

COMMUNAL LAND MANAGEMENT PRACTICES AND CONFLICTS IN SAMBURU COUNTY, KENYA

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ABSTRACT

In Samburu County, where pastoralism serves as the primary livelihood, communal land is essential for sustaining local communities. However, conflicts frequently arise over access to grazing land, water resources, and territorial boundaries, leading to loss of life, displacement, and significant economic disruption. These conflicts undermine social cohesion and hinder development in the region, highlighting the critical need for effective land management practices. Therefore, this study sought to assess communal land management practices and their relationship with inter-communal conflict in Samburu County, Kenya. The specific objectives include assessing the effect of communal land tenure systems, evaluating communal grazing management practices, determining the influence of communal land-use planning, and examining local governance structures on inter-communal conflict. The study adopted Common Pool Resources and Conflict Theory and used a descriptive research design to collect and analyze data. The target population consisted 370 respondents, and a sample size of 142. Stratified random sampling was used. Data collection employed semi-structured questionnaires and interview guides, and was analyzed using SPSS to

generate descriptive and inferential statistics. Analysis results reveal that communal conflict in Samburu County is primarily driven by competition over vital grazing resources, exacerbated by governance systems that lack community trust and transparency. Specifically, grazing management had the strongest positive predictive effect on conflict, land tenure had a weak positive and statistically significant effect while the effect of local governance was positive but only marginally significant. The study recommends that grazing management plans be formalized, well communicated and enforced by local land management committees, for tenure systems to be strengthened to ensure they are more equitable, locally-owned, and transparent, and for laws to protect land rights for women. Additionally, the study recommends for more efforts to communicate and make community members more aware of grazing practices, land use and tenure policies through community-led awareness campaigns. These should be hyper-localized and address the community's unique needs.

INTRODUCTION

The management of land and natural resources is a major challenge in developing countries. The extraction of high-value resources like oil, gas, minerals, and timber is frequently cited as a catalyst for the onset, escalation, or continuation of violent conflicts around the world. Moreover, competition for limited renewable resources such as land and water is intensifying, driven by factors like environmental degradation, population

growth, and climate change (United Nations Interagency Framework Team for Preventive Action, 2019).

Poor management of these resources is contributing to the emergence of new conflicts and hindering the peaceful resolution of existing ones. According to Bruch, Muffett, and Nichols (2016), resource mismanagement, particularly in fragile states, continues to be a leading cause of conflict escalation. In Malaysia, native customary land disputes have been on the rise as Indigenous communities challenge the land alienation process to secure their land rights, bringing significant attention to the issue (Azima et al., 2019). Similarly, in Mexico, according to the Strategic Program of the National Agrarian Register for 2021 to 2024, there are approximately 500 unresolved land conflicts, with about half involving Indigenous communities in the states of Oaxaca and Chiapas. (MbazorD., & OjoB, 2019).

In Africa, land disputes and conflicts arise at various levels, including disagreements between neighbors over field boundaries, between men, women, and generations regarding their respective land rights, and between pastoralists and farmers. Conflicts also occur between states and Indigenous peoples, as well as between companies and local populations concerning rights to exploit land and resources. These disputes highlight the complexity of land ownership and resource management across the continent (Alden Wily, 2018). These historical injustices have profoundly impacted the socio-economic and political standing of various communities. As a result, numerous land conflicts persist, and in many Sub-Saharan countries, the issues surrounding land rights and historical inequalities continue to remain unresolved (Kandoro, 2021; Osei-Tutu, 2021).

Kenya has a protracted history of land conflicts that dates back to the colonial era when German and British authorities implemented policies that alienated local communities from their customary lands, fostering divisions among ethnic groups. These practices persisted even after the country gained independence (Ojwang, 2020). The situation escalated dramatically in 2007 when widespread violence erupted following the presidential elections, leading to the deaths of approximately 1,300 individuals and the displacement of up to 600,000 people. A significant portion of this violence was attributed to longstanding land disputes that had been unresolved for decades (Mwebi, 2021).

