

# Integrating donkey transport into a smallholder dairy project involving women farmers in Uganda

by

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## Abstract

*Donkeys have been used in Uganda for hundreds of years and promoted most recently by donor-supported projects. Following these experiences donkeys were chosen as power sources to assist with the work needed to successfully manage smallholder dairy units. Leader farmers, mainly women, were chosen, trained and equipped with donkeys so that they could disseminate donkey technology. Introduction of the donkeys proved successful and a number of lessons were learnt. Recommendations made include the setting up of a national programme for donkey promotion and the training and education of all those involved in the use and care of donkeys.*

## Introduction

The concept of donkey utilisation is not new in Uganda. Donkeys have been used for hundreds of years in Kapchorwa District and by the migrating Karamojong. Their traditional use has mostly been confined to packing. There is some use for carting and to a lesser extent for plowing.

In 1993, a project funded by the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) started working on popularising donkey traction. Donkeys were introduced in the districts of Iganga, Jinja, Mukono, Mpigi, Luwero, Masaka, Mbarara, Bushenyi and Kasese. Nongovernmental organisations such as CARE also introduced donkey traction in the districts of Arua, Nebbi and Moyo. The main emphasis was on packing though limited promotion of carting was also carried out.

The following constraints to greater donkey utilisation in Uganda were identified:

- veterinary support service inexperienced in donkey management and health
- poor management at farm level resulting in poor body condition and hence low work output
- poor harnesses at farm level leading to reduced operating efficiency

- lack of donkey drawn equipment (carts, plows and weeders)
- social and cultural issues
- economic issues: donkeys have a low disposal value as compared to cattle
- little extension support for donkey traction.

## Background to the dairy project

The smallholder dairy project involved the distribution of dairy heifers to farmers, initially in Mpigi and Jinja Districts and later in Kibale and Ntungamo Districts. The overall objective of the project was to raise the socio-economic status of the women beneficiaries through milk production, consumption, income generation, promotion of self reliance and integration of animals into the small scale farming system in order to improve crop productivity.

The main production system used was zero-grazing. Each recipient farmer had to grow a minimum of half a hectare of elephant grass (*Pennisetum purpureum*) as a precondition for receiving any animals. The distance of the pasture to the homestead was often not given consideration and as a result some pasture areas were far away from the zero-grazing units. This led to a high labour demand for carrying the grass to the animals, as each animal can consume around 100 kg of fresh fodder per day.

Though there was an attempt to provide water through the construction of reservoir water tanks these were not useful during the dry season when the water demand by the animals was high. Each animal can drink up to 80 litres of water per day. Availability of water was therefore one of the major constraints leading to high production costs.

It was thus observed that the system was labour intensive in terms of chopping and carrying fodder for the animals. There were also difficulties in ferrying water and in maintaining good hygiene in the sheds especially with regard to waste removal and transport to the fields. These constraints led to

low profit margins especially during the first year of operation. In order to change this situation appropriate interventions were necessary.

### **Donkey traction and the dairy project**

Taking account of the constraints identified and the circumstances of the heifer project units it was decided to introduce donkeys to assist the women with the work involved. At an early stage 54 volunteer women leaders in the project were identified, 32 in Mpigi District and 22 in Jinja District.

One week training courses were conducted on donkey utilisation and management for these volunteers to equip them with the knowledge required to promote donkeys in their areas. Contracts were signed between the Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Industries and Fisheries (MAAIF) and the women leaders in which the women agreed to receive the donkeys from MAAIF for the purposes of demonstrating this technology to other farmers.

Donkeys were procured by MAAIF from within Uganda and from Kenya and distributed to the women leaders. Monitoring was carried out periodically on the effectiveness of the leaders in disseminating the technology.

### **Lessons learnt**

Donkeys can play a big role in reducing the drudgery of fetching grass, water, transport of manure and milk, especially for women.

Use of donkeys reduced production costs, especially of transport, thereby making the units more profitable.

Improvements in the socio-economic status of women and their families through better income and saving of time for other activities were achieved.

There was little input required in acquiring and managing donkeys, thus little effect on investment costs.

The programme helped in popularising the technology, especially for dairy farmers.

Donkeys were under-utilised due to lack of knowledge on other forms of utilisation.

Donkeys' work efficiency was reduced by poor management.

### **Recommendations**

A programme should be initiated where selected artisans are trained in cart-making and their workshops upgraded to enable them to manufacture donkey carts.

Training of extension staff and leader farmers on management and proper harness making should be emphasised.

Formal training on donkey health care, especially for veterinarians, should be encouraged.

In order to enhance the spread of donkey traction, the technology should be taught in secondary schools and agricultural colleges.

A national donkey programme should be developed for support by NGOs and other donors.

*Photograph (opposite): Prototype single donkey cart and collar harness promoted by a non-governmental organisation in Central Malawi*

*Photo: Paul Starkey*