. However, the global demand for donkey skins – an estimated 5.9 million every year – to produce the Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) ejiao, has transformed donkeys into commodities and subjects them to immeasurable suffering.

Ejiao is predominantly marketed to women, promising health and youthfulness, but it fuels a trade that devastates the lives of some of the world's most vulnerable women and children.

When a donkey is stolen or sold, it is not just an animal that is lost; it can be a family's future. The consequences are immediate, and can be catastrophic. Incomes plummet, children, particularly girls, are forced to leave school, and women suffer physically and emotionally as they struggle to perform the work that donkeys once shouldered.

The ripple effects of this crisis are profound. Families fall into cycles of poverty that can be impossible to escape, cementing generational disadvantage, with long-term impacts on education, health, financial security and access to essential resources like food and water.

In 2024, the African Union, recognising the profound socio-economic importance of donkeys, agreed a fifteen-year continent-wide moratorium on the slaughter of donkeys for skins.

This is not just a story of stolen donkeys; it is a story of stolen lives. The ejiao trade's relentless demand for donkey skins comes at the expense of women and children who have little power to defend themselves against this exploitation.

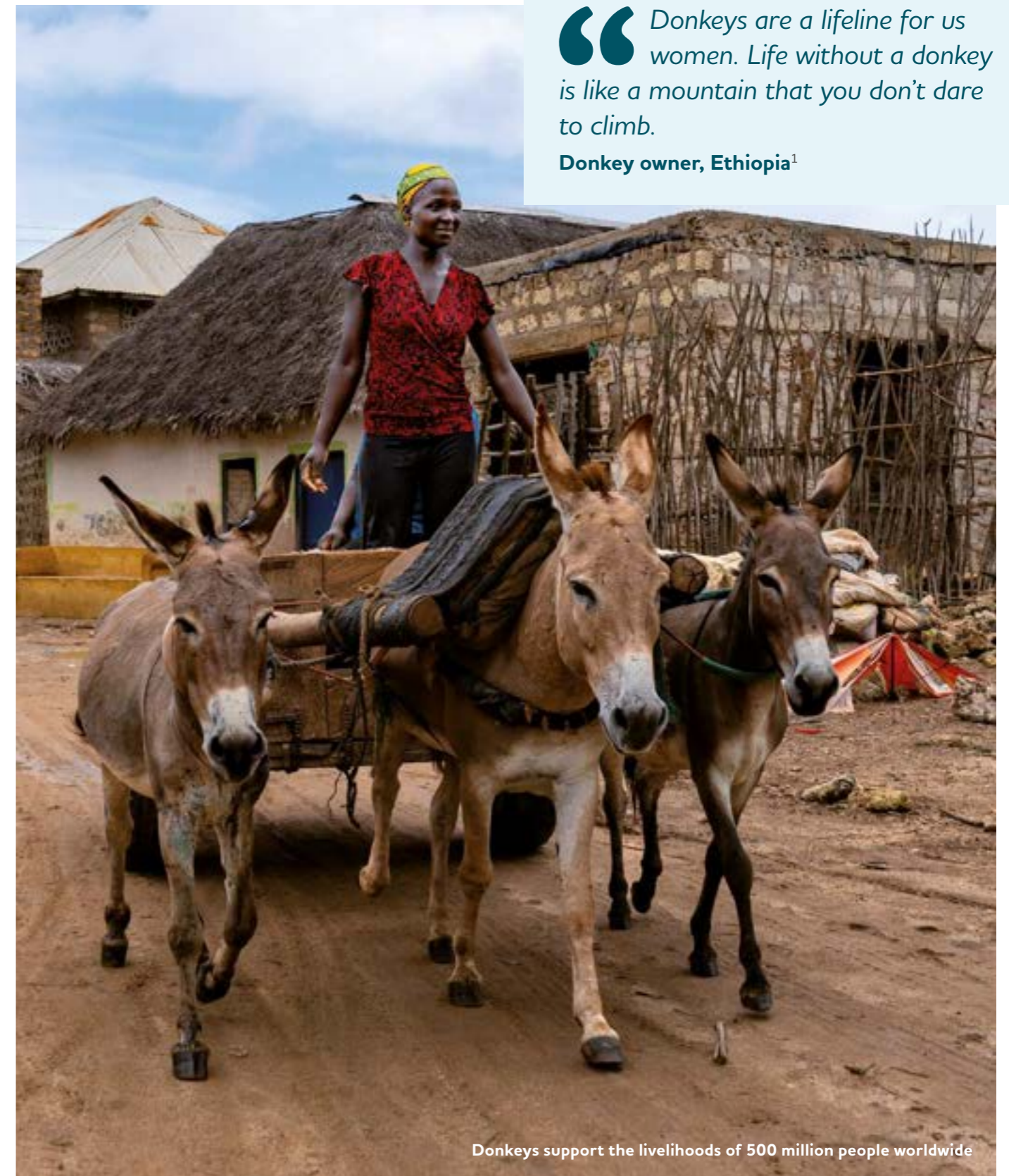
There is an urgent need to defend against the harmful impacts of the donkey skin trade and to equip and support communities to protect their donkeys. Donkeys are simply too important for the international community to turn a blind eye to the ejiao industry and the havoc it wreaks.

There is a path forward and momentum against the trade is building. The African Union's decision was more than a rallying cry for national governments; it also paved the way for international airlines, shipping lines and law-enforcement agencies to act. By banning the export and transport of donkey skins, promoting alternatives and equipping communities to protect their donkeys, we can end the devastating impact of this trade.

AT LEAST
5.9 
**MILLION DONKEYS
SLAUGHTERED FOR THE
SKIN TRADE ANNUALLY**

“Donkeys are a lifeline for us women. Life without a donkey is like a mountain that you don't dare to climb.

Donkey owner, Ethiopia¹



Donkeys support the livelihoods of 500 million people worldwide

“Preserving donkeys in Africa holds profound significance beyond their role as traditional work animals. These resilient creatures are integral to rural livelihoods, serving as vital assets in transportation, agriculture, and economic sustenance for communities across the continent.

African Union Inter-African Bureau for Animal Resources, 2025²

INTRODUCTION



Riziki and her donkey Aitogal, rural Kenya

For decades world leaders have grappled with the challenge of protecting women’s human rights; achieving gender equality and advancing women’s economic security. Despite progress, the World Economic Forum predicts it will take 134 years – around five generations beyond the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) target – to reach parity in economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment.³

This is acutely evident in sub-Saharan Africa, home to 62% of the world’s women and girls who live in extreme poverty.^{4,5} According to UN Women, if current trends continue, ‘more than 340 million women and girls will still live in extreme poverty by 2030, and close to one in four will experience moderate or severe food insecurity’.⁶

These women have very few options in the labour market and face precarious employment devoid

of basic labour rights.⁷ For these women, working livestock, and particularly donkeys, offer a lifeline and can be the difference between destitution and modest survival.⁸

Donkeys carry water and firewood; are used to work the land; and provide critical transport for people and goods to market. They afford women an income and, critically, the time needed to care for children and meet their domestic and community responsibilities.