Over the past decade, Samburu County has experienced ongoing intercommunal conflicts, driven by a variety of factors. These include the proliferation and misuse of small arms, challenging terrain, ungoverned spaces, competition for scarce natural resources, intercommunal raiding, acts of revenge and retaliatory violence, harsh climatic conditions, and political incitement (Karanja, 2025; Lekapua, 2023). The enduring nature of these conflicts has had a detrimental impact on the local economy and has polarized relationships among communities (Mwebi, 2021). Efforts to address the conflict, such as the deployment of security forces, have been limited in effectiveness as they tend to be

reactive rather than proactive. Consequently, these interventions often fail to tackle the root causes of the conflict, which are deeply rooted in structural underdevelopment and fractured relationships within and between communities.

Statement of Problem

Inter-communal conflict has been a persistent issue in various regions of Kenya, especially in arid and semi-arid areas, where competition over limited resources such as land and water has been a significant driver (Ojwang, 2020). In areas like Samburu County, where pastoralism is the primary livelihood, communal land plays a crucial role in sustaining communities. However, conflicts over access to grazing land, water, and territorial boundaries frequently arise, often resulting in loss of life, displacement, and economic disruption (Lekapua, 2023). These conflicts undermine social cohesion and hinder development in the region, making effective land management practices a critical area of concern (Mwebi, 2021).

Kariuki (2019) analyzed the peacebuilding initiatives aimed at reducing conflict but found that most interventions fail due to insufficient community engagement and weak governance. Despite these valuable insights, limited attention has been given to how specific communal land management practices, such as land tenure systems, grazing management, land-use planning, and governance structures, influence inter-communal conflict. The gap in existing literature lies in the lack of detailed examination of communal land management practices and their potential to mitigate or exacerbate inter-communal conflict in pastoral regions like Samburu County. By providing a detailed analysis of these factors, the study aims to offer evidence-based recommendations for enhancing land management practices to promote peace and reduce conflict in the region.

Objectives of the Study

- i. To assess the influence of communal land tenure systems on inter-communal conflict in Samburu County
- ii. To evaluate the influence of communal grazing management practices on inter-communal conflict in Samburu County
- iii. To determine the influence of communal land-use planning on inter-communal conflict in Samburu County
- iv. To examine the effect of local governance structures on inter-communal conflict in Samburu County

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Review

Conflict Theory, developed by Karl Marx (1848) and further elaborated by contemporary sociologists, explains that conflicts arise from inequalities in power, resources, and access. It posits that groups or communities that feel marginalized or deprived of resources such as land are more likely to engage in conflict as they seek to challenge the status quo and address perceived injustices. Collier and Hoeffler (2004) applied Conflict Theory in their analysis of resource-based conflicts, particularly in Africa. They argued

that competition over land and other resources can escalate into violent inter-communal conflicts when resources are scarce or mismanaged. Their empirical research suggested that land scarcity, coupled with ineffective land governance, significantly contributes to the intensity and frequency of inter-communal conflicts. Collier and Hoeffler also emphasized the role of economic inequality in fueling these conflicts, supporting Marx's original premise that unequal resource distribution creates social tensions that lead to conflict. In the context of Samburu County, land is a critical resource, and competition over access to communal grazing lands and water can fuel tensions among different communities. Conflict Theory is applicable in analyzing inter-communal conflicts because it highlights how unequal land distribution, competition for scarce resources, and ineffective management can escalate tensions and lead to violence (Mahamud, 2020; Akande, 2024). The theory helps explain how poor land management practices may exacerbate resource-based conflicts in pastoralist regions like Samburu County.

Empirical Review

Elfverson (2019) study found that while ethnicity remains politicized, the impact of national political dynamics on communal conflicts varies by region, with decentralization sometimes intensifying local power struggles and competition over resources. This mixed result was more pertinent in agro-pastoralist areas where competition for pasture, water, and unclear land rights still trigger violent conflict. Mutiso (2020) found a significant relationship between land resource conflict and communal peace, revealing that land disputes negatively affect socio-economic development, political stability, business, trade, inter-marriages, and cross-cultural relationships between communities. While Mutiso's research provided important insights into how land resource conflicts impact peace, it focused more on the broader effects on communal peace and development without delving into the specific mechanisms of land tenure systems that may drive such conflicts. Adelphi (2023) reported that increasing frequency and severity of droughts, along with the proliferation of weapons from war-torn neighboring countries, exacerbate these conflicts. Despite these challenges, Adelphi noted that recent grassroots initiatives have shown promise in reducing the intensity of pastoralist violence in the region.

