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Flying for Life

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A courageous schoolgirl

10 Kenya
Loaning livestock



'We want more life than death'



A swirling sea of colour; arms covered with Rendille beads and waists hanging with Borana gourds dance around each other in joyful motion. Hands clapping a vibrant rhythm, voices raised in harmony, switching between languages but the meaning always the same: 'God, bless Your children with peace. Bless Borana, bless Rendille, cover them with Your peace.'

This is a peace meeting, bringing together two tribes who have been trapped in conflict for decades. Women who once held each other in contempt now hold one another's hands, but the journey that brought them here hasn't been smooth.

Violent cattle raids

The village of Leyai, south-east of Marsabit in northern Kenya, was once home to both Borana and Rendille people. Living as neighbours, they cultivated and herded there side by side. But escalating disputes, and increasingly violent cattle raids claiming more than 250 lives, caused such division that eventually almost all the villagers left and segregated themselves into separate tribal enclaves. Houses crumbled into disrepair and crops were overrun with weeds.

Over the years, various attempts have been made to re-establish peace, but with little

success. Among several seemingly insurmountable obstacles was the fact that Marsabit is over 310 miles from Nairobi, where most humanitarian agencies are based. Long journeys on terrible roads eat up precious time and take a huge toll on vehicles.

But an innovative approach by development agency Sauti Moja Marsabit ('one voice' in the Swahili tongue) has sparked change and brought new hope to this fractured society. And being able to use MAF planes has made the delicate process of reconciliation more efficient, and less expensive for the agency.





A unique peace project is thriving in Marsabit, and MAF's role in the process is increasingly crucial to its success

Story **Katie Machell** Photos **LuAnne Cadd** and **Katie Machell**

Livestock loans

With a strong focus on vulnerable and marginalised women, Sauti Moja was already running Community Livestock Banks (CLBs). A 'loan' of one donkey and four goats is given to an impoverished woman, and then repaid by giving away the first female offspring of the animals to another woman in the community.

Sauti Moja had often been approached about undertaking peace work in the area. 'But everybody was doing peace work out here and I thought, what can we possibly do that's meaningful, that's different?' recalls Tim Wright, the organisation's founder.

The idea came to use livestock loans as a catalyst for peace. Instead of giving an animal to a widow from their own tribe, the ten Borana and ten Rendille women chosen to participate would pass on the animals to women from the other tribe.

These women, who considered each other responsible for their own widowhood and destitution, would have to share their most valued and precious resources with each other. The emotional challenge was immense.

If Sauti Moja's 'peace' CLB succeeded, it would send a powerful message of reconciliation to the warring communities, and hopefully pave the way towards lasting peace.

Making choices

Memories of stability, friendship and life in harmony were distant and faded by the time the project began. Already a whole generation of Borana and Rendille had grown up knowing only hatred and bloodshed. 'During that time when there was no peace, people could not go to get firewood or take the livestock to water,' explains Sube, a Borana widow, 'It was not safe.'

Against this backdrop, the team realised that while they could manage logistics, facilitate meetings and encourage interaction between the women, the true work of change was an internal process. Each woman would have to choose to set aside her history and actively work for peace.

This wasn't always easy for the project participants. Gumatho, a Rendille woman who lost her son in an ambush, describes how she felt when she first came face-to-face with those she had long considered her enemies. 'The first time I met with them, everything came back to me,' she remembers, 'and I couldn't tolerate it for a long time'.

Better than conflict

However, determined to overcome these difficulties and encouraged by others in the group, Gumatho became convinced that, ultimately, peace is better than conflict. ✈️



Main Rendille and Borana women walking home together

Far left Katie Machell

Left A 'peace' loan of one goat

Above Project founders Tim and Lyn Wright



With the same resolution and fortitude that is common to all these women, she committed to leaving the past behind and working towards a better future.

The first peace CLB not only succeeded, but far exceeded the hopes of the Sauti Moja staff. Purposefully focusing on similarities rather than differences, the women truly embraced the project, and began to develop and enhance it with their own initiatives.

They started visiting each other in their homes, and they welcomed one another to weddings, funerals and other significant events. They even visited other communities to encourage them towards reconciliation.

Women have been empowered to preach peace and share testimonies, and male tribal elders have responded positively. Happiness is growing in communities which had been defined for so long by hatred, fear and devastating loss.

Swords into ploughshares

Thanks to MAF pilots, Sauti Moja staff have been able to take many of these long, dangerous journeys of peace 'off road' – simply flying above the obstacles of armed raiders and hazardous roads.

There is still a long way to go and much work to be done. Intertribal conflict remains a daily reality for many in northern Kenya, but the work of Sauti Moja and the women of Leyai has

shown that hope isn't futile and the possibility of peace is very real.

'Instead of conflict, let us unite and advocate against the war,' the women sing together. May their voices echo through many generations to come.



Top Sauti Moja in action

Left Gumatho, a Rendille widow

Above Sube, a Borana widow