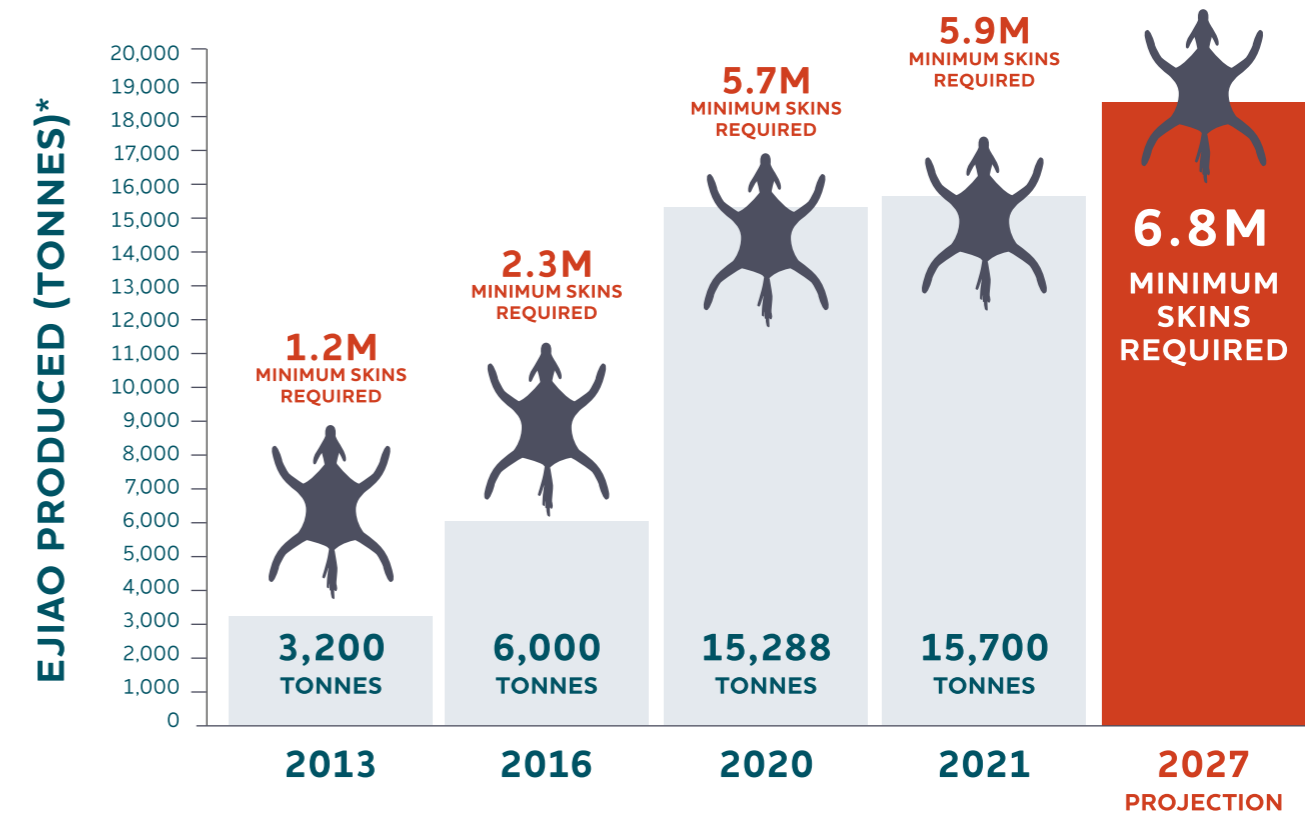
Inequality is driven by complex, deeply entrenched factors that require sustained action by government and communities. This action is undermined by the large-scale theft, trade and slaughter of donkeys to produce ejiao, a Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) made by boiling donkey skins. Extensive marketing campaigns⁹, favourable public policy and greater disposable income in China¹⁰ have dramatically increased ejiao

consumption, far beyond the point where the demand for donkey skins can be met within China. Having decimated the Chinese donkey population – from 11 million in 1992 to less than 1.5 million in 2023¹¹ – the USD\$6.38 billion ejiao industry⁵² has long taken donkey skins from Africa.

Research undertaken by the Africa Centre for One Health-One Welfare Research, Innovation and Sustainable Livelihoods and Maasai Mara University in Kenya in late 2024 shows the harm the donkey skin trade does to women and girls. One hundred and fifty women from five Kenyan counties shared first-hand accounts of donkey theft and the resulting harm to their health, wellbeing and finances, as well as their children’s health, nutrition and education.¹² This research, commissioned by The Donkey Sanctuary, adds to an already extensive evidence base showing that a stolen donkey often means a stolen future.

“The skin trade is the biggest threat facing donkeys around the world today and a One Welfare crisis. There is now an urgent need to act, not just to protect donkeys but also the women, children and communities who rely on them.

Marianne Steele, CEO, The Donkey Sanctuary



*Figures based on calculations from Bennett et al (2019¹⁰) using ejiao output estimates from Hui (2017⁶⁶) and Li (2022⁵²)⁶⁷

WOMEN'S ECONOMIC SECURITY

Women's economic security is critical to achieving gender equality.¹³ It accelerates inclusive economic growth¹⁴, increases productivity and contributes to more stable and fairer societies.^{15,13} In countries with lower female workforce participation, closing the gender gap could drive GDP growth by up to 35%.¹⁶ Put simply by UN Women (2018), 'when more women work, economies grow'.¹³

Extensive research shows that women's economic participation and equitable access to productive assets reduce systemic inequities and help to:

- Strengthen national economies¹⁷
- Accelerate poverty reduction⁴
- Increase household productivity and living standards¹⁷
- Enhance children's health¹⁸, nutrition and wellbeing¹⁷
- Improve school attendance.¹⁸

“Girls dropping out of school early are more likely to marry or have children early, before they may be physically and emotionally ready to become wives and mothers. This may affect their own health. It may also affect that of their children.

World Bank, 2018²⁸

INVESTING IN WOMEN, INVESTING IN THE FUTURE

Greater financial security is strongly linked to positive mental and physical health.^{19,20,21,22} The benefits of strengthening women's economic security however extend far beyond women themselves.²³ According to UN Women (2018), women's economic empowerment is a cornerstone of, and central to, achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).¹³

The World Economic Forum, UN Women and Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) note that women invest significantly more of their earnings in their families than men, with some sources suggesting it could be as high as 90% for women and between 35% and 50% for men.^{24,23,25} This is in addition to women's heavy childcare and household responsibilities, highlighting the need for women to be supported, including by their precious donkeys.

The investment women make can bring far-reaching and multi-generational²⁶ benefits including increased health and nutrition in children, improved living standards and higher rates of school attendance. The health, social and economic benefits of higher rates of school attendance are well documented. According to the World Bank (2011) an additional year of schooling for girls can deliver a profound economic impact by increasing individual wages by up to 20% once women are working and by lowering birth rates.²⁷

Higher education levels for girls lead to:

- Faster poverty reduction
- Better maternal health and lower child mortality
- Greater HIV prevention
- Reduced violence against women.⁴



In the Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe, women are involved in agricultural production supported by their donkeys

“Investing in women's economic empowerment sets a direct path towards gender equality, poverty eradication and inclusive economic growth.

UN Women, 2024¹⁴

DONKEYS: SHARING THE LOAD



Children are transported to school by donkey in rural Zimbabwe

According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (2025), livestock ‘support the livelihoods and food and nutrition security of almost 1.3 billion people’.²⁹ This is particularly true in low- and middle-income countries, where they play a critical role in alleviating poverty for hundreds of millions of smallholders.³⁰

Working equids (donkeys, horses and mules) fulfil a particularly important function and, in some communities, equid ownership represents the only viable escape from extreme poverty.³¹ For this reason, they are often the most valuable asset owned by families and communities³⁰ and, while equid ownership in general can bring substantial socio-economic benefits, this report specifically addresses the unique role that donkeys play in the lives of African women.

Donkeys are sensitive and intelligent animals. They are known for their strength, dependability and

resilience, and are vital to the women who own and work with them. They can make a profound difference to women’s economic security and are an important contributor to food security, water access and poverty reduction.^{1,32} Women use donkeys to carry water and firewood, and to plough and till the land. They are an essential form of transport and enable women to grow crops to sell at market. They are also critical to a One Welfare approach to sustainably optimising the wellbeing of people and animals, as well as the environments that support them.

“Donkeys are highly valued by their owners as they play a valuable role in providing a pathway out of ultra-poverty.

