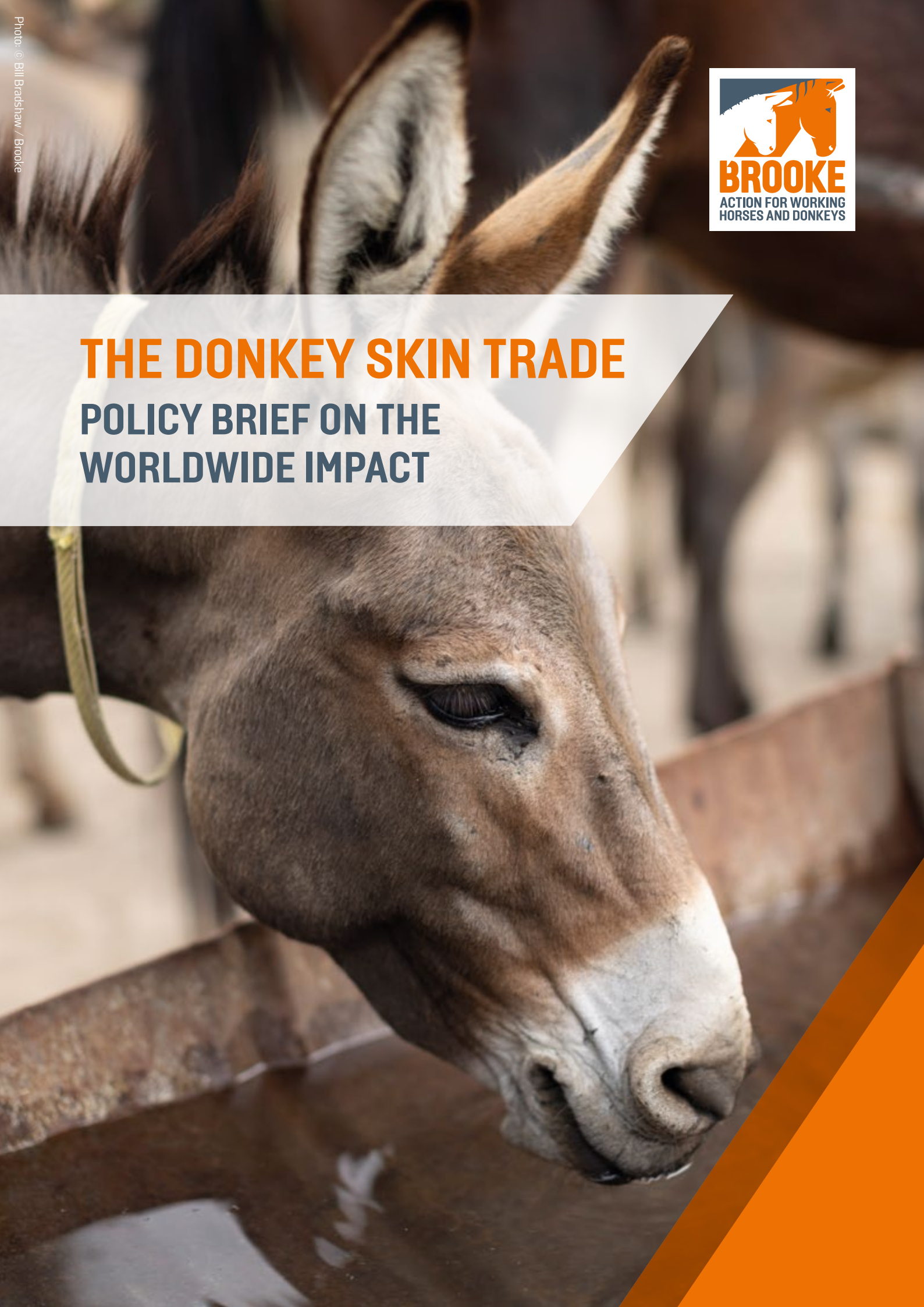




# **THE DONKEY SKIN TRADE**

## **POLICY BRIEF ON THE WORLDWIDE IMPACT**



A high demand for ejiao – a gelatin produced from boiling donkey skins and used in traditional Chinese medicine and beauty products – is putting global donkey populations in crisis and threatening the livelihoods of millions of people that depend on them. While Africa remains the primary source of both legally and illegally-sourced donkey skins to China, the trade has spread across the globe. This Brief explores the global impact of the donkey skin trade. It calls on policymakers and influencers to address this urgent issue that is destroying lives and livelihoods across the globe. It also shines the spotlight onto two success stories, and calls for many more as we make progress towards **a global ban on the slaughter of donkeys for their skins.**



Donkey skin drying, Ghana  
Photo: © Emmanuel Sarr / Brooke

## Introduction

Of the world's 55.5 million donkeys, 43 million of them are working. As working livestock, donkeys are critical to the livelihoods of millions of people throughout the developing world. From providing access to water to strengthening agricultural supply chains, working livestock make vital contributions to the realisation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).<sup>1</sup>

### EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES

#### ROLES OF WORKING LIVESTOCK

##### LIVELIHOOD



IMPROVED  
INCOME  
EARNINGS



##### ACCESS TO WATER



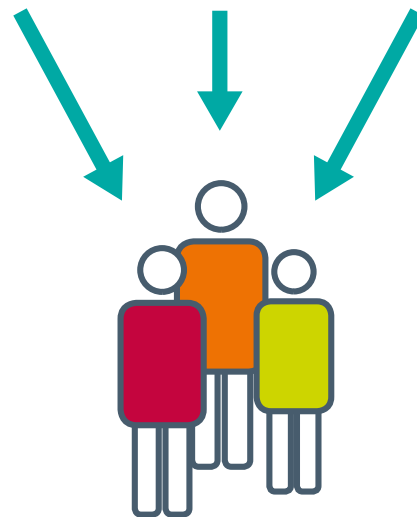
IMPROVED  
WATER  
SECURITY



##### NUTRITION



IMPROVED  
FOOD SECURITY  
& HEALTH



**EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES TO MAKE THE BEST DECISIONS FOR THEIR FAMILIES AND FOR THEIR ANIMALS' WELFARE**



*In Senegal, donkeys are reported to significantly improve living conditions of pastoral communities by enabling access to better quality water for human consumption during the rainy season.<sup>2</sup>*





Donkey skin farm, Ghana  
Photos: © Emmanuel Sarr / Brooke

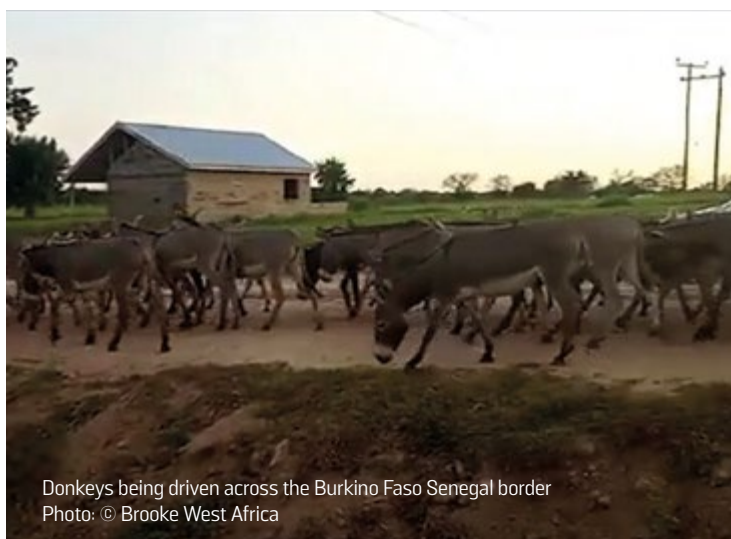
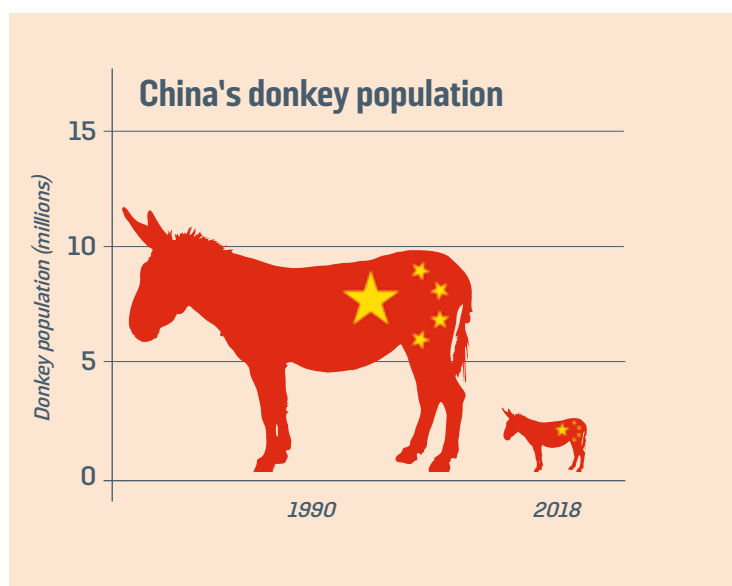


China's donkey population has rapidly shrunk from 11.1 million to 2.5 million donkeys between 1990 and 2018<sup>3</sup> due to increasing demand for ejiao,<sup>4</sup> which is used in cosmetics and traditional medicine. This demand has soared in recent years due to the popularity of ejiao among the emerging middle class in China, as well as the introduction of Chinese government policies that promote TCM use<sup>5</sup> including by reducing donkey skin import tariffs.<sup>6</sup> Some manufacturers have also launched influential advertising campaigns, resulting in a lucrative industry worth US\$1.5 billion in 2015.<sup>7</sup> This has driven a large increase in the price of ejiao from just \$20/kg in 2001 to \$830/kg by 2017.<sup>8</sup>

