

The specialist view: supporting working animals to support societies

Interviewer: [Gareth Byatt](#): Principal Consultant, [Risk Insight Consulting](#)

Interviewee: [Raphael Kinoti](#), [The Brooke Hospital for Animals](#)

November 2025



Image courtesy of [The Brooke](#)

Gareth: Thank you for making the time to discuss your work, Raphael, and how it contributes towards the global effort to avoid disasters. As a [Disasters Avoided](#) team, we collect and share stories and case studies about disaster prevention and action taken to avoid disasters, to form a body of knowledge of positive action being taken around the world.

Can we begin this interview with an overview of the activities of [The Brooke Hospital for Animals](#) and your geographic coverage, and also your own background?

***Raphael:** Thanks for the opportunity. I am a practising vet, and I have been with the Brooke since 2021. We are an animal welfare entity and charity that specialises in supporting working animals, particularly equines such as horses, donkeys and mules. This work has implications on communities, as I am sure we will discuss.*

We work with and support some of the largest populations of working animals in the world. Our goal is for these animals to lead a life worth living, considering all welfare aspects. Working animals cannot change their situation, and we do a lot of work with the people and communities who keep them, getting involved in direct interventions for animals and with communities.

Our HQ in the UK is where we focus on fundraising and advocacy. A listing of the primary geographies where we work on the ground are described [on our website](#). In summary, our oldest working office is in Egypt, which is where Brooke was born 90 years ago. We operate across East and West Africa. In Eastern Africa we have a regional office in Nairobi, Kenya (the office I work out of), which oversees the Eastern African region, including in Kenya, Malawi, Zambia, Tanzania, Uganda, South Sudan and Somalia. We also have an office in Ethiopia. In West Africa, we have a regional office located in Senegal, which supports operations in Burkina Faso, Togo, Cote d'Ivoire, and Senegal itself.

In Asia, our work currently spans Afghanistan, India, Nepal and Pakistan. For the Americas region we have a regional office serving the Caribbean in Nicaragua which supports countries in that part of the world including Nicaragua, Panama and Honduras.

Gareth: Thanks for this overview about Brooke, Rafael.

What are some of the main aspects you see in your work that relate to disasters, and how working animals can play a part to help people to avoid them happening?

Do you work with the owners of working animals to help them protect their livelihoods and to have resilience for the shocks and stresses they face? I'm thinking of how working animals such as horses, donkeys and cattle and others can be crucial to support people's livelihoods. I imagine that the ability to sustain livelihoods is critical when a hazard strikes, whether it is drought, flooding, an earthquake or something else. The geographies where Brooke operates face a range of hazards.

Raphael: *It's an interesting and significant point. When Brooke began, our target was mainly to look after the health and welfare of working animals. Over time we have realised that there are so many factors that have a human orientation that can impact animals negatively, and we have broadened our work over the years to include aspects that are related to disasters and how to reduce the impact of events that occur for people and animals.*

Much of our work today involves community education. This has helped us to understand a wide range of activities that many communities are undertaking to survive, that they don't always realise are creating vulnerabilities for themselves and the animals they keep. This includes aspects of settlement, agriculture and anything that curtails the natural operation of things and the way nature works.

Think about what can happen in a village located on a steep slope, with a community that is performing some form of agriculture to sustain themselves. There could be animals used for logging on these steep slopes and managing the land.

We undertake education with communities to discuss what sort of danger they may be exposing themselves and their animals to as a result of their activities, such as soil erosion and exposure to flash flooding. Through working with local communities, we believe we can make a big difference. If a hazard strikes, the life of working animals is linked to the life of people.

An example of intervention in Africa is with pasture establishment. Pasture establishment can be looked at it in a narrow perspective of feeding animals, to in turn support communities. For us, we think about the effect of land degradation and the vulnerabilities it can create. We work on designing interventions that focus on allowing communities to rejuvenate degraded areas where vulnerabilities and exposure exist, such as areas where trees have been cut down.

