

Catastrophic Conflicts: “Analyzing the Historical, Social, and Economic Roots of Land Boundary Disputes in Eastern Uganda”

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Abstract

Land boundary disputes in Eastern Uganda remain a persistent and complex problem shaped by a combination of historical, social, and economic forces. Colonial land policies introduced systems of ownership that conflicted with traditional communal tenure, leading to dispossession and inequality. Postcolonial reforms often reinforced these imbalances, with political elites benefiting disproportionately. Social factors such as ethnic diversity, cultural conceptions of land, and demographic pressures compound tensions, while economic drivers like agricultural commercialization, resource competition, and wealth disparities exacerbate disputes. Climate change further intensifies scarcity, fueling conflict among pastoral and farming communities. Case studies from Bukedea, Kumi, and Ngora illustrate how these dynamics play out in real settings. Local governance structures and gender considerations influence dispute resolution, but challenges of corruption, limited capacity, and customary-law conflicts remain. This study synthesizes historical, social, and economic dimensions to propose inclusive, transparent, and technology-enabled approaches to conflict resolution.

Keywords: Eastern Uganda, Land Disputes, Colonial Legacy, Customary Tenure, Boundary Conflicts.

1.0 Introduction

Land boundary disputes consistently generate tension in multiple regions of Africa, notably in Eastern Uganda. Conflicts frequently arise from a complex interaction of historical legacies, socio-cultural dynamics, and economic pressures. Stafford (2019) stated that in Eastern Uganda, land disputes are rooted in colonial cartographic inaccuracies, post-independence administrative changes, and current pressures from population growth and economic transformation. Land constitutes one of the most valuable and contested resources in Eastern Uganda, functioning not only as a basis for subsistence and income generation but also as a key marker of cultural identity and social belonging (Otim, 2019; Kandel, 2022). It plays a central role in sustaining rural livelihoods, facilitating agricultural production, and supporting community cohesion (Claude, 2019). However, despite its

socio-economic and cultural importance, the region has witnessed an increasing incidence of land boundary disputes (Nardi & Runström, 2024). These conflicts often escalate into violent clashes or evolve into prolonged legal proceedings, undermining both social harmony and economic productivity (Aliru, 2023). The roots of such disputes are complex and multidimensional. Historical grievances, some dating back to the precolonial and colonial eras, continue to shape contemporary perceptions of ownership and entitlement (Otim, 2019; Kandel, 2022). Postcolonial governance systems, though designed to harmonize land administration, have in some cases exacerbated tensions by creating overlaps between statutory and customary tenure systems (Kandel, 2022). The coexistence of these two frameworks each with its own principles, enforcement mechanisms, and legitimacy often generates ambiguity, leaving communities vulnerable to competing claims (Peter, 2024). Moreover, the pressures of demographic expansion have intensified competition for limited land resources (Claude, 2019). Rising population density has led to fragmentation of landholdings, reducing their economic viability and heightening disputes over boundaries (Aliru, 2023). These pressures are further compounded by changing economic priorities, where land is increasingly viewed not merely as a subsistence asset but as a commercial commodity, particularly in areas experiencing infrastructural growth and market integration (Claude, 2019). Environmental stressors, including land degradation and climate variability, have also amplified the struggle for arable land, adding another layer of complexity to dispute dynamics (Nardi & Runström, 2024).

Understanding the persistence of land boundary disputes in Eastern Uganda therefore demands an integrated analysis that captures the interplay between traditional tenure systems, statutory legal frameworks, demographic pressures, economic transformations, and environmental change (Otim, 2019; Kandel, 2022; Nardi & Runström, 2024). Such an approach is essential for developing conflict management mechanisms that are both contextually relevant and sustainable.

At the theoretical level, this study advances existing debates on land conflict by adopting an integrative framework that links historical legacies, socio-cultural dynamics, economic change, governance arrangements, and environmental stressors. While prior scholarship often treats these factors in isolation, the study demonstrates how their interaction produces

persistent boundary disputes in Eastern Uganda Kandel (2022). By examining the coexistence and tension between customary and statutory tenure systems within specific community contexts, the research refines theoretical understandings of land conflict as a dynamic and relational process rather than a purely legal or administrative problem.