Donkeys are difficult to breed on a large-scale due to their low reproductive rate, and so as a result of China's own decimated donkey population ejiao producers have turned to global markets to fuel their demand for donkey skins. Chinese media outlets now report that imported skins account for 90% of ejiao production.<sup>9</sup>

The African continent is suffering the most significantly from the trade, with insufficient regulation, inhumane slaughter, donkey theft and cross-border smuggling creating a crisis across the continent. Some countries have responded by banning the export of donkey skins, but where bans do exist, enforcement can be ineffective, with limited consequences for those breaking the law. Where slaughter is legal, significant welfare concerns exist along the slaughter value chain<sup>4</sup> and the rate of slaughter is unsustainable.<sup>10</sup>

The impact of the trade is not confined to Africa. The trade in donkey skins poses a threat to various countries in South Asia, such as India, where the donkey population has significantly declined and reports of improper disposal of donkey carcasses represents a serious hazard to health.<sup>11</sup> Brooke's research in Latin America has also uncovered evidence of donkeys being transported thousands of kilometres to be slaughtered<sup>12,6</sup> and has identified Mexico, Colombia, Brazil and Peru as hotspots for the trade.<sup>12</sup> This global, unsustainable slaughter of donkeys is threatening livelihoods.



Donkeys being driven across the Burkino Faso Senegal border  
Photo: © Brooke West Africa

"In most households I visit, donkeys are a key pillar of family life. They carry water from rivers, public pumps and wells; they transport farm produce from the field to the home or market; and they help move heavy building material to and from construction sites. If a human were to perform these tasks, it would take an enormous amount of time and effort."

*Laura Kavata, Brooke East Africa*



## Reports from researchers, media and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) reveal the scale and spread of the global donkey skin trade

### GHANA

An abattoir opened in Walewale in 2013 and was widely blamed for fuelling donkey thefts in the region. Although the abattoir closed in 2017, legal loopholes allow trade to continue through bush slaughterhouses.<sup>13</sup>

### NIGERIA

Currently a hub for both legal and illegal donkey slaughter, Nigeria receives stolen and smuggled donkeys from across the region. The government is taking steps to follow the example of other West African countries and ban exports.<sup>14</sup>

### BOTSWANA, BURKINA FASO, MALI, NIGER, SENEGAL AND UGANDA

The donkey population in Botswana has reportedly fallen by 60% in just five years.<sup>6</sup> These countries have banned donkey exports to China, but there are no penalties for offenders and illegal trade still occurs in some countries. In Burkina Faso, the Ministry of Livestock has begun to revise the decree with an emphasis on penalties for breaking the law, but due to ongoing political instability the process remains paused. Meanwhile, the border between Burkina Faso and Ghana continues to be a hotspot for illegal activity.<sup>18</sup>

### KENYA

Bilateral trade agreements between China and Kenya characterised by a mutual desire to improve trade and collaboration make it easier for Chinese-owned donkey trading companies to be registered in Kenya.<sup>15</sup>

### TANZANIA

In a victory moment in early 2022, the Tanzanian government declared a 10-year ban on donkey slaughter for the trade.

### AFGHANISTAN

Reports have been received of donkey skins being smuggled into Pakistan for suspected export to China.<sup>16</sup>

### EGYPT

Government authorities set an export quota of 8,000 donkey skins for annual export in 2012, which was increased to 10,000 by the Ministry of Trade and Industry. Chinese demand has also created a black market for donkey skins in Egypt.<sup>17</sup>

### PAKISTAN

Formerly a key exporter to China, Pakistan imposed a ban on exports in 2015. However, a Chinese company has established a warehouse in Gawadar Pakistan. They have an agreement with the government of Pakistan for donkey skin import and export. The company imports skins from across Africa which are then processed in Pakistan, and exported as ejiao to China. The skins are not allowed to enter any other Pakistani region.

## INDIA

The donkey population has experienced a rapid decline of 61% in recent years. Although this is generally attributed to increasing mechanisation and other factors, evidence has begun to emerge that the illegal donkey skin trade is on the rise within India and across its borders.<sup>11</sup>

## BRAZIL

An export treaty between Brazil and China generates \$3 billion annually.<sup>12</sup> Three other abattoirs in Bahia state are licensed to export donkey meat and skin, and businesses there have exported at least 200,000 donkeys per year to China.<sup>12</sup>

## COLOMBIA

Between 2011 and 2016 the donkey population declined by 1/10.<sup>6</sup> In 2015 and 2016, 208 tons of donkey skin were illegally exported from Cartagena and Bonaventure to China. The trade has also been linked to the drug trade in Sucre. Members of the 'Los pela burros' gang, which translates as 'the donkey peelers', use donkey skins to hide and traffic drugs.<sup>12</sup>

## PERU

Illegal donkey skin is Peru's third highest export, after cocoa and garlic. Illegal trade in donkey skins has been found in four Peruvian districts: Sicaya, Chilca, Sapallanga, and Coto.<sup>12</sup>



Donkeys resting at Halaba shelter, Ethiopia  
Photo: © Bill Bradshaw / Brooke





Donkey skin farm, Ghana  
Photo: © Emmanuel Sarr / Brooke

## IMPACTS OF THE GLOBAL DONKEY SKIN TRADE

### RISK OF DISEASE

A significant concern surrounding the global donkey skin trade is an increased risk of transboundary disease transmission – to both animals and humans.

