

The Kasese Land Question and Socioeconomic Development: Exploring the Implications of the Land Conflicts on the Economic Development of Kasese District

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the land conflicts vis-à-vis socioeconomic development. Majorly, the paper looks at the impact of land conflicts on economic development in Kasese district. The writer acknowledges that there are several land conflicts that have constantly marred Kasese district, distablising peace, stability and economic development. This conclusion is supported by several publications reviewed by the writer. Literature reviewed also reveals that Kasese is one of the poorest regions in Uganda with the levels of poverty standing at 55.2%. Therefore, the endless land wrangles have taken a toll on development, diverted people's energies and time away from developmental projects, hindered sustainable environmental use and led to several deaths of the able bodied who could foster development, to mention but a few. Therefore, a critical analysis of the land issue could contribute to the understanding of this challenge and its solution. For this reason, the paper finally suggests sustainable solutions to this land question.

INTRODUCTION

Land conflicts or disputes, as other researchers refer to them, are generally disagreements over land ownership and use. This idea is supported by [1] who has the notion that land conflicts are incompatible clashes on land ownership and usage rights by two or more parties, focused on a particular piece of land. [2] too notes that land conflicts occur when there are conflicting views on land-use policies such as when an increasing population creates a competitive demand for the use of land, causing a negative impact on other land users nearby. On the other hand, economic development is qualitative increase in social and economic aspects of the society. It is the programs, policies and activities that seek to improve the economic well-being and quality of life in a community [3]. Economic development is the process of improving economic welfare in an economy and it entails improvement in all

or most of the societal aspects like household incomes and assets, health, economic activity, infrastructure, sanitation and energy [4]. Low economic development, or underdevelopment, is a general characteristic for most developing countries, Uganda in particular. Kasese District is not spared either as it is one of the underdeveloped districts of Uganda. According to [5], though in general Uganda has reduced monetary poverty at a very rapid rate, the statistics do not reflect what is on ground in most parts, especially upcountry Uganda. For example, though the proportion of the Ugandan population living below the national poverty line declined from 31.1% in 2006 to 19.7% in 2013, the poverty levels of Kasese stand at 55.2% which is much higher than the national poverty tally. This presents a critical problem that needs urgent solution. The low development problem in Uganda is

further worsened by the inequalities that exist among the different regions and areas in the country. For example, progress in reducing poverty has been much slower in Western Uganda (where the Kasese District lies), and thus, the concentration of poverty is higher in this region compared to central Uganda. Also, households in Uganda's Western region have much lower levels of human capital, fewer assets, and more limited access to services and infrastructure than households in the Central region. For example, electricity is almost nonexistent in Western regions, where the proportion of households with access stands at only 8.6% where the Rwenzori region takes a considerable share of this percentage. This is far lower than 32.3% recorded for the Central region. Worth to note is Kasese scores very low in almost all other economic development indicators. For example, Kasese's literacy rates stand at 68% yet the national figure is higher at 76.5%. Also, the quality of life, employment levels, access to clean water, infrastructural development and general household incomes are very low in most of the parts of Kasese [5, 6, 7].

Land conflicts and economic development are two issues that have attracted researchers all over the world due to their prevalence. Land conflicts alone are currently widespread in the world, with most of the economies of countries affected by the social issue. Studies carried out across the world in Sri Lanka, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Liberia and Sudan among others point to a high prevalence