Empirically, the study contributes original, context-specific evidence from the Sebei and Bugisu communities, drawing on primary field data to illuminate how land boundary disputes are experienced, negotiated, and resolved at the local level. The focus on strategic conflict management mechanisms provides nuanced insights into the practical functioning of customary institutions, local governance structures, and hybrid dispute resolution approaches. In doing so, the study addresses gaps in the literature that often rely on policy analysis or national-level data, offering grounded perspectives on how disputes unfold within everyday social and institutional settings Deininger & Byerlee (2012).

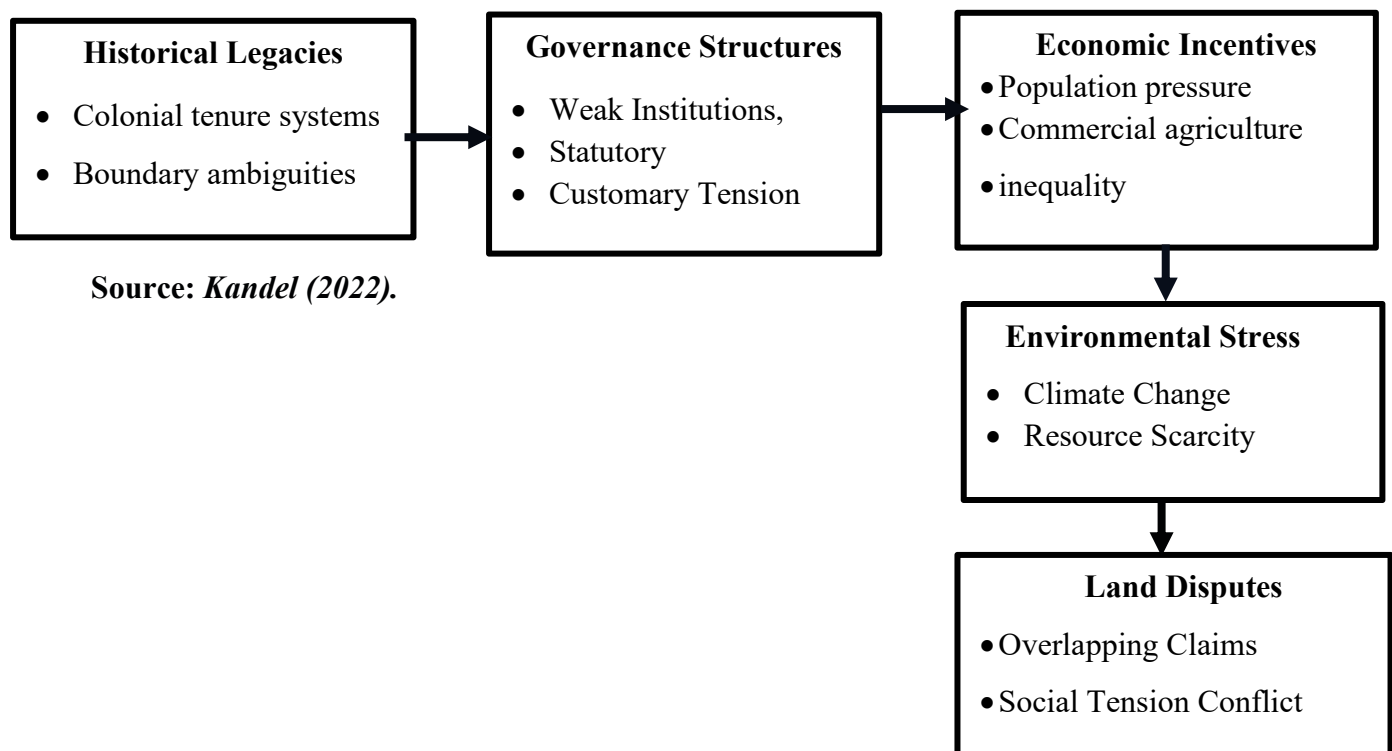
From a policy perspective, the findings offer actionable implications for land governance and conflict management in Eastern Uganda and comparable contexts. By identifying strengths and limitations in existing dispute resolution mechanisms, the study highlights opportunities for aligning formal legal frameworks with customary practices in more inclusive and equitable ways. The emphasis on community participation, institutional coordination, and sensitivity to historical and environmental contexts provides a basis for designing land policies and mediation strategies that are both socially legitimate and practically effective. This study seeks to examine the strategic conflict management mechanisms employed in resolving land boundary disputes within the Sebei and Bugisu communities of Eastern Uganda, with the aim of identifying best practices and addressing systemic gaps (Peter, 2024).