**Both the World Health Organization (WHO) and the UN Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) define transboundary diseases as "those diseases that are of significant economic, trade and/or food security importance".<sup>19, 20</sup>**

In intensively farmed systems such as those in China, donkeys are frequently imported from other regions to supplement breeding numbers, risking the potential introduction of diseases to the breeding herd.<sup>21</sup> Studies show that disease outbreaks are difficult to contain and have resulted in high levels of mortality and rates of abortion on some large donkey farms.<sup>22, 23</sup>

Intensive donkey breeding farms in China experienced a significant outbreak of strangles which spread across six farms with 13.4% of animals affected and a higher than normal mortality rate.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, in 2019 two intensive donkey farms in the Shandong province reported a severe outbreak of acute enteritis in foals, again with a higher

mortality rate with more than half the foals falling ill.<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile in Eastern China in 2017 an abortion outbreak likely caused by the bacterium *Salmonella abortus equi* spread through a herd of 500 pregnant donkeys and caused 61 mares to abort their young.<sup>22</sup>

Outbreaks like these cause needless and debilitating sickness to large numbers of adult donkeys and foals. The World Organization for Animal Health (WOAH) highlighted the donkey skin trade as a likely cause of a 2019 outbreak of equine influenza in West Africa<sup>26</sup> which killed 62,000 animals in Niger alone.<sup>27</sup> In many cases, such as in Brazil, donkeys are transported long distances without documentation, which contravenes local legislation and risks disease outbreaks.<sup>28</sup>

If unregulated live trade routes open up in other regions, such as Central Asia, there is increased risk of disease spread, including zoonotic diseases.

**The WHO describes a zoonotic disease, or zoonoses as "an infectious disease that has jumped from a non-human animal to humans."<sup>29</sup>**

Zoonotic diseases, such as glanders, can pass between animals and humans. Glanders is reported sporadically across Central Asia and although transmission to humans is currently rare, it is most common in those working closely with equids, and can be fatal or result in chronic infection.<sup>30</sup> This poses a significant risk to human health as well as the equine population.

The spread of diseases such as glanders is exacerbated by poor health systems in many developing countries, which mean healthcare for both animals and humans may be difficult to access (especially in rural locations) or too expensive for those living in poverty.

Glanders was also diagnosed on a donkey holding facility farm in Brazil where approximately 1000 donkeys were discovered suffering from severe malnutrition and where hundreds of donkeys died as a result.<sup>31</sup>

Economically, an outbreak of a disease such as equine influenza in regions such as South America would be disastrous for the sports horse industry,<sup>32</sup> which generates US\$1.6bn in Brazil alone.<sup>33</sup> Finally, both legal and illegal donkey slaughter is associated with significant biosecurity concerns. Reports from India show donkey remains being thrown into drains which then flood onto farmland during monsoon season, which represents a serious public health risk.



(clockwise from top) Dogs and crows are seen feeding on donkey remains discarded in open drains in Andhra Pradesh, India<sup>11</sup>  
Photos: © Karan Kapoor

Meanwhile in Kenya, a slaughterhouse was found to be dumping donkey carcasses in pits near farmland, raising concerns about polluted groundwater and the spread of disease.<sup>34</sup>

Due to the risk to the environment and public health from improper disposal of waste, as well as the detrimental effect to human livelihoods, the trade in donkey skins at every stage from breeding through to slaughter should be considered a One Health issue.

**According to the WHO, One Health is an approach to designing and implementing programmes, policies, legislation and research in which multiple sectors (human health, animal health and the environment) communicate and work together to achieve better public health outcomes.**





## ANIMAL WELFARE

Donkeys are sentient beings. Right across the trade, evidence shows that donkeys are subjected to mistreatment, transportation over long distances in cramped and dangerous vehicles, starvation, neglect and inhumane slaughter.<sup>35</sup>

