



# Promoting the welfare of donkeys to build sustainable rural economy: The case of Musekwa Valley, Vhembe District of Limpopo Province

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## Abstract

Donkeys have played a major role throughout history in the livelihood provision and economic development of humans. Despite their contribution, the welfare of donkeys continues to be undermined at household and policy levels – especially in the developing regions. This paper investigates donkey welfare trends in the Musekwa Valley. The paper opines that improving donkey welfare might improve prospects and opportunities promoting sustainable local economic development. Fifty-five (n=55) purposively selected primary participants were interviewed using semi-structured questionnaire instrument administered on face-to-face basis. Key informant interviews and Focus Groups Discussion (FGD) were administered on purposively selected key informants (n=4) and a group comprising 10 (n=10) participants. Donkey welfare still needs to be improved in the study area. However, there has been considerable improvement in the area regarding the welfare of donkeys. Most locals have begun to view donkeys differently as they have become integral in the emerging and thriving donkey transportation economy in the study area; creating jobs and assisting households generate crucial income. Stakeholders such as the government and donkey advocacy groups must educate the residents on the welfare of donkeys by running awareness and education programs.

**Keywords:** Brutality; Donkeys; Economic Significance; *i'jeao*; Traditional Medicine

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## 1. Introduction

Worldwide, donkeys (*Equus asinus*) are increasingly taking centre stage and have been drawing growing legislative, policy and research attention – especially when it has been discovered that they have had pivotal role in human civilisations and development since their domestication approximately 5000 years ago (Geiger and Hovorka, 2015; Johnston, 2023; McLean and Gonzalez, 2018). Donkeys have assisted humans to cope with threats to their livelihoods – especially vulnerable and marginalised groups such as women and children who donkeys enabled to integrate into mainstream socio-economic frameworks from which they were often excluded from (Braithair et al., 2013). In Africa, there is a popular assertion insinuating that the donkey has had profound influence on the economic development of the continent. They say about the donkey “if, as Herodotus stated, Egypt is the gift of the Nile, then it is a gift largely delivered by donkeys” (Johnston, 2023). This assertion postulates and suggests that donkeys were in use when modern Egypt was built by the Arabs – especially its cities of Cairo and others.

Donkeys have had profound influence on the livelihood of humans and their economic development around the world even in this modernisation age of increased tractorisation and motorisation of the economy – especially in the agricultural sector of the developing regions where the economic power and influence of donkeys still dominates (Ravichandran et al., 2023; Vetter, 1996; Ahmed et al., 2023; Ali et al., 2014; Ali et al., 2016; Bazzano et al., 2022; Burn et al., 2010; Fernando and Starkey, 2004; Geiger and Hovorka, 2015; Hassan et al., 2013; Mueller et al. 1994; Mwasame et al., 2019; Norris et al., 2021; Valette, 2005). In fact, African trade and the continent’s early access to offshore markets including its socio-economic mobility were enhanced by donkeys providing transportation and other forms of labour (Geiger and Hovorka, 2015; Johnston, 2023). Despite this significance, there have been considerable concerns regarding the welfare of donkeys which has been systematically ignored among owners and users including policymakers in some regions of the world since time immemorial (Ravichandran et al., 2023). Concern on the welfare of donkeys has significantly grown following current trends promoted by the emerging highly lucrative donkey trade and slaughtering in China anchored by the *i’jeao* economy (Johnston, 2023). The *i’jeao* economy has brought with it considerable threat to donkey populations and welfare violations as demand for their skin surges (Maggs et al., 2021).

Provoked by factors around the donkey such as its utility in the economy and welfare for example, the dreadful impacts of the donkey slaughtering economy in China on the poor, women and children and Africa’s role as a supplier of donkeys to the Chinese demand of donkey hides (Johnston, 2023), donkey-related research informing policy development in some countries of the developing regions worldwide has been on the rise – especially research relating to their contribution in the improvement of human livelihood, health risks based on the Chinese *i’jeao* economy and socio-economic benefits donkeys contribute at household level (Ali et al., 2014) for example. In most developing regions of the world, donkeys are considered as ‘raw material’ from which to extract valuables such as meat, milk, and hides (Ali et al., 2014; Gifford-Gonzalez and Hanotte, 2011; Johnston, 2023) apart from the labour input they contribute for those who use and keep them (Ali et al. 2014; Mwasame et al., 2019). Because of their durability in harsh labour, donkeys are called “beasts of burden” (Ali et al., 2014; Braimah et al., 2013; The Donkey Sanctuary, 2020) by some globally. Despite the stellar role played by donkeys in human life, humans have not always been kind to them.

