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Farm Radio Weekly

Tanzania: Maasai women gain access to land (by John Cheburet, for Farm Radio Weekly, in Kenya)

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Mary Komeiyan would like to grow food for her children. But she has no land. She lives in a village where crops come second in importance to livestock. Cows feed on the small plot of maize near her house. She cannot take action because the animals belong to her husband. Her situation is typical of Maasai women in Tanzania. They have little or no say on how land is used.

But one local initiative is helping women to secure their land rights. The Maasai Women Development Association, or MWEDO, has succeeded in making customary practices less rigid. Over the last decade, MWEDO has enabled 850 women from two districts to acquire land. They have achieved this through lobbying for their rights under Tanzania's Village Land Act of 1999. The Act provides for equal access and ownership of land between men and women.

Scolastika Porokwa is a social worker with MWEDO. She says, "The position of Maasai women towards access to and ownership of land is very limited. This is due to the Maasai culture, the communal land ownership system and patriarchal leadership."

Maasai land belongs to the community. It is controlled by men and used to graze livestock. Women are the caretakers of homesteads. They have little access to land to produce food for children. This has worsened poverty among women, which increases inequality. In addition, few women know about Tanzania's land policies and processes.

MWEDO mobilized women to form leadership forums, known locally as *baraza*. During these gatherings, both men and women were made aware of Tanzania's land laws. The women worked with government authorities and traditional leaders to develop customary land use plans for each village. Through these plans, land surveying and demarcation were carried out, using traditional knowledge. This was all done in collaboration with village governments.

The next step is for women to apply to their villages to secure individual or group ownership of land. The number of women who have been able to access land for agriculture, grazing and settlement has increased. More women now request information, and more women are assuming local leadership positions.

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Ms. Porokwa reflects that, "Long-term collaboration with local governments is necessary for effective results." She also believes that increasing the number of women in decision-making bodies is key to increasing their bargaining power. This will have a positive effect on access to other rights, such as education and health.

For Ms. Porokwa, "This success is not enough. We make sure that good practices are shared with new groups." This sharing will ensure that the successes and lessons learned are carried to other parts of Maasailand and the rest of East Africa.

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