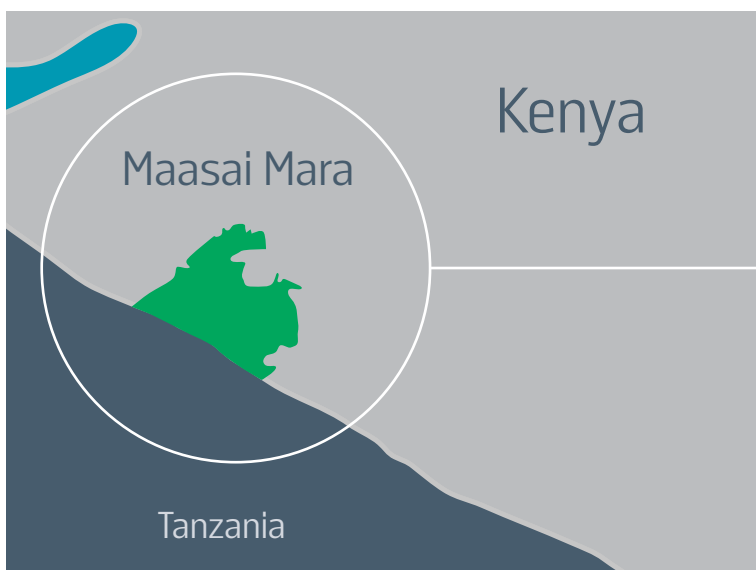
### Farming and breeding

Though often touted as a logical solution to the rising demand for donkey skins, farming and breeding donkeys commercially is incompatible with good welfare.<sup>36</sup> Donkeys have complex physiological and psychological needs that vary depending on age, seasonality and sex.

Appropriate nutritional and environmental parameters that allow for the expression of donkeys evolved social and behavioural complexity are important for them to live **a life worth living**. People interacting with these animals have a responsibility to respect these needs as outlined by the WOAAH.<sup>37</sup>

Donkeys are prone to masking signs of pain and distress in high-stress environments<sup>10</sup> such as intensive farms which are not their natural habitat.

Furthermore, as the skin of the donkey carcass remains largely useable regardless of the welfare and nutrition of the donkey, and the meat is of little value as an end-product, there is a lack of incentive to provide proper care and nourishment for farmed donkeys.<sup>32</sup>



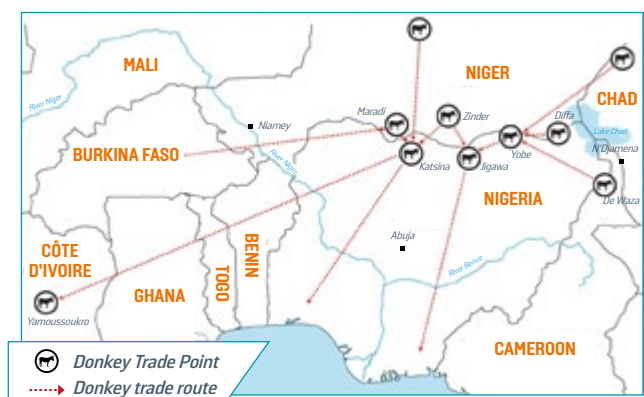
Each donkey requires at least 0.5 acres of grazing land in order to maintain a good level of health, welfare and reproductive potential.<sup>38</sup> A total of 301,977 donkeys, representing 15% of Kenya's donkey population, were slaughtered between 2016-2018.<sup>4</sup> To supply another 300,000 donkeys through farming alone would take an area half that of the Maasai Mara national game reserve (371,200 acres or almost 600 square miles in total). The University of Reading conducted a study to analyse how quickly new donkey breeding systems that are being set up in China may be able to produce the 4.8 million skins needed annually.<sup>39</sup> Results show it will take at least 10 – 15 years for new farming systems to meet the demand for skins.<sup>10</sup>

### In transport

Large scale donkey breeding often requires live relocation which is damaging to their health and welfare. The long-distances and often very crowded and hot conditions that donkeys are transported in will cause chronic stress, physical injury and exhaustion, resulting in even minimum international recommendations outlined by the WOAAH in Chapters 7.2-7.4 of the Terrestrial Animal Health Code<sup>37</sup> not being met.

A 2017 study conducted by Brooke revealed that significant welfare violations result from the transportation of donkeys for trade, with 10% of donkeys suffering bite wounds or dying in transit.<sup>35</sup> Market collection points are also areas of poor animal welfare with 84% of survey respondents reporting that there were no donkey welfare provisions at holding pens. Reports of movement of donkeys for slaughter from across Africa paint a picture of overcrowded transportation over hundreds of miles, as well as exhausting distances covered on foot. This includes land border crossings which may be illegal and contravene quarantine regulations. In West Africa, there are reports of donkeys

arriving at slaughterhouses and illegal slaughter points in a state of exhaustion or starvation, after travelling great distances on foot with severe injuries and sometimes dying en route.<sup>18</sup> The map below<sup>40</sup> shows just some of the smuggling routes used by illegal traders. Meanwhile in South America there are reports of donkeys being transported more than 1000km before being slaughtered.<sup>12</sup>



*Cross-border smuggling and donkey theft in West Africa sub-region*



## Slaughter

On arrival at slaughterhouses donkeys, already in a state of high stress and suffering from numerous injuries from transportation, are subjected to further mistreatment. At an absolute minimum, animals should be stunned before slaughter using a captive bolt gun which renders them unconscious. Analysis of export abattoirs in Kenya revealed a discrepancy of 27.7% – 100% between the number of bullets purchased for captive bolt stunning and the number of donkeys killed at those abattoirs,<sup>4</sup> suggesting a large number of donkeys were killed without being stunned. In Ghana, evidence from a recent visit to a slaughterhouse found that donkeys were slaughtered by slitting their throats without being stunned.<sup>18</sup> This defies national and international animal welfare law and standards.<sup>41</sup>

