

Donkey promotion in Western Province, Zambia

by

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Abstract

This paper describes how donkey technology was introduced into a predominantly cattle-keeping area of Zambia and how women farmers, female-headed households and non-cattle-keepers have come to embrace and adopt this technology. Constraints to donkey promotion are indicated. Unlike oxenisation, donkey technology appears to have no taboos or cultural barriers limiting its adoption. Women farmers seem to find donkeys more docile and easier to manage than oxen and their participation in pilot donkey promotion activities is higher than that of men. With proper training, availability of donkeys, affordable prices and appropriate implements, donkey technology could help to improve the quality of life and independence of rural women.

Introduction

The objectives of this paper are to:

- describe how animal traction technology was introduced into Western Province with special reference to women and donkey ownership report the constraints that were encountered and that require attention in the future
- describe how animal traction was promoted in Western Province with special reference to women and donkeys.

Western Province is located in the south-western corner of Zambia and shares boundaries with Angola, Namibia and Botswana. Western Province is characterised by sandy soils with low nutrient retention capacity, with only occasional pockets of good soils scattered over the Province in Kaoma, the Lui Valley, parts of Senanga and the eastern bank of the Zambezi River in Lukulu District.

Ever since the settlement of people on the Zambezi flood plain, the role of cattle in their farming systems has been important (Beerling, 1991). Cattle provide vital inputs to crop cultivation throughout the region. Sustainable, profitable agriculture on these poor sandy soils would be practically impossible without the use of cattle manure. The poor quality of the soils means

that relatively large areas have to be cultivated to grow sufficient crops to meet household food requirements and ensure some surplus production for sale. Manual cultivation delays planting and reduces the area that can be cultivated. Hence, the use of animal traction is an integral component of crop production.

According to the 1994 Livestock Census, the Province has a population of over 540,000 cattle and 800 donkeys (Munthali, Lagerwerf and Mulenga, 1995). Half of the donkeys are found in Mongu District. With a high cattle population, the use of oxen is common. As a result, earlier efforts in promoting animal traction concentrated on oxen, rather than donkeys. Donkeys have become relatively more important in those areas that are infested with tsetse flies and which cannot easily support cattle.

Realising the potential of animal traction in the Province, a Dutch funded project, the Western Province Animal Draught Power Programme (WP-ADPP) was introduced by the Government. The programme was implemented by RDP Livestock Services BV, The Netherlands. The programme's overall objective was to contribute to the development of sustainable farming practices by means of increasing, intensifying and diversifying the use of animal traction by the community in priority areas. The programme started in 1989, and was extended with a second phase in 1993 running to the end of 1995.

The target group of the programme comprised all rural farm households in the target areas, with special attention being paid to people with few resources such as non-cattle-owners, female farmers and female-headed households. Other groups that received attention were blacksmiths, carpenters and small scale rural entrepreneurs. Apart from monitoring trials and organising demonstrations of implements and their uses, the programme facilitated contact between farmers and traders of oxen and implements. It contributed to the improvement of ox training and plowing

skills of farmers (both men and women) with mobile courses (Department of Agriculture, 1992).

Women in the Western Province Animal Draught Power Programme

In the first phase of the WP-ADPP (1989–1992), ox plowing courses were specifically organised for women. Barter loans were made for an animal traction package, consisting of two oxen and a plow, harness, trek chain and spanner. All had to be repaid in kind within two seasons. These loans were provided to non-cattle-owning farmers of which at least four were women. All the barter loans were fully repaid (Huisman, 1995).

In the second phase, plowing courses for women continued and the involvement of female extension staff intensified. Despite numerous animal traction courses conducted for women, very few women went on to practice the technology (Hocking, 1991 and 1994; Simwinji 1994). The reasons for this were that the women farmers feared oxen or needed men to help in their handling. Some could not afford oxen although others could hire oxen from relatives or neighbours. Traditionally, ox-handling is considered to be a male activity. It is widely considered to be demeaning for women to attempt to perform oxen related activities within the community.

Considering the difficulties that women farmers had in working with oxen, the programme decided to try alternative sources of animal traction such as donkeys. It was realised that, although animal traction technology could support female-headed households by reducing labour constraints in crop production, most female-headed households neither had the resources to qualify for credit for oxen and implements, nor the skills and knowledge to make the technology profitable. In contrast, donkey utilisation was a low-cost technology and was considered appropriate. As donkeys have been accepted their cost has increased tremendously and now appears to be one of the constraints to greater adoption of this technology.

Donkey promotion

Donkeys have been used extensively, and with great success, in the neighbouring countries of Botswana and Zimbabwe for many years.

Donkeys have been found to be more disease tolerant and friendly, and easier to manage than oxen. They have proved to be good breeders. One

does not require to have a kraal to keep donkeys. They can be used for plowing, for pulling a cart, for water and firewood collection or for carrying a bag of maize for grinding. Most of these activities have traditionally been performed by women. Thus, given the potential of donkeys, it was considered appropriate to start promoting them, not only in Western Province but in the whole of Zambia.

The cost of donkeys in the neighbouring countries was relatively low, whilst in Zambia the promotion of donkeys and their low availability led to a dramatic increase in their price. The price per donkey was K10,000 (US\$ 24) in 1993, and was K100,000 (US\$ 91) in 1997. The donkeys imported into the country from Zimbabwe in 1997 are estimated to cost K 230,000 (US\$ 177) each. The high costs are partly due to the expenses of organising the purchase and the expenses of staff to inspect the donkeys before purchase. With this situation it is doubtful whether resource-poor female-headed households could ever afford donkeys without credit or subsidy. Perhaps costs could be reduced by using a private company to arrange the purchase of donkeys rather than government services.