We know that providing food for working animals in most of parts of Africa takes place where land is already significantly degraded. Planting trees in such places is very difficult because it may not directly support people's livelihoods. We work with communities so that when they think about where and how to create pasture, they see the value of taking care of the land, to produce enough pasture to help livestock and also provide some form of resilience. If pasture can be managed in the right way, eroded soil can eventually recover and hold moisture where underground roots for trees and other flora can begin to show, and eventually perhaps an area can be rejuvenated. So, we focus on animal welfare which includes their feed provision, which links to how to revitalise land areas that are degraded, which helps community resilience and helps to lessen their vulnerability to a range of hazards. We think this is an example of thinking more broadly about the value of working animals.

Gareth: What you have described, Raphael, is a good example of using systems thinking to look at the challenges people face and to collaborate together to work through solutions that provide multiple benefits – for working animals, the agrarian system that supports communities and caring for nature and ecology.

Linked to this point, what is your view on the availability of the right investment for disaster risk reduction action and resilience (we refer to it as the value of *investment* rather than *funding*)? You mentioned some examples just now of encouraging communities and villages to undertake sustainable activities. Are you seeing positive signs of good investments being made to support them with the right actions? I'm sure it's a challenge, but are you seeing some good examples?

Raphael: *We always want to see more evidence and examples of good investment taking place. In a number of the marginalised and vulnerable land areas in Africa, I have seen NGOs come up with innovative methods of farming that help to make communities sustainable and avoid disasters.*

There is a walk I know on the Kenyan coast where one of the rivers is vulnerable to flooding, and in this area communities that settle close to the riverbank for economic and livelihood reasons face vulnerabilities during the rainy season. We came up with a way for these communities to settle in the upper areas of the river and be able to farm in the lower areas, in an approach that works with and respects the environment whilst limiting their exposure to flood risk.

The extent of the challenge we face is significant. There is only so much that individual interventions can achieve, however valuable they are locally. When people want quick gains and do not have time to focus on long term impacts of development, it's hard to make a difference.

Perhaps a quarter of the interventions are really helping to make a positive long-term difference. For the rest, some short-term gains are achieved but the investment opportunity is not there, or it does not match what needs to be done for the long term.

Gareth: I appreciate this candid explanation of the challenges people face, Raphael. The right investment is one of the six factors of [our Disasters Avoided model](#). The right investment links to the five other factors, one of which is about having the right mindset – a mindset to approach development in the right way and to think about long-term sustainability.



[The Disasters Avoided model](#): © G Byatt, I Kelman & A Prados

With the work you do with communities to help them nurture and look after land properly and take good care of working animals, how are they addressing vulnerability over the long term to slow onset disasters – those that occur slowly over time such as drought? When slow onset events occur, I imagine the ability of families and communities to keep their animals in good health is crucial.

Raphael: *It is an important area of focus. In this part of the world of the Horn of Africa, we have had a number of cycles of drought in recent years. When you look at the global figures, the figures for heads of cattle in this part of the world of Africa are declining significantly, which is linked to these conditions.*

The frequent cycles of drought that are occurring are having major implications for how people live in Eastern Africa. When a drought comes it severely reduces the number of working animals. It takes time to regain livestock and working animal capacity, and too often, before long another drought comes around which impacts recovery. In this part of the world a vital working animal today is the donkey. However, donkey population numbers are declining in this region. There are various reasons why, [as we have written about on our website](#), which includes the donkey skin trade. The illegal trade in donkeys is a problem, as highlighted in [a report by the Brooke about the trade](#).

When you visit communities in some of the marginal areas of Eastern Africa where cattle used to roam, they now have just a small herd and they will tell you that the donkey is nowadays critical to them – because it is almost the only animal left standing, given its hardiness to withstand the cycles of drought.

