Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

POLICY BRIEF


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Cattle ownership and households' welfare: Evidence from Southern Africa

This policy brief, based on economic analyses, identifies actionable opportunities for policymakers and stakeholders to drive sustainable livestock transformation in Southern Africa. These actions aim to enhance household well-being, with a particular focus on supporting female-headed households.

BACKGROUND

The prevalence of undernourishment in Africa has increased significantly over recent decades, with nearly one in five people experiencing hunger in 2022 (FAO, AUC, ECA and WFP, 2023). Within the continent, 94 percent of those affected live in the Southern African region, where food insecurity levels are significantly higher among women.

Cattle ownership is increasingly recognized as a vital tool for improving rural livelihoods. Owning even a single unit of cattle can significantly enhance household wealth in Southern African countries, in line with efforts to reduce poverty, eradicate hunger and promote gender equality. However, its potential remains underutilized, as it is rarely integrated into comprehensive strategies addressing multiple key aspects of well-being, such as income generation, food security, and nutrition.

KEY FINDINGS

- **Cattle ownership significantly increases household income**, with average annual gains of approximately **52 percent for female-headed households**, 31 percent for rural households, and 29 percent for smallholders. These differences underscore the need for targeted interventions for different socioeconomic groups.
- **The average impact of cattle ownership on household outcomes is positive and significant**, boosting income by 29 percent, total consumption (food and non-food expenditures) by 9 percent, and food consumption by 8 percent. Notably, the income effect is approximately three times higher than its impact on total expenditures and food consumption.
- **Cattle ownership has a greater effect on total household expenditures than on food consumption**, increasing total expenditures by approximately 18 percent for female-headed households and 8 percent for rural households and smallholders.
- **The rise in food consumption is relatively lower**, at around 14 percent for female-headed households, and 7 percent for both rural households and smallholders. A higher share of livestock income is allocated for non-food expenditures, such as housing, education, and overall well-being.

- **The effects of owning cattle vary significantly across countries**, highlighting the importance of localized approaches. For instance, Kenya reports the highest income increase (nearly 60 percent), while Malawi demonstrates the strongest impact on both food consumption and total consumption (about 12 percent and 30 percent respectively). These variations emphasize the need for targeted and country-specific policies to maximize the benefits of cattle ownership.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Given the significant positive impact of cattle ownership on household welfare, particularly for female-headed households, it is crucial to integrate cattle ownership-oriented strategies into broader poverty alleviation and food security initiatives. Key recommendations include:

- **Enhance access to cattle** through interventions such as microfinance programs, women-led cooperatives, government subsidies, and improved veterinary services. These measures can significantly boost income generation, particularly among female-headed households.
- **Empower women with control over cattle and related income assets** by addressing socio-cultural barriers to ownership and participation in household decision making.
- **Develop targeted interventions for women** that acknowledging their critical role in household income generation, food security, and nutrition.
- **Establish comprehensive monitoring and evaluation systems** to assess the effectiveness of cattle ownership programs with a focus on income generation, poverty reduction, and food security.
- **Collect and analyse gender-disaggregated data** to identify and address barriers faced by men and women. Incorporating this analysis into program design from the outset ensures gender-responsive strategies.

ABOUT THE STUDY

This study assesses the impact of cattle ownership on income, expenditures, and food consumption in rural households across Southern Africa, with a specific focus on female-headed households and other socioeconomic groups (Acosta, Nicolli, and Tirkaso, 2024). The findings provide evidence-based guidance for prioritizing policy programs and investment strategies within broader poverty alleviation and food security initiatives.

Acknowledgements

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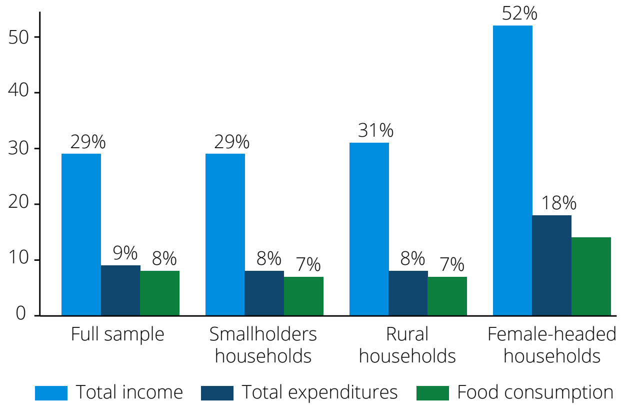
The method

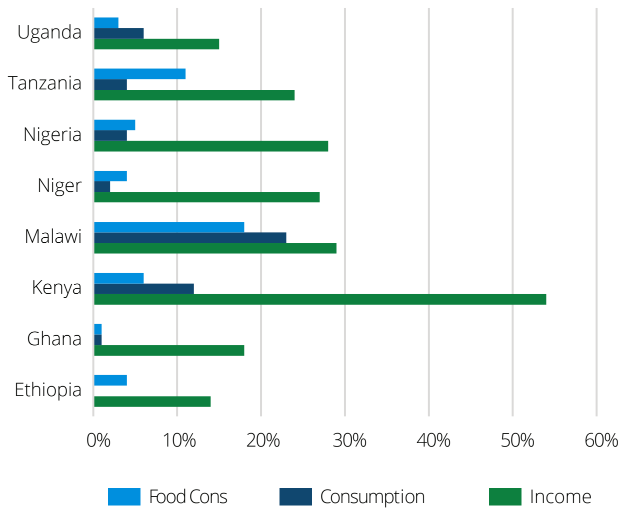
The study utilizes an econometric approach, combining a regional dataset that integrates socioeconomic characteristics of rural households with livestock indicators. This empirical framework is designed to capture the decision-making process behind adopting cattle ownership and to test its impact on household welfare. By matching households with similar characteristics, this method aims to provide robust and reliable results on the effects of cattle ownership on income, expenditures, and food consumption.

Figure 1. Welfare effects of cattle ownership on income, total consumption, and food consumption in Southern Africa.



Source: Acosta, A., Nicolli, F., & Tirkaso, W. (2024). Cattle ownership and households' welfare: Evidence from Southern Africa. *Global Food Security*, 42, 100772. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gfs.2024.100772.

Figure 2. Welfare effects of cattle ownership on income, total consumption, and food consumption in selected Southern African countries.



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