In their case study by Kalabamu (2019) which evaluated the impact of post-independence land tenure laws on conflicts. The study used the literature synthesis method and results established the implementation of policies with minimal community involvement, resulting in continued land governance and inequality issues. The study further established some form of anti-pastoral prejudice which impacted their ability to develop sustainable land management goals. Kuot (2024) highlights that these conflicts contribute to a dire humanitarian crisis characterized by food insecurity, malnutrition, and disease proliferation. Additionally, Kuot noted that the ongoing tensions hinder agricultural productivity and livestock-rearing activities, further exacerbating the country's food crisis and perpetuating societal divisions, escalating ethnic tensions, and undermining social cohesion and national unity. Okonkwo, Chris, and Udegbumam (2023) revealed that these conflicts result in significant socio-economic challenges, including the loss of

lives, property destruction, displacement, poverty, economic losses, a decline in GDP, and food insecurity. Additionally, the conflicts lead to environmental degradation, such as soil damage and water pollution, while escalating tensions between communities.

Oluteyo (2024) revealed a strong link between land ownership, sources of income, and education levels in sustaining homegrown extremism, particularly in the context of land-use conflicts. While the findings underscore the role of socio-economic factors in fueling extremism, the study did not specifically explore how communal land-use planning might mitigate these conflicts. The current study aims to address this gap by determining the effect of communal land-use planning on inter-communal conflict in Samburu County, focusing on how land management strategies can influence conflict dynamics in pastoralist communities. Okafor and Chioma (2022) revealed a statistically significant relationship between communal clashes and agricultural output, with boundary disputes having an inverse relationship with agricultural productivity. The study concluded that communal clashes significantly disrupt agricultural production in the area. However, the research did not specifically explore how communal land-use planning might mitigate such disputes and their effects on agricultural production.

Enyinnah (2024) study discovered that the primary causes of the conflicts were land boundary disputes, traditional factors, and political issues. Additionally, the social effects of these conflicts included sexual harassment of women, arms acquisition, deterioration of social relationships, and restrictions on movement and communication, all of which significantly hindered socio-economic activities in the area. While the study highlights the socio-economic consequences of inter-communal conflicts, it does not explore how local governance structures may influence these conflicts. Osei and Baffour (2022) study found that well-resourced local governance institutions were critical in reducing land-related conflicts. The findings highlighted that local leaders, when provided with decision-making authority and adequate resources, were more effective in mediating and resolving disputes, fostering community harmony and preventing conflicts.

Conceptual Framework

The below conceptual framework highlights the interaction between the independent variables and the dependent variable of the study;

