

PHE CHAMPIONS: RUKIA SEIF

Making Life Easier in Rural Tanzania.

Rukia Seif is a population, health, environment (PHE) peer educator who promotes simple economic, environmental, and health behaviors that make sense. In many ways, the Mkalamo village where Rukia lives is a typical rural Tanzanian agricultural village. In another important way it is very different. Mkalamo abuts the biodiversity rich Saadani National Park—the only wildlife park in Tanzania that borders the sea. Ironically, this park makes life not easier, but more difficult, for people living in Mkalamo. In the park, there is a ban on the cutting of wood, making it difficult to find enough wood to fuel villagers' cooking stoves. Also, increasing numbers of the park's wild animals often destroy the villagers' precious crops.

As a PHE peer educator, Rukia talks with her fellow community members about simple things they can do to improve their lives. Her messages are clear:

- By planning their families, women can ensure their own and their childrens' health and can decide the optimal number of children that they can provide for.
- By using fuel efficient stoves, women can spend less time collecting fire wood—freeing up time for other chores or livelihoods; and reducing the amount of needed fuel and thus helping sustain the forests for future generations.
- By joining community - led savings and credit associations, women and men gain access to capital, allowing them to scale-up current livelihoods or diversify to new sources of income.

Rukia sets a good example of how doing these simple things can improve a family's life and protect the environment. At age 36, she is a mother of three girls, ages 14, 12, and one and a half. Rukia and her husband, Seif Ramadhani, are taking measures to plan their family. Rukia used pills before they decided to have



Rukia cooking on one of her fuel efficient stoves.
Photo by Juma Dyegula

their last daughter. Now they are using condoms as a back-up while Rukia is breastfeeding the baby. Through her work, Rukia meets and talks to many people every day. She discusses family planning and if someone is interested, she refers them to community-based distributors and the dispensary for family planning services. *“I talk to my peers about planning their families so we have enough natural resources to meet the needs of the villagers who depend on these resources.”* She added, *“Also, when you plan your family, you will get more time to perform other activities”*

An active member of the savings and credit association, where she also acts as the accountant, Rukia is living proof of this last statement. Through savings and loans, Rukia has diversified her



Giraffes inside the Saadani National Park, Tanzania. Photo by Elin Torell.

income by buying a sewing machine and a fuel-efficient oven. Today, she generates income from cow and poultry husbandry, tailoring, bread-making, selling soft drinks, and constructing fuel-efficient stoves. With this increased income, Rukia and her husband have been able to put an iron sheet roof on their house and send their first-born daughter to secondary school—a great achievement in a country where only 5% of women stay in school beyond the primary level.

Rukia demonstrates her two fuel-efficient stoves. One is a metal oven that she uses for baking breads and cakes. The other is a simple mud stove that she uses for cooking. The mud stove, which costs less than U.S. \$2 to build, is getting increasingly popular in the community. It saves fuel wood, prevents fires,

produces less smoke (a serious health hazard), and cooks the food faster! *“I can even wear my best clothes and put on some lip shine when I use this stove, because it does not foul up the air”* Rukia explains with a laugh. Seeing the benefits of the fuel efficient stoves, Rukia has inspired the ten community-based distributors and five village leaders to join the team of individuals showcasing the fuel efficient technologies.

Rukia is a perfect example of practicing what one preaches. She is improving her own life, helping others learn to do the same, and protecting the very natural resources upon which almost everyone in Mkalamo depends.