Maggs et al. 2021³³

A DONKEY’S NAME OFTEN REFLECTS THEIR VALUE AND THE AFFECTION THEIR OWNERS FEEL FOR THEM

NAIRETOI

means ‘helper’
in Maasai dialect

TOTO

means ‘child’
in Swahili

MWIITU

means ‘lady’
in Kikamba

DIESEL

refers to
‘power’

MKOMBOZI

means ‘saviour’
in Swahili



Donkeys are often the most valuable asset for many women in Kenya

“Donkeys provide social status, empowerment to marginalised groups such as women and the very poor and provide a sense of companionship. Donkeys are an important support in rural, peri-urban and urban settings through the creation of economic security independence and participation in local savings schemes. Working donkeys are an important source of draft power and transport for many in both rural, peri-urban and urban areas throughout the year.

Geiger et al. 2024⁴³

WOMEN'S HEALTH

“...carrying these things on your back is not good for your health. It causes back problems, but you do it anyway because there's no other option.” Donkey owner, Kenya¹²

Carrying heavy objects on the head or back can have serious and long-term health impacts for women,^{34,35} including risk of injury; compromised reproductive outcomes and impacts on maternal and foetal health;³⁴ acute and chronic musculoskeletal pain;³⁶ and prolapsed discs.³⁷

Donkey ownership is life changing for many women. They both figuratively and literally carry the load, freeing women from this burden, and lessening the risk of physical pain, injury and subsequent psychological harm.

WOMEN'S WELLBEING

“The importance and value of donkeys to women cannot be overstated. In everyday life, donkeys work with women to care for children and families.” Martha Geiger, 2024³⁸

The impact of donkey ownership on a woman's life cannot be overstated and is central to the One Welfare framework. Women often describe their donkeys as their most valuable asset, best friend or co-wife. They enjoy the companionship of their donkey(s); often have more time and opportunities to earn income; experience better health and living conditions; and have greater capacity to care for their children and to support their education.

CHILDREN'S HEALTH AND NUTRITION

“There is a critically small ‘window of opportunity’ for addressing undernutrition in children, which in turn hinges on timely access to food, including time for breastfeeding and timely preparation of meals in the first two years of life – a period in which... women with young children are likely to be especially heavily burdened with work.” World Bank, 2006³⁹

Healthcare and nutrition are essential for infant and child health and wellbeing, and these are made possible through both the transport provided by, and the money earned with, a donkey. Maternal care is a critical factor in infant and child health,⁴⁰ and a woman with a donkey has more time available to care for her children. She is also more likely to have money to buy the food her children need.

Donkey ownership also makes breastfeeding more achievable for women. With a donkey, a woman can bring her baby with her while collecting water and other household supplies: the donkey carries the load, the woman carries the baby. This enables the baby to be breastfed and to receive the maternal care that is so critical in the early stages of life.



Having a donkey enables a mother to provide food, healthcare and essential items for her children

One Welfare is a concept akin to One Health, recognising that human wellbeing and animal welfare are interdependent and bound to the health of the ecosystems in which they exist. One Welfare extends the approach of (and partially overlaps) the One Health theme used for human and animal health; this approach promotes the direct and indirect links of animal welfare to human welfare and environmentally friendly animal-keeping systems.⁴¹



Women carry the burden of heavy water loads without a donkey

CHILDREN'S EDUCATION

“The donkey has become my ‘door key’ as it is opening doors where I earn an income, and I am happy I can now pay my children’s school fees and buy their uniforms.” Donkey owner, Zimbabwe⁴²

Education offers a pathway out of poverty and the income earned with a donkey is often used to pay for school fees, books and uniforms, enabling children to gain an education that brings entirely new opportunities.

“I did not go to school myself. I can’t imagine my children not going to school, I use this money to invest in their primary and secondary school education.” Donkey owner, Kenya¹²

The time saved through a donkey’s labour can allow a child to remain in school, rather than being

forced to rise before dawn to collect water and other provisions or, in some cases, stay home to help with household chores.⁴³

“You the parent can use the donkey to plough without children having to stop school to work on the farm.” Donkey owner, Ghana³³

According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2018), with ‘even a few years of primary education, women have better economic prospects, fewer and healthier children, and better chances of sending their own children to school’.⁴⁴ Higher education levels for girls contribute to higher earnings,²⁴ faster poverty reduction, better maternal health, lower child mortality, greater HIV prevention and reduced violence against women.⁴



The donkey unlocks access to education for girls in rural Ethiopia

“...for every year a girl stays in school, her future earnings will increase exponentially.

World Economic Forum, 2014²⁴

INCOME

“This donkey is the base for helping my family’s life. All my family’s income is from this donkey.” Donkey owner, Ethiopia⁴³

Income is generated through agriculture, transport and construction where donkeys provide draught and load-bearing power.^{1,45} Donkey-owning households in Ghana, for example, derive up to 60% of their income from donkeys.³³ In other cases, working equines support 100% of the annual income of households reliant on crop and cow milk sales.⁴⁶

Donkey owners earn income by transporting people and goods such as construction materials and agricultural produce, and by selling donkey manure. By transporting goods, donkeys enhance market access and help boost local economies.

Money earned can be invested in purchasing additional working equines; held as a ‘safety net’; or invested in savings schemes,¹ helping to build stronger economies and communities.



Donkeys provide crucial support for their owners in Southern Ethiopia

“If there are no donkeys, there is no community. Donkeys are like my right hand. My donkey doesn’t fail me – she is everywhere I am.

Donkey owner, Ethiopia⁴⁷



In drought-stricken Southern Zimbabwe, women spend many hours collecting water

TIME: THE MOST VALUABLE COMMODITY

“Carrying the firewood five times can use about six hours, but the donkey would use about two hours.” Donkey owner, Ghana³³

Donkeys perform a multitude of tasks that would otherwise fall to women and children. They can carry heavier loads than women and children, which means less time is required to collect water, firewood and other provisions. The precious time saved can be spent on activities such as childcare or paid employment. In Ghana, for example, people report being able to take on paid work due to the time they gain by having a donkey.³³

“...an estimated 13.54 million women and 3.36 million children were responsible for water collection across 24 sub-Saharan countries.”* Unicef, 2016⁴⁸

*when water collection took more than 30 minutes

STANDING IN THE COMMUNITY

“People who do not own donkeys are underprivileged, not respected and underestimated... they are the poorest sector of the community. Those who don’t have donkeys are in definite poverty.” Donkey owner, Ethiopia⁴³

Donkey ownership supports people to fulfil their social obligations by, for example, loaning their donkey to others or forming owners’ groups.¹ The ability to meet these obligations strengthens a person’s standing in the community.



In some cultures, livestock ownership is directly linked to social status

THE GLOBAL TRADE IN DONKEY SKINS

Ejiao was once prized as a rare and precious commodity. This high-value product, made by boiling donkey skins, was sold at comparatively low quantities and the demand for donkey skins was largely met within China.

THE MARKETING MACHINE

Large-scale marketing campaigns by the ejiao industry, predominantly by the Chinese Government-backed company Dong-E-Ejiao, drove a huge increase in the demand for ejiao and, in turn, donkey skins.