1.1 Conceptual Model

A conceptual model for the study positions land disputes in Eastern Uganda as an outcome of interacting structural and contemporary forces rather than isolated legal disagreements. Historical legacies provide the foundational layer: colonial land policies disrupted indigenous tenure systems and created enduring ambiguities around ownership and boundaries. These inherited distortions interact with economic incentives arising from

population growth, agricultural commercialisation, and resource scarcity, which intensify competition over land Kandel, (2022). Governance failures manifested through weak institutional capacity, inconsistent application of land laws, corruption, and the uneasy coexistence of statutory and customary systems mediate how these pressures are managed or mismanaged. Environmental stressors, particularly climate variability and land degradation, further aggravate scarcity, pushing communities into contested spaces and overwhelming traditional conflict-resolution mechanisms. Together, these factors reinforce one another, transforming latent grievances into active disputes and, in some cases, violent conflict.

Conceptually, the framework assumes a dynamic and circular relationship rather than a linear cause-and-effect sequence. Historical dispossession shapes present governance weaknesses; governance failures amplify the effects of economic and environmental pressures; and intensified disputes, in turn, undermine trust in institutions and social cohesion, perpetuating vulnerability. Presenting this interaction visually clarifies how land disputes emerge from multiple converging pathways, strengthening the analytical coherence of the paper by linking past processes with present-day outcomes.



2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Historical Context of Land Disputes

The historical roots of land disputes in Eastern Uganda lie largely in colonial land governance, which imposed formal tenure systems that conflicted with indigenous communal arrangements. Colonial instruments such as the 1900 Crown Land Ordinance and the Buganda Agreement introduced private ownership and rigid territorial demarcations that ignored customary land management and ethnic boundaries, generating overlapping claims that persist today (Otim, 2019).

Colonial boundary mapping, undertaken with minimal local consultation, later became the basis for post-independence administrative borders, despite limited legitimacy among affected communities. Disputes such as those between Tororo and Mbale districts illustrate how vague colonial-era boundaries continue to provoke conflict (Castagnini & Deininger, 2004).

Although post-independence reforms, including the 1975 Land Reform Decree and subsequent legislation, sought to rationalise ownership, they failed to reconcile statutory and customary tenure systems. In practice, traditional authorities often retain influence over land allocation and dispute resolution, creating friction with formal legal institutions and reinforcing historically rooted grievances (Thompson, 2007).

2.2 Ethnic Diversity, Demographic Pressure, and Cultural Conceptions of Land

Ethnic diversity and demographic change further complicate land relations in Eastern Uganda, where groups such as the Bagisu, Basoga, and Banyole maintain distinct cultural understandings of land ownership. Clan-based communal tenure remains prevalent, with land inherited and managed collectively across generations, frequently clashing with individualised titling promoted under the Land Act of 1998 (Margaret, 2009). Rapid population growth and internal migration have intensified pressure on finite land resources, increasing perceptions of encroachment and competition. Poverty and economic vulnerability amplify these tensions by encouraging assertive claims over land, sometimes outside formal legal channels (Bazaara, 1994).

In rural contexts, customary norms often override statutory procedures, as elders and clan leaders continue to arbitrate disputes. The resulting overlap between formal and informal systems sustains uncertainty over land rights and deepens social tensions, particularly where state institutions lack the capacity or legitimacy to enforce coherent land governance.

2.3 Economic Factors Influencing Disputes

Economic forces play a central role in shaping land conflicts in Eastern Uganda, where land remains the foundation of both subsistence livelihoods and commercial production. The increasing commercialisation of agriculture, particularly the expansion of high-value crops such as maize, soybeans, and coffee, has substantially raised the economic value of land. This shift has intensified competition among smallholder farmers, local communities, private investors, and agribusiness enterprises, thereby heightening the frequency and intensity of boundary disputes (Deininger & Byerlee, 2012).

