



Left: Atieno carrying a plastic jerrycan on her head
Below: Atieno supporting one of her donkeys loaded with multiple jerrycans



Rusinga Island

WHERE DONKEYS ARE MAKING A DIFFERENCE

There is a captivating story of empowerment and change unfolding on Rusinga Island. Donkeys are emerging as the unlikely heroes in the lives of the local farmer women. Once lauded as agents of development in ancient civilisations, the robust animals are today invaluable to Rusinga's women as they help them pursue sustainable farming livelihoods.

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Lush green landscapes sprawl as far as one can see, water-filled trenches feeding into the gardens of several homesteads. A common sight here, these kitchen gardens are changing livelihoods on the island.

Located in western Kenya, Rusinga is one of the many islands on Lake Victoria. Its strategic location makes it, by default, a fishing community and the island's economic backbone. Food sources here have always been dependent on the lake's activities. However, this scenario is changing – and fast. Today, communities on the island turn to agriculture for sustenance. Flourishing kitchen gardens are proof of this change as are the resilient donkeys that are making agriculture less of a burden for women.

32-year-old Lensa Atieno is a perfect illustration of how women on the island embrace this change. The *Vice Versa Global* team meets her as she steers one of her two donkeys to the lake to fetch water. She is one of the women who depend on the animals to ferry water for household and farm use. Donkeys are now part and parcel of their lives. 'I came to fetch water for my plants,' she says, lifting the jerrycans off the donkeys' backs and carrying them to the lake shore to be filled. Once this is done, she carefully loads them on the donkeys' backs to be ferried back to her garden.

Atieno has had the donkeys for three months now. It is an unfamiliar concept to her but one she appreciates. A widow and mother of six, she is her family's sole breadwinner and having the donkeys eases the burden. She used to work as a fish collector, a job she says was neither profitable nor sustainable. 'For a day's work, I earned US\$1.2 (about KShs. 210) which I used to feed my family and pay for their schooling. At one time I could not afford to send them to school.'

After receiving the donkeys, Atieno was trained in how to care for them and ensure they are fit and healthy to perform the laborious work. 'Donkeys are low maintenance. All they consume is grass and water. With them, I am assured of sufficient water,' she says with a smile. Having lost two children to sickle cell anaemia, which doctors said was aggravated by malnutrition, she took to farming to save her remaining children. 'Before I started farming, all we ate was fish. It was all I could afford. I never knew that lack of a nutritious diet could result in my children's death,' she says sadly. However, this has changed.

'I used to wake up at 5:00 a.m. and walk for two hours to and from the lake every day to fetch water. With the donkeys, this has changed' – Adhiambo

'I can now feed my children with food grown in my garden. I sell the surplus food, together with fish and water collected with the help of the donkeys, to supplement my income,' she says. 'The donkeys have made it easier to manage the farm even during long drought periods.' She also grows potatoes, kale, cassava, and rears poultry. Like Atieno, 61-year-old Carina Adhiambo also acknowledges the importance of small-scale farming for food security and the advantage of donkeys. She began by growing vegetables for family consumption in a 10 by 10-unit kitchen garden at the back of her semi-mud and concrete house.

She grows a variety of vegetables, including spinach, kale, onions, and cassava. She sells any surplus to neighbours, generating additional income. By engaging in small-scale agriculture, she ensures household food security and economic stability. The mother of seven moved to Rusinga Island more than 40 years ago after marriage. They sold charcoal with her husband to sustain their family.

'I have been a charcoal burner for the better part of my working life. We used to cut trees, burn wood, and sell charcoal,' she says. She is not proud of it, but it was their only livelihood source. A look around her compound reveals a small herd of goats and a flock of chickens roaming freely. There are also two donkeys, the strongest link in the setting. To others, they are simply animals, but to her, they are treasures.

'I used to wake up at 5:00 a.m. and walk for two hours to and from the lake every day to fetch water. With donkeys, this has changed,' she says. She now makes fewer trips and brings back more water. 'With the donkeys, I fetch more water for domestic use and irrigation purposes. I also sell water to my neighbours for five shillings (less than a dollar) for a 20-litre jerrycan. This provides me with an extra source of income,' she adds happily.

