

# Urbanisation, human–animal interaction, and the emerging crisis in working equid welfare

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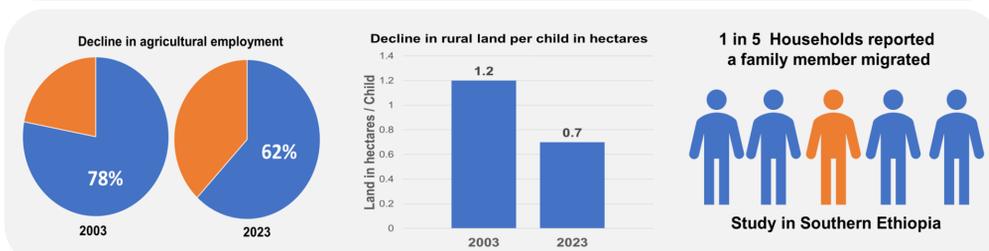
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## INTRODUCTION & AIM

In rural Ethiopia, donkeys, mules, and horses are part of livelihood, culture, heritage and everyday life. Children learn livestock handling and husbandry skills through herding and knowledge transfer from generations. This social bond, embedded in social norms and tied to survival in the environment, helped sustain their livestock in the absence of modern services.

The context is now changing rapidly. Land shortage, population pressure, conflict and the hope for a better life in towns are pushing people to migrate. Youth spend less time with animals, limiting human-animal interaction and generational transfer of livestock-keeping skills [1] [2] [3].



The aim of this poster is to discuss how urbanisation and rural-to-urban migration is reshaping human–equid relations, changing the use of equids, and creating a welfare crisis.

## METHOD

The findings presented in this poster are generated from review of literature, field observations and consultations in urban and rural sites.

## RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Unemployed urban youth and migrants start life with low skill manual jobs. Then progress to buy a donkey or mule and run an informal transport business without any training. These urban and peri-urban equids are used for cart pulling, unlike rural pack ones.

The transition from rural pack use to urban carting has created a welfare crisis.

- Indigenous knowledge system and the equid – human attachment is weakening in the transition [4].
- Equids are overloaded, beaten, have multiple sores, forced to work without rest even while lame [5].
- They also face shortage of feed and stressful environments.
- They often change handlers when rented or sold, and suffer from neglect and abandonment when unproductive [6] [7].

Field observation in selected towns of Ethiopia revealed that equine carts are, operated by untrained youth, were not purpose built, had poor harness and hitching. They also lacked braking systems and reflectors, leading to motor accidents. The Equids were subjected to beating, sores, lameness, and abandonment at the end of working life.

### The crisis is intensifying

- Municipalities prioritise motorised transport, trying to push equids out with no transition plan.
- Yet they continue to operate informally under harsher conditions: long distances, night work, punishment, and unsafe roads.
- Traffic accidents increase, costing both equid and human lives.
- Cart innovations limited, often to heavier and oversized
- Welfare standards decline sharply, with abandonment on the rise.

## RESULTS & DISCUSSION CONT...

	Traditional rural paradigm	Consequences of urbanisation
<b>Environment and Social bond</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Part of smallholder family life, natural environment, grazing</li> <li>• Known to community, has attachment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Less attachment with family, unnatural harsh environment, no grazing</li> <li>• Less community bond, mechanical utility</li> </ul>
<b>Knowledge transfer</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children grow herding livestock</li> <li>• Husbandry skills passed from generations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rapid rural-to-urban migration</li> <li>• Severed lineage of traditional husbandry, inexperienced handlers</li> </ul>
<b>Work and Equipment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mainly serve as pack animals</li> <li>• Mainly used by a family, varied workload</li> <li>• Simple, traditional harnesses for pack</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Repurposed for high-intensity cart-pulling.</li> <li>• Frequently change owners or rented, high work demand</li> <li>• Carts with poor design, hitching and harness</li> </ul>
<b>Welfare services and regulatory framework</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community-enforced norms and indigenous care</li> <li>• Limited Vet and livestock service access</li> <li>• Regulated through social norms &amp; CBIs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overworking, overloading beating common</li> <li>• Economic pressure: less spend on feed &amp; Vet care</li> <li>• Informal sector, no regulatory standards</li> </ul>
<b>End of Life</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Managed within the community/family structure</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Abandoned when they can no longer work, a sharp rise in urban</li> </ul>

## CONCLUSION

Equids remain economically vital, contributing significantly to household income and national GDP of Ethiopia. Urbanisation and rapid rural to urban migration is reshaping their use. Indigenous knowledge systems and human-equid bonds are weakening. Urban equids are facing significantly harsher conditions and neglect driven by multiple factors.

### Urgent call to action

- Regulate the informal sector : register, license, roads, parking
- Bridge generational knowledge gap: educate, built on heritage
- Train on compassionate handling: positive human-equid interaction
- Tailor welfare programmes to suit urban and rural settings
- Embed equid welfare in initiatives: youth, migrants, IDPs
- Innovate welfare friendly equipment: efficient, purpose built, safe
- Include Equid transition planning in modernisation efforts

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