

The importance of donkeys in a restocking programme in Eritrea

by

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Abstract

There are three breeds of donkey in the western lowlands of Eritrea, namely Mekadi, Atbawi and Reef. The donkey is an important livestock species that is well adapted to the different environments of Eritrea. It serves for riding, as a pack animal for short distance transport, and as a draft animal. Because of its importance the donkey was included in a restocking programme which aimed to overcome the shortage of agricultural power encountered by returnee farmers. A study showed that owning a donkey reduces the work load of women and at the same time increases time spent on other income generating activities. Lack of farmers' knowledge of appropriate harnesses and management is a limiting factor in the more efficient use of donkeys. There is a potential for the greater use of donkeys in the rural economy of Eritrea and by returnees. Realisation of this potential depends on technical and social changes for which a research and extension programme is needed.

Introduction

Eritrea, located in the Horn of Africa, has a population of four million people. During the 30 years of war most of the families in the lowlands were either dislocated or became refugees in Sudan. Following the liberation of Eritrea in May 1991 the number of refugees residing in Sudan was estimated to be approximately 500,000.

Most of the dislocated households which remained in Eritrea were able to return to their original homes and resume normal life once the war ended. Circumstances were more difficult for many of the refugees who had been living in Sudan because many had lost their oxen and/or breeding animals. The Government of Eritrea therefore set up the Programme for Refugee Reintegration and Rehabilitation of Resettlement Areas in Eritrea (PROFERI). The rehabilitation package provided two hectares of farm land, tools, seeds, access to a free tractor service and livestock of choice to the value of US\$ 420 for each family. Within this programme a pilot project was set up

to help 5000 returnee households to reintegrate into viable communities and to start the process of becoming self sufficient in food production once again. The pilot project also aimed to provide experience to help in future programme design.

This paper describes the important role of donkeys in the rehabilitation project. A total of 28,662 animals (of which 7.9% were donkeys) were distributed to returnees. Of 3864 households, 2117 chose to have a donkey. This was more than anticipated in the livestock package described in the pilot project (Catley, 1995). The preference for donkeys was related to the situation at the settlement sites and the distance to farm land, water sources and market centres.

Donkey breeds and management

Breeds and feeding

The donkeys in Eritrea can be characterised by their body conformation and working speed into three breeds: *Mekadi*, *Atbawi* and *Reef*. The dominant breed is the *Mekadi*. *Reef* donkeys are mainly found in the lowlands as they appear to originate from Sudan. Monitoring of the restocking project has shown that most returnees selected *Mekadi* donkeys. Supplements such as crop residues and sorghum grain are sometimes provided after work. *Reef* donkeys are believed to require more supplementation than other breeds.

Loading with and without pack saddles

In the lowlands of Eritrea most packing involves the use of a pack saddle (*korich*) and panniers. The *korich* is meant to balance the load on each side of the donkey and the panniers, made of doum palm leaves (*keale*), are used to contain the materials being transported.

Loading without a pack saddle is commonly practised by farmers in the highlands. Donkeys are loaded without the use of any supporting frames. Prior to loading, some padding, usually a sack, is placed on the back of the donkey in order to protect its skin. However, saddle sores are very common on donkeys in the highlands. At the

settlement sites all returnees, regardless of their origins, used saddles because the *korich* was common where they were staying in Sudan.

The roles of donkeys

Riding

The availability of donkeys or pack animals during the growing season determines the family's success in crop production. During this period it is very difficult to share or to borrow an animal from another household. For most returnees their farm land is 1–4 hours on foot from the settlement sites. Those who do not own donkeys usually move to live on their farms during the cropping season. This is not possible for women with children. In a sample of 40 female-headed households, ten women had not weeded their fields due to the unavailability of transport.

Water, marketing and livestock feed

Fetching water is a responsibility of girls or women. The water source may be 1–3 hours away from the homestead. Returnees who have donkeys use them for fetching water for themselves and often for relatives and neighbours at no charge.

Some of the settlement sites are far from any market which makes it difficult for the farmers to sell their goods unless they have donkeys.

After harvest donkeys are commonly used to collect crop residues from the fields for livestock feeding. Of 40 returnee farmers interviewed 32 had collected their crop residues using their own donkeys or those of relatives. Payment for use of the donkeys was made by giving a percentage of the crop residues to the owners. Those without access to donkeys often left their crop residues in the fields. During the dry season some returnees collected green foods (mostly weeds) and transported them using donkeys.

Plowing

Plowing with donkeys is common among the farmers who have light soils and who do not own either a camel or an ox. For heavy soils donkey power is not adequate. Plowing is done using a wooden plow with a beam and handle, with or without a chisel type iron tip. The Ministry of Agriculture provides free tractor plowing for returnees, although this service is not expected to continue for long. A few returnees are forced to

use donkeys because their land is full of stumps which makes tractor cultivation impossible.

Source of income

There is some commercial transport of domestic water, firewood, agricultural products and goods using donkey power. Some returnees allow others to use their donkeys in return for a share of the profit. Because donkey owners can transport crop residues to feed other animals, such as cattle, the profitability of these animals is increased.

Constraints to donkey use

Constraints encountered which hinder efficient use of draft animals especially donkeys are:

- shortage of food
- lack of appropriate animal-drawn implements
- lack of training for the farmers.

It is recommended that:

- animal traction should receive greater support than in the past
- credit programmes would assist the purchase of donkeys, especially by women
- attention should be given to promoting the wider use of donkeys in all field operations and not only in plowing.

Conclusions

The provision of donkey power reduces the work load of farmers, in particular women's time spent in going to and from the farm, fetching water and collecting firewood. This enables farmers to carry out other agricultural activities on time and also to engage in additional income generating activities. The use of donkeys in collecting crop residues and green food from irrigated farms minimises the need to dispose of productive animals during the dry season. This helps to maintain herd numbers.

The donkey has an important role in many farming systems in Eritrea greater than measured by donkey numbers alone. Opportunities exist to make even greater use of donkeys in the future. There is a need for more investment in donkey research and extension.

Reference

- Catley A, 1995. *The livestock component of the PROFERI Pilot Project: final report to Christian Aid, Oxfam, UK/Ireland and the Overseas Development Administration (UK)*. Christian Aid, PO Box 100, London SE1 7RT, UK. 35p.