Humans have mistreated, abused, neglected, and violated donkeys compromising their health and welfare with impunity (Ravichandran et al., 2023; Ahmed et al., 2023; Bazzano et al., 2022; Braimah et al., 2013; Burn

et al., 2010; De Aluja, 1998; Geiger and Hovorka, 2015; Haddy et al., 2020; Khan et al., 2022; Mwasame et al., 2019; Norris et al., 2019; Smith and Pearson, 2005) largely because donkeys have been considered to be of low status, underdeveloped and backward as compared to livestock such as cattle, camels, goats and sheep (Brammah et al., 2013; Fernando and Starkey, 2004). Humans have exposed and subjected donkeys to life of distress, pain, torture, and fear among others (Ahmed et al., 2023; Geiger et al., 2021; Geiger and Hovorka, 2015). Donkeys have had to cope with these difficult conditions (Ahmed et al., 2023) exacerbated by, among others the negative perception humans have about donkeys despite their contribution to socio-economic activities of humans (Fernando and Starkey, 2004; Mwasame et al., 2019). In the growth of incidences of donkey abuse and violation of their welfare in some regions of the world, there has been lack of interest from the stakeholders including among others donkey owners and users, policy makers and researchers to remedy the scourge. Advocacy on the welfare of donkeys has conceded that donkey welfare may best be addressed if donkey owners and users are engaged, lobbied, and persuaded to commit themselves into the agenda of improving it (Donkeys for Africa, 2020). However, the challenge has been that although animal welfare lobby groups and workers have had interventions to improve on the welfare of donkeys for example, the interventions have had limited impact because it had been near impossible to convince donkey owners and users “to adopt a lasting solution” (Donkeys for Africa, 2020).

This paper builds its narrative from this context informed by observations that the welfare of donkeys in the Musekwa Valley of Vhembe District in Limpopo Province, South Africa requires attention by redressing it as it is prevalent. The main aim of this paper was to investigate the factors informing the perpetual abuse and violation of welfare of donkey in the study area. Local communities have of late become reliant on the emerging donkey transport economy which on the other hand is under threat by the perpetual abuse and violation of the welfare of donkeys at the study area. The paper starts by presenting a comprehensive introduction before moving on to literature review which focused on the historical origin of the donkey and threat for its decline and extinction, the Chinese *i-jeao* economy and the subsequent protection of donkeys from trade and slaughtering for this economy and the donkey welfare research, the prioritisation and promotion of its welfare.

## 2. Literature review

The literature reviewed for the purpose of this study covered among others the historical genealogy of the donkey and threat for its decline and extinction, the Chinese *i-jeao* economy and the subsequent protection of donkeys and the welfare of donkeys, research on the protection and the promotion of the welfare of donkeys.

### 2.1. The historical origin of the donkey and threat for its decline and extinction

The donkey “descended from the African wild ass” (*Equus africanus*) (Chiwome et al., 2019; Gifford-Gonzalez and Hanotte, 2011). Gifford-Gonzalez and Hanotte (2011) report that donkeys were Africa’s discovery and domestication which Africans manipulated in the process to serve their socio-economic interests. Fernando and Starkey (2004) posited that donkeys originated in the north-eastern regions of Africa and, over time, spread to the rest of the world eventually becoming part of humans and their livelihood systems (Ali et al., 2014; Avornyo et al., 2015; Gifford-Gonzalez and Hanotte 2011; Mwasame et al., 2019) for over 5000 years (Ali et al., 2014). Donkeys are in large numbers in Asia, sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) and Latin America (Fernando

and Starkey, 2004; Norris et al., 2029) although Ali et al. (2014) submit that the largest number of donkeys could be in Central and South America and parts of Europe with China (11 million donkeys) dominating the population in the Asiatic block. The economic significance of the donkey has been increasing in global political economy – especially with its role in household livelihood in most poorer regions of the world where the donkey’s contribution in the economy has been significantly increasing over the years. The contribution of the donkey economy in countries such as China has also increased the stature of the donkey globally. Worryingly is that donkey populations around the world are under threat from numerous factors including among others, injuries, diseases and the emerging *i’jeao* donkey market in China which has encouraged donkey owners outside China to engage in mass slaughtering of donkeys to extract the hides for the growing market in China (Gifford-Gonzalez and Hanotte, 2011; Maggs et al., 2021).

According to Mwasame et al. (2019), donkey populations have dramatically declined in China from 11 million to five million in a period of 20 years. The decline of donkey numbers in China was primarily apportioned to the growth of the *i’jeao* market (Mwasame et al., 2019). The *i’jeao* market relies on the supply of donkey hides which are used to manufacture the *i’jeao* traditional medicine to cure various human ailments including the beauty economy. To cater for this need, China has created an international supply chain service which provides the raw material of donkey hides to its fledging *i’jeao* market. This Chinese *i’jeao* economy is spilling over the rest of the world. Matlhola and Chen (2020) reported this economy is impacting on the donkey populations in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) where this economy has been taking root. Other factors leading to the decline of donkey populations involve lack of clear policies and legislation to protect donkeys from, among others, unregulated slaughtering, and trading – especially with the *i’jeao* market (Mwasame et al., 2019; Jaakkola et al., 2020). The *i’jeao* market has become a major concern in those countries where donkeys are still considered crucial role players of the economy (Donkey Sanctuary, 2020).