Resource scarcity further compounds these tensions. Competition over access to water sources, grazing areas, and mineral-rich land has become increasingly pronounced, especially in regions such as Karamoja, where mineral discoveries have attracted external actors. Economic inequality amplifies these conflicts, as wealthier individuals and corporate entities are better positioned to secure land through legal, administrative, or political channels, often at the expense of poorer community members. Such disparities skew dispute resolution outcomes and contribute to the dispossession of marginalised groups. Where legal remedies are perceived as inaccessible or biased, unresolved disputes may escalate into open confrontation, reinforcing cycles of insecurity and social fragmentation.

2.4 Gender Dynamics in Land Disputes

In Eastern Uganda, traditional patriarchal norms restrict women's ownership and decision-making authority regarding land. Although constitutional guarantees and statutory provisions exist to support women's land rights, societal and cultural practices persist in favouring male ownership. Women frequently encounter substantial obstacles in asserting claims, particularly in contexts such as inheritance disputes, divorce, or communal land conflicts.

Recent interventions, including empowerment programs and heightened participation of

women in local governance, have led to improved awareness of legal rights and increased involvement of women in dispute resolution. However, established traditional systems frequently oppose these changes, resulting in women being disproportionately impacted by ongoing land conflicts (Margaret, 2009).

2.5 Environmental Stressors and Climate Change

Environmental changes have intensified land disputes by altering resource availability. Pastoralist communities in districts such as Katakwi and Moroto face diminished pasture and water sources due to prolonged droughts and unpredictable rainfall patterns (Nardi & Runström, 2024). Such scarcity increases competition for productive land, often resulting in cross-community tensions and migration of herders into traditionally occupied areas.

Climate variability also affects livestock health, reducing grazing options and forcing pastoralists to encroach on neighboring lands. Traditional dispute resolution mechanisms, which once mitigated seasonal conflicts, are increasingly inadequate in the face of environmental stress, leading to more frequent and intense disputes.

2.6 Governance Structures and Dispute Resolution

Local governance structures including village councils, parish authorities, and community elders play a pivotal role in mediating land disputes. These structures combine customary practices with formal legal approaches to provide contextually appropriate resolutions. Local councils often serve as the first point of contact for disputing parties, facilitating dialogue and negotiation (Peter, 2024).

However, the effectiveness of these mechanisms is constrained by resource shortages, corruption, political interference, and limited capacity to handle disputes arising from commercial investments. Large-scale agricultural projects, urbanization, and investor-driven land acquisitions introduce new types of conflicts that traditional councils are ill-equipped to manage. The combination of these limitations underscores the need for enhanced governance frameworks that integrate formal legal processes, customary practices, and community participation.

3.0 Method

This study employs a qualitative research design to investigate the historical, social, and economic aspects that contribute to land border disputes in Eastern Uganda. A qualitative methodology is suitable for investigating the intricate and context-dependent characteristics of land disputes, especially where perceptions, cultural narratives, and lived experiences influence conflicts around land ownership and utilisation (Khan et al., 2025). The research approach adopted utilises a comprehensive synthesis of secondary sources to examine land boundary disputes in Eastern Uganda. The sources included peer-reviewed journal articles, doctoral dissertations, government reports, NGO publications, and official records from the Uganda Land Commission. This triangulation of sources allowed for a multi-dimensional understanding of the historical, social, economic, and environmental factors driving land disputes in the region.

To provide empirical depth and context, the study incorporated multiple case studies from Bukedea, Kumi, Ngora, Mbale, Soroti, Kamuli, Katakwi, and Kaabong districts. These case studies were selected based on documented incidences of land boundary conflicts, diversity of ethnic groups, and variations in socio-economic and environmental conditions. Each case study was analyzed to identify recurring patterns, conflict triggers, and resolution strategies, highlighting both local and systemic influences on disputes.

Primary data for this study were generated directly from the field through qualitative methods conducted in selected districts of Eastern Uganda. Key Informant Interviews were carried out with district land officers, local council leaders, clan heads, community elders, and representatives of civil society organisations involved in land governance. In addition, Focus Group Discussions were conducted across the study sites, each comprising eight to ten participants drawn from different ethnic, gender, and socio-economic backgrounds. Participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling to ensure that respondents possessed direct experience or knowledge of land boundary disputes. Where feasible, participant observation was undertaken during community meetings and dispute resolution sessions facilitated by traditional authorities, allowing the researcher to capture everyday practices and interactional dynamics surrounding land conflicts. These data were

collected directly by the researcher through fieldwork rather than extracted from existing reports.