This increase in demand created an unrelenting appetite for donkey skins. With the domestic donkey herd significantly depleted – and donkey farming not a viable solution^{49,50} – the ejiao industry drives a massive global trade in donkey skins, much of it illegal. The minimum number of skins required in 2021 was 5.9 million and, if production continues to grow at the present rate, could reach a minimum of 6.8 million skins by 2027.⁵¹

The ejiao industry is worth USD\$6.38 billion and has an annual growth rate of 8.7%.⁵²

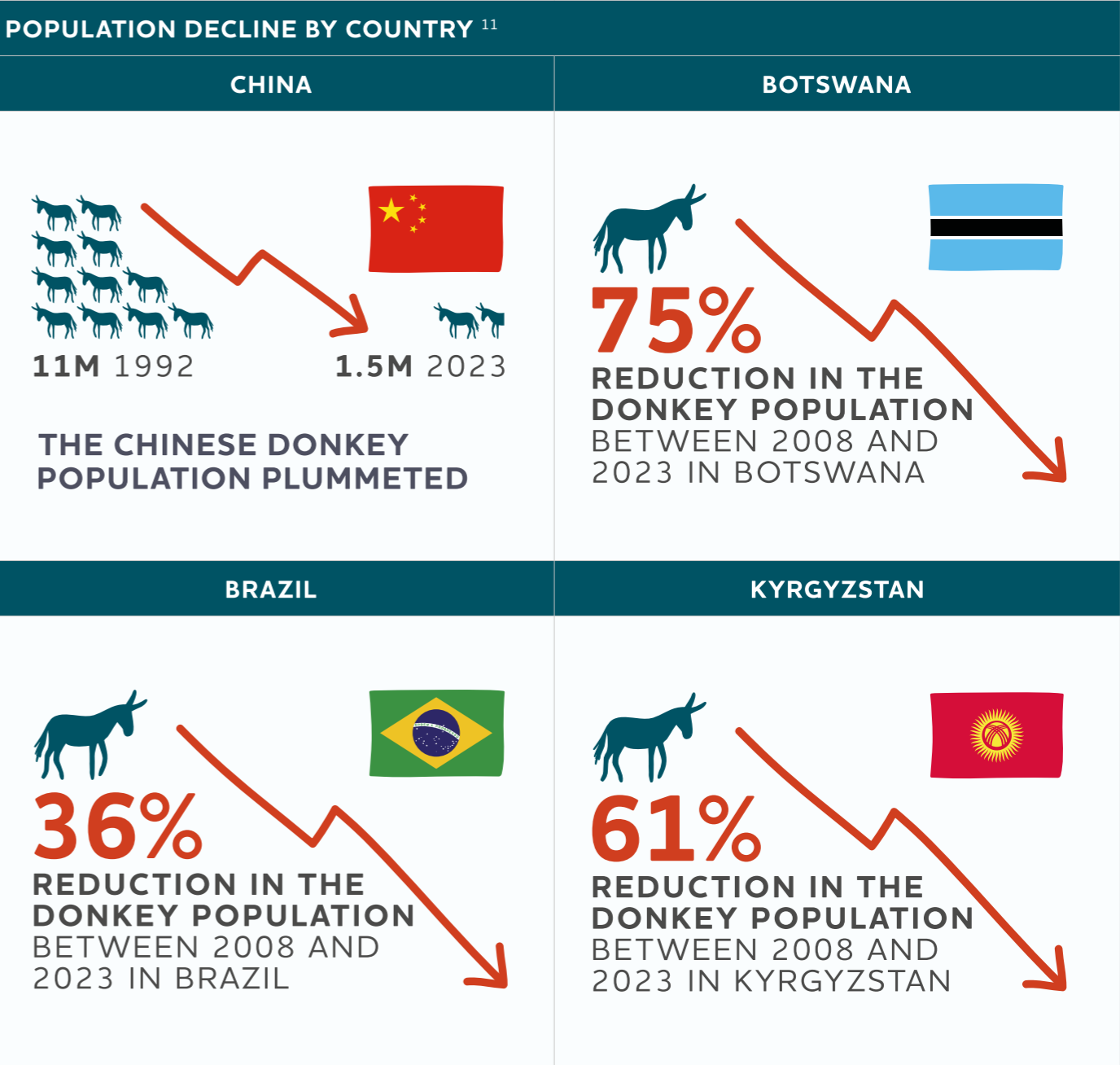
EGREGIOUS EXPLOITATION

For decades the ejiao industry has imported donkey skins from across Africa. Traders exploit vulnerable people using large and sophisticated networks of agents to pressure donkey owners into selling their animals. Worse still, illegal networks operate across the continent, often without consequence, stealing and slaughtering donkeys in the night. The donkey skin trade has inflated prices so much that donkey theft victims often struggle to replace their donkey(s).



Dong-E-Ejiao drove an increase in ejiao sales through product placement in a highly popular soap opera series and other large-scale advertising. Image credit: Breaking Asia⁵³

| EJIAO MARKET VALUE ⁵² | |
|----------------------------------|--------------|
| YEAR | \$ USD |
| 2015 | 3.75 BILLION |
| 2021 | 6.38 BILLION |
| 2027 | 7.77 BILLION |



GROUNDBREAKING RESEARCH: STOLEN DONKEYS, STOLEN FUTURES

A new study of 150 female donkey owners across five Kenyan counties shows the widespread devastation caused by the donkey skin trade. The study, undertaken in late 2024 by the Africa Centre for One Health-One Welfare Research, Innovation and Sustainable Livelihoods and Maasai Mara University, found that **up to 97% of surveyed donkey owners have had their donkey(s) stolen**.¹²

The results revealed that the average drop in income for donkey owners could be as high as 73% and exposed the multitude of ways that families are impacted.¹²

The theft of a donkey can change the trajectory of a woman's life – and that of her children. The impacts are immediate, and they can be catastrophic. Women describe the devastation of waking to find that their donkey has been stolen and slaughtered during the night.

Many families live week-to-week and a sudden drop in income can be catastrophic. Donkey theft can propel a family from a situation of modest survival to one of absolute and enduring poverty. Demand from China has driven donkey prices so high that donkey theft victims find it difficult, if not impossible, to replace them.

“My donkey is my employer, without her where else would I get my earnings?”
Kenyan water vendor who struggled to survive when her donkey was stolen for the skin trade¹²

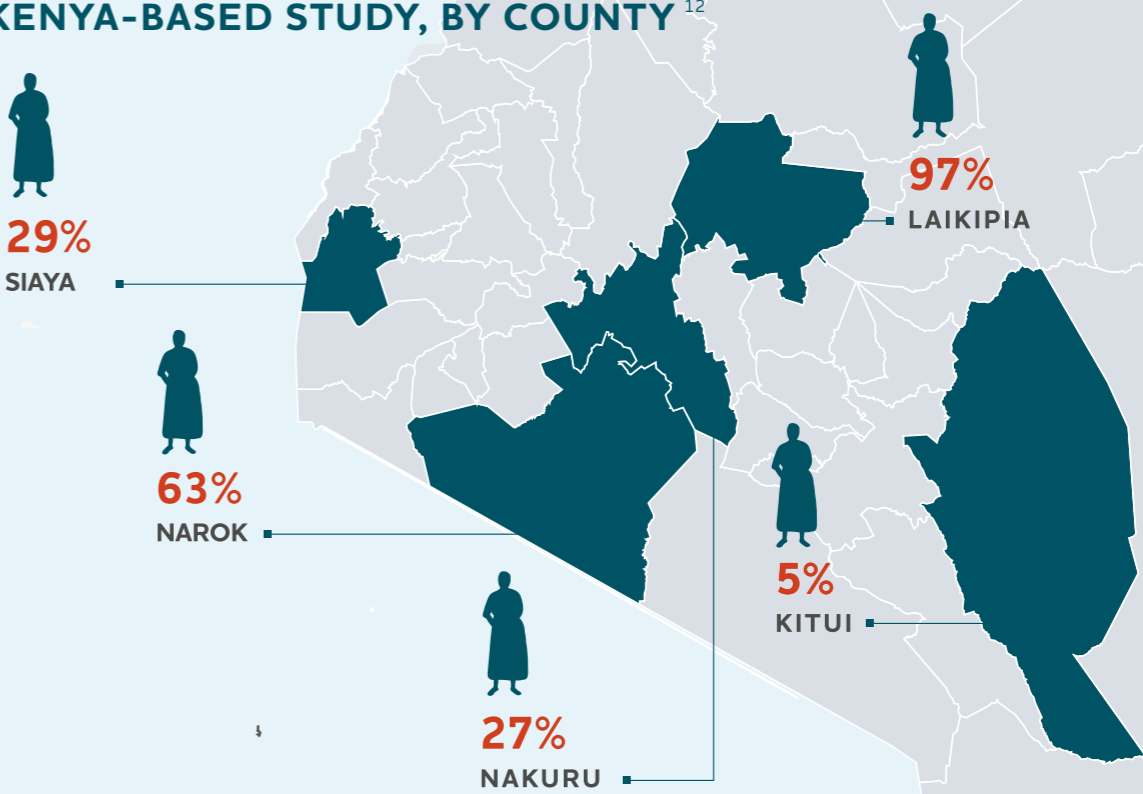
“The impact of the trade extended beyond financial loss, manifesting as emotional strain, health issues, and disruption of children’s education. Replacing lost donkeys often involved trade-offs such as delaying school fees, scaling back investments, and limiting access to basic necessities.”