Independent Variables

Dependent

Variable

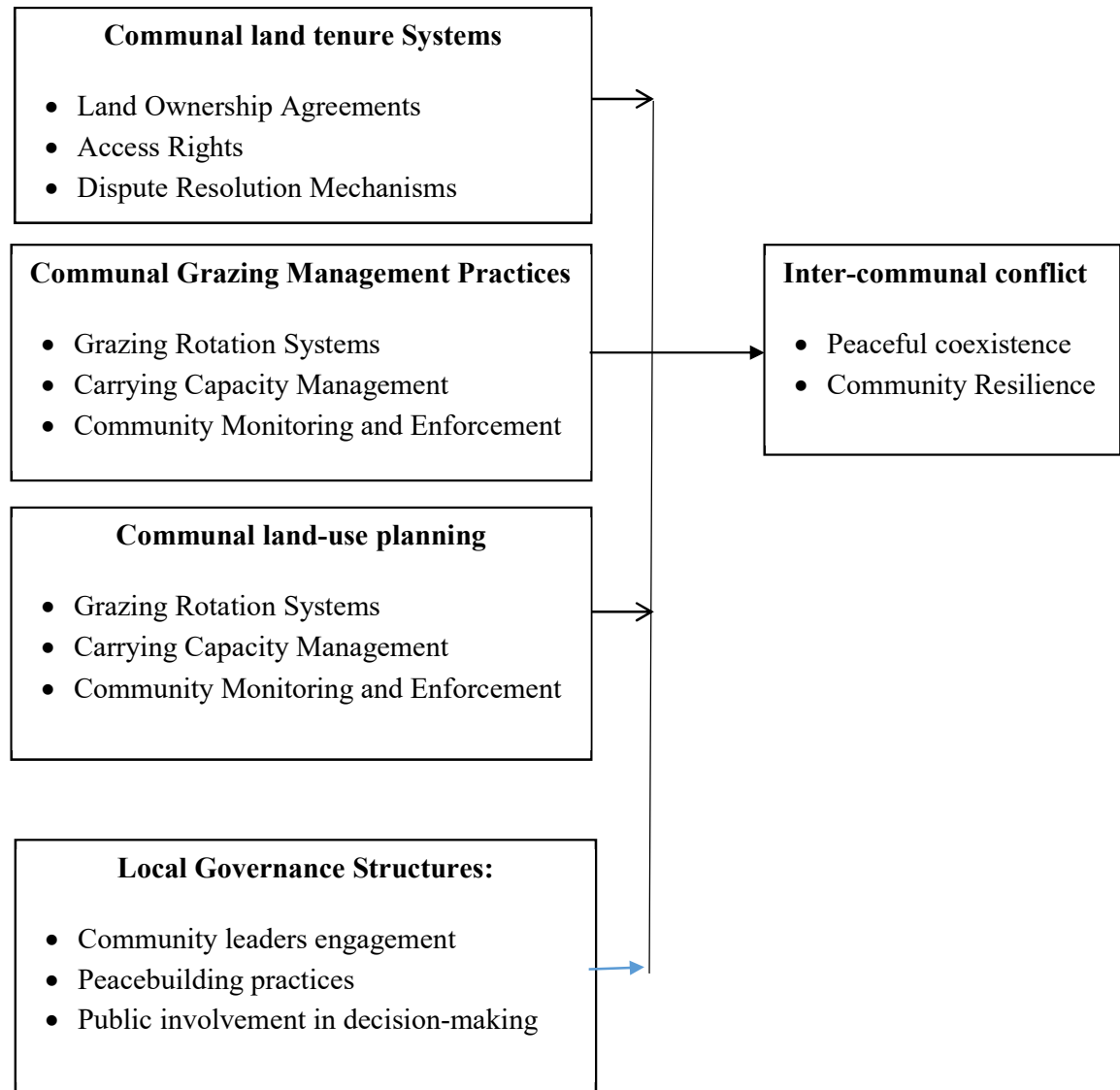


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a descriptive research design, which is effective for exploring and understanding the characteristics of a particular phenomenon within its context (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Descriptive research allows for a detailed exploration of communal land tenure systems and inter-communal conflicts by capturing the lived experiences and perceptions of community members. The target population for this study comprises community members residing in Samburu County, specifically focusing on pastoralist communities that rely heavily on communal land for grazing and other livelihoods. In selecting the target population, the study included different categories of community

members, with specific numbers as follows: 300 pastoralists to provide insights into their land management practices and experiences of conflict; 50 local leaders and elders to offer understanding of the historical and cultural context of land use and governance structures; and 20 representatives from community-based organizations to provide a broader perspective on the socio-economic implications of communal land management practices. (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2022).

Given the population size of pastoralist communities in Samburu County, a sample size of approximately 142 respondents was targeted to achieve a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error of 5%. This size is deemed adequate to ensure reliable and valid results that can adequately represent the views of the population. Data was collected using a combination of structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews as research instruments. Questionnaires were distributed to community members to gather quantitative data on communal land tenure systems and the frequency and nature of inter-communal conflicts. Quantitative data collected through questionnaires was analyzed using SPSS, to generate descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics provided an overview of the respondents' demographics and key trends related to communal land tenure systems and inter-communal conflict (Creswell, 2014). Inferential statistics, such as regression analysis, was employed to explore the relationships between variables and assess the significance of the findings.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographics

The research was conducted between the months of October 2025 and November 2025 with physical data collection conducted within Samburu County. The research also developed Google forms which helped in collecting study data electronically. The survey was able to receive 114 responses which represented an 80% response rate which was considered suitable for the quantitative analysis of the collected data as shown in Figure 2