There are developments in some parts of the globe where governments and animal rights groups are collaborating to end the donkey slaughtering and exportation of the hides for the Chinese *i-jeao* economy for example. The lamentations around the African continent on the slaughtering of donkeys were heard and responded to by the African Union Summit of the Heads of State which gathered in Adis Ababa, Ethiopia on 18 February 2024 and made profound pronouncement on the banning of donkey slaughtering in Africa. On this, advocacy groups fighting for the protection of the welfare of donkeys reasoned “we are therefore extremely pleased that Africa’s Heads of State have banned the slaughter of donkeys for their skins, across the continent” (The Donkey Sanctuary, 2024) as asserted by Dr Calvin Solomon Onyango, who is the Director of The Donkey Sanctuary in Kenya. Onyango’s sentiments were equally shared by among others Dr Otieno Mtula, the Regional Campaigns and Advocacy Manager and Marianne Steele the Chief Executive Officer of The Donkey Sanctuary who both commended the 37th AU Summit of the Heads of State saying “this milestone moment is just the beginning – this decision needs to be implemented and enforced by every country that makes up the African Union. We will work closely with our colleagues and partners across Africa to provide all the support and resources we can to see this commitment to a ban on the slaughter of donkeys for their skins become a reality across Africa and the start of a new era for donkey welfare” (The Donkey Sanctuary, 2024) and that “this is a truly momentous result for the welfare of donkeys in Africa. The decision to ban the slaughter of donkeys for the skin trade is enormous. Donkeys are sensitive and intelligent creatures who deserve protection for their own sakes, and for the countless communities who rely on them” (The Donkey Sanctuary, 2024).

## 2.2. The Chinese *i-jeao* economy and the subsequent protection of donkeys

This paper builds on the expressions of the 37th AU Heads of State and the arguments raised by the donkey rights activists Dr Calvin Solomon Onyango, Dr Otieno Mtula and Marianne Steele for example. The banning of donkey slaughtering in Africa had been an inescapable decision being contemplated by many even before the 37th Summit of The Heads of State in Adis Ababa which sat on the 18th of February 2024. Prior to this pronouncement, countries such as Kenya and Botswana for example have had enough of this brutal deed on donkeys. Botswana had already moved to ban the export of donkey hides to China prior to the events of the 37th AU Summit of the Heads of States leading to the ban in Africa, in fear of donkeys becoming extinct in the country (Matlholo and Chen, 2020). Most critically and in the spirit of this paper is that criticism of the *i'jeao* economy has been that it undermines the welfare of donkeys as it promotes increasing unsustainable donkey slaughtering practices which are not properly regulated by legislation and relevant policies (Lima et al., 2022; Mwasame et al., 2019).

The *ijeao* 'crisis' may not be alone for long as the growing attention of the donkey industry for commerce in countries such as Ghana, Botswana, Kenya and Nigeria for example, where farming and trading on donkeys, nationally and abroad, have been on the increase (Avornyo et al., 2015; Hasssan et al., 2013; Matlholo and Chen, 2020; Mwasame et al., 2019). The donkey meat demand has been growing in southern Nigeria, where approximately 16 000 donkeys are received per year from the north for slaughtering for human consumption (Hassan et al., 2013). It is understandable why there has been significant emergence and growth in countries such as Nigeria of a strong donkey farming enterprise (Hassan et al., 2013). Some communities have started farming on donkeys to feed the growing local market for meat in both rural and urban areas (Hassan et al., 2013). It is evident the donkey has arrived in the global economy as a serious contender in the food chain market, employment creation opportunities and means of poverty reduction in resource poor communities. The donkey will play a major role in the realisation of the UN's MDG targets – specifically the call to reduce global poverty in all its forms while ensuring that food security is safeguarded underpinned on improved nutrition and promotion of sustainable agriculture. From the literature reviewed for the purpose of this paper, it has become evident that donkeys have begun to be used by many – especially at household level to fight poverty as donkey users generate significant disposable income while increasing the prospects of donkeys to guarantee food security as their milk and meat get integrated into the mainstream food chain.

## 2.3. Donkey welfare research, the prioritisation and promotion of the welfare

While interest on researching on the welfare of donkeys – especially in the study area has been conspicuously absent, research on the same elsewhere in countries such as Botswana, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Namibia, Nigeria, Somalia and Zimbabwe among others (Ahmed et al., 2023; Avornyo et al., 2015; Chiwome et al., 2019; Geiger et al., 2021; Mwasame et al., 2019) has had an upsurge – at least in the last decade or two. Some of this literature has argued for prioritisation of donkey welfare in communities. Furthermore, this literature contends that stakeholders in the donkey economy must be assisted through education to develop better understanding about donkeys and their welfare. This exercise must include awareness of the status of donkeys in respective communities and societies at large. The assumption is that if stakeholders have a better understanding of this status, they might develop a culture of caring. Donkey advocacy groups such as Eseltjesrus Donkey Sanctuary (EDS), World Horse Welfare and in the case of South Africa, *amaTrac uluntu* and



