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Will the newborn heir grow to change Maikona?

By Anthony Nyandiek, Communications Manager, USAID Nawiri

USAID Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) is funding a 5-year Development Food Security Activity (DFSA) project known as Nawiri, led by Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and being implemented in the arid and semi-arid land (ASAL) counties of Isiolo and Marsabit in Kenya. The project's goal is to sustainably reduce levels of persistent acute malnutrition among vulnerable populations in Isiolo and Marsabit Counties.



Photo: Anthony Nyandiek, USAID Nawiri

Doko Elema and daughter outside her manyatta

As one travels to Marsabit County, Kenya's second-largest county boasts diverse natural features, a sharp contrast in climate and terrain, the people, their culture, and everything in between is a sight to behold. You will love the scenery of the vast drylands, hills, and camels in vast numbers grazing towards the west. During the trip, you can't help noticing that the county shares four main ecological zones –forest, woodland, bushland and dwarf scrubland making it one of the most beautiful sceneries in Kenya. Marsabit County is also one of the most diverse counties in Kenya; It has 14 indigenous communities, the three big ones are Borana, Gabra, and the Rendille. Among the conspicuous threats to the people's livelihoods is the decline in crop production, increasing livestock deaths due to

droughts, persistent malnutrition, and migration. The Garbra pastoral community in Maikona Ward is one such greatly affected.

It's 4.30 pm when I arrive at a Doko Elema Duba's homestead, a 43-year-old mother of seven children. Doko just gave birth to her seventh child. I convey my congratulatory message, she welcomes me, passes me an old stool and without hesitating hands me a delightful cup of tea which I gladly accept as it's considered disrespectful to decline the host's food.

She quickly retreats to her *manyatta* (traditional house) to tend to her newborn, the only boy in the family, the family's heir. As I glance around, I see a newly built *manyatta* considerably smaller than the main *manyatta* which



Mzee Edema and his plus neighborhood children outside the main manyatta. On the roof is a stool symbolizing the birth of a baby boy

she later tells me has been built for her husband to relax away from the scorching sun. Elema's eldest child Adama, 19 years, is followed by 6 other children of whom the newborn is the seventh. Out of these, some looked malnourished, with their eyes bulging and weak under the scorching Maikona sun.

Her baby boy was born at home, yet the nearby Boji health dispensary is only a few kilometres away. When asked why she gave birth at home, Elema replies: "Boji health dispensary does not have a maternity room, so I had to travel to Maikona, 20 kilometers away for clinics. I missed many of these appointments due to the long-distance town. That's why I decided to give birth at home "

The community faces many challenges that contribute to poor health-seeking and self-care behaviors, as well as some weak nutrition-related practices by caregivers for their children. This is the same environment that the heir will also grow up in. It is a tough task, to prosper and grow up as a successful heir in such conditions. His mother, a member of the Gabra community, is excited and worried at the same time, wondering how she can support her boy to hold the family name in the future and requesting support. I ask if she has heard about exclusive breastfeeding,

According to the Gabra tradition, she is not supposed to come out of her *manyatta*, let alone be seen by other people whose eyes could be

evil. So - she comfortably wears her traditional mascara/ make-up, a paste of charcoal and milk for 40 days after childbirth.

The *manyatta* is marked with a stool at the door entrance to indicate the presence of a newborn baby and specifically of a boy. During the first 40 days, Elema is not allowed to feed on any maize meal – this is one of the rarest occasions where the family slaughters a goat or sheep for her meals during the 40 days. After 60 days she can eat any kind of meal, but without consuming any raw milk. Elema's family eats twice in a day if lucky, breakfast made of only tea (barely enough to call it breakfast) and one maize meal in the evening.

The father of the newborn child is now around, having traveled back from *fora* (traveling in search of pasture for animals, usually for an extended period) because in his household another heir has been born. A boy is a symbol of wealth and pride in the family and even the

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mother is elated. Before migrating with the herd, he had left in the homestead several animals to be milked to take care of the family and is back to ensure that the family can slaughter a goat for the newborn boy (this would not have happened if it was a girl).

Girls and women have their typical roles in this community, with little say in most decision-making in these households and communities. These and other challenges are what the new heir will need to grow up and challenge to change since he has 6 other siblings who are female, who will take care of him until he cannot just walk but be able to stand for himself in his teen years.

USAID Nawiri has prioritized supporting social and behavior change initiatives including more equitable decision making between couples, more equal resource allocation and use in these communities, to catalyze and sustain gains in the reduction of acute malnutrition. Otherwise, the resources typically available are not

“I have heard about it, but we still give livestock milk little by little. Some Community Health volunteers always come here but as I am not allowed to go out, so they just speak with the other women”

“Immediately the baby was born the baby was given livestock milk - We then shaved the baby after seven days, after which we increased the quantities of milk (animal) day by day”

adequate and generally, only the male head of the household can determine their use, even if he is far away.

Community discussions are being supported to help empower women and young caregivers in these communities. The newborn will grow up seeing his mother Elema doing her best, given her circumstances, to cater for him and his siblings, as well as to create time to go to the market for some fruits and vegetables (if available and affordable) which she probably knows and is learning are nutritious for her children. This she has heard recently from the community healthcare worker who visited her while she was pregnant. She often

sends her older daughter in search of such nutritious commodities; she is uncertain that her daughter will get them and it's Thursday and the vehicle of fresh produce came last Friday when she did not have the time or money to purchase any. Maybe nearby *dukas* (small shops) will still have some dried remnants that she can purchase. When the vehicle came, she was in labor and all that mattered was the safe delivery of her heir. She leaves the little one in the hands of her loving sister, who has come to help the mother. How can this heir help, when even the schools are quite a distance away? Will he be a pastoralist like his father, go away for so long and only come back for a few



Photo: Anthony Nyandiek, USAID Nawiri

First-born daughter carrying a jerrycan of water, who also has a young child who came to help, who is faced with similar resource-constrained challenges



Medina (center), USAID Nawiri community mobilizer and a nurse, in conversation with the heads of households

days in a year, will he empower his mother Elema? What might change?

The lack of resources in such communities is another reason that traders do not supply fresh produce frequently in these hard-to-reach areas, they may end up making losses due to the nature of perishable goods, or the cost of transport for fewer commodities or multiple trips to these areas. Will the heir be able to discuss potential options like selling animals, to enable his household to be able to cook meals that will help reduce the family's chances of malnutrition?

Maybe he will grow up to become a community champion, a teacher, or even a doctor if he has more life options in the future.

USAID Nawiri is working with community members and traders within specific value chains to create more demand in the community about the value of such nutrient-rich foods to the community, as well as to explore ways of helping mitigate related transport, packaging, and marketing challenges, to help fresh produce reach local communities in time. Perhaps the new baby will join such initiatives and become a leader?

USAID Nawiri has assisted by reaching out to the nearest facility provider, who visited the household and had a discussion with both parents on their involvement in monitoring their health. Medina the Nawiri Community mobilizer and a nurse had a friend-

ly discussion with the head of the household and visiting male friends, on how the men can support their wives and children to be healthier and bring more pride to households.

The heir will also join this group of men visiting each other in the community and discuss "old men" issues, can this become a space to create positive change? Time will tell and change will happen with the support of all of us. For today the slaughtering is happening, the fire is starting, we will all be here to enjoy the party, for an heir has been born, let's also play our part to ensure that he is there to see positive change in the direction of strong and not malnourished children.



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