

Working equids supporting women's disaster risk management

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1. Introduction

Approximately 116 million working equids—mainly horses, donkeys, and mules—support the livelihoods of 600 million people (Allan, 2021; Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), 2022) including for managing disaster risk and disasters (Clancy *et al.*, 2022). Horses, donkeys and mules particularly reduce the work burden on women, while protecting the livelihoods of female-headed household in what development agencies often term “low and middle-income countries” (LMICs) (Bonsi *et al.*, 2023). Brooke Action for Working Horses and Donkeys (Brooke) operates as an animal welfare charity in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East dedicated to improving the lives of working equids (see Plates 1–6).

To fulfil its vision of a world in which working horses, donkeys and mules are free from suffering and have a life worth living, day-to-day activities must yield tangible gains (see Brooke's analysis at Pritchard *et al.*, 2018). By definition, achieving this approach must consider disaster risk management (Hewitt, 1983; Lewis, 1999; Wisner *et al.*, 2004). Women's capabilities and roles for using working equids (Valette, 2014) and for disaster risk management (Enarson and Morrow, 1998) are frequently downplayed or bypassed, as is the welfare of their equids (Sommerville *et al.*, 2018).

This photo essay uses locally produced and locally focused positive visual representations of women enacting disaster risk management for themselves with working equids. This locally focused approach contrasts with women's frequent post-disaster visual victimisation, which often occurs without asking the women portrayed about their situation (Childs, 2006). This photo essay demonstrates how women proactively use working equids within Brooke's programmes to support local disaster risk management on their own terms. The visual medium selected moves beyond normative and typical academic article styles and structures.

Brooke has permission to use the photos from the people in the photos and from the photographers, the latter being either Brooke staff or trusted freelancers under contract. The choices of locations, circumstances, people and images emerged from Brooke's local work, with women, photographers and local staff having developed working partnerships to determine how the women would wish to be portrayed with their equids. Through various interactions, not one-off requests or single events, participants agreed to be involved in Brooke's documentation activities. They provided either signed or verbal consent, agreeing individually or as a group for photos to be taken and used publicly. The purposes are for developing collaborations to act on, educate about, promote and improve Brooke's work.

Selection and curation of the photos was completed by seeking a balance of places, circumstances, photos illustrating women addressing disaster risk management and good photographic composition. The key is permitting the photos to tell most the story, framed with short captions and minimalist text placing the points within past academic work, rather than offering a detailed paper punctuated by images.



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2. Images



Plate 1. Stephen Kiprop, 2023

In Kenya, the Nkareta women’s group use their donkeys to collect and carry water from the nearby river. This work supports drought risk management, with lack of freshwater being a prevalent concern in these areas (Bowell *et al.*, 2021). Using donkeys for carrying water in Kenya is long-standing alongside the opportunity to earn money by loaning out the animals (Curtis, 1986). When drought becomes too much to deal with locally, such as in the Nkareta area, equids are also used to move families and their belongings (Valette, 2014).



Plate 2. Atul Loke/Panos Pictures, 2018

Rural India is home to about 87% of the country's working equids and around 84% of rural Indian women rely on these equids for farming livelihoods (Valette, 2014). Horses comprise approximately half of the working equids, with donkeys just over one-third, and mules the rest. Working equids are used to transport materials to and around the farm, as well as to bring goods to markets. This income generation supports the women in managing disaster risks (e.g., Bhadra, 2017), especially noting how frequently poverty is cited as a cause and driver of vulnerability (Hewitt, 1983; Lewis, 1999; Wisner *et al.*, 2004) including rural India (Sam *et al.*, 2017).



Plate 3. Jose Collado (Chepe), 2023

In Nicaragua, Irma describes how she relies on her horse Azul Azul (meaning “Blue Blue”) for her daily life, aiding in tasks such as commuting to school, attending meetings, going to Church and visiting the health centre. Irma expresses a deep trust in him, highlighting his gentle nature and how he allows her to care for him, including bathing and saddling him. Irma and Azul Azul's partnership exemplifies how women use working equids in Nicaragua to transport people and goods when hazards manifest, including for evacuation (especially those who are sick and injured) to safe areas or shelters. Building up the trust and skills on an everyday basis ensures that the woman-equid connection and their actions are routine rather than exceptional when dealing with a hazard. Thus, women lead (with their working equids) disaster risk management, as has long been shown to help in Nicaragua (e.g., Bradshaw, 2001).



Plate 4. Freya Downson, 2016

In pastoral areas in Senegal, women rely on donkeys to carry water, although men would tend to be the animals' owners, buyers and sellers ([Fernando and Starkey, 2004](#)). Water fetching becomes more and more frequent as the dry season progresses, so it becomes common to make two or three trips a day in order to have enough water for the family ([Diop and Fadiga, 2021](#)). Without the donkeys, the women would have little scope for obtaining sufficient water, also noting that walking in the heat with heavy loads is dehydrating. The donkeys are key to drought risk management, keeping the women healthy.



Plate 5. Petterik Wiggers, 2019

Using local plants, the Kaliluni Women's Group in Kenya produces harnesses and tethering ropes for donkeys as well as bags to sell, generating income for themselves and their families. The women then have money available to support themselves after a hazard in addition to a skill which, post-disaster, is often in demand. This work further supports farming as a livelihood ([Giger et al., 2022](#) who also demonstrate how the role of working equids in farming can be underplayed) and income diversification to avoid worsening drought through farming (see [Glantz, 1994](#)). Prevention and preparedness are preferred to post-disaster actions for disaster risk management, exemplified by the women and their working equids here.



Plate 6. Petterik Wiggers, 2019

3. Conclusions

The photos of working equids used by women for their own disaster risk management illustrate a well-accepted theme and baseline from disaster research that supporting livelihoods locally, including self-sufficiency and income generation, helps to manage disaster risk (Hewitt, 1983; Lewis, 1999; Wisner *et al.*, 2004). Despite the power of images, especially positive ones, they are merely snapshots. They offer less regarding long-term processes of women enacting disaster risk management, such as working equids raising women's status in the community (Valette, 2014) and the role of companionship (Haddy *et al.*, 2024). Nor can they especially express or prove how local the work, initiative, leadership and impacts actually are, for either women, their equids, or the wider community.

Further exploration into video essays might contribute to overcoming these limitations, especially asking women to explain or demonstrate their lives, work, and situations in their own words and/or actions in their own ways. This photo essay nonetheless provides examples through a visual communication mode for indicating specific actions which policy and practice could enact to support women and their equids for local and locally led disaster risk management.

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