Secondary data consisted of documentary and policy sources used to contextualise and triangulate field findings. These included colonial land maps, district boundary records, court judgments, NGO reports, and national land policy documents. Documentary materials were analysed alongside interview and FGD transcripts through thematic analysis, enabling cross-verification of historical narratives, institutional claims, and reported conflict patterns. Integration occurred at the analytical stage, where themes emerging from primary data such as economic pressure, commercial land acquisition, and governance weaknesses were compared with evidence from secondary sources to assess consistency, divergence, and explanatory depth. This combined approach strengthened analytical rigour by linking lived experiences with documented policy and historical frameworks, while ensuring that findings were grounded primarily in empirically collected field data rather than solely synthesised from existing literature.

The research also integrated empirical findings from community interviews, dispute mediation reports, and official Uganda Land Commission records. These data sources provided evidence to validate thematic trends identified in the literature and offered insights into the effectiveness of conflict management mechanisms employed at local and district levels.

Data analysis followed a thematic approach, categorizing information into historical, social, economic, environmental, governance, and gender dimensions. Patterns and relationships among these themes were examined to understand the interplay of factors contributing to land disputes and to identify strategies that have successfully mitigated conflicts. This methodological approach ensured a holistic examination of land boundary disputes, capturing both structural and community-level dynamics in Eastern Uganda.

3.1. Study Area

The study concentrates on Eastern Uganda, particularly the districts of Tororo, Mbale, Bukedea, and the Karamoja sub-region. The selection of these places is based on their

recorded history of land-related conflicts, ethnic variety, and rising land value resulting from agricultural commercialisation and mineral extraction.

3.2. Data Collection Method

To gather in-depth and contextually rich data, the study employs the following methods:

- (1) Key Informant Interviews (KIIs):** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of local government officials, land officers, clan leaders, community elders, and representatives of civil society organizations. These stakeholders are expected to provide insights into the causes, nature, and resolution mechanisms of land disputes.
- (2) Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):** FGDs were held with community members from diverse ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, ensuring gender representation. These discussions aimed to capture collective experiences, perceptions, and social memory related to land ownership and boundary conflicts.
- (3) Document and Policy Analysis:** The study reviewed colonial land maps, district boundary records, court case reports, and national land policy documents. This analysis provided historical context and traces the evolution of administrative and legal frameworks affecting land governance.
- (4) Participant Observation (if feasible):** When possible, the researcher observed community meetings or dispute resolution sessions facilitated by traditional authorities. This method helped understand the role of customary practices and social dynamics in conflict mediation.

3.3 Sampling Strategy: Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used to identify knowledgeable participants and key stakeholders. Initial contacts in local governments and NGOs helped identify further informants based on their experience with land conflicts.

3.4. Data Analysis: The collected data underwent transcription and was subjected to thematic analysis. Coding was performed manually and/or with the assistance of qualitative data analysis tools (e.g., NVivo). Themes were inductively constructed to represent the patterns that arise from the data, encompassing historical grievances, ethnic narratives, economic competition, and institutional deficiencies in land governance.

3.5 Ethical Considerations: Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained to protect participants from potential social or political repercussions. Ethical approval was sought from a relevant research ethics committee before data collection begins.

4.0 Findings and Discussion

This section presented the major themes that emerged from field data and documentary analysis, organized around the historical, social, and economic dimensions of land boundary disputes in Eastern Uganda. The discussion critically links empirical findings with existing literature and policy frameworks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the drivers and dynamics of land-related conflicts.

4.1 Economic Pressures and Commercial Interests: The study revealed that economic pressures are a major driver of land boundary disputes in Eastern Uganda. NGO reports indicate that families are frequently evicted from lands they depend on for subsistence due to commercial interests, such as large-scale agricultural projects for sugarcane or other cash crops. These evictions often occur with minimal consultation or compensation, increasing community tensions and deepening poverty among affected populations. Economic disparities exacerbate these disputes, as wealthier actors are better positioned to secure land through formal or informal channels, leaving marginalized groups vulnerable (Claude, 2019). Competition for fertile land and resources intensifies conflicts, particularly where local communities attempt to protect livelihoods while external investors seek commercial gains.