Cart Horse Protection Association (CHPA) among others have engaged communities through training workshops as form of outreach to improve perceptions of users and owners on the welfare of animals such as donkeys and horses for example. These organisations solicited animal owners to commit to promoting animal welfare (Donkeys for Africa, 2020). Ahmed et al. (2013) have found that training has had influence on the donkey stakeholders regarding how they responded to issues on donkey welfare. The study found that “those who were trained tended to have better donkey handling skills compared to those who were not trained on donkey welfare” (Ahmed et al., 2023). This assertion is supported by Donkeys for Africa (2018), which states that the poor treatment of donkeys emanates from a lack of education about donkeys among others. The idea of educating the stakeholders on donkey welfare is to bring the stakeholders closer for collective approach on locating the solution to this scourge. This idea hinges on Khan et al.’s (2022) proposition that “the welfare of donkeys in low-middle income countries (LMICs) requires a collective approach involving donkey owners, farriers, veterinarians and researchers”. In Cameroon for example, the FAWCAM extended the training workshops to children, who after the trainings have learnt to report incidences of abuse and any other form of violation of the wellness of donkeys to adults known as Village Champions. The paper builds its narrative on the idea that it is the attitude and perception of donkey owners and users that promote the negative manifestations of donkey welfare in developing regions (Khan et al., 2022). Building on this assertion, Donkeys for Africa (2018) argued that “education is the key to more ethical donkey treatment” among users and owners. These sentiments and those made earlier in the paper call for meaningful research to be undertaken in rural communities experiencing this challenge of violation of welfare of donkeys – especially in South Africa where such incidences have been prevalent. This paper responds to the question “Why is it that the wellness of donkeys is compromised in the study area? The author adopted the ‘animal well-being’ theory of Silberman (1988) and Daniel Engster’s (2006) animal care theory both of which underpin the idea that animal suffering instigated by humans must be prevented.

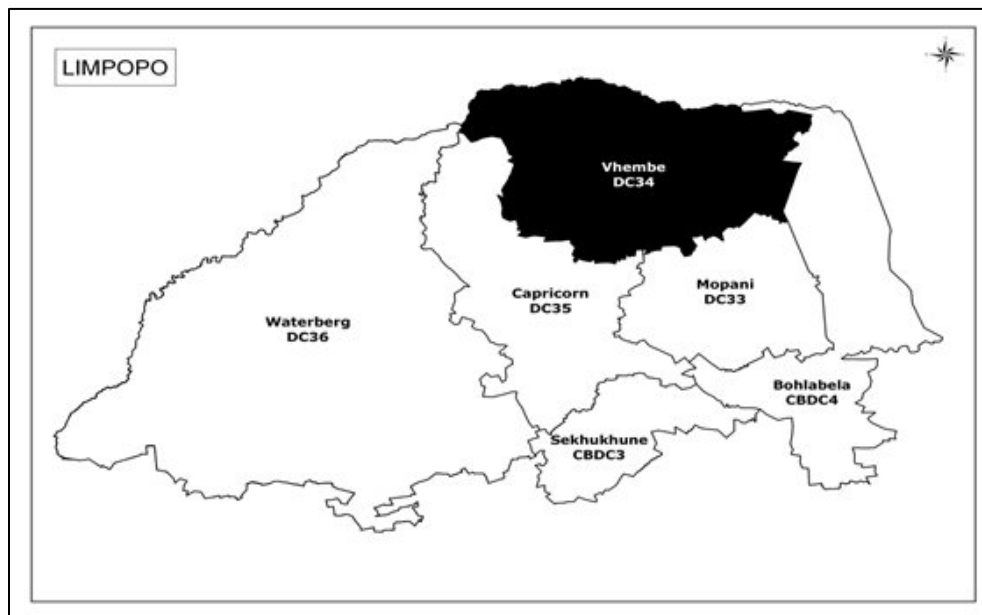
### **3. Conceptualisation, theoretical underpinnings, and analytical framework**

This paper is anchored on the assumption that using of animals for production of food for humans and provision of labour is ethically acceptable and justified (Haynes, 2011). Because the concept animal welfare remains contested in the animal welfarism literature and in the “animal welfare science community,” (Haynes, 2011) with its meaning shared differently by different researchers, this paper conceptualises donkey welfare from the definition posited in Valette (2015), which could be translated to suggest that as long as the animal is guaranteed to cope with its environment – especially the conditions in which it lives, the welfare of the animal is not violated. The animal is therefore in a good state of welfare if it shows a healthy condition, comfortability, well nourishment, has safety from danger or threats, free from pain and distress for example. Good animal welfare requires that humans treat animals with care. The animal care theory as adopted by among others De Villiers (2015), Stucki (2020), Engster (2005) and Engster (2006) become prominent in this framework. The animal care theory is not exhaustive of the analysis but merely most relevant. This paper concedes that there is therefore more than a single way from which to approach animal welfare advocacy (Fragoso et al., 2023). The paper borrows from the theorisations of animal care theorists such as Eva Kittay and Martha Fineman whose perspectives anchored on the so-called ‘care ethics’ theory (Engster, 2005). These theorists are opposed to animal suffering because they argue that humans have relations with animals to such an extent that they should be caring about their welfare (Engster, 2006). It is evident from this paper that the author affirms these

