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From school farms to household gardens

Supporting Maasai Women in climate-smart farming

Project Brief

Summary

This project explores how gender-sensitive, climate-smart school farming initiatives can help address food insecurity while navigating deeply rooted social norms in pastoral communities of Kenya. Working in Kajiado County, the initiative builds on school-based learning centres to extend regenerative farming practices into households, with a deliberate focus on empowering Maasai women farmers. By engaging local leaders, schools, and communities of practice, the project seeks to generate evidence for more inclusive food systems that improve nutrition, strengthen livelihoods, and support gradual shifts toward women's empowerment.



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Context

Maasai women in the Kajiado county of Kenya are faced with multiple intersecting challenges that hinder their ability to take part in smallholder farming in the region. First, human activity on land use—such as over grazing, charcoal burning, land degradation, sand mining and land leasing to camel herders from Northern Kenya—has negatively impacted rangeland productivity, water availability, and food security. Next, the coexistence of humans, herbivores (zebras, antelopes, warthogs, giraffes, buffaloes, elephants and monkeys), and carnivores (lions, leopards, hyenas) on lands next to Amboseli National Park have resulted in human-wildlife conflict over livestock pastures and water. Last, The Maasai community, commonly referred to as “Maa”, are a highly patriarchal society with strict adherence to traditional norms and culture—relegating women to mainly reproductive roles. Given the complexity of these issues, there is a need to better understand the role of men and women in the Maa community in rural areas to inform intervention design and policymaking.

“Girls in this community who are not in school are married off by their parents at an early age. I am a trained teacher but when I am at home, all major decisions are made by my husband. Joint ownership of property, such as land and livestock, is unheard of. There is no gender equality. I think men are using culture as pretext to deny women fundamental rights. Sometimes the administrative and justice system at the grassroots level is biased towards women grievances. Oh, I forgot to mention one other issue: control over my income. My husband regards my earnings as “our” income.”

Local Teacher, female

“I consider my wife as one of my children. I regard her as my first born. When I married her at 14 years, I gave her two cows so that she can produce milk for household use and sell some to traveling traders for incidentals. She looks after goats and sheep and is also allowed to grow some crops. Ownership, control, and decision making on all assets is my prerogative. In the Maa community, women make decisions on small livestock such as chicken, income from milk and vegetables. Sometime we consult before making decisions on important family issues, but, as a man, I have the final say.”

Local Chief, male
Speaking through interpreter



Women farmers herding small stock. Credit: Dr. Simon Omondi

Project overview

The aim of this project is to generate evidence for food systems transformation through school meals programmes (SMPs) through the establishment of climate-smart learning centres on school farms in two pastoral regions of Kenya. During phase one, the objective was to establish pilot learning centres in selected schools to support the supplementation of school menus with locally grown vegetables, fruits, and Nyota beans. After successfully establishing the learning centres, Communities of Policy and Practice (CoPPs)—comprising of teachers, pupils, extension staff, farmers, and local NGOs—have taken over the management of the centres. The centres are currently experimenting with farming and knowledge sharing on climate-smart farming practices, including regenerative agriculture (RA).

In this next phase, the objective is to replicate the skills and knowledge obtained at learning centres at the community level. This phase will take a gender sensitive approach by working specifically with the women farmers who participated in learning centre trainings.

Intervention

Based on insights from selected key informants involved in each learning centre, the CoPP co-developed a strategy on how to navigate the delicate subject of gender empowerment in the community.

To do this, members of the CoPP held consultative meetings with local leaders to explain the project and establish a local partnership. In these meetings, CoPP members explained that food insecurity does not favour men over women. In this landscape, school children walk for 15km daily—traversing hills, bushes, dry river beds, and gulleys—in the quest for education because of the availability of meals at school. Enabling women's access to iron- rich beans and vegetables,

provides women an opportunity to control household food supplies and contribute to household diets. This type of action encourages women's empowerment in the community and the household, while also benefiting men and children's health.

Local leaders reacted positively to discussions and subsequently organised meetings to spread awareness about the project. Some meetings were men only, while others were women only, and a few were combined.

With this positive local support, CoPP members were able to distribute seeds that are being used in the pilot learning centres—such as vegetables, fruits, and Nyota beans—to women farmers who were involved in phase one of the project.

Impact

At this stage, learning centre and household gardens are being monitored. The following preliminary results include:

- More than 30 Maasai women from two villages, now known as “RA villages” are growing beans and vegetables for healthy nutritious diets. The farmers plan to sell surplus to schools and markets.
- The project received acceptance in the community.
- Attitudinal change towards women's empowerment in Maasai community is gradually evolving.

Next steps

The next steps for the project include conducting a systematic gender study, assessing the extent of achievement of commonly agreed indicators, and organising a field day or food festival to celebrate women's household farms.

Acknowledgement

We are grateful to all the key informants who participated in our interviews. Special thanks to Leaders from the Maa community in Bissil and Namanga sites for organising consultative meetings. The project is indebted to Kajiado Community of Policy and Practice members (schools, teachers, students, extension staff, NGOs and local community) for facilitating field activities.

About this project brief

This project brief is part of a series aiming to convey the results and progress of the Food Systems Transformation Through School Feeding Project, funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and the Rockefeller Foundation under the Catalyzing Change for Healthy and Sustainable Food Systems (CCHeFS) initiative.

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Document designed by Savannah Dysard.

Images by Dr. Simon Omondi.

Suggested citation: Omondi, S., Kamau, E., Dysard, S., & Singh, S. (2026). From school farms to household gardens: Supporting Maasai Women in climate-smart farming. London, United Kingdom.

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Opinions stated in this brief are those of authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the CCHeFS program funders.