4.2 Colonial Legacies and Cartographic Errors

Colonial-era boundary demarcations emerged as a recurring theme in both interview narratives and documentary evidence, underscoring their enduring influence on contemporary land disputes. Respondents consistently described colonial borders as administratively expedient rather than socially informed, noting that British officials frequently delineated boundaries with limited knowledge of local land use systems or ethnic settlement patterns. Cartographic records were often produced without adequate ground verification, privileging mapping convenience over accuracy. These practices

institutionalised errors that later acquired legal authority, embedding uncertainty into land administration frameworks that persist long after independence.

Accounts from Tororo and Mbale districts illustrate how these colonial boundaries fragmented customary land holdings and disrupted communal territories. Elders explained that such divisions generated overlapping claims among neighbouring ethnic groups, notably the Iteso and the Japadhola, both of whom assert historical attachment to contested areas. The failure of post-independence governments to systematically review or amend these inherited boundaries has allowed ambiguities to endure, periodically resurfacing as conflict. As a result, colonial cartographic inaccuracies continue to function as structural fault lines, sustaining inter-communal tensions and complicating contemporary land governance.

4.3. Role of Local Governance Structures

Local governance institutions, particularly village and parish councils alongside community elders, occupy a central position in mediating land disputes in Eastern Uganda. Evidence from Mbale, Kumi, and Ngora districts indicates that the most effective interventions draw on hybrid approaches that blend customary practices with formal dispute resolution procedures. Public meetings convened by local councils and supported by elders often rely on oral testimonies, historical land-use markers, and negotiated settlements to reconcile competing claims, lending social legitimacy to outcomes.

Despite their importance, these institutions face significant constraints. Limited financial and technical resources, inadequate training, and susceptibility to bias frequently undermine their effectiveness. Findings from Kumi district reveal instances where wealthier parties exerted undue influence over dispute outcomes, exposing vulnerabilities to elite capture and inequitable decision-making. Moreover, external pressures such as political interference and rising land investment have further complicated the ability of local councils to act impartially and consistently (Aliru, 2023). These challenges highlight the need for strengthened institutional capacity and safeguards to ensure fairness and accountability in local land governance.

4.3 Gender Dynamics in Land Disputes

Women's participation in land ownership and dispute resolution in Eastern Uganda remains significantly constrained by entrenched patriarchal norms, despite the existence of constitutional and statutory protections. Customary practices frequently privilege men as primary landholders, thereby limiting women's ability to assert ownership claims or engage meaningfully in mediation and adjudication processes. As a result, women are often marginalised in disputes involving inheritance, marital dissolution, or communal land allocation.

Nonetheless, evidence from the study indicates gradual shifts in this landscape. Empowerment initiatives, legal literacy programmes, and increased representation of women within local governance structures have enhanced awareness of women's land rights and, in some cases, enabled successful challenges to male-dominated decisions. Case examples illustrate women leveraging formal legal provisions to contest exclusionary practices, although such actions are often accompanied by social backlash, harassment, or intimidation (Aliru, 2023). These findings underscore the need for sustained, gender-sensitive interventions that not only strengthen legal protections but also address the cultural and institutional barriers that continue to limit women's equitable access to land and dispute resolution mechanisms.

4.4 Impact of Policy, Urbanization, and Globalization

Land disputes in Eastern Uganda are increasingly shaped by shifts in governance policy, economic reform, and patterns of urban growth. The formalisation of land ownership through registration and titling frequently clashes with customary tenure arrangements, creating uncertainty over legitimate claims and authority. At the same time, economic liberalisation and foreign investment have intensified competition for land, often placing local communities at a disadvantage when confronting investors with greater financial and legal capacity. As Ahmed et al. (2025) observe, meaningful involvement of local populations in urban planning processes can enhance public trust and participation, helping to mitigate conflict as urban expansion accelerates.

