

# INDIGENOUS NEGOTIATIONS CASE STUDY

## Indigenous Women's Participation in Conservation, Tanzania

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### 1. The Negotiation Challenge

Women have an important role to play in the conversation of natural spaces all around the world, due to their unique perspective on and relationship with the environment. However, women's voices are not always given serious consideration in some communities, and specifically those with traditionally male-dominated governance structures. In Maasai communities, women are viewed like children, or like people who cannot be involved in decisions or anything of importance to the community. This has led to the sidelining of women when it comes to conservation activities, even though women traditionally pass down important knowledge to children on the need to conserve nature and maintain the balance between flora and fauna.

This exclusion of women from conservation is a serious shortcoming that has not helped Maasai communities, and that is not beneficial as the world looks for solutions to the challenges of climate change and conservation. There are dire needs to capture the traditional and the unique knowledge of women, in order to compliment modern knowledge and in hope of overcoming disasters brought about by climate change and imbalances in biodiversity.

In the Maasai communities of northern Tanzania, Martha and the women of her own and the neighboring communities saw a need to have a piece of land allocated solely for women's use and management, so that women can actively participate in conservation. The intention for this land is for it to be women owned and conserved. On the land, the women will grow trees, let the rejuvenation from overgrazing take place, and rehabilitate the soil for the cultivation of traditional medicinal plants. The women's ownership and management of this plot of land can also hold great cultural value, as it will be an area where women pass down traditional knowledge in practice. It will also help the women have access to nearby grass, reducing the workload they have to go out and collect grass for sick and weak cattle.



*Figure 1: Maasai women from Martha's community and nearby communities are negotiating for their own plot of land to manage and conserve.*

## **2. Context**

### **People and Communities**

This negotiation for a plot of land solely owned and managed by women is taking place in three villages in Longido District, Arusha province, which is located in the northern part of Tanzania adjacent to the Kenyan border. The villages involved are Oltepesi, Kimokouwa and Eorendeke villages. These three villages are all populated by the Maasai people, a nomadic indigenous people settled throughout east Africa. Roughly 155,000 people reside in Eorendeke, 150,000 in Kimokouwa and 140,000 people in Oltepesi. Few community members have received a formal education.

Like the Maasai across east Africa, the Maasai of these communities are nomadic pastoralists, meaning they move from one area to another with their livestock in search of pasture and water. Maasai livelihoods, both economic and cultural, are almost entirely dependent on the keeping of cattle. For a Maasai man, his wealth is measured in the number of cattle he owns. Cultural ceremonies which are much valued cannot be separated from the livestock. For example, if a man is to be declared an elder in his community, there is a ceremony that is conducted and regardless of how far his cattle have roamed, all the cattle must be gathered and brought home before any part of the ceremony is conducted. Maasai people hold cattle and their role in the Maasai economic and cultural beliefs dear and sacred.

Because the vitality of a cattle herd is directly dependent on environmental conditions, and both the Maasai and the cattle they rely on are especially prone to hardships as a result of climate change. For the past 10 years in Martha's area, the Maasai communities have experienced prolonged droughts due to climate change, and as a result people have lost their livestock in thousands. The encroachment of other tribes to the Maasai territories is another threat to the culture and livelihoods of these Maasai communities, as grazing lands are turned into residential areas to accommodate new people moving in.

Women do not hold a strong position in the Maasai community. Women are not taken seriously and can be considered a child amongst her own children. As an example, a boy child who has reached an age of circumcision is considered an important member of the community with inherent rights in decision making and ownership, yet the woman who gave birth to that boy is still viewed as a child and less important than own son. It is important to develop an understanding the cultural insignificance of a woman in the Maasai community to appreciate the importance of the work we are doing to promote and advocate for full and effective participation of woman in conservation.

### **Governance and Decision-Making**

A Maasai community is structured somewhat like a government within a government. Maasai peoples have their own decision making structures – different Maasai clans make up a tribe, and within each clan there are leaders who then meet with the rest of the leaders from other clans to make important decisions for the whole community. This hierarchy is respected, and the community elders make the final decision. Women are not in any of the leadership positions traditionally.

Although Maasai have their own traditional governance system, the state also has a mandate to enact its laws on Maasai peoples, as citizens of the country. There are also things that both governance systems do in partnership. For example, if there is something the formal, political government wants done, then the traditional governance system is used to mobilize and organize people to accomplish it – this can include things like vaccinations for children, voting and so on.

## Legal Framework

The Tanzanian Constitution requires the involvement of women in all development projects and leadership positions. This position contradicts the traditional ways of governance, but since the Maasai are subject to the Tanzanian political governance system as citizens, the government works to ensure women participate in decision making and hold positions of power as a matter of upholding this mandate in the constitution. When it comes to negotiating for a plot of land for women to manage, Martha and the women of the involved communities are using this constitutional provision to bring on the support of other government bodies.