The donkey is critical for moving communities around when they are displaced, and to help them bounce back from shocks and stresses. We are seeing communities appreciate this. The other related aspect associated with the criticality of being able to move around is that a lot of rivers that are drying out in Eastern Africa, and as a result there are less and less water sources for communities to find.

When we talk with them about welfare, they are acutely aware of the value the donkey has to help them maintain resilience. We are seeing in animal pastures containing a herd of animals that the owners value a donkey, because it can carry several jerrycans on its back to provide vital water to people and livestock.

So, communities are increasingly valuing the capacity of this hardy animal to reduce the negative impacts of drought and forced displacement. The donkey is appreciated more than when I began working 20-25 years ago.

Gareth: It's really interesting to talk about the criticality of certain working animals such as the donkey, Raphael, and how times change. I know the donkey is vital in other parts of the world as well to so many people and communities, and the way people live.

This relates to one of the points you mentioned earlier, Raphael, about making sure that whatever the working animals are, making sure they are fed and nourished in the right way, and not overworked, is crucial. Given the criticality of donkeys, all the more reason to make sure they are looked after well rather than having an attitude of because they are tough they'll look after themselves.

Raphael: *That's absolutely right. As I mentioned, in Eastern African we have a scarcity of the donkey around here because of a range of factors (as our article I mentioned earlier describes).*

Gareth: There are clearly some important global measures to address and tackle in the work you do at the Brooke.

I'd like to talk about some matters now that relate and link to what we've been discussing, particularly the value of global goals and targets.

As we move towards 2030 and the next decade, we are going to see some new global frameworks or iterations of the current ones. The Sustainable Development Goals (the SDGs) and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 are two such frameworks. Are there any points you think need to be addressed for these frameworks as the new versions or replacements of them are considered? I am wondering if there is enough linkage to the practicalities at the local level and what is described at the global level, for all sorts of needs and development. By the way, I noted [the piece published by the Brooke about working animals for COP30](#).

Raphael: This is a good question, Gareth. For the last 25 years most of my work has been with small communities in villages. So, I will give a perspective about the micro nature of things which I hope can link to the macro level of global goals and frameworks. I'll give 2 examples to demonstrate a point about the importance of local engagement.

I remember one example a couple of years ago where a large international company came with what looked like a lucrative and appropriate venture for local people in the coastal part of Kenya to consider growing jatropha. Jatropha as a genus has many different species, and one or some produce oil which can be used as fuel to power vehicles as biodiesel. The idea for growing this plant in Kenya was sold to the Kenyan government as a green energy solution. Negotiations were held at the national government level, and then when the solution arrived at the village level people discovered that a lot of land was being requested to grow this crop.

It had been planned and mapped out without asking local communities about it and the impact it would have. For people living and working in local communities, it was ironic for them because the government was talking about producing green energy, but the land already had trees and shrubs and other flora, all of which had to be cut down to make way for the crop, which would be a biodiversity loss and would also have a carbon impact. The biodiversity of a large area where migratory birds and other animals would come would be changed.

I am giving this example because we supported communities in a long struggle against the project, and eventually it didn't proceed. I have seen lots of examples around Africa of good intentions for green energy, but too often the solutions that are put forward are not fully thought out, and there is a lack of local involvement in thinking about what would be best for an area.

As we think about what new global frameworks will look like, I would like to see them emphasising the importance of local engagement to find the right solutions. We need agreed ways for development that work locally, not ones that look good on paper but are not practical on the ground. When solutions are being thought about, we must emphasise the importance and value of discussions with local communities. Much good work today goes unrecognised, which is a great shame.

I'll give a second example. In a small administrative area in Kenya, I saw the local government come up with an idea to provide new tractors to the communities for ploughing their fields. It sounded good on paper, to have these tractors that can improve productivity supported by a system of running and maintaining them at the community level and how they can help communities increase their food security, fight hunger, have new forms of employment. In theory, several SDG boxes are ticked.