Urbanisation further amplifies these pressures by increasing the value of land in peri-urban areas, encouraging speculation and contestation over ownership. As towns and cities expand, land that was previously governed through informal or customary arrangements becomes subject to new regulatory and commercial interests, heightening the risk of dispute. Together, these dynamics demonstrate how policy reforms, investment flows, and demographic change intersect to generate new and increasingly complex patterns of land conflict in Eastern Uganda (Otim, 2019; Kandel, 2022).

4.5 Historical and Social Contexts

Historical legacies arising from both colonial and post-independence land policies continue to shape contemporary land disputes in Eastern Uganda. Colonial boundary demarcations frequently disregarded indigenous land-use systems, producing overlapping and contested claims that remain unresolved. These inherited structural flaws were often reinforced rather than corrected by postcolonial administrations, which retained colonial boundaries for administrative convenience. As a result, present-day disputes are embedded in long-standing institutional ambiguities rather than isolated disagreements over land ownership.

Social dynamics further compound these historical challenges. Ethnic diversity, strong communal identities, population growth, and increasing pressure on land resources intensify competition and heighten the risk of conflict. Evidence from Kisindai–Nawaikoke, Kumi, and Ngora districts indicates that effective dispute resolution must integrate historical awareness with contemporary economic and social conditions. Traditional mechanisms, including elder-led mediation and rotational access to shared resources, have demonstrated continued relevance. When complemented by formal mediation frameworks and legal recognition, these indigenous approaches offer adaptive and context-sensitive pathways for managing land disputes in complex rural settings.

4.6 Environmental Stressors

Climate change has intensified land scarcity and heightened disputes, particularly among pastoralist communities in districts such as Katakwi and Moroto. Prolonged droughts, unpredictable rainfall patterns, and declining pasture availability have driven migration and increased competition over shrinking resources, generating heightened inter-communal tensions. These environmental pressures not only undermine livelihoods but also strain traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, as the scale and immediacy of resource scarcity increasingly exceed local coping capacities (Nardi & Runström, 2024). Moreover, environmental stress interacts with economic incentives, including the conversion of grazing land to crop cultivation or tourism ventures, further complicating access and control over land. This convergence of climatic and economic pressures adds a critical layer of complexity to land dispute dynamics in the region.

The findings align closely with existing scholarship that identifies economic pressure and commercialisation as central drivers of land disputes in agrarian regions. Consistent with Deininger and Byerlee's argument that rising land values intensify competition, evidence from Eastern Uganda shows that large-scale agricultural investments and cash-crop expansion have displaced subsistence-oriented households, often through processes perceived as opaque or coercive. This supports Claude's assertion that unequal access to capital and legal instruments skews dispute outcomes in favour of wealthier actors. However, a notable divergence emerges from the case studies: while much of the literature portrays commercial land acquisition as uniformly disruptive, some local respondents acknowledged short-term employment benefits associated with investor-led projects. These benefits, though unevenly distributed, complicate the dominant narrative of purely negative commercial impacts and suggest a more ambivalent local assessment of land commodification.

Strong agreement also emerges with scholars who emphasise the enduring influence of colonial legacies on contemporary land conflicts. Interview accounts from Tororo and Mbale corroborate Castagnini and Deininger's observation that colonial cartographic practices produced boundaries detached from social realities, embedding long-term uncertainty into land governance systems. The persistence of disputes between groups such as the Iteso and Japadhola reinforces the argument that post-independence governments

largely reproduced colonial spatial arrangements rather than correcting them. Where the findings diverge slightly from existing literature is in the role attributed to postcolonial institutions. While some scholars characterise state inaction as the primary problem, respondents highlighted selective state intervention, often driven by political or economic interests, as equally destabilising. This suggests that inconsistency, rather than absence of governance, may be a critical factor sustaining disputes.

Debates surrounding the effectiveness of customary dispute resolution systems are reflected clearly in the findings. In line with authors such as Thompson, the study confirms that elder-led mediation and locally grounded practices remain central to dispute resolution, particularly in rural settings where formal institutions lack legitimacy. Case studies from Kumi, Ngora, and Kisindai–Nawaikoke demonstrate that customary mechanisms can adapt successfully when combined with local council oversight and basic legal recognition. Yet, contrary to more optimistic accounts of customary systems, evidence from Kumi reveals instances of elite capture and gender bias, supporting critiques that traditional structures may reproduce inequality. This contradiction underscores that customary systems neither uniformly succeed nor fail; their effectiveness depends heavily on context, power relations, and institutional support.