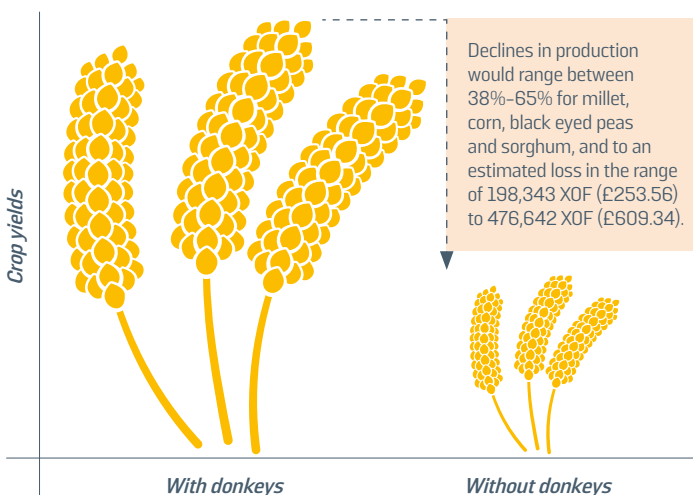
These welfare concerns occur within the legal trade, but the conditions of illegal trade are often significantly worse. Humane slaughter is often not observed, especially in illegal bush slaughter.<sup>18</sup> Those donkeys that remain within communities also suffer as they are shared among the community to carry the additional loads left by slaughtered stock. This causes exhaustion, wounds and an increased risk of injury during work.

## PEOPLE'S LIVELIHOODS

As well as these harmful effects on animal welfare, the growth of the global donkey skin trade ultimately impacts people. As working livestock donkeys support the livelihoods of millions of people in low and middle income countries. They directly provide an income through agriculture or construction and save time and money in transporting goods from field to home to market. In Ghana, donkey owners reported the ability to take on paid work as a result of the time owning a donkey saves them.<sup>42</sup>

In both urban and rural areas people are dependent on donkeys and suffer when they disappear. In Burkina Faso, a study conducted by Brooke<sup>43</sup> found that crop yields would fall significantly in the absence of donkeys.

### Burkina Faso crop yields



In Kenya, smallholder farmers lose Sh11,390 per month (equiv. \$109.73) on every working donkey that is slaughtered through theft or sale.<sup>4</sup> Working donkeys also provide vital domestic support. A study<sup>44</sup> of donkey owners in rural and urban areas in Ethiopia found that 80% reported that having a donkey created security against financial hardship. Donkey ownership brought with it a higher socio-economic and social status. More than that, donkeys were described by participants as "friends for life". Feelings of happiness were expressed when participants described the way they work with their donkeys.<sup>44</sup> The shock of losing a donkey can destroy a person's livelihood and push them into poverty.



## CHARLES, KENYA

"Earning money with donkeys feeds my family – I have three boys in secondary school. My mother and father back home...I send them money through that donkey. One is able to depend on donkeys and have a good life. My donkeys are used to ferry goods for people and also to carry water. Before the problems started I had around nine men working for me. I lost more than six donkeys – the thefts were many and the price of donkeys was high".

Charles lives in Kenya where concerted efforts from Brooke East Africa and other animal welfare organisations continue to call for a permanent and enduring ban to the trade, following its reversal in May 2021. His story is replicated across Africa and the world, as donkeys and the people who depend upon them suffer.



Photos: ©Stephen Nderitu/ Brooke

## VULNERABLE GROUPS

The impact of the global donkey skin trade is particularly felt by women, children and older people.

Millions of women across the world depend on working donkeys to support them in crucial domestic tasks, such as fetching water and firewood each day. In Ghana, women report that their donkey provides for between 30–60% of their income and can provide a multitude of income benefits when compared with non-donkey owning families.<sup>45</sup> Without donkeys, many women have no choice but to walk long distances to fetch water and firewood for their household, which they must carry themselves. The achievement of SDG 6 (water and sanitation for all) by 2030 will be threatened if women lack the means to transport water back to their homes.

Often the decision to sell a family's donkey lies with male members of the household. Without working donkeys the burden of domestic chores and unpaid care work significantly increases for millions of women. The additional time and effort required in fetching water, firewood or food limits women's capacity in other areas such as attending community gatherings or seeking paid employment. With less influence over community decisions, women are further disempowered and progress towards gender equality (SDG 5) will be hindered.

In addition, many children travel to school on their donkey in places where vehicular access by road is limited or impassable.<sup>46</sup> Children often assist with domestic chores and the impact of a lost or stolen donkey places a bigger burden on young people. Many children are forced to miss school in order to support their parents at home and the reduction in household income that results from losing a donkey means many families can no longer afford to pay school fees. These factors hinder progress towards SDG 4 – inclusive and equitable quality education for all.