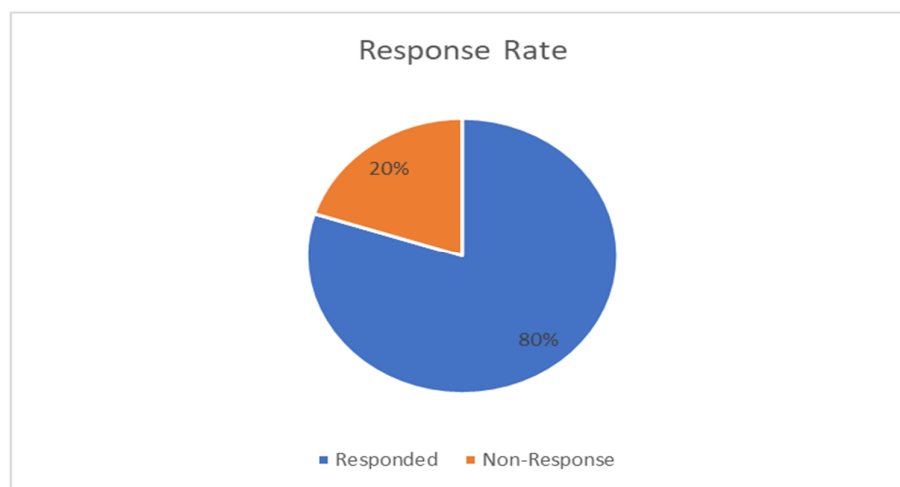


Figure 2 Response Rate

Table 1 Socio-Economic Profile of Respondents

| | | Frequency | Percent |
|-------------------------|--------------------|------------|--------------|
| Years living in Samburu | 5–10 years | 9 | 7.9 |
| | 11–20 years | 5 | 4.4 |
| | More than 20 years | 11 | 9.6 |
| | I was born here | 89 | 78.1 |
| | Total | 114 | 100.0 |
| Ethnic Group | Samburu | 69 | 60.5 |
| | Turkana | 18 | 15.8 |
| | Rendille | 10 | 8.8 |
| | Other | 17 | 14.9 |
| | Total | 114 | 100.0 |
| Household Size | 1–3 people | 17 | 14.9 |
| | 4–6 people | 46 | 40.4 |
| | 7–9 people | 43 | 37.7 |
| | 10 or more people | 8 | 7.0 |
| | Total | 114 | 100.0 |

Analysis showed that 78% of respondents were born in the County with 10% having lived there for over 20 years indicating the participants have stayed in the community for long thus can respond on the phenomenon being studied. The results showed that 61% of respondents identified as Samburu, 16% as Turkana and 15% were from other ethnic groups indicating the growing cosmopolitan ethnic diversity in the county. The findings showed that 40% of the households had 4-6 people, 38% between 7-9 people with 15% having 1-3 dwellers implying a multi-dwelling household setup.

Communal Land Ownership

The research further examined the ownership of communal land within the County and the summary is shown in Table 3

Table 3 Communal Land Ownership

| | | Frequency | Percent |
|--------------------------|---------------------------------------|------------|--------------|
| Own/Manage Communal Land | No | 34 | 29.8 |
| | Yes | 80 | 70.2 |
| | Total | 114 | 100.0 |
| Role in Community | Community leader | 9 | 7.9 |
| | Member of a land management committee | 2 | 1.8 |
| | Grazing committee member | 13 | 11.4 |
| | Local government official | 9 | 7.9 |
| | General community member | 81 | 71.1 |
| | Total | 114 | 100.0 |

The results showed that 70% of the respondents owned of managed communal land within the County showing experience in issues regarding the inter-communal conflict.

The findings revealed that 71% of respondents were general community members, 11% were grazing committee members and 8% community leaders in Samburu County confirming they have knowledge on the subject matter being investigated.

Regression Analysis

The study conducted regression analysis to estimate the effect of communal land management practices on inter-communal conflict in Samburu County. The results are shown in this section.

Table 4 Regression Summary between communal land management practices on inter-communal conflict

Model Summary

| Model | R | R Square | Adjusted R Square | Std. Error of the Estimate |
|-------|-------------------|----------|-------------------|----------------------------|
| 1 | .399 ^a | .159 | .128 | .53710 |

a. Predictors: (Constant), Local Governance, Grazing Management, Land Tenure, Land Use

The findings above showed an R-square = .159 which revealed that holding other factors constant atleast 15.9% of the changes in inter-communal conflict in Samburu County can be determined by communal land management practices.