### 3. [Key Actors in the Negotiation](#)

The key actors in this case study include:

- Community women: The women who are negotiating for their own plot of land to manage are from ten different women's groups representing three different villages: Oltepesi, Kimokouwa and Eorendeke.
- Pastoralist Information and Development Organization (PIDO): PIDO is a grassroots organization founded and led by women which aspires to promote human rights, and specifically the rights of women and girls in areas of health, education, livelihoods and environmental conservation. PIDO is registered to work at the national level in Tanzania, but it is currently focusing chiefly on supporting women in the Longido District, including supporting these women as they negotiate for their own plot of land to manage.
- Community members: Other members of the three villages these women come from will influence the final decision of the elders council on whether or not the women will be granted a piece of land of their own. Some members are supportive of the women's request, while others do not support it because they don't think the women will manage the land well.
- District Council: The Longido District Council seeks to change some of the traditional cultural practices that oppress or exclude women. They allies to the women of the community in their negotiation over the plot of land.

### 4. [The Negotiation Process](#)

The women initially developed the idea of a plot of land they could own and manager on their own after attending a training on climate change several years ago, where they were reminded of the important contributions that women's work and knowledge makes for combatting climate change. They were interested in having an area in every village that they could be in charge of conserving.

The women of these communities came up with the idea to use their own plot to grow grass for the weak cattle who couldn't go out to graze with the rest of the herd. The weak cattle survive even during drought because the women take care of them very well as part of their domestic chores.

Initially, the women thought they should go to the government and demand a plot for their project, but after more consideration, realized their work wouldn't have the buy-in from the men, and men wouldn't appreciate the importance of the project. So instead, the women made the decision to start internally with the community, talking to elders and the men to negotiate for a piece of land instead. The women are interested in moving this project forward, but they want to do it in a traditionally acceptable way. In this effort to negotiate for a plot of land, the women of these communities are being supported by PIDO (Pastoralist Information and Development Organization).

The women developed three objectives for their negotiation over the plot:

- Develop acceptance and appreciation in the community of the need to let women actively take part in conservation
- Establish a women-led conservation area over which women have sole decision making power
- Change the mindset of the community on the capabilities of women

With these objectives in mind, the women have developed several strategies to be successful in their negotiation:

- Begin advocacy at the community level: it has been agreed that five total meetings will take place for this negotiation – two of these meetings will take place with community elders who are supportive of the women’s request, to determine how those elders can help to influence others in the community. The other three meetings will consist of representatives from the women’s groups interested in working on the plot of land.
- Make use of the elders who support women’s participation: Within these communities, it can’t be denied that times are changing. Some of the traditional elders have come to realize that women’s equity is important, and this has made them rethink their position and support the women’s claim to their own plot of land. They are willing to publicly tell other men, “if we knew so much and the women knew so little, why are we being defeated every drought?” These elders recognize that they are taking strong cattle out onto the land to graze, leaving the weakest behind for women to take care of. Yet, when the rains return, the strong cattle out grazing are the ones that perish, and the weak ones the women have been caring for are the ones that survive. The elders recognize that this is enough evidence that women know the trick, and just as they care for small children, they care for the livestock and they can be entrusted with anything, including a plot of land that will be taken care of as well.
- Involve the local government authorities: The local government, like the District Council, seeks to change some of the cultural practices that exclude or oppress women. The women can potentially turn to them to advocate for their claim to a plot of land.

The women have outlined a sophisticated strategy that involves approaching their allies to illustrate that granting them their own plot of land actually helps their allies solve their problems. To the elders, they show how the area will be conserved, making it easy to get grass for the weak cattle and increase the number of livestock that will survive the drought. The women show the local government how the success of the project in these villages can be used as a demonstration project for women’s-led conservation that can be duplicated in other villages. The district could even receive recognition from the Vice President’s Office which is responsible for environmental conservation. These strategies are proving helpful because it makes it look like the women are coming up with their own solutions to a problem, and that giving them a plot of land is just a smart partnership.

## **5. Current Situation On the Ground**

This negotiation process started in 2018 and is ongoing. Local elections were held in 2019, and the women are working with the newly elected village chairpersons to reexplain and generate support for their idea.

The women expect to have a very fruitful set of meetings with the elders and other members of the community. They expect that the elders will agree to set aside a pilot area where women can practice conservation and seed grass to feed the weaker cattle. If their plot of land is approved, the women will start by setting the perimeter of the area with a natural fence. They will then gather and spread the seeds

from the indigenous grasses collected. After all this, the area is left to rejuvenate while monitoring the progress and making sure that there are no trespassers.

## **6. Broader Implications**

Women have important perspectives and knowledge to contribute to the conversations around climate change and biodiversity conservation, and indigenous women no less so than others. Yet, women's contributions have historically been overlooked when seeking solutions to these grand challenges. Especially in Maasai and other traditional societies, where women can be viewed as lacking anything substantive to offer to climate or biodiversity solutions, it is important that women take hold of opportunities to demonstrate that they can also make an impact.

In Martha's community in northern Tanzania, women are negotiating ownership and management of a piece of land that would be solely their own. No other plot of land within the community is solely managed by women, so this is a novel undertaking for them. The women plan to use the plot of land to show their conservation prowess, restoring the land that has been degraded by overgrazing. In turn, this will have important benefits for the livestock of the community and may be beneficial to the local government leadership, who strive to promote women's equality in traditional societies. This exclusion of women from conservation is a serious shortcoming that has not helped Maasai communities, and that is not beneficial as the world looks for solutions to the challenges of climate change and conservation. The women of Martha's community are negotiating to hopefully address this issue.