



**Working
Animals
International**



Count every one

**Making working animals impossible
to overlook**

Executive summary

About us

Working Animals International, the new name for SPANA, is dedicated to transforming the welfare of working animals in greatest need globally.

By increasing access to services, skills, knowledge and resources – and advocating nationally and globally for policy change alongside our network of partners – we're building a world where working animals are healthy and valued, communities are stronger, and livelihoods are more secure.

Working Animals International is part of the International Coalition for Animal Welfare (ICFAW), the International Coalition of Working Equids (ICWE), and the World Federation for Animals.

Acknowledgments

Working Animals International would like to thank our many programme partners for their contributions to this policy briefing, and their tireless dedication to transforming the welfare of working animals.

Contact

advocacy@workinganimals.org

The full report can be found at
www.workinganimals.org

Overview



Working animals, such as horses, donkeys, mules, camels, and oxen, are the quiet driving force behind countless communities.

They are sentient beings and central to the survival and livelihoods of millions of people. Yet despite an estimated population of around 200 million working animals globally, many countries lack robust data about the size and distribution of their working animal population, their purpose, the value they contribute, and whether their health and welfare needs are being met.

This invisibility weakens the ability of governments to plan, monitor, regulate and invest in the systems that protect working animal health and welfare – and in turn, the welfare of the communities that rely upon them.

Working Animals International is calling on governments to take **one simple but powerful step: to explicitly include working animals in national censuses** so their role and vital socio-economic contributions are recognised, they are fully considered in policymaking and planning, and their welfare needs can no longer go unmet.

The importance of working animals

Working animals are an integral part of daily life for millions of people across the globe, supporting livelihoods, contributing to food security, enabling access to essential services, and building stronger, sustainable communities.

They provide valuable draught power, supporting smallholders to maintain production; they take crops and goods to market, materials to construction sites, and carry feed for other animals; and enable livelihoods across industries as diverse

as agriculture, construction, tourism, and rubbish collection. In many communities, where formal systems are lacking, working animals are the infrastructure, carrying water over long distances for households and daily use; providing essential transport to support access to health services; and bringing libraries on their backs to support children's education.



Without him, I can't earn money. My children wouldn't have food. He's my partner in work.

Cheikhny, donkey owner, Mauritania

Working animals further gender equality – by reducing household burdens, they support greater economic independence for many women and enable girls' access to education. And they also play a valuable role in the response to humanitarian emergencies and extreme weather events – transporting supplies, supporting survival and early recovery, and helping families rebuild their livelihoods.

The data gap: Barriers to effective planning



Although many countries do undertake national agricultural and livestock censuses, these can be infrequent, inconsistent across nations and rarely reflect the scale of national working animal populations.

Globally, national ministries report livestock data to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the UN. Although nearly half of all countries reported some official data to the FAO between 2020 and 2024, reporting was often confined to a single species. 81 of the 161 countries (50%) captured in the data reported no official livestock numbers and relied entirely on estimated values.

Nationally, animals are identified through broad livestock species classifications that can obscure an animal's purpose and role (i.e. identifying draught animals such as working oxen within numbers of cattle used for production). Many national censuses

also focus solely on production animals and lack essential household-level detail, perhaps because working animals are not recognised as having direct commercial value. Moreover, there is no single agreed definition or classification of working animal that is consistently used for data collection purposes across sectors or nations, leading to significant variation in the extent and quality of available data.

As a result, there is no robust picture of the number of working animals among national and global livestock populations, or the nature of the socio-economic contributions they make.

This is a critical gap for policymakers and planners, especially when they are considering the rural, remote and marginalised communities where working animals are most relied upon.

Making the case for counting working animals

Without good data, decision-makers can't see where working animals are making vital contributions towards the Sustainable Development Goals.

They can't see where donkeys reduce household burdens such as water collection to ensure girls can remain in school; where working horses contribute to poverty reduction by driving and sustaining incomes, or enabling access to essential health and education services; where working oxen play a role in sustainable food production; where working dogs protect wildlife; where mules deliver humanitarian aid; where camels may have a significant presence in a local area and require consideration in urban planning processes to avoid unnecessary injury.



I do not go to bed hungry because I have him. He is my livelihood. I live by him; I support my children by him. I have no other means of support - he is my entire life.

Abera, horse owner, Bishoftu, Ethiopia



Bringing visibility to working animals in national data systems is a first step towards many benefits.

-  Visibility enables governments to identify gaps in infrastructure, services, and systems, and recognise and plan for working animals' contribution to livelihoods, economies, and essential services.
-  Visibility supports governments to identify and address gaps in veterinary education, professional training and workforce capacity.
-  Visibility ensures communities have access to adequate veterinary services and welfare support, including during emergencies and public health crises.
-  Visibility drives greater policy and community awareness of the importance of good animal health and welfare in building and maintaining strong and sustainable communities.
-  Visibility supports governments in identifying and responding to the specific needs of women and girls, who in many communities depend significantly on working animals for their livelihoods and wellbeing.
-  Visibility strengthens disease surveillance and tracking, enabling early detection and control, and allowing us to identify where potential public health risks may emerge.
-  Visibility helps in implementing effective vaccination programmes and other preventative systems for animal health and enabling better planning for veterinary services to meet working animals' needs.
-  Visibility enables governments and local communities to embed greater effectiveness and responsiveness in national resilience and disaster risk reduction strategies, ensuring high-dependency areas can be identified, veterinary support allocated strategically, and animals essential to aid delivery protected from the outset – recognising working animals as an asset in survival and recovery.
-  Visibility helps governments and law enforcement to better understand and disrupt illegal activities and exploitation that impact working animals and their owners, such as the global trade in donkey skins.

Policy recommendations

By counting every working animal, we make them impossible to overlook.

Working Animals International is calling on governments to take one simple but powerful step: to explicitly include working animals in national censuses so their role and vital socio-economic contributions are recognised, they are fully considered in policymaking and planning, and their welfare needs can no longer go unmet.

Governments should:

- 1.** Include working animals as a distinct category of 'working livestock' within national agricultural and livestock census and data collection systems, under each recorded species.
- 2.** Undertake a count of working animals every five years, so that planning for services, infrastructure and livelihoods reflects the realities of the communities who rely on them.
- 3.** Collect and report data that can be disaggregated to identify every species of working animal and clearly document their purpose within the community.
- 4.** Consider the inclusion of working animals in wider population and public health surveys to capture essential household-level data, especially within rural and remote communities, recognising the integral role working animals play in facilitating access to essential services.
- 5.** Work with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN and the World Organisation for Animal Health to agree a shared definition and common data fields to make working animals visible within livestock data, for use in national and global systems.