Gender and environmental dimensions further illustrate points of both convergence and tension with existing scholarship. The findings affirm Margaret’s argument that patriarchal norms continue to marginalise women in land governance despite progressive legal frameworks. However, the documented cases of women successfully challenging exclusionary practices indicate gradual shifts that are less visible in earlier studies. Similarly, environmental stressors identified in Katakwi and Moroto strongly support Nardi and Runström’s position that climate variability intensifies land conflict. An unexpected finding, however, lies in the weakening legitimacy of traditional coping arrangements under climate stress, suggesting that environmental change is not only increasing conflict frequency but also eroding long-standing social institutions. Taken together, these insights reinforce the need for hybrid governance approaches that acknowledge historical legacies, economic realities, and social diversity while remaining responsive to emerging environmental pressures.

4.7 Synthesis of Case Studies

The findings underscore that land boundary conflicts in Eastern Uganda are rooted in interwoven socio-political, economic, and cultural dynamics rather than in technical or legal deficiencies alone. Colonial legacies, ethnic identity, demographic change, commercialisation, institutional weakness, and political interference collectively sustain these disputes, rendering them both complex and persistent. As such, land conflict emerges not merely from unclear boundaries but from historically produced inequalities and contested claims to authority, belonging, and resources.

Insights from the case studies reveal that resolution pathways are equally shaped by local context and adaptive practice. In Kisindai-Nawaikoke, reliance on shared historical narratives and recognised traditional markers enabled communities to settle long-standing boundary disagreements. In Kumi, negotiated settlements were achieved through a hybrid approach that combined formal mediation with economic incentives acceptable to competing groups. In Ngora, rotational grazing arrangements reflected an environmentally responsive strategy that balanced resource sharing with social stability. Taken together, these cases demonstrate that effective conflict resolution extends beyond mapping and adjudication. It requires community-led processes, recognition of customary tenure, strengthened and impartial dispute resolution institutions, and deliberate efforts to depoliticise land governance. Addressing structural inequalities in land access and legal protection must therefore remain central to Uganda's broader land reform agenda.

5.0 Recommendation

Drawing on the study's findings, a set of aligned and mutually reinforcing strategies is proposed to improve the management of land boundary disputes in Eastern Uganda. Central to these recommendations is the integration of customary and statutory land tenure systems. Hybrid frameworks that recognize culturally embedded land practices while ensuring legal certainty can reduce ambiguity, enhance legitimacy, and promote community acceptance of dispute outcomes.

Equally important is the strengthening of local governance institutions that serve as the first line of mediation in land conflicts. Targeted capacity-building for local council

members, coupled with adequate logistical support and robust anti-corruption safeguards, can enhance the credibility and impartiality of these bodies. Improving institutional effectiveness at this level is essential for preventing elite capture and ensuring fair resolution processes.

Gender inclusion must be systematically embedded within land governance reforms. Enforcing women's land rights through legal awareness initiatives, accessible legal aid, and meaningful representation in dispute resolution structures can counteract persistent patriarchal norms. Such measures not only advance equity but also contribute to more durable and socially accepted resolutions.

Technological innovation offers complementary tools for reducing boundary-related disputes. The adoption of GIS-based mapping and digital land registries can improve accuracy, transparency, and accessibility of land records, thereby minimizing overlapping claims and administrative uncertainty. When combined with community validation processes, these technologies can strengthen trust in boundary demarcation.

Addressing environmental drivers of conflict is equally critical. Supporting climate adaptation through drought-resilient agricultural practices, water management initiatives, and regulated rotational grazing systems can ease competition over scarce resources. These interventions are particularly relevant for pastoral and Agro-pastoral communities facing heightened climate stress.

Finally, sustained community engagement is essential for proactive conflict prevention. Inclusive dialogue platforms that bring together local communities, migrants, traditional leaders, and investors can facilitate negotiation, build mutual understanding, and address emerging grievances before they escalate. Together, these strategies reflect an integrated approach that aligns legal reform, social inclusion, environmental resilience, and participatory governance in addressing land boundary disputes.

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