theorists arguing that the suffering of donkeys by any human actions must be opposed and removed. The paper makes this call based on the idea that the relations between humans and donkeys must necessitate such removal of the sufferings of the donkey. However, those critical to the ideas of animal care theorists argue on the other hand that these activists instead promote the welfare of the animals to further exploit them by maximising the utility of the animals in their own world (Engster, 2006). Engster (2006) contends this assertion arguing that care theorists do not get involved in debates wanting to speak from the animal rights perspective for instance. Care theorists argue that animal welfare must be promoted based on the relationship humans have with animals (Engster, 2006). This is the position the current paper departs from. It is postulated that the adoption of the animal care theory to underpin the analysis of the narrative of this paper would enable the paper to identify and display the factors which would awaken the moral obligation of humans to care for the donkeys better – on account that these animals have cordial relations with humans. It is this relation which must bind humans to the need to declare their affection to the animals – specifically the donkey in the case of this study. It is therefore crucial for humans to safeguard the welfare of donkeys to ensure their continued existence for the benefit of humans. The animal care theory would assist in the analysis to establish if donkeys in the study area have access to basic needs such as food, drinking water, adequate shelter, medical care when sick, have rest and whether they have protection from any harm, suffering and pain for example. This paper conscientizes stakeholders of the donkey economy in the study area with the fact that donkeys must be taken good care of. Enabled by the animal care theory as has been stated, this paper relays the important message to stakeholders of the donkey economy that violation of the welfare of donkeys jeopardises their own existence. Donkeys must be protected, and their welfare ensured. Here the paper would refer to the Bela-Bela case in which a donkey owner was arrested, prosecuted, and sentenced to two years imprisonment for violating the welfare of his donkey. Anchored on this theorisation, the paper argues that donkeys can attain good state of welfare if stakeholders could ensure that their donkeys were healthy, comfortable, well fed and nourished, safe, able to express innate behaviour, and they do not live under any threat, pain, fear and distress. To achieve this, the paper borrows from the so-called five cardinal pillars which are commonly known as the five freedoms framework of 1965 as developed by the United Kingdom (UK) government report on livestock husbandry. The framework is presented in figure 1 as espoused by David Fraser (2008). The five cardinal pillars of analysis would enable the paper to employ broad based framework to assess the welfare of donkeys at the study area (Fraser, 2008). Fraser (2008) proposes a framework with a focus on the basic health and functioning of animals, freedom from disease and injury. Furthermore, the framework allows for focus on the "affective states" of animals – among others looking at factors such as freedom from pain and distress as experienced by the animals. The framework allows for the review of "the ability of the animals to live reasonably natural lives by carrying out natural behaviour and having natural elements in their environment" (Fraser, 2008). The David Fraser framework confirms that "scientific research on animal welfare has been based on various criteria of welfare" (Fraser, 2008). The scientific outcome has assisted researchers on animal welfare "to identify and solve animal welfare problems" emerging with scientifically acceptable solutions (Fraser, 2008).

#### **4. Description of the study area**

This study was undertaken at the Musekwa Valley of the Vhembe District municipality (see Figure 1) of Limpopo Province, South Africa.



**Figure 1.** Map showing the geographic position of Vhembe District in Limpopo Province (Source: Maonya and Mpandeli (2015)).

Vhembe District covers the areas in the northeast of the Limpopo Province, South Africa. The study area, Musekwa Valley is situated in the north-western part of the district (Mafukata, 2012). The district is predominantly rural with a population of approximately 1.5 - 2 million people. The district is known for its vibrant and multimillion rand citrus and cash crops farming empire in the Levubu, Tshipise, Waterpoort and Mopani sub-regions among others. The economy is still divided along racial lines following the events of the land dispossession of 1913 and 1936 respectively (Nthai, 2022; Manenzhe, 2015). Livestock keeping dominates economic activities for the arid and drier areas of the district. The drier and arid areas are occupied mostly by black South Africans who were moved there during the 1913 and 1936 land dispossessions. Musekwa Valley is in these areas. Most households in the Musekwa Valley depend on informal livestock and dryland cash crop farming for livelihood. Poverty is alarming in the area. This is exacerbated by the lack of formal employment opportunities. The populace therefore relies on any other means including the donkey enterprise to survive the harsh reality (Mafukata, 2012). Donkeys are a frequent sight in the study area, and play a major role in the economy (Mafukata, 2012).

## 5. Materials and methods

This study was conducted at the Musekwa Valley, Limpopo Province, South Africa. Face-to-face interviews which used semi-structured questionnaire were administered on fifty-five (n=55) purposively selected participants. Key informants (n=4), Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) comprising ten (n=10) participants and transect walk were also used to collect data. Key informant interviews were administered on purposively selected informants (n = 4), who were individuals with knowledge of the donkey economy in the study area. The four key informants comprised the traditional leader, a representative of the local civic association, a researcher on the livestock economy in the study area, and a representative of the livestock owners. Data was



also collected through transect walk, to observe the environment in which donkeys spent their days. The research team was assisted by a volunteer guide, who was a local resident. The guide ensured the safety of the research team. The participants were interviewed using a Tshivenda language questionnaire as it was anticipated that there could be language barriers should the interviews be conducted in English. The design of the questionnaire was guided by Braimah et al. (2013) who adopted a similar approach with this study. Captured qualitative data were analysed using thematic approach while the quantitative data were analysed using the Excel spreadsheet to determine frequencies. Simple figures and tables were used to capture the quantitative outcome, while the outcome from the qualitative data was captured in reader friendly narratives.