Table 5 ANOVA Summary between communal land management practices on inter-communal conflict

ANOVA^a

| Model | | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | Sig. |
|-------|------------|----------------|-----|-------------|-------|-------------------|
| 1 | Regression | 5.959 | 4 | 1.490 | 5.164 | .001 ^b |
| | Residual | 31.444 | 109 | .288 | | |
| | Total | 37.403 | 113 | | | |

a. Dependent Variable: Communal Conflict

b. Predictors: (Constant), LocalGovernance, Grazing Management, Land Tenure, Land Use

The results of the ANOVA tests revealed a F-value = 5.164, Sig = .001<.05 which shows there was a positive and statistically significant relationship between communal land management practices and inter-communal conflict in Samburu County.

Table 6 Regression Coefficients for communal land management practices

| | | Coefficients ^a | | | | |
|-------|--------------------|-----------------------------|------------|---------------------------|-------|------|
| Model | | Unstandardized Coefficients | | Standardized Coefficients | | |
| | | B | Std. Error | Beta | t | Sig. |
| 1 | (Constant) | 2.421 | .520 | | 4.651 | .000 |
| | Land Tenure | .040 | .015 | .031 | 2.667 | .003 |
| | Grazing Management | .340 | .100 | .357 | 3.404 | .001 |
| | Land Use-Planning | -.052 | .130 | -.043 | -.403 | .688 |
| | Local Governance | .178 | .090 | .199 | 1.973 | .051 |

a. Dependent Variable: Communal Conflict

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Communal Land Tenure Systems and Inter-Communal Conflict

Communal land tenure systems ascribe collective ownership and describe the flexibility of boundaries in communal land, this study established that land tenure systems in Samburu County have a weak but statistically positive and significant effect on inter-communal conflicts, implying that there may be unclear or unwritten boundaries on communal territories, seasonal use overlap due to shrinking land resources, or weak legal protections for communal tenures. These findings are in coherence with the Common Pool Resource and conflict theories both which observe that poorly designed communal land tenure systems that do not properly define and enforce access and use rights can inadvertently increase inter-communal conflict (Gwatela, 2017). Similarly, Ndi and Batterbury (2017) findings were that political conflicts over land resources were contributing to feelings of marginalization which often results in conflict. The study particularly highlighted the impact of large-scale land acquisitions by foreign interests on land scrambles and claim-making, a finding that was also confirmed to contribute to conflict in Samburu by its residents. While for Ndi and Batterbury;, however, land conflicts in Cameroon were triggered by land purchases for farming purposes, in Samburu County, these conflicts are usually triggered when pastoralists encroach into conservatives and private ranches. Such modern tenure systems permitting land privatization are usually seen to undermine traditional communal practices and disrupt established social relations and power dynamics (Kilonzo & Wanjala 2016).

Communal Grazing Management Practices and Inter-Communal Conflict

Pastoralism relies on shrinking land and while communal grazing systems aim to address the root causes of conflict by providing structured frameworks for grazing patterns, this study found them to have the most significant predictive effects on inter-communal conflict ($\text{Beta} = .340$). Being Common Pool Resources, the CPR and conflict theories both predict that grazing management practices contribute to conflict when they fail to address competing resource demands, especially those that are prone to overuse and degradation (Mahamud, 2020). The CPR in particular highlights how local land management structures contribute to conflicts when they are perceived as partisan, are ineffective, or distrusted by members of the community. Indeed, Nigeria's Okonkwo, Chris, and Udegbumam (2023) established that while the ongoing clashes between farmers and herders stem from competition over water and grazing lands, they have persisted due to unsustainable grazing practices and effective conflict resolution mechanisms. In Botswana, Kalabamu (2019) findings were that there was an unequal relationship in how laws are formulated and implemented, confirming anti-pastoral prejudice as a factor that increases their exclusion in decision-making arenas.