Africa Centre for One Health-One Welfare Research, Innovation, and Sustainable Livelihoods

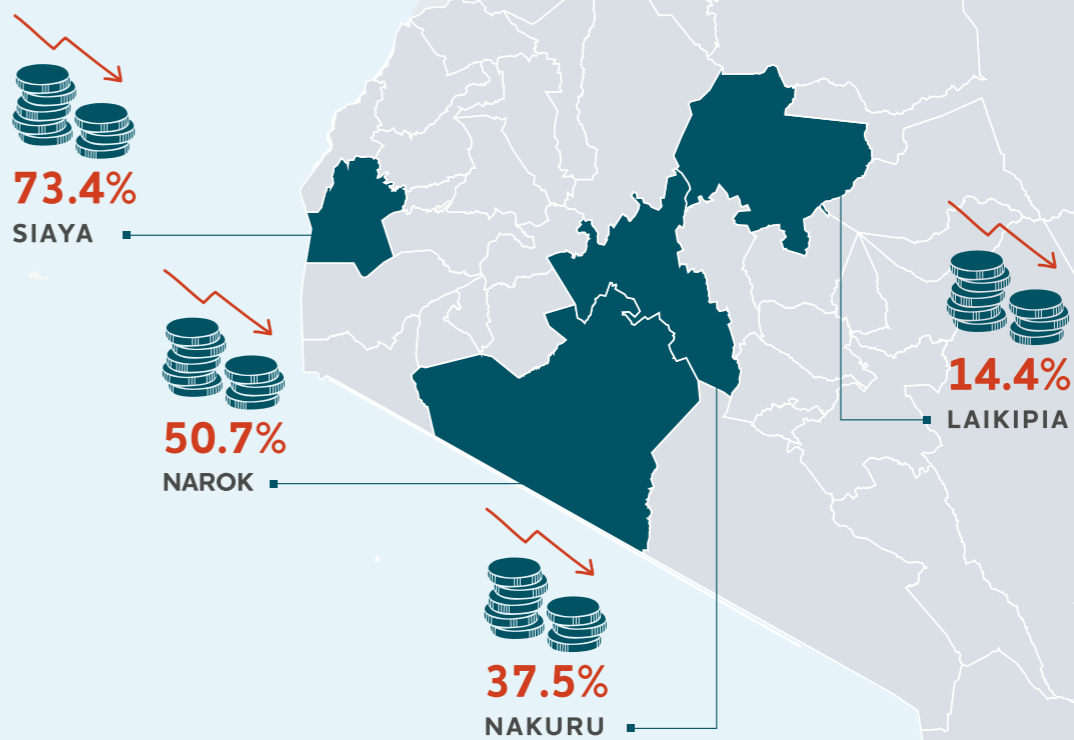
UP TO **97%** OF SURVEYED DONKEY OWNERS HAD THEIR DONKEY(S) STOLEN

THE AVERAGE DROP IN INCOME FOR DONKEY OWNERS COULD BE AS HIGH AS **73%**

INCIDENTS OF DONKEY THEFT AMONG PARTICIPANTS IN KENYA-BASED STUDY, BY COUNTY ¹²



AVERAGE REDUCTION IN INCOME FOLLOWING THEFT OF DONKEY FOR EJIAO PRODUCTION BY COUNTY ¹²



GROUNDBREAKING RESEARCH: STOLEN DONKEYS, STOLEN FUTURES



EMOTIONAL TRAUMA

Women often develop deep and enduring bonds with their donkeys, and many experience profound grief when their donkeys are stolen and slaughtered.

“I love my donkey since it helps me in a lot of work. It is like my co-wife.”
Donkey owner, Kenya¹²

“I cried like I was bereaved. I was wondering how I would continue to raise my kids without a donkey. I was very disturbed.” Donkey owner, Kenya¹²

“Women are really affected by... the overwhelming loss we experience.”
Donkey owner, Kenya¹²

STOLEN TIME

When a donkey is stolen, what was a single trip with a donkey to collect water or supplies becomes multiple trips, and many hours, with the woman carrying the load herself.

“In the case where I have a child who is not going to school and I do not own a donkey, I will borrow one from a neighbour. However, in exchange, I will have to fetch water for them in return. While this is still better than carrying the water on my back, the number of trips to the river increases...”
Donkey owner, Kenya⁵⁴

CHILDREN DENIED NUTRITION

Donkey theft sees children deprived of food and water simply to feed the ejiao industry. A woman without a donkey may be forced to leave her breastfeeding baby behind so that she can carry the load. Parents living in poverty struggle to provide food, healthcare and essential items for their children and may be forced to reduce meal sizes or to skip meals entirely.

“If there is a donkey in the house, the mother carries her child on her back and lets the donkey carry stuff, be it water or crops. However if they don’t have a donkey, she has to leave the child behind at home even when there is no one to look after the baby, as she has to carry the load herself. So donkeys make a huge contribution caring for babies.” Donkey owner, Ethiopia¹

“After losing my donkey, a meal for me and my children was by chance.”
Donkey owner, Kenya¹²

“If I cannot get someone to lend me a donkey, I will have to carry a water jerrycan on the back and child on the chest. Other young kids not in school are fed and locked inside the house with windows opened... they play until I come back from fetching water.” Donkey owner, Kenya⁵⁵

“My donkey was my only source of income, and its death has hit me and my family very hard... our access to food has also been affected. I am no longer able to purchase fruits on a daily basis and we have to make do with having fruits once per week or at times none.” Donkey owner, Kenya¹



PHYSICAL HARM

Heavy loads carried on the head or back cause physical injury and deterioration and can lead to severe musculoskeletal pain,³⁵ maternal and foetal health problems³⁴ and psychological trauma.

“After I lost the donkeys and had searched for them and couldn’t find them, I was worried my husband would beat me... I was carrying everything on my back until I was able to buy another donkey.” Donkey owner, Ethiopia³⁸

CHILDREN – MOST OFTEN GIRLS – DENIED EDUCATION

Without a donkey, parents often can’t afford to pay for school fees, uniforms or supplies. They also can’t spare the labour and day-to-day survival may force them to sacrifice their children’s education. This burden disproportionately falls to girls,^{56,57} further embedding gender inequality and cementing them into a lifetime of poverty and disadvantage.

“You can sometimes negotiate with the school to pay fees in instalments, but the children will have to go to school without textbooks and writing material.” Donkey owner, Kenya¹²

Children kept in school may need to collect water and provisions before and after school, leaving little time for the study, rest and play that are critical to their health, growth and development.^{58,59}

“For the children, I have had to wake them up early at 4am so we can fetch water before they go to school.” Donkey owner, Kenya¹²

DECLINING LIVING STANDARDS AND SANITATION

Without a donkey, families can struggle to access all the provisions they need, and, in the case of water, this can lead to health and sanitary problems in families. Basic provisions fall beyond the reach of families.