## 6. Results and discussion

The results of this paper covered the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents, how the respondents' valued donkeys, check if there were perpetrators of donkey abuse and violation, evidence of donkey abuse and violation of their welfare, description of the factors influencing disregard of the welfare of donkeys and the positives from those who put value on donkeys and their subsequent attitudes towards donkeys. These guiding focus areas were aligned with the adopted David Fraser framework (Fraser, 2008) and to respond to the theorisations as anchored on the works of Eva Kittay and Martha Fineman's 'care ethics' theory (Engster, 2005).

### 6.1. Socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents

**Table 1.** Socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Household head distribution</b>		
Male	43	78.2
Female	11	20.0
Child-headed	1	1.8
<b>Age distribution</b>		
+65 Years	30	54.5
55-64 Years	13	23.6
45-54 Years	4	7.3
35-44 Years	6	10.9
25-34 Years	1	1.8
18-24 Years	1	1.8

Table 1. Cont.

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Married	43	78.2
Widow	6	10.9
Single	5	9.1
Divorced	1	1.8
<b>Educational level attained</b>		
No formal education	12	21.8
Primary education	19	34.5
Secondary education	21	38.2
Post-school education	3	5.5
<b>Economic status</b>		
Unemployed	31	56.4
Employed	6	10.9
Self-employed	18	32.7
<b>Main source of income</b>		
Government grants	13	23.6
Government employment	3	5.5
Private sector employment	3	5.5
Remittances	7	12.7
Self-employment activities	19	34.5
Livestock farming	10	18.2
<b>Ownership of donkeys</b>		
Yes	17	30.9
No	38	69.1
TOTAL		100

Source: Author's construction

Table 1 summarises the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. The table revealed that 78.2% of the households among the participants of this paper were male headed followed by those headed by females (20.0%) and children (1.8%). Most of the respondents (54.5%) were aged 65 years of age and above. This age

bracket was followed by those at 55-64 years (23.6%), 35-44 years (10.9%), 45-54 years (7.3%), 25-34 years (1.8%) and finally 18-24 years (1.8%). Married participants (78.2%) dominated, followed by widows (10.9%), single respondents who never married (9.1%) and lastly those who had divorced (1.8%). The results furthermore revealed that 21.8% of the participants lacked any formal education. On the other hand, 34.5%, 38.2% and a further 5.5% respectively had attained primary, secondary, and tertiary level education. Unemployment was high among the participants (56.4%) followed by those who were self-employed (32.7%) and finally the formally employed either in the government or private sector – especially in the white commercial farms neighbouring the study area (10.9%). Household income generation had limited sources ranging from government grants (23.6%), government employment (5.5%), private sector employment (5.5%), remittances from other family members (12.7%), self-employment (34.5%) and livestock farming (18.2%). The results of this paper revealed that 30.9% of the respondents' owned donkeys against 69.1% who did not. As the local economy is highly dependent on livestock production, many of those respondents who did not own donkeys instead owned other livestock such as goats, cattle and sheep. Goats (55.8%), cattle (39.9%), donkeys (2.4%) and sheep (1.9%) were the most preferred livestock among the respondents (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Frequency of livestock population in the Musekwa Valley

Livestock	Frequency	Percentage
Goats	4170	55.8
Cattle	2980	39.9
Donkeys	180	2.4
Sheep	148	1.9
Total	7478	100

Goats were the most preferred because they were cheaper to acquire, and they adapted well in the local semi-arid and drier environments. This result corroborates Mafukata (2012) and Nthakheni (2006).

## 6.2. How the respondents valued donkeys

When asked how they valued donkeys, the results revealed varying patterns (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Value the respondents put on donkeys

Rating	Frequency	Percentage
High Value	43	78.2
Low Value	11	20.0
Not sure	1	1.8
Total	55	100

Most of the respondents (78.2%) placed high value on donkeys whereas those who placed low value on them amounted to 20.0% with a further 1.8% of the respondents being unsure with the value they placed on donkeys.

### 6.3. Abuse and violation of donkey welfare

Participants were asked if they were ever involved in any acts of violation and abuse of the welfare of donkeys in the past 12 months. The results are captured in table 4.

**Table 4.** Involvement in the abuse and violation of the welfare of donkeys in the past 12 months

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Adult male	23	41.8
Adult female	7	12.7
Children male	1	1.8
Children female	X	X
Youth males	21	38.2
Youth female	3	5.5
Total	55	100