Communal Land-Use Planning on Inter-Communal Conflict

Integrated land use plans aim to reduce conflict by properly identifying and categorizing land for different purposes, resource access, management, and dispute resolution. While poor planning can exacerbate conflicts, and responding expressing strong belief that effective land-use planning can reduce conflict this study found no significant linear

relationship between land use planning and conflict. This finding contradicts theoretical expectations of the CPR theory which predicts that communal land-use planning should reduce inter-communal conflict by introducing frameworks for governance of shared resources that address unequal power dynamics, resource access, and conflicting interests among different groups (Degefa, 2010). The finding that land-use planning has no significant effects on inter-communal conflict also contradicts empirical evidence from Mbazor and Ojo (2019), Oluteyo (2024) and Agheyisi (2024) who all established direct associations. For Mbazor and Ojo (2019), lack of a comprehensive land use plan increased horizontal inequalities and the sense of marginalization among identity groups which intensified communal conflicts while in the study by Agheyisi (2024), unequal power relations and structures led to competing land claims.

Local Governance Structures and Inter-Communal Conflict

Local government structures they provide the platform for citizens to participate in the decision-making processes that affect their lives and the systems for procedural actions, consultations and cooperation, agreements, as well as mutual arrangements and, this study findings were that the governance structures in Samburu County have positive significant effect. This is supported by the CPR theory which predicts that high-quality self-organized local institutions should play a significant role in reducing the risk of conflict by providing trusted, efficient, and transparent structures that are locally owned. Meanwhile, the conflict theory suggests that governance structures undermine conflict resolution and increase intercommunal conflict when they exhibit bias, undermine traditions, or fail to ensure equitable representation (Kandoro, 2021). Osei and Baffour (2022) particularly highlighted the role of local leaders in mediating and solving disputes, fostering community harmony and addressing root causes of conflicts. Wagana et al. (2019) further ascertained that even after controlling for poverty, urbanization, and prior conflict levels, the likelihood of violence reduces significantly when local governments are trusted and presumed to be incorruptible. This study's finding therefore contradicts these findings and highlights a need to ensure local institutions are truly locally owned, transparent and accountable.

Conclusions

The study concludes that the variables investigated can reliably predict levels of communal conflict, with grazing management practices showing the strongest positive predictive effect on conflict. The study concludes that grazing management is the single most significant positive predictor of conflict, with perceptions of grazing access inequality giving rise to communal conflicts. The study concludes that while the leaders have developed rules for sustainable grazing, many of these rules are rarely respected, invoking that they are not effectively executed or too limiting. Consequently, grazing areas are not equally accessible to all community members, and conflicts mostly arise from inadequate grazing management practices.

The study further concludes that land tenure rules have a small, but significant effects on the likelihood of conflict, implying that changes to existing land tenure arrangements

increase the likelihood of conflict. The study concludes that while some land tenure arrangements may have a positive effect on peace by enhancing resource sharing, land ownership disputes are common in the community. The study further concludes that local governance only has marginal effects on conflict, with governance weaknesses predicting conflict.

The study concludes that while effective local governance structures can be effective in enhancing resource management, and local leaders can play a role in conflict mediation, local governance structures are not accessible to all community members. Lastly, the study concludes that while conflicts can be resolved through effective land-use planning, they mostly arise from poor land-use plans which do not address the needs of all community members. Moreover, community members are rarely involved in land-use planning which could remove them from ownership of the plans.

Recommendations

The first recommendation is for land commission policy makers to introduce national and regional policy frameworks promoting decentralized, community-managed grazing units. This framework should empower the local groups to be able to play a key role in defining and enforcing rules on resource boundaries, access, and sanctions. Moreover, the study calls for clear, equitable rules providing provisions for access to grazing fields. In addition to setting up these rules, the study calls for rigorous community education campaigns to ensure all locals are aware of sustainable grazing practices.

Further, at county level policies should legally integrate legitimate traditional land tenure practices into statutory systems and ensure there are clear, conflict-sensitive frameworks directing land access and ownership. Land mapping in the region should be community-driven and mapped along customary land boundaries and use rights to reduce possibilities of external influence. Aside from these laws, the study calls for community-driven education meetings educate all community members, especially women and youth, on their land rights under both traditional and national laws.

This study calls for the structures to be reformed to ensure they are more inclusive and transparent. There should be legislative requirements for the proceeding of meetings decisions, and budgets related to resource management to be publicly disclosed to all community members. These can be done through regular public forums specifically held to discuss resource management practices, grazing and rotation plans, as well as the budgets for protecting communal land. Moreover, the study calls on land management committees to carry out regular town hall meetings and invite inputs from all members of the community. The study further recommends that land-use plans be integrated with grazing management strategies to increase their effectiveness.

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