



## Feed the Future Country Fact Sheet

Online Version: <https://feedthefuture.gov/article/maasai-women-find-balance-between-tradition-and-good-nutrition>

# Maasai Women Find a Balance Between Tradition and Good Nutrition



Derick Fernandes, MBNP Manyara

Salome Rumas with her 4-month old baby, George. Rumas received support from a birth attendant educated by Nditolai Longoni on healthier nutrition behaviors, such as exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months, which Rumas is practicing with George.

Nditolai Longoni is a traditional birth attendant in northern Tanzania and a member of the Maasai tribe, a semi-nomadic people whose way of life has remained largely unchanged for centuries. To visit a Maasai village, like the one in Manyara region where Longoni lives, is to step back into a fascinating and ancient way of life. The Maasai are cattle herders, and animals are literally the lifeblood of the community. The tribe measures its wealth in cows, goats and sheep, and its diet consists almost exclusively of raw meat, raw milk and fresh animal blood.

Yet while the Maasai people and their culture are among Tanzania's national treasures, some of their deeply ingrained beliefs—rooted in folk wisdom and ancient customs—can have negative consequences for mothers and babies. For example, it is customary among the Maasai (who generally live in isolated rural areas with limited access to medical services) to restrict the amount of food pregnant women eat in order to control the baby's weight, a practice that is intended to promote a safe and uncomplicated delivery but leads many infants to start their lives undernourished. It's also not unusual for mothers to feed their infants milk mixed with animal blood, or to participate in hard physical labor during pregnancy.

But the Maasai in Longoni's village are beginning to adopt healthier nutrition practices for children and pregnant women with the help of *Mwanzo Bora* (A Good Start), a nutrition program funded by USAID through Feed the Future. In partnership with a local civil society organization, the program works with Maasai birth attendants like Longoni to increase the awareness and practice of behaviors that promote good nutrition among women and children.

Within Maasai culture, traditional birth attendants provide support to pregnant and lactating women who live in isolated areas. Their role makes them highly respected leaders in their communities and valuable catalysts for change. After attending sessions offered by *Mwanzo Bora* in her village, Longoni began to expand her knowledge about nutrition and

reevaluate some of the practices she had grown used to.

"Since I started attending these sessions, I realized some of our practices are wrong," Longoni said. "We need to change. Those were just old traditions."

She now encourages women to visit clinics during pregnancy; consider delivering at a clinic or hospital where complications can be addressed more quickly; eat a diversified and nutritious diet; grow small home gardens; and breastfeed exclusively for the first six months of their infants' lives in lieu of the traditional practice of feeding them fresh animal blood mixed with milk.

The story doesn't stop with Longoni. She also shares what she's learned with 16 other Maasai birth attendants who have agreed to promote these new approaches to nutrition among the women they serve. The Feed the Future program also helped Longoni's village establish a garden to provide fresh vegetables for the mothers in the tribe. Good nutrition continues to grow.

*Mwanzo Bora seeks to reduce maternal anemia and childhood stunting by 20 percent in six regions across Tanzania by providing education on pro-nutrition behaviors. In its fifth year, the program has reached over one million children with essential nutrition services and its social behavior change communication kit has been formally adopted by the Government of Tanzania to scale up national gains in improved nutrition. Earlier this month, the Tanzanian government released the 2015-2016 Demographic and Health Survey (DHS), which demonstrates a significant reduction of childhood stunting in three Mwanzo Bora regions, including Manyara, where this story takes place. Compared to 2010 when the last DHS was released, stunting prevalence in Manyara fell from 46 to 36 percent; it also fell from 44 to 33.4 percent in Morogoro and from 56 to 36.5 percent Dodoma regions respectively.*