Male adults (41.8%) followed by youth males (38.2%), adult females (12.7%), youth females (5.5%) and children male (1.8%) dominated the abuse and violations of the welfare of donkeys. Discussion with key informants and focus group participants revealed that the main form of abuse and violation of the welfare of donkeys was inflicting injuries on donkeys, donkeys left with open wounds, flogging, exposing donkeys to hard labour like ploughing and carrying heavy loads for long hours. Incidences of the donkeys working long hours without rest, feeding and/or watering were still prevalent although change in attitude is also increasing. Some respondents revealed that they had begun to provide care for their donkeys with access to water and feeding for example. There was absence of health care on donkeys. Sick donkeys were not given medical care attention, and in some cases, they were also used to carry out the day-to-day work despite their being unwell. Lack of veterinary services constrained donkey owners and users from providing health care to sick donkeys. The results of the study further revealed that donkeys were left to roam the streets straying into the roads causing accidents – especially at night. This indicates that donkey care in the study area remains low and considered as nothing serious. The paper noted a few factors influencing abuse and violation of the welfare of donkeys. For example, there were wrong perceptions about donkeys among the residents. Residents lacked proper education about donkeys – especially on welfare issues. Undefined ownership of donkeys was the history which led to perceptions that donkeys were not worth protection from abuse and violation. Donkeys are perceived not to have owners. Some residents put no socio-economic value on donkeys as compared to other livestock such as cattle, goats, and sheep for example. Other livestock were viewed as economically important but not the donkey despite its massive contribution to the local economy. Donkeys were viewed as livestock

for the women as they used them to do the hard work. Therefore, the women owned most of the donkeys in the study area. Key informant interviews revealed that those who abused and violated the welfare of donkeys did so because they know that they are mostly owned by women. Donkey abusers have no fear like when the donkeys would have been owned by men. There were no punitive measures and consequences on the perpetrators of donkey abuse and violation as law enforcement agencies such as the police were not interested in the donkey economy and often neglected such cases. In addition, *misanda* (traditional leaders) who would in most cases be involved in the protection of the welfare of the locals' livestock such as goats, sheep and cattle by punishing offenders also lacked interest when it is a donkey involved.

## 7. Discussion

Most of the respondents acquired their donkeys through inheritance as their animals were passed from generation to generation within the family. However, a few others purchased theirs from fellow residents and/or neighbouring villages. The selling of donkeys in the study area was becoming a popular active practice and economy. From the mid-1960s to the mid-2000s – selling donkeys was not popular. Donkeys were freely accessed and used as found in the vicinity – especially in the livestock grazing camps. They would not have any known 'owners', and they roamed the communal livestock grazing camps, and moved from village to village. It was easier for residents to grab them for whatever use and release them thereafter. However, later, ownership of donkeys was introduced in the study area. Donkeys had become in-demand livestock as some residents began to show interest in owning them for economic reasons. The transport and traction market started to grow providing the much-needed jobs and generation of critical household income for users and owners these custodians sold the services to other residents. The donkey selling practice became economically attractive to many. The price of purchase of a donkey has skyrocketed to as high as R2 000–R5 000, depending on seasons, competition, and demand. Buying a donkey during the planting season would be costly. Donkeys are on high demand during this season as many residents begin to look for the services. Competition for donkeys is also high because they are generating critical income for those who own them. Donkeys have become unaffordable for the poor because of their astronomical selling prices. Increased ownership of donkeys introduced high levels of commercialisation in the donkey economy. The commercialisation served as a coping strategy for the residents to curb the high unemployment rates (56.4%) in the study area. The donkey enterprise has become the main household income generation source to 34.5% of the respondents in an economy dependent on government grants (23.6%), formal employment in government and private sector (11%), remittances from relatives and friends (12.7%) to supplement household income. This pattern suggests that the donkey enterprise plays a major role as the source of household livelihood among donkey owner households. This calls for the protection of donkeys and their welfare. This must be done by all the stakeholders of the donkey economy.

Most of the donkey owners earned between R2 500 and R10 000 a month – especially when business would be booming. This is sufficient income for a household to survive on. The income is used to meet the needs of the donkey owners. Most of the respondents who showed high value for donkeys were motivated by the economic input donkeys have had in their livelihoods system. Some literature (Mafukata, 2012; Stroebel, 2004; Nthakheni, 2006) found similarly. Donkey keeping was growing as evidenced by the high population of donkeys as compared to sheep for example. There were 180 (2.4%) donkeys against 148 (1.9%) sheep.



Donkeys have multiple benefits and rewards to owners and users as compared to sheep which in the main is kept for meat while surplus of small quantities are sold to an intermittent informal market to generate household income. The sheep selling period is during the festive season in December when locals buy them for slaughtering. Sheep are often vulnerable to predators and theft. Owners kept a few sheep to guard against these risks.

Donkeys on the other hand provided crucial labour, and other services such as provision of means of transport for humans and goods. Donkeys were also used for traction purposes in the dryland fields where tilling and carrying of on-farm inputs such as manure and post-harvest residues are dependent on them because mechanisation has not been accessible or affordable to most respondents. The donkey users carry materials such as building sand, which is harvested from the non-perennial river streams for use in the informal construction economy in the villages from which informal bricklayers earn a living from. It is evident that the donkey enterprise diversifies the economy in the study area. Donkeys also carry firewood, transport post-harvest crop residues and other materials from the fields to the homes of their owners, users, and other residents on a fee. These results concur with earlier studies (Braumah et al., 2013; Avornyo et al., 2015; Maggs et al., 2021) which reported that donkeys had been crucial livelihood assets for most households for decades in the developing regions – especially where women, children and youths were involved. Many a women headed households in the study area survived from the income generated from the donkey enterprise. This result is in line with those reported by Avornyo et al. (2015) in a study conducted in Bawku, Nigeria, and that of Braimah et al. (2013) conducted in Kassena-Nankana, Ghana. More and more women are entering the donkey ownership economy encouraged by the benefits and rewards their peers earned from the activities. It was observed that the demand for donkeys is skewed towards women-headed households. This result is contrary to those reported by Braimah et al. (2013) who found that the donkey economy and their ownership in Kassena-Nankana, Ghana were male dominated. In the study area donkeys provide women with an opportunity to be active participants in the economy and to also generate crucial household income. Donkeys also help the women by providing hard labour such as carrying water and other goods. This result is consistent with Ali et al. (2014) who reported on the utility of donkeys worldwide.