Adhiambo who started farming two years ago on her 10 by 10 kitchen garden unit, now has a 2-acre farm. She grows a variety of crops including potatoes, and fruit trees such as pawpaw and horseradish trees—commonly known as the Moringa tree. Weather changes remain a challenge with island weather patterns barely supporting rain-fed agriculture. This exposes them to long drought spells. The Donkey Project bridges this gap.

'The success of the donkey water project and the overall food security efforts demonstrate that Africa has the potential to feed itself' – Onger

'Sometimes, the drought period lasts for six months which affects our crops. This means more trips to the lake to get water for basic household needs and crops. It is now much easier with donkeys,' she says. Donkeys became a part of the lives of farming women after Victoria Friendly Montessori School realised there was a need to bridge the gap as far as water challenges were concerned.

'When we realised there was a water problem, we decided to start a water project. We took water from the lake uphill to a reserve tank and sent it to houses downhill using solar power,' Philip Onger, programme manager at Victoria Friendly Montessori School, explains. However, he adds, this system did not provide water to residents in hilly areas of the island as they were above the reservoir. To address this, they came up with the idea of giving donkeys to female small-scale farmers.

'Currently, a donkey costs US\$100, about KShs. 14,000. We encouraged the women who qualified to get a donkey to raise a quarter of this amount, and we financed the rest,' he says. The donkey project started a year ago. To date, sixteen donkeys have been handed out. 'We ensure sustainability by providing training to women on how to care for the donkeys. Each family receives a male and female donkey for breeding purposes so that more families can benefit from the programme,' he states.

He confirms that the objective is to establish continuous food cycles throughout the year on the island. 'This not only involves providing access to a variety of food crops but also promoting long-term crops and crop diversity. The introduction of nutritious African vegetables like spiderweed and pumpkins, as well as the horseradish tree, has been a notable achievement.'

'Changing the mindset about farming has been challenging, particularly among the younger generation. They often view agriculture as a menial and undesirable occupation. It is imperative to instil the right mindset in children and youth as they are the future custodians of food security,' he asserts. 'We are working towards achieving this by involving the young generation through the promotion of a positive view of farming. This will ensure a sustainable future for food production on the island. The success of the donkey water project and the overall food security efforts demonstrate that Africa has the potential to feed itself.'

He continues: 'By identifying and addressing local challenges, such as the lack of access to water and the need for sustainable agricultural practices, communities can find solutions that empower them to improve their food security. Local perspective and understanding of small-scale farmers' challenges have been instrumental in this initiative's success.'

Carina Adhiambo using a plastic bucket to irrigate vegetable crops in her back garden



Carina Adhiambo posing with one of her donkeys in front of her house



Set up to address the issue of out of school children on Rusinga Island in 2014, Victoria Friendly Montessori realised they could not solve the above without considering challenges of food and nutrition security.

'We set up Victoria Montessori Friendly upon realisation that parents were not keen on sending children to school. Soon after we realised most children came to school hungry and were unable to concentrate in class,' explains Onger.

He adds, 'We then introduced a feeding program at the school where children get two nutritious meals in a day – breakfast and lunch. But this did not solve the challenge at home as they were not getting a third meal.'

To counter this, Onger says the school engaged parents and found out what was needed to ensure children had a third meal at home. Together with the parents, they came up with food security activities that involved food production at home through kitchen gardens.

'The programme started by engaging families whose children attended the school but later on involved the community after realising food security problems affected not only families with children at the school but the community as a whole,' explains Onger.

'Women especially were bearing the burden, as the responsibility of taking care of the household and the children

falls entirely on them when their fishermen husbands leave on fishing trips. When children return home after school, they look up to their mothers to be fed,' he says.

Because fishermen are nomadic, they migrate to different islands depending on where the greatest catch of fish will be leaving the women behind as sole providers for the families.

'Most of the beneficiaries of our programs are women, and we believe that empowering the women will translate into empowering the community,' emphasises Onger.