Brooke-commissioned research in Kenya revealed that older people are often targeted by donkey thieves as they are unable to provide adequate protection for their animals. The research demonstrates that certain vulnerable groups within communities suffer most from losing a donkey.<sup>47</sup>

### EMILY, KENYA

Emily's donkeys were supporting their family of five, enabling them to earn a living, pay their rent and provide food for their family. On top of that, their donkeys were allowing Emily and her family to save for their future. Their donkeys were directly supporting their income generation and Emily says "because of the good income our children had a good life".

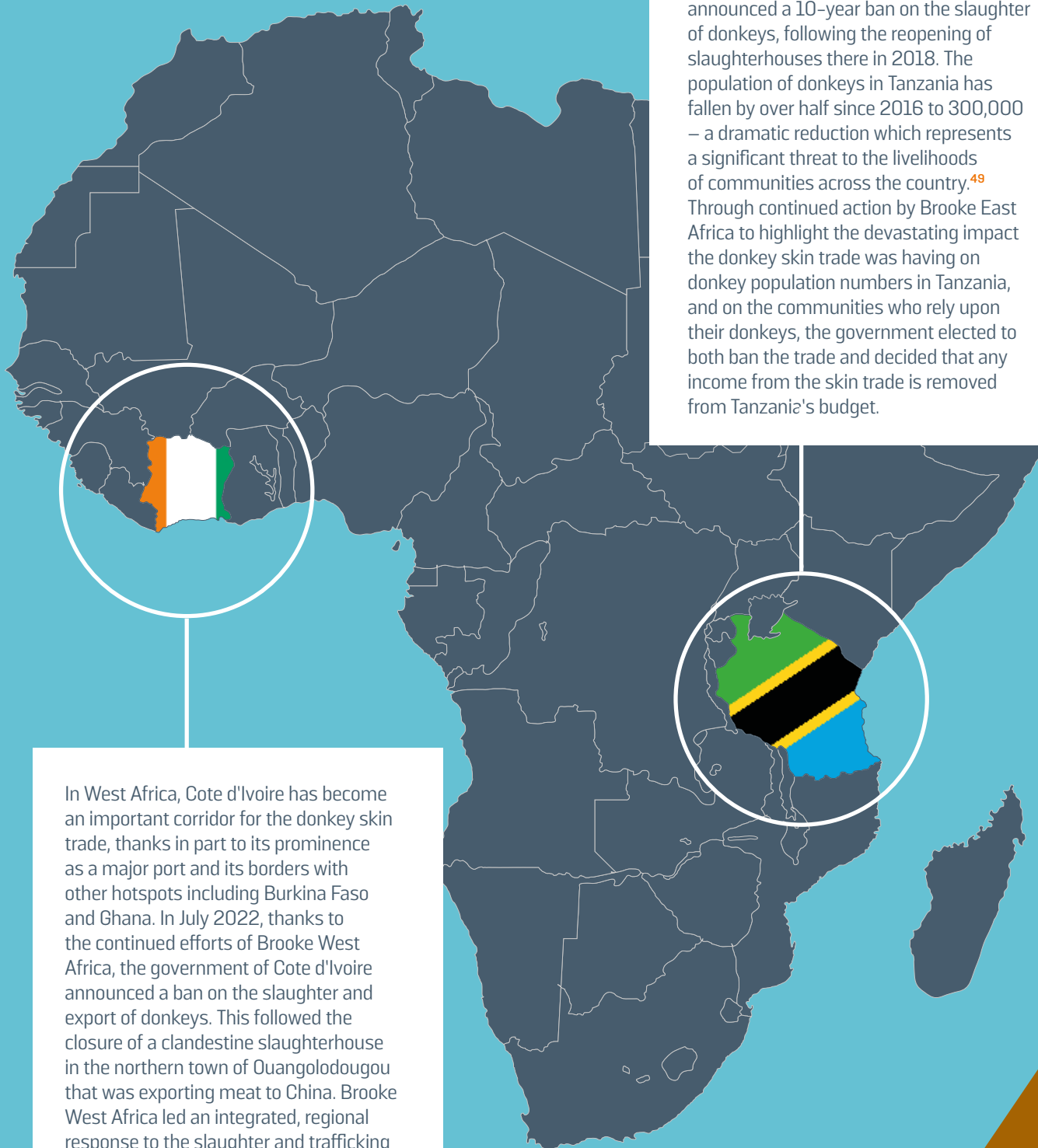
When five of Emily's donkeys were stolen in 2015, Emily's family were devastated and in order to survive Emily had to undertake hard, physical labour in the fields. Emily describes the loss of their donkeys as "taking them backwards as a family". Research in Kenya, where Emily lives, as well as across India, Pakistan and Ethiopia has shown that women value their donkey above all other livestock. But, as Emily discovered, the cost to replace donkeys stolen into the skin trade has skyrocketed due to their increasing scarcity. The adverse effect this has upon women is stark: simply put, "when the donkeys are gone, the woman must play the role of the donkey".<sup>48</sup>

