Working equids in refugee camps

Patrick J Pollock

Refugee camps offer good opportunities for cooperation between humanitarian and animal welfare organisations for the benefit of displaced people and their working animals.

It is estimated that there are over 100 million working equids – horses, donkeys and mules – in parts of the world that are underserved by veterinary care: 55 million horses (84% of the world population), 41 million donkeys (98%) and 13 million mules (96%). These working horses, donkeys and mules provide transport and agricultural energy and in many cases are the sole means of generating income for their owners, many of whom live in poverty. It is estimated that a remarkable 50% of the world’s population is reliant on animal power as its main source of energy for agriculture and transport.

There are many groups, non-governmental organisations and individuals working to improve the health and welfare of working equids across the globe. This work includes the provision of veterinary care and training for local veterinary surgeons and equid owners. However, to date little is known about the numbers of working equids associated with displaced people and in refugee camps. The ‘Humans and animals in refugee camps’ project is seeking, among other things, to determine the numbers of working equids travelling with displaced people and to quantify the needs of these animals and the challenges they face.

While healthy, well-managed equids are assets, many owners are too poor to access information about animal care and often live far from any form of veterinary care. This may be particularly the case where people have been displaced, whether to refugee camps, informal settlements or other locations, where their access to veterinary care may be poor or non-existent.

In 2003, approximately 14,000 donkeys carried families displaced by war and natural disaster into the Abu Shouk refugee camp in Darfur, Sudan. Eighteen months later, only around 2,300 were reported to have survived. The Society for the Protection of Animals Abroad (SPANA) estimated that 84% had died through lack of access to feed. To date few, if any, specific guidelines or protocols have been published to better manage situations such as that reported in Sudan.

In resource-limited settings, animals take second place to humans, which is perhaps how it ought to be. But at Abu Shouk, as veterinarian Tess Sprayson noted, “For want of better collaboration between humanitarian aid and animal welfare agencies, the donkeys died an unnecessary and miserable death, while their owners lost what, in many cases, was their sole means of transport or of earning a living” – and a critical lifeline to a future outside the camp. In Darfur, SPANA intervened to provide fodder and basic veterinary care, and the remaining animals in the Abu Shouk camp survived. However, very little data exist on the numbers of working equids used either to travel to or from refugee camps anywhere in the world. Furthermore, little is known about the fate of working equids after their owners have reached a camp.

Since it is recognised that once refugees lose their livestock they are less likely to return home,2 it is time to undertake work to determine the scale of animal displacement in order to understand the fate of these animals and to develop frameworks for responding to the presence of working equids. Humanitarian and animal welfare organisations are well suited to working together; they have similar needs, often use similar equipment and have a common interest in ‘one health’ (the collaborative effort of multiple disciplines – working locally, nationally and globally – to attain optimal health for people, animals and the environment). To date there are very few examples of this;4,5 however, refugee camps represent a great opportunity for veterinary and animal welfare agencies
Sheltering animals in refugee camps

Lara Alshawawreh

Animals play an important role in many people’s lives in displacement. Camp planners and managers need to take animals’ needs into greater account in order for displaced people to continue to benefit from this interaction.

One of the key challenges in emergency response is planning long-term support. Animals in refugee camps, however, suffer not only from a lack of long-term support but in most cases are also neglected during the initial response. The welfare of humans is of course the priority – but animals contribute to that welfare.

In most emergencies, refugees will bring their animals with them to the camps or will start buying and trading animals soon after settling into their new shelters. In the initial stages of emergencies, refugees may have to rely heavily on support organisations but in time people start searching for ways of making a living. Animals provide a significant contribution to human livelihoods, whether for pastoralists, those who sell animals or animal products or provide feed and other services, people who use animals for transportation, security and cultural activities, or simply families who are dependent on animals for food or income. Animals are even used as a way of storing financial capital in the absence of access to banks. Cooperation between refugees, the host community, the host government and support organisations is very important to provide the care that animals need. A number of aspects relating to the camp or settlement need to be considered to ensure its appropriateness for sheltering animals – aspects such as access to water points and grazing land, and the veterinary support that is essential for both their health and human health.

Key considerations

Refugees understand the importance of animals in establishing their new life in camps. Examples of refugees sacrificing the materials they are given for their
to make a difference for the long-term benefit of displaced people and their animals. Co-operation might extend to the development, integration and evaluation of screening tools, shared diagnostic methods, medicines, vaccines, surveillance systems and policies for the prevention, management and control of zoonotic diseases.

With an unprecedented number of displaced people in the world today, it seems logical to assume that the number of affected animals has also increased. The Field Information and Coordination Support Section of the UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR, tracks the number of people forced to flee each year and since equids are readily identifiable, recording their presence and number should be relatively simple. The development of simple screening tools that would allow non-veterinary personnel to flag the presence of equids and other animals in need of veterinary intervention has the potential to offer considerable welfare benefits for this forgotten population of animals, and for the people that rely so heavily upon them.

Patrick J Pollock Patrick.Pollock@ed.ac.uk
Senior Lecturer in Equine Surgery, University of Edinburgh www.ed.ac.uk