When they presented the idea, our response was that we wish you had worked with us as an NGO early in the process (at the start, ideally) to help communities to think about and develop better ploughing systems, not necessarily new tractors but perhaps with their existing animals – noting that they use donkeys to plough their land, with the versatility and other benefits this approach provides. But the local government was thinking big and wanted to make a statement example. In the end, three years later, out of the 26 tractors that were introduced in the community only three remained in operation given the high running costs, repairs and maintenance.

We need to be clear on what we mean by “smart solutions” and indigenous technical knowledge. A smart solution leverages the way communities have learned how to use their own local resources. Today in that county of Homa Bay in Kenya, communities are back to using their donkeys and their hands. Some of them had sold their donkeys to use the tractors, and now they're having problems to find donkeys again (I mentioned that there is a shortage of them earlier). So, a project that could have been very good to increase food security in this part of the world actually had the inverse effect; it depressed food production. What we always need is recognition of indigenous technical knowledge and indigenous local ways, sustainable ways that communities have adopted over time to live and to implement things. I wish this could always be focused on first, not an engineering solution that didn't fit.

Gareth: Thank you for these two examples, Rafael. I hope the importance of local people and communities as the experts is something that reviews about new global goals will take into account.

You have reminded me with these examples about the power of listening to the experts at the local level, by whom I mean the people who live in local areas. Whether it's people in the countryside or cities, locals are the experts. Professionals in certain disciplines can be advisors rather than the determinants of a way forward, and decision makers should listen to their local experts, not drive a top-down approach.

Meaningful engagement is one of the factors in our Disasters Avoided model, which we fervently believe in. Part of this factor is to make the effort to reach out and properly involve and engage with people. Don't just talk about it, make the effort to work with people at the local level because they are the experts in their area and then engage some professional advisors to help to come up with options. This gets back to the mindset of working with sustainable local ways of doing things. Maybe in time some of those ways they might be more automated and use new technology. However, a donkey pulling a better designed plough is a good use of smart technology. Smart is not just digital.

I think this resonates with the right investment factor in our model also. I think back to the point we discussed earlier where lots of global level reports talk about the need for better investment. As well as discussing billions of dollars at the global scale, we also need to see how to make local investment work at the local level. This could be emphasised through new frameworks and global goals.

Is there anything else that we can help to highlight for you?

***Raphael:** I was looking at your model and one of the factors it contains is good data. I appreciate how critical this is, and it's worth discussing along with the other factors we have talked about today. Looking at the situation in Africa and in other parts of the world, I wonder who the providers of data are that is being used by people, and whether they are being supported in the data gathering and management process. We need systems and infrastructure to help us gather good data, yet too often this infrastructure is not provided.*

I can tell you for example, Just like a number of governments in our area of operation, the governments of Tanzania and Kenya have in a number of occasions requested data from us about various aspects of donkeys. We are a small NGO, and we know there are a range of entities that depend on us, such as the Livestock Research Institute, universities for their research and government ministries in terms of agriculture and livestock. I'm involved in coordinating this data, and we try our best to make sure our data is as good as it can be, but it's not easy. There are so many aspects to the donkey that we need to explore further and I ask myself, if this good data, how can it be improved?

The data gap in this part of the world and perhaps other parts of the world also is huge. We know that good data can play a crucial role for decisions to help avoid disasters. People may not understand that when you come to a part of the world like Africa which has limited resources, the system of data gathering is one of the areas that gets least attention. I suspect that in a number of the developing economies where there are potential disasters, we have a big data gap.

What can we do about this? I completely agree with the need for good data, I just wonder how we can ensure it really is good, everywhere.

Gareth: Thank you for this perspective about the criticality of providing a support system to ensure good data exists to support discussions and decision-making, Raphael. As you say, we know we need good data, and how we achieve it links to our discussion about the right investment. Perhaps support for good data being captured locally can link into the thinking about the next iteration of the global goals.

Thank you very much for your time, Raphael.