Emily with her donkeys, Kenya  
Photo: © Brooke





## PROGRESS TOWARDS A GLOBAL BAN – SPOTLIGHT ON TANZANIA AND COTE D'IVOIRE



In early 2022 the Tanzanian government announced a 10-year ban on the slaughter of donkeys, following the reopening of slaughterhouses there in 2018. The population of donkeys in Tanzania has fallen by over half since 2016 to 300,000 – a dramatic reduction which represents a significant threat to the livelihoods of communities across the country.<sup>49</sup> Through continued action by Brooke East Africa to highlight the devastating impact the donkey skin trade was having on donkey population numbers in Tanzania, and on the communities who rely upon their donkeys, the government elected to both ban the trade and decided that any income from the skin trade is removed from Tanzania's budget.

In West Africa, Cote d'Ivoire has become an important corridor for the donkey skin trade, thanks in part to its prominence as a major port and its borders with other hotspots including Burkina Faso and Ghana. In July 2022, thanks to the continued efforts of Brooke West Africa, the government of Cote d'Ivoire announced a ban on the slaughter and export of donkeys. This followed the closure of a clandestine slaughterhouse in the northern town of Ouangolodougou that was exporting meat to China. Brooke West Africa led an integrated, regional response to the slaughter and trafficking through Cote d'Ivoire which has resulted in this "historic decision for the preservation of the donkey species".<sup>50</sup>

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## POLICYMAKERS IN AFFECTED COUNTRIES MUST:

- Follow in the footsteps of countries like Cote d'Ivoire and Tanzania by introducing legislation to ban the slaughter of donkeys and all trade in donkey skins for the production of ejiao and to take measures to enforce such a ban (including illegal cross border trade).
- Reinforce and uphold bans and other legal sanctions on the trade in countries where they already exist.
- Acknowledge the life-long value of working donkeys as a livelihood asset by explicitly including them in national livestock surveys and policies, taking tangible steps to safeguard them.
- Strengthen the resilience of local communities to donkey theft through supporting protection initiatives. These must be community driven and politically backed to encourage local buy-in and ensure measures are sustainable and practical.
- Recognise that breeding and farming donkeys to supply the skin trade is not a commercially viable solution and that donkeys are not a suitable species for intensive farming.
- Prioritise and improve reporting at country level of working equid populations, including donkeys, so as to better evidence the impact of the donkey skin trade and map trends.

## GLOBAL POLICYMAKERS AND INFLUENCERS MUST:

- Recognise the threat posed by the donkey skin trade in rural communities that rely on working donkeys as key livelihood assets, providing draught, traction and transport as a significant development concern.
- Support counterparts in countries affected by the trade to impose legal sanctions to curtail the impact of the donkey skin trade.

## DONKEY OWNING COMMUNITIES AND INDIVIDUAL OWNERS MUST:

- Protect their donkeys against theft through using such legal measures as are appropriate for them.
- Ensure that communities as a whole understand the value donkeys bring in terms of long term improvement to livelihoods and community resilience.

## NGOS AND COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS MUST:

- Empower local residents to lobby their governments to act on this issue and support a ban on the export of donkey skins and associated products or maintain and reinforce an existing ban.
- Work together to raise awareness of the donkey skin trade, share research and best practice, and collaborate to bring the issue to the attention of global policymakers.

## RESEARCHERS MUST:

- Continue to develop evidence and understanding on the global donkey skin trade that informs policy change and facilitates global conversations.
- Continue to expand research into South Asia, recognising that the livelihood impacts of the trade go beyond Africa.



## SUMMARY

The scale and rapid global spread of the donkey skin trade to fuel China's demands for ejiao is unsustainable. The trade is having devastating consequences for donkeys and their owners around the world, which are felt most keenly by vulnerable people in poor communities.

By jeopardising people's abilities to secure a strong and sustainable livelihood and by hindering food security, gender equality, access to water, healthcare and education, the donkey skin trade is threatening the achievement of a number of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.<sup>51</sup>

The spread of both legal and illegal trade within existing countries and into new trading partners means these impacts are escalating. Without donkeys, families will struggle to survive and the economic development of some of the world's poorest countries will suffer.

Stakeholders must work together to take urgent action – both within and across countries – recognising that each country will require a bespoke response.

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**"My three donkeys were stolen in July 2018. One [donkey] was pregnant. My neighbours helped to trace them and unfortunately we found them slaughtered in a bush. Since then, I have been struggling to feed my family. I used to sell water to local schools and [use my earnings to] pay school fees for my children. I am now unable to continue with this".**

*Mother of three children, Migwni, Kitui County, Kenya*

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Halaba Shelter equine owner Ethiopia  
Photo: © Bill Bradshaw / Brooke

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