“It affects my family because I end up arguing with my husband when he can’t get water to bathe... The children also suffer if they find I haven’t prepared food for them. It’s very hard to be without a donkey.”
Donkey owner, Kenya¹²

“If my donkeys get stolen, I’m the one affected because I will have to go to the river myself to fetch water with a jerrycan. Water is important to human beings and the donkeys help us to get that water. If I lose a donkey, I suffer a lot because one jerrycan of water is not enough for me. In the house you need 100 litres of water so that you’re able to complete your housework.” Donkey owner, Kenya⁶⁰

“Cleanliness in my home was a challenge [when the donkey died] because the amount of water that I can carry on my back cannot be enough for livestock and household chores.” Donkey owner, Kenya¹



A VICIOUS CYCLE OF POVERTY

The insatiable demand for donkey skins has driven donkey prices to extreme heights, well out of the reach of many Africans. To save enough money to replace a stolen donkey, people are often forced to sell other livestock that would otherwise have been bred as a source of income.

“You have to replace your donkey, you just have to replace your donkey, there is no other option, personally I had planned to do crop farming with the money.”

Donkey owner, Kenya¹²

To replace their donkeys, participants in the Africa Centre for One Health–One Welfare Research, Innovation, and Sustainable Livelihoods study said they were forced to divert money from:

- **School fees and materials.** Many donkey theft victims said that the money they spent to replace their donkeys would otherwise have been spent on school fees.
- **Farm cultivation.** Preparing fields for planting is an investment that is critical to food and livelihood security.
- **House construction.** The purchase of building materials to improve their housing conditions.
- **Food and provisions.** Money diverted from the purchase of food, clothing and other essential provisions.
- **Livestock purchases.** Funds saved for the purchase of farm animals, such as a cow or goat, to provide milk for domestic consumption or sale are instead used to replace a stolen donkey.

The diversion of these critical funds worsens a family’s financial position and future prospects, but donkeys are so important that victims of donkey theft are left with no choice but to do everything within their power to replace it. And they must do this with full knowledge that their replacement donkey may also be stolen. Many people have had multiple donkeys stolen for ejiao, subjecting them to a vicious cycle of poverty that they may never escape from.

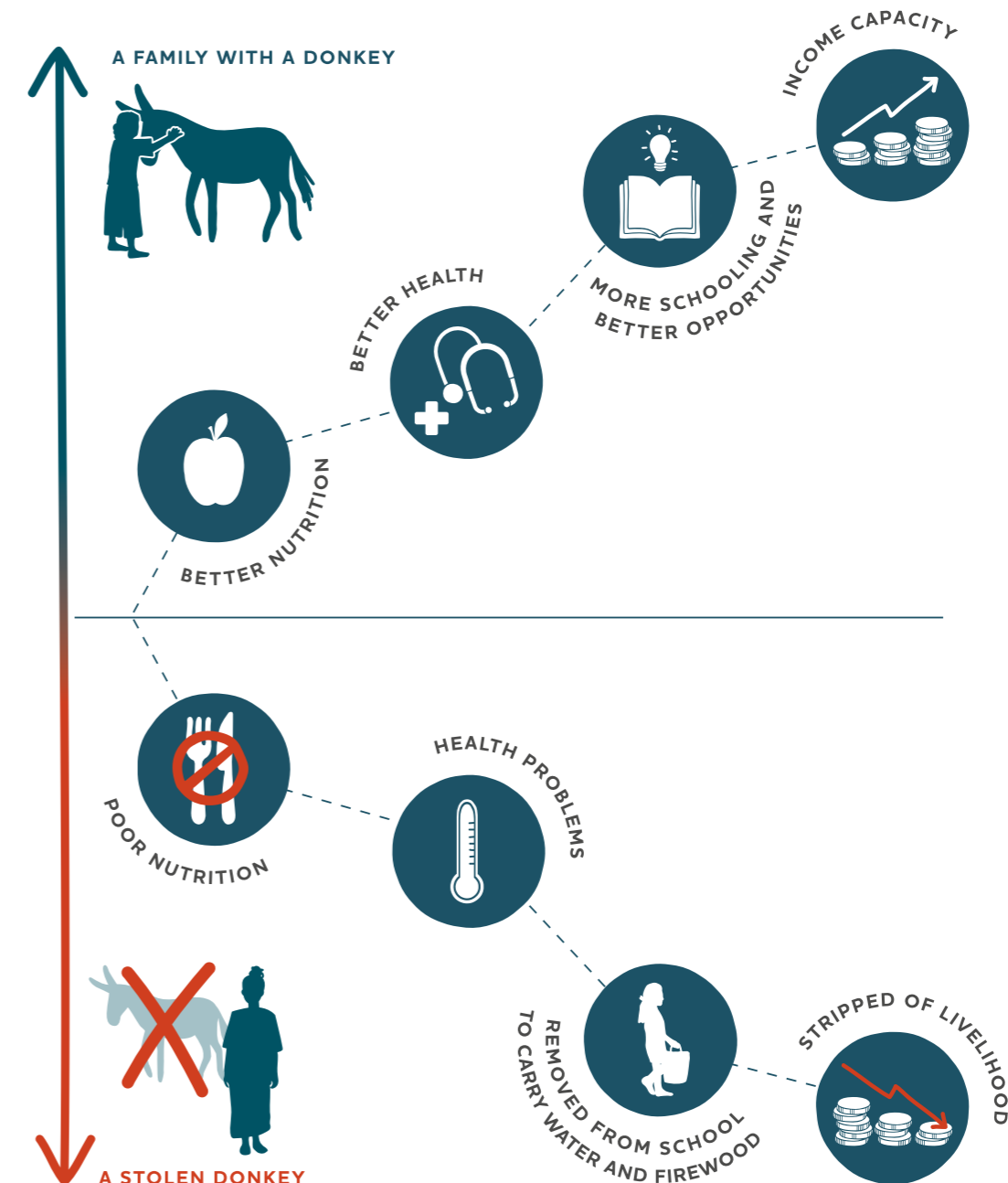


A stolen donkey robs women of so much more

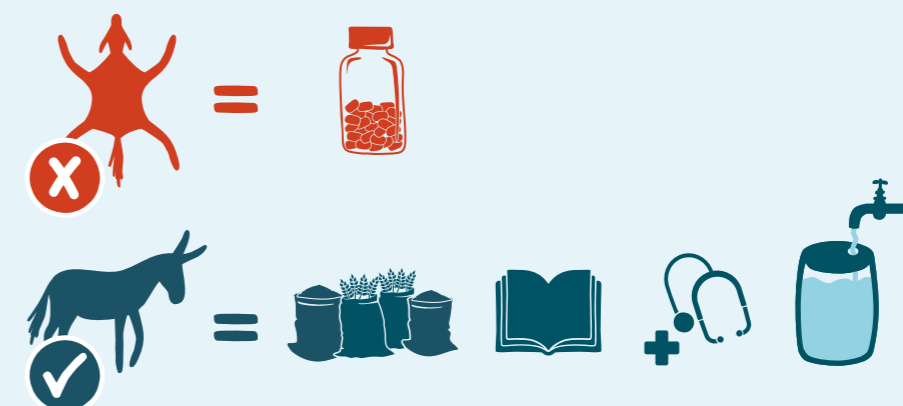
“The sheep I sold would have had young ones, and I could have used them to pay school fees for the children.”