Western Province has had donkeys for many years. Some people say that the number of donkeys has been declining, but no one seems to know the reasons for this decline. This suggests that donkeys also require some attention, contrary to the wider perception that donkeys require no care at all. It can also be speculated that the number of donkeys has declined due to the low social status of donkeys compared to oxen. Among other things, cattle can be slaughtered for meat, while donkeys cannot, at least in Zambia. Cattle can be used for 'bride price', donkeys cannot. The tendency was, perhaps, for farmers to try to accumulate the more valuable cattle. Where donkeys are still being kept, they are normally used for riding and as pack animals. Their use for plowing has been at a low level.

Donkey promotion in the Province started with Sesheke District, which is on the border with Namibia. The district often has low rainfall and is infested with tsetse flies, which makes cattle rearing difficult. The few surviving oxen cannot cope with the work demand.

Given this situation, and following field visits the Masese Agricultural Project noticed a woman farmer in the area who was keeping donkeys. The

Table 1: Donkey supply and ownership in Sesheke District

<i>Year</i>	<i>Number supplied</i>	<i>Recipients</i>
1994	20 (mostly male)	Male farmers (all)
1995	26 (25 female, 1 male)	25 female-headed households

Source: *Masese Agricultural Project, 1997*

donkeys were thriving and reproduced well in the area. The woman, with family connections in Zimbabwe, had started with one pregnant donkey. She was able to plow her maize fields and transport items to the market in Sesheke. With this observation, and augmented by experiences with donkeys from neighbouring countries, the project started purchasing donkeys from other parts of Western Province (Mongu and Senanga) for sale to the farmers in the district. The donkeys purchased initially were supplied to male farmers only, who happened to be members of Crushpen Associations (see Table 1).

Following representation from the Gender Awareness Officer, WP-ADPP provided funds to purchase donkeys for sale to women farmers. The proceeds realised were to be plowed back into more donkey purchases on a revolving fund basis. The donkeys acquired by women in 1995 were paid for in kind, in exchange for labour, thus eliminating the need for credit.

Meanwhile, at the national level an outbreak of Corridor Disease decimated the cattle population in major farming areas leading to a shortage of

cattle, and consequently of animal traction. Donkeys appeared to provide the solution. In 1995, the Government decided to import 86 donkeys from Botswana. It was from this group that Western Province received 46 donkeys. The donkeys were distributed to farmers in Kaoma and Sesheke Districts.

Prior to the receipt of donkeys, farmers, mostly women, were trained in donkey husbandry, utilisation and management at an ox-training centre in the Province. The course took two weeks and was conducted by instructors who were earlier trained in Zimbabwe, under WP-ADPP sponsorship. After training the farmers, the donkeys were distributed to five Extension Groups and two Farming System Research Groups in Kaoma District (see Table 2).

The Farming System Research Team in the Western Province has been assessing and monitoring the suitability of donkey utilisation among resource poor-farmers (women) in the area (Kaluba, 1995).

Farmers' experiences with donkeys

More than 60% of the members of the groups in Kaoma and Sesheke Districts were women. They were more willing to use donkeys than oxen. The use of donkeys for field operations (plowing) and transport (pack animals) has generated a lot of interest among farmers, especially women. Farmers expressed the following views:

donkeys are more docile than oxen, so easier for female farmers to handle

Table 2: Composition of groups by sex and number of donkeys supplied

<i>Group</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Number of donkeys</i>
Extension group				
Liyoyelo	3	5	8	2
Tungongote	2	8	10	2
Linyandelo	3	4	7	2
Region of Mary	3	4	7	2
Kuimponela (female-headed households)	3	6	9	2
Farming Systems Research Group				
Liyoyelo-Munkuye	3	6	9	5
Tungongote-Munkuye	1	8	9	5
Total	18	41	59	20

they are easier to manage as they are not as susceptible to common diseases as cattle (only saddle sore injuries have been reported) female and male donkeys can be used without breaking any traditional norms or beliefs they work for a longer period than oxen, though this is dependent on initial training and appropriate implements feeding management is less demanding than with cattle

you do not need a kraal to keep donkeys.

Women appear pleased and more at ease with donkeys than with oxen. The donkeys can be reared and owned by women without much help from male counterparts. The donkeys can be used for most chores on the farm, such as water and firewood collection, carrying a maize bag for grinding and for riding.

Constraints

Even though donkey technology is gaining acceptability, constraints that require immediate attention in Western Province are:

- scarcity of donkeys
- scarcity of implements for donkeys
- the harness for donkeys is complicated and more expensive than for oxen
- some farmers consider manure important, and therefore prefer oxen or cattle to donkeys
- donkeys may need herding because of the cassava fields
- the unit price of donkeys has increased greatly in recent years
- donkeys cannot be slaughtered for meat
- donkeys are not used for 'bride price'.

Conclusions

The promotion of donkey technology in Western Province has provided hope for female-headed households and non-cattle keepers who hitherto depended on hiring oxen. The ownership pattern shows that most donkeys are owned by women. There are no cultural barriers preventing women owning and using donkeys, as is the case with oxen. However, the price of donkeys will continue

to rise and be out of reach for most female-headed households and non-cattle owners unless a large number of donkeys are imported into the Province, which will stabilise or reduce their price. The increased supply of appropriate donkey equipment and harnesses at affordable prices will increase the rate at which the technology can be adopted.

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