When asked if the respondents participated in the emerging *i'jeao* market, most respondents (78.2%) revealed that they had no knowledge about this market and therefore did not participate. Only a few respondents (20.0%) had knowledge of the activities, and only as is mentioned in the media – especially on television and radio. Only 21.8% of the respondents expressed desire to participate in the activities to increase their household economic opportunities to generate much needed household income.

The high price donkeys were fetching for those who sold them has had influence on the attitudes of some residents towards donkeys. Those who abused and violated donkeys have begun to see the economic returns and benefits from donkey ownership and market opportunities. First, donkeys are now owned by certain classes of individuals, which had not been the case over the years when donkeys were seen as freely roaming animals which anyone could use. Today, donkeys belong to certain better resourced people who can afford to purchase them, which forces members of the community to 'respect' donkeys as property belonging to other people, who may be aggrieved if their property is abused. This has encouraged reduction of incidences of abuse, harassment, and injury of donkeys. This is good news for the agenda to promote welfare of donkeys as this might assist in the eradication of these practices. Evidently, myths about donkeys were still dominant. Donkeys are overused in distorted belief that they do not experience fatigue for example (Ali et al., 2014). This

perception runs contrary to reported observations that animals do experience complex emotions such as grief and empathy because they too feel and respond to pain (Douglas-Hamilton et al., 2006).

Owners of donkeys have also started to keep them in safe enclosures, particularly at night, to protect them from harm, escalating livestock theft in the area, and from being used by unauthorised persons. As a result, the number of stray and wandering donkeys has declined. Some donkey owners have begun to rest their donkeys when at work. They also water them and provide time for grazing. Injured donkeys were also treated although using traditional means because of lack of proper veterinary services. When asked how to improve on donkey welfare, most of the respondents suggested that interested parties such as agricultural extension services must consider running educational campaigns on donkey welfare. This would increase awareness among the locals on the welfare of donkeys. This assertion is supported by Donkeys for Africa (2018), which states that the poor treatment of donkeys emanates from a lack of education about donkeys among others. Educating the stakeholders would motivate and encourage them to realise the intrinsic value of donkeys – especially in relation to the socio-economic inputs donkeys brought into the sector (Fragoso et al., 2023).

The respondents called for punitive consequences against the perpetrators of violence and brutality against donkeys. They argued that the Bela-Bela case must be extended to other areas to deter others. The Bela-Bela case had resulted in a conviction and sentence by the courts of the donkey owner who had abandoned his injured donkey without access to food and drinking water (Network for animals, 2021). The judgement was viewed by some as “a rare victory for animal welfare and a sign of positive change for the future” (Network for animals, 2021). The respondents demonstrated improved attitude on donkeys on learning about their economic inputs in the local economy. They started to see the missed opportunity and possibility of creating sustainable jobs for themselves. Donkeys were therefore viewed as an important catalyst to underpin the idea of rural economic development.

## 8. Conclusion and recommendations

This paper argued that donkeys have had major role throughout history on the livelihood provision and guarantees to humans and were considered a powerful tool for local economic development and yet their contribution continued to be undermined by perpetual abuse and violation of their welfare. Donkey owners, users and policymakers systematically undermined the welfare of this animal. The main aim of this paper was to investigate the factors influencing the perpetual abuse and violation of donkey welfare in the Musekwa Valley given preliminary observations that abuse, and violation of donkey welfare were still rife in the area. The paper postulated that improvement or eradication of incidences of abuse and violation of donkey welfare in the area might improve prospects and opportunities for local economic development as theorised by among others Geiger and Hovorka (2015). The study used the ‘animal well-being’ theory of Silberman (1988) and Daniel Engster’s (2006) animal care theory both of which underpin the idea that animal suffering instigated by humans must be prevented. The results of the study revealed that donkeys were still exposed to perpetual abuse, brutality, and hardship at the hands of their users and owners. However, the results also revealed that since donkeys provided a critical economic alternative for this poor community, most of the respondents showed a change of attitude on donkey welfare. Through the emerging donkey transportation enterprise providing jobs and household income generation, the donkey economy has become pivotal and key to promoting sustainable local economic development. There is a need to conduct awareness and education

campaigns in the area on the welfare of donkeys. Volunteer institutions and government extension services must be encouraged to provide this service. This could assist in improving the way donkeys are treated and subsequently sustain the donkey economy as a means of livelihood and local economic development imperative in the area.

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