

Extension staff and farmer training challenges in donkey traction applications

by

Martin Bwalya

Palabana Farm Power and Mechanisation Centre, Private Bag 173, Woodlands, Lusaka, Zambia

Abstract

The major issue for donkey traction in Zambia is the shortage of donkeys. Other issues that need attention include: development and dissemination of simple farmer-friendly messages on husbandry (health, feeding, and housing); availability of appropriate implements and carts and the training of both extension staff and farmers in the management of this 'new' technology. This paper focuses on the challenges in developing and conducting appropriate training to enhance sustained adoption and effective use of donkey draft power technologies. The main features include: curriculum development (identification of training needs and preparation of training manuals and training methodology), development and use of learning aids and conducting skills training (planning and conducting practical lessons). The experiences of the Palabana Farm Power and Mechanisation Centre are highlighted in this paper. It is stressed that there is a considerable need for additional documentation on donkeys and for practical skills based courses on their use for draft.

Introduction

Zambia's history in the use of animals as sources of power is largely restricted to cattle and goes back to the 1930s and 1940s. This was the period when farmer migrants were moving into present day Zambia from the South. These farmers are said to have come with cattle, some of which were used for draft purposes. A few are believed to have brought in some donkeys. Some Zimbabweans who came to Zambia in the 1960s and 1970s are also said to have come with donkeys. Thus, many adults who grew up in Central, Lusaka, Southern and Western Provinces recall communities with large numbers of donkeys. Most of these donkeys have now vanished. Therefore, the development of animal power technologies have predominantly been with cattle. Only in the last three to four years have donkeys again become an important issue in Zambia. This is despite the fact that neighbouring

countries especially on the southern side have much larger numbers of donkeys and use them for draft purposes.

Farmers give various reasons for wanting to acquire donkeys. Most of these reasons are based on hearsay and include beliefs such as, donkeys do not get sick, they are relatively stronger than cattle and they are easy to feed. The demand for donkeys is very strong and attempts are being made by government, some NGOs and private-individuals to satisfy this demand. As a result it is becoming clear that Zambia has to cope with many more issues in addition to just donkey supply. These include:

- dealing with the cultural attitudes involving donkeys
- development and adaptation and/or procurement of suitable implements for donkeys
- training needs and issues.

Palabana Farm Power and Mechanisation Centre has been responding to the last of these issues and has been developing a training curriculum for farmers and extension staff involved in donkey use and training.

Farmer training needs

This development of a donkey traction training programme has involved consultations with various groups including farmers and extension staff. This has been done in addition to reviews of donkey use and experiences from within and outside the country. The trainees have also contributed directly through exercises with farmers on training needs assessment. The main subject areas for which training is needed are shown in Table 1.

These subject areas are considered within the context of various physical, socio-economic, and technical aspects as learned from the concerned communities. These include crosscutting issues such as gender, environment and sustainability.

Table 1: The main subject areas for training

	<i>Topics</i>	<i>Remarks</i>
<i>Attitude</i>	Donkeys as domestic animals Donkeys as draft animals Donkeys in relation to other domestic/draft animals Social and financial implications of keeping donkeys	Awareness campaigns and demonstrations are expected to be important
<i>Knowledge</i>	Donkey behaviour Training donkeys Breeding and rearing donkeys Donkey domestication and handling What a donkey eats and drinks Health care (signs and prevention) Draft uses of a donkey Donkey harnesses (making and using) Hitching donkeys Field operations with donkeys Transportation with donkeys Donkey housing Estimating age in donkeys Draft capacity of donkeys	The lack of adequate information on many aspects of donkey husbandry has led to development of myths/beliefs which may need to be corrected
<i>Skills</i>	Training donkeys Handling donkeys Making and using donkey harnesses Plowing/weeding with donkeys Pack loading donkeys Feeding donkeys Estimating age in donkeys Handling donkeys Carting with donkey power Rearing young donkeys	

Taking into account the nature of the subject and its application, training in donkey power use has to be multidisciplinary, taking into account socio-economic, animal husbandry and agricultural mechanisation aspects.

The characteristics of the target group are important. Average smallholder farmers and extension officers are only just realising that donkeys are not only a domestic animal but also a draft animal. Many may not have encountered donkeys at all. Many are coming from communities with no or very little information let alone experience of donkey husbandry and draft use, and may have regarded donkeys as worthless animals. Most of these people have used or are still using draft cattle. In some cases widespread deaths of cattle have inspired farmers to consider donkeys. This has reinforced the belief that

donkeys are not affected by most diseases that kill cattle. As for extension staff, the college curriculum which had been weak in the use of cattle for draft power, made little or no reference to donkeys.

Course methodology

The course methodology adopted is essentially and deliberately focused on competence building. It is a process of experiential learning with each trainee learning by trial and reflection. The methodology is flexible to accommodate the special needs and requirements of every group being trained. Farmers are trained to go and practise. Their training is therefore focused on real skills training. The training of extension staff is geared to their main responsibility of passing on knowledge and skills to farmers and includes communication skills.

Course organisation

The courses in donkey traction, which normally last for two weeks, are conducted at Palabana. The Centre has thus developed appropriate facilities and aids to facilitate practical learning. These include a herd of donkeys, donkey implements and an area for practical operations. Training is offered on request by trainees-to-be or their organisations. In the latter case the course content and methodology can be adjusted to take into account the special requirements or characteristics of a group.

Trainees' reactions

There has been an overwhelmingly positive response and active participation from the trainees on the courses. This has included both male and female trainees. The participation of female trainees has been exceptionally high, at 76%.

Among the factors highly appreciated by trainees has been the opportunity to handle donkeys

throughout the courses. This has led to the development of self confidence and brings home the reality of donkey use. The practical nature of the training is especially appreciated by farmers who have noted that academic training is not a precondition for someone to participate in the courses.

Further considerations

For a country like Zambia, which is expanding the keeping and using of donkeys for draft, training is an indispensable requirement. That this training has to be made realistic and appropriate cannot be overemphasised.

Among the main considerations in this process will be the development and documentation of a practical problem-solving based curriculum. This aspect is crucial. Even in countries where the use of donkeys is traditional, there is often very little documented information on practical training in donkey traction management. Concerted efforts on the international scale are recommended.