The implications of the land conflicts on socioeconomic development

Land conflicts world over have a devastating impact on socioeconomic development. They undermine developmental efforts and activities that stimulate development. Most of the socioeconomic indicators are affected negatively or stagnated by these conflicts. Agricultural is negatively affected or crippled, food production lowered and the entire sector's output affected. Agriculture forms the backbone of the economics of most developing countries where such conflicts are rampant. Infrastructural development is affected,

of land conflicts and their devastating effects especially on economic progress. In most of these areas, studies have found a close link between land disputes and economic progress. In Uganda, the land question is one of the trending unresolved issues. All regions of the country are characterized by land disputes of all types. There is evidence of land violence in Buganda, Karamoja, Ankole and the Rwenzori region. In Kasese in particular, there are several conflicts over land [8, 9]. According to [10], between 2.5% and 5% households in Uganda had a pending land conflict in and about the same percentage had been affected by a land dispute in the last 8 years. Since then, figures of land disputes in Uganda have increased with the increase in population. For example, [11] notes that that there is a county wide increase in land disputes, where the occurrence of land conflicts at household level is (34.9%), with rural households accounting for (36%) of these conflicts. Kasese shares on these important statistics for rural Uganda. With such interesting dynamics, it is important to study land conflicts economic development. Interesting to note is that with the ever-rising population figures in Uganda, land disputes are expected to escalate. Uganda's population is growing at a high rate of 3.2 per cent and is projected to shoot to over 55 million in 2025 [12]. These important statistics have a direct impact on economic development, which is expected to be worsened by land conflicts.

local businesses crippled, the environment degraded and put to improper use, mining distablised, the health sector shattered as among other threats to socioeconomic development presented by land conflicts. In a more dangerous twist, land wrangles have resulted into dangerous wars in many parts of the world such as Sri Lanka, Nigeria and Sudan to mention but a few. The wars have even done more harm to socioeconomic development than the land conflicts themselves. There is enough empirical evidence of the danger that land

conflicts are able to cause to socioeconomic development.

Though [13] who investigated ethnic grievances and land conflicts in Sri Lanka found out that there is no enough evidence to support the argument that land had a link with the conflicts in the country, there was still a clear link between conflict and economic development. Other studies in the same country find land conflicts prevalent and significant, having a toll on development projects [14, 15]. Again, a study by [1] concludes that the nearly 25-year war in Sri Lanka that devastated development was fought over geographic claims to an ethnic homeland for the country's minority population. Such interesting dynamics call for a study to iron out such differences. Studies on the same area could also be carried out elsewhere to test the contradictory findings of such earlier findings.

According to [16], most of the countries where competing land jurisdictions exist, communal land conflict is 200-350% more likely to happen. This prevalence of communal land conflict in Africa is worrying. In most of the African countries, there are both customary and modern land jurisdictions in area predominantly inhabited different ethnic groups. This is a precursor to land insecurity which largely leads to land conflicts. This explains the various land disputes in West African countries such as Ivory Coast, Ghana, Gambia, Niger, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Senegal and Togo among others. The study doesn't exonerate the rest of Africa. However, the interesting coincidence the study presents is that these countries fragile to land conflicts are some of the poorest in the world [16]. These interesting statistics continue to confirm the link between land disputes and socio-economic development in African countries.

In Nigeria, inter-community conflicts caused by boundary disputes have been heavily linked to crop production. According to [17], arable crop production was adversely affected by land conflicts, but picked up after resolution of the conflicts in most Nigerian communities.

Agricultural activities were negatively affected by the conflict incidences. The conflict cases were managed with adoption of negotiation, security agents, and governmental agencies' intervention and judicial injunction. Crop production in Africa forms a vital component of socioeconomic development since most of the developing countries are largely dependent on agriculture. Therefore, to stimulate economic development, one must stimulate agriculture. The stagnation of many economies in Africa could be attributed to the poor performance of the agricultural sector. This explains why this writer interests themselves in land conflicts that have been cited by [17] as being factors behind the poor performance of agriculture in Africa, Nigeria in particular.

In Uganda, for instance, in 2020/2021, agriculture accounted for about 23.7% of GDP and 31% export earnings the highest compared to other sectors. Also, about 70% of Uganda's working population is employed in agriculture. Agriculture shares the largest percentage of the country's economy. Therefore, if the agricultural sector is distalised, this could distalise the entire economy. For the moment, the performance of Uganda's economy will largely depend on the performance of the agricultural sector. Land conflicts, on the other hand, limit agricultural activity as usually no activity takes place in disputed land [11, 12].