Donkey owner, Kenya¹²

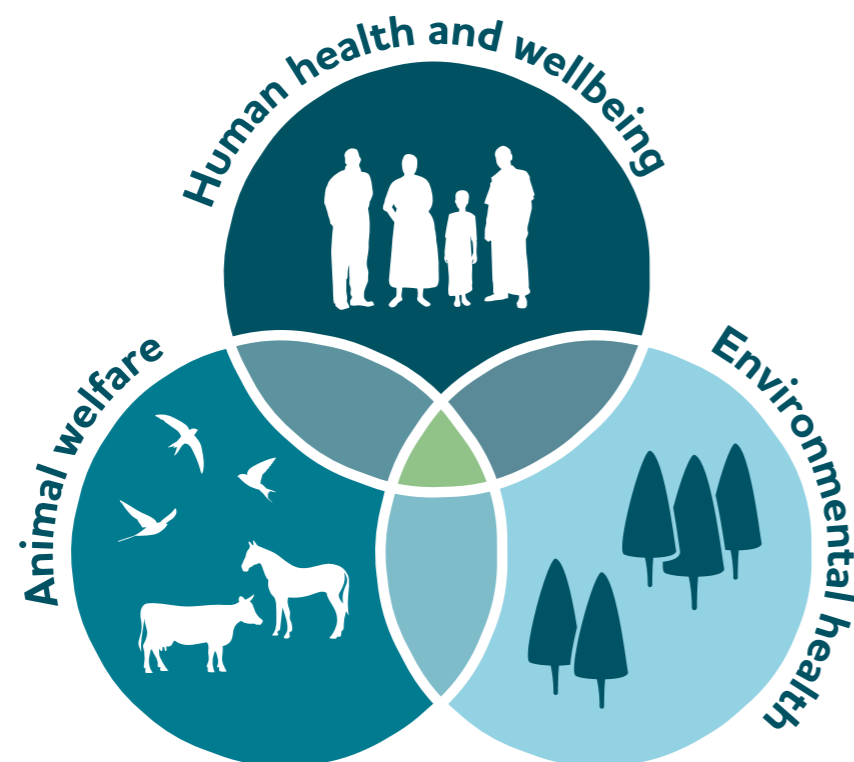
THE IMPACT OF A DONKEY ON A GIRL'S LIFE



THE VALUE OF A DONKEY



THE THREAT TO ONE HEALTH, ONE WELFARE



The One Welfare framework highlights the link between animal welfare, human wellbeing, and the physical and social ecosystems they occupy.⁶¹ It complements the established One Health approach that addresses the interconnections between human, animal and environmental health, and promotes the development of policies with these front-of-mind.

One Health primarily focuses on health impacts, a component part of the broader One Welfare concept, which considers that the wellbeing of the individual (animal and human) and the totality (ecosystem) are interdependent. In a post-pandemic world facing unprecedented challenges directly linked to animal health and welfare, including food and water security, sustainability and disease prevention, its importance has never been greater.

Following global attention post-pandemic, the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), World Health Organisation (WHO) and World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH) established a formal Quadripartite to drive a One Health Joint Plan of Action to tackle planetary health threats.⁶² Amid growing momentum, at the Third Quadripartite

Executive Annual Meeting in March 2025, parties called for urgent, strategic and sustained support and investments to scale up One Health implementation worldwide.⁶³

Donkey transport, including unregulated cross-border trade, and slaughter pose serious biosecurity and antimicrobial resistance risks and, at worst, could lead to zoonotic disease outbreaks and pandemics. Critical transmission sites associated with the donkey skin trade such as borders, slaughterhouses and markets point to these unsustainable risks.

“ [Donkey] welfare is not merely a matter of compassion but a strategic imperative for maintaining socio-economic stability and ecological balance.

African Union Inter-African Bureau for Animal Resources 2025²

HUMAN WELFARE

- Children are forced to leave school to fetch water and other provisions without a donkey.
- Women suffer physical pain and injury as they struggle to carry the loads the donkey once shouldered.
- Women suffer psychological and emotional trauma of having their donkey stolen and slaughtered.
- Analysis of donkey skins from a Kenya abattoir revealed the presence of bacterial strains with antibiotic resistant genes.⁶⁸
- Long-term impacts on education, health, financial security and access to essential resources like water.
- Significant biosecurity risks: poor hygiene practices in slaughter and transportation create ideal conditions for the spread of zoonotic diseases.

ANIMAL WELFARE

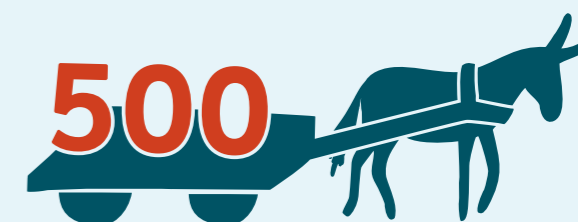
- At least 5.9 million donkeys are slaughtered every year. If production continues at the present rate, this could reach a minimum of 6.8 million donkeys by 2027.⁶⁷
- Donkeys suffer at every stage of the process, including over-crowded transportation, lack of food and water, and cruel slaughter methods.
- Many donkeys die during transit or arrive at slaughterhouses with severe injuries.
- Risk to domestic horse industry: spread of disease for which euthanasia is compulsory could prove highly damaging to the horse industry.

ENVIRONMENTAL WELFARE

- Depletion of donkey populations and loss of biodiversity.
- Pollution of groundwater and drinking water supplies due to improper disposal of donkey carcasses.
- Large-scale movement of animals and animal products across borders without proper regulations further exacerbates biosecurity and health risks.

“ We are therefore reminding countries to protect the health and welfare of donkey populations. Doing so is also crucial to advancing human wellbeing and socioeconomic development.

World Organisation for Animal Health⁶⁴



MILLION PEOPLE WORLDWIDE RELY ON DONKEYS AND OTHER WORKING EQUIDS FOR THEIR LIVELIHOODS⁶⁴

WHEN A DONKEY IS STOLEN HOUSEHOLD INCOME PLUMMETS

Findings reveal donkeys contribute between 60-80% of household income in some African communities.



“ 60% of known infectious diseases and 75% of emerging infectious diseases are zoonotic (transmissible from animals to people).

United Nations Environment Program 2020⁶⁵

ERODING PROGRESS TOWARDS THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



SDG 1 – NO POVERTY

Households without direct and indirect financial benefit from donkeys lose resilience and are more likely to slip into (or further into) multidimensional poverty.



SDG 2 – ZERO HUNGER

Food security is compromised by decreased agricultural productivity for subsistence and small-scale producers, coupled with reduced access to sufficient and varied sources of nutritious food (including markets / barter systems).



SDG 3 – GOOD HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Healthcare services may become inaccessible, physically and financially, worsening existing risks to physical and mental health. Women experience both acute and chronic pain due to the heavy loads they must carry.



SDG 4 – QUALITY EDUCATION

Education is disrupted or terminated altogether when children, particularly girls, are forced to compensate for a stolen donkey. This decreases social engagement and increases the percentage of the population growing up without basic literacy and numeracy skills.



SDG 5 – GENDER EQUALITY

Domestic and unpaid workloads for women and girls increase significantly without a donkey, affecting time budgets, responsibilities, potential economic activity and social status.



SDG 6 – CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION

Access to adequate supplies of clean water for domestic and productive purposes may be reduced, with consequences for basic needs including sanitation.

CONCLUSION

THE TRUE COST OF EJIAO: STOLEN DONKEYS AND STOLEN FUTURES

For millennia, donkeys have been indispensable to human societies, serving as partners in the livelihoods of rural households across Africa. To countless people, particularly women, donkeys are lifelines, co-workers and companions in their daily struggles to provide for their families. However, the global demand for donkey skins to make the Traditional Chinese Medicine ejiao has transformed donkeys into commodities, fuelling a trade epidemic that devastates the lives of the already-vulnerable women and children who rely on them.

When a donkey is stolen or sold, it is not just an animal that is lost; it can be a family's future. The consequences are immediate, and they can be catastrophic. Incomes plummet, children are forced to leave school, and women endure relentless physical and emotional trauma as they struggle to perform the work that donkeys once shouldered.

The removal of a donkey can be the removal of security, hope and a future. The ripple effects of this crisis are profound. Families fall into cycles of poverty that can be impossible to escape.

This is not just a story of stolen donkeys; it is a story of stolen lives. The ejiao trade's relentless demand for donkey skins comes at the expense of the most vulnerable.

But there is a path forward. By addressing the ejiao trade's devastating impact, promoting sustainable alternatives and supporting communities to protect their donkeys, we can begin to heal the wounds inflicted by this global trade.

This product, marketed for health and wellness, leaves a trail of destruction in its wake.

When a donkey is stolen, so too is the key to a woman's future, and to that of her children. Donkeys are simply too important for the international community to turn a blind eye to the ejiao industry and the havoc it wreaks.

To protect African women and their families and to advance gender equality and women's economic security, governments, regulators and the transport sector must confront the devastating reality of the ejiao trade, and their role within it, and act decisively to end the trade in donkey skins.



To protect Africa's women and their families, the donkey skin trade must be brought to an end

RECOMMENDATIONS

The donkey skin trade is an inhumane animal and human welfare disaster that has a negative impact on millions of lives, yet it remains largely unheard of, even in the countries it affects.

The trade thrives in the dark so it is critical to shine a light on it and the harm it does. The more people talk about the trade and agitate for change, the more likely those with the power to make a difference are to act.

AFRICAN UNION MEMBER STATES

- 1. Support the African Union and Inter-African Bureau for Animal Resources (AU-IBAR) moratorium on donkey slaughter for the skin trade by confirming bans and measures to end it for good.
- 2. Introduce and/or enforce export bans linked to the donkey skin trade.
- 3. Crack down on illegal activity, including bush slaughter linked to the donkey skin trade.
- 4. Support communities to prevent donkey theft and slaughter through anti-theft initiatives and mechanisms at national, devolved government and community leadership levels.
- 5. Support and apply the Pan-African Donkey Strategy, being led by AU-IBAR, to protect donkeys and improve their health and welfare.

GOVERNMENTS OF OTHER EXPORTING COUNTRIES

- 6. Take immediate steps to legislate against donkey slaughter and exports linked to the donkey skin trade.
- 7. Engage in collaborative global action to stand against the donkey skin trade and prevent expansion into new trade routes and markets.

GLOBAL TRANSPORT SECTOR

- 8. Adopt a ‘No Donkey Skins Carriage’ policy and raise global awareness of the impact of the donkey skin trade within the sector.
- 9. Increase surveillance measures for donkey skins and engage with networks that pool intelligence on international crime.ⁱ

ⁱ Red flag indicators are outlined in The Donkey Sanctuary’s *Transport Sector Threat and Risk Assessment Fact Sheet* and *Aviation Risk and Assessment Operational Guidelines*.

THE EJIAO INDUSTRY

- 10. Stop the import of donkey skins and move towards a humane and sustainable ejiao industry (eg cellular agriculture).

GLOBAL INSTITUTIONS AND POLICY INFLUENCERS

- 11. World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH) to raise awareness of the biosecurity risks and drive a common position that stands against the donkey skin trade.
- 12. United Nations (UN) organisations focused on gender equality to recognise the importance of donkeys and mules to attainment of SDG 5 in policy discussions and decisions.
- 13. UN Member States to strengthen protections for working animals in line with UN General Assembly resolutions on Agriculture development, food security and nutrition and Disaster Risk Reduction.ⁱⁱ
- 14. Institutions involved in animal census and data collection to ensure working donkeys are properly counted, so that the impact of the donkey skin trade can be fully understood and acted upon.
- 15. Members of the One Health Quadripartite (UN FAO/UNEP/WHO/WOAH) recognise the impact of the donkey skin trade within the implementation pathways of the One Health Joint Plan of Action, to influence national action plans.

ⁱⁱ (A/C.2/79/L.25/Rev.1 (Agri) and A/C.2/79/L.16/Rev.1 (DRR))



An urgent, concerted effort is needed to protect the future of children, women and donkeys in Africa

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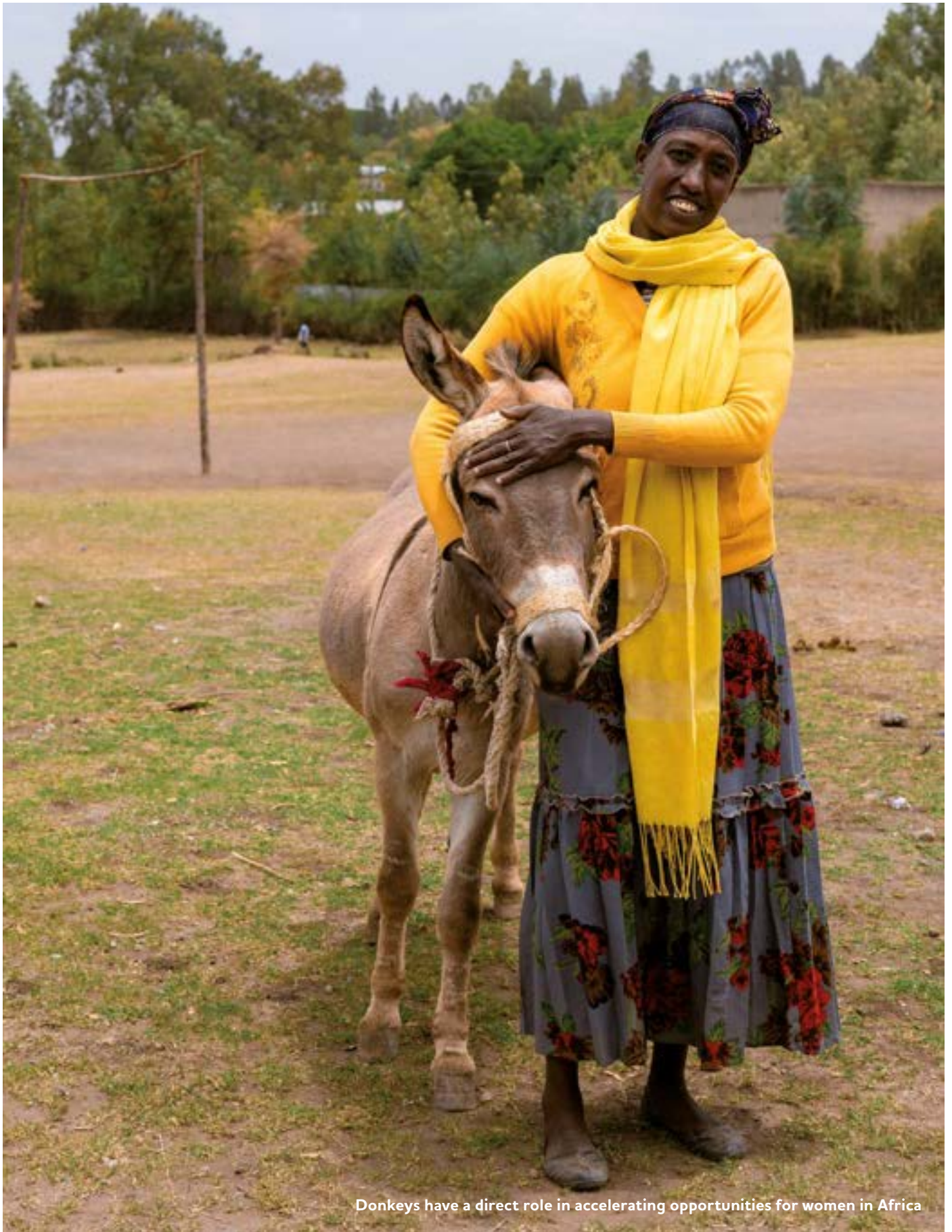
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Donkeys have a direct role in accelerating opportunities for women in Africa

THE DONKEY SANCTUARY

Slade House Farm, Sidmouth, Devon EX10 0NU

[44] (0)1395 578222 | enquiries@thedonkeysanctuary.org.uk | thedonkeysanctuary.org.uk

The Donkey Sanctuary was founded by Dr Elisabeth Svendsen MBE in 1969. The Donkey Sanctuary (registered charity number 1207593) is a company limited by guarantee (company registration number 15150580) and has its registered office at Slade House Farm, Sidmouth, EX10 0NU. Linked charities: The Elisabeth Svendsen Trust for Children and Donkeys (EST); The International Donkey Protection Trust (IDPT); and The Donkey Sanctuary (TDS Trust).