[18] who empirically researched about farm land conflicts and their Socio-Economic Consequences in Tigray, Ethiopia discovered how farm land conflict terminates the social interaction of the community. Furthermore, the study found out that in average individuals and communities involved in these conflicts waste pretty much time in settling the cases, the time they would invest in developmental activities like farming. On average, one farm household respondent waste more than one month and birr 2445.72 annually to execute their case when the farm land conflict went to the court. Moreover, farmers lose 18.8 percent to 23.2 percent agricultural productivity because of farm land

conflicts. Farm land conflict hampers local and national development by mainly affecting rural agricultural productivity [18, 19]. Such statistics are bad for developing economies that largely depend on agriculture.

There is also evidence of land wrangles destroying success in livestock farming. Most of the pastoral communities in Africa usually have land conflicts due to communal ownership and use of land. Such communities end up disagreeing on how they should use the land before they go to who owns the land. Such clashes have been common in Western and Central Africa among the Fulani of Nigeria, the Massai, Tuareg, Peauls, Karamajong, and the Turkana among others. In Western and Central Africa alone, pastoral communities account for 13% of the inhabitants. In Africa, there are about 268 million pastoralists [20, 21]. Therefore, the land conflicts scattered among pastoral communities are able to affect a considerable part of Africa. This picture gives the exact magnitude of the problem. Land conflicts among pastoral communities are able to affect 43% of the continents total land mass since this is what is occupied by these pastoralists [21]. [22], in a study among the pastoral communities in Ghana, explains that reduction in farm produce, insecurity and increase loan default rates were among some of the major economic impacts of the land conflicts on livelihoods. Other socioeconomic impacts highlighted by the

The context of Kasese district

Conflicts over land use and access in Kasese and their impact on socioeconomic development have been widely reported [24, 25, 26]. Some studies highlight a recent rise in land disputes and foresee a further increase as population continues growing and more young workers enter the job market [6]. Kasese district has a long history of conflict ranging from armed conflict to ethnic and land conflicts. The conflicts in this area have led to internally displaced persons who are majorly landless. These have escalated land tensions further. The Bakonzo ethnic group which dominates the district have a historical claim for

study include interruption of education of children due to low income. Since the conflicts are among farmers and cattle keepers, both economic activities have been disrupted.

[23] studied land related conflicts and their impact on infrastructural development and found that the progress of the Diamer Bhasha Dam project in northern Pakistan had been seriously hampered by land wrangles related to unfair land acquisition, improper displacement, inadequate compensation, resettlement and future livelihoods. The development of such a lucrative socioeconomic venture had been put at stake due to land wrangles. The completion of the project then depended on the arrangement of project finance, resolution of conflicts among different actors and the consent of all stakeholders which was costly. Outside Pakistan, land wrangles have hampered public infrastructural development. Socioeconomic goods like roads, electricity lines, playgrounds, commercial structures, markets, power stations have been affected in Uganda. [24] studied the post LRA land disputes in Northern Uganda and found out that land related conflicts hindered postwar reconstruction, infrastructural development, peace and stability in the region. This kept the region lag behind in socioeconomic development compared to the more developed regions such as central Uganda.

marginalization which claim once was responsible for the boiling tensions between the Bakonzo and Tooro Kingdom. Tensions peaked in the 1960s, when the Bakonzo embraced the Rwenzururu movement. At the time, the Bakonzo were only limited to the slopes of Mt Rwenzori which were fertile but could not favour other economic activities like trade given their unfavorable relief. Taking up this part of the land meant the Bakonzo would lag behind in socioeconomic development. Today, poverty in Kasese is estimated at 55.2% [12]. Majority of the inhabitants of the district have allowed conflict to consume much of their time

that they would invest in development. Conflicts have also created a lot of divisionism which destroys the social structure and wellbeing consequently hampering development. According to the [8], Kasese remains divided, and tensions over access to resources persist; activities by external development actors sometimes inadvertently aggravate these divisions impacting on the development

of the area. The land question in Kasese is a time bomb. Only one third of Kasese is legally habitable, since over 60% of land is taken up by conservation and government projects [8]. The biggest part of Kasese is occupied by national parks, game and forest reserves. It is also interesting to note that 29113skm of land in Kasese is dry. The land area in Kasese can be summarized by the table below

Table 1: Land Area in Kasese District:

Total surface area:	3,389.8 Km
Dry land:	2911.3 square kilometres (86 per cent)
Open water:	409.7 square kilometers
Permanent swamp/wetland:	68.8 square kilometres (2 %of the total Land area)
Nature and wildlife conservation:	1834.6 square kilometres (63 per cent of the land area)
Population density:	183 persons/Km2, (450 persons per square kilometre-land available for farming and settlement)

Source: *Kasese District Local Government, 2022*

This land distribution leaves little land for the people to use for both farming and grazing. The 450 persons per square kilometre is worrying. This situation has exacerbating land wrangles between the Basongora cattle keepers and Bakonzo cultivators consequently resulting into loss of lives, crops, property and livestock in areas such as Busongora county. For example, renewed clashes among the Bakonzo and Basongora groups in Kabukero in 2021 left at least nine people injured and more than 10 cows mutilated. The two communities are still feuding over the ownership of part of the 1,100 acres which were carved out of Mubuku prison farm in 2017 to resettle Basongora pastoralists and later a section of dispossessed Bakonzo. Apart from interpersonal conflicts, land wrangles in Kasese have also led to serious conflicts between humans and the environment. As a result, some gazetted land for environmental protection has been taken up for use by people. This either has an impact on tourism which is a socioeconomic activity in Kasese. A report published by the Independent (2021) notes that Basongora communities were resettled on a piece of land measuring 2,017 acres after they had been forced out of Queen Elizabeth National Park. The group had a year earlier been evicted out

of Virunga National Park by the Democratic Republic of Congo-DRC. Later, the Kasese district local government raised concerns about the existence of landless Bakonzo communities, prompting the government to give them a portion of the land. The land was distributed in the ratio of 3:1 acre for Basongora: Bakonzo respectively which has sparked fresh wrangles. Land conflicts in Kasese have also affected infrastructural development, scaring donors, investors and government. Harris (2008) has reported land wrangles slowing the construction and use of the Kiywebe Gravity Flow Scheme in the Rukoki and Mahango communities. The KDLG District Water Office (DWO), along with Saferworld, CECORE and REDROC developed the Kiywebe scheme, a gravity flow scheme (GFS) for the Rukoki and Mahango communities, which would connect approximately 10,000 people with water. While plans for the scheme were undertaken along with participation of numerous actors, the process had not been easy. Some of the most common conflict issues with the project included relationships between communities and those communities' trust in local government.

Livelihoods and ethnicities are closely related as noted by [8], but these are

disorganized by the land conflicts that destroy the social structure in the district. The Bakonzo, largest ethnic group in the district, are mainly dedicated to agriculture while the Basongora mainly rely on livestock [8, 25]. The Basongora people feel marginalized and oppressed by the Bakonzo majority while these consider that the Basongora are largely benefiting from development projects and land distribution administered by the

central government. There are disputes over land ownership due to unclear land titles, aggravated by the lack of land in a district where conservation areas occupy more than half of the territory [25]. These series of vulnerabilities and grievances have led to violence between both ethnic groups, including the killing and injury of people, attacks on livestock and the burning of houses [27].

CONCLUSION

Land conflicts in Kasese district are a significant issue, with the population increasing rapidly. The district is particularly affected by underdevelopment and land conflicts. To address this issue, deliberate efforts should be made to improve the insecure land tenure system, government efforts, and economic activities in the area. In Uganda, the land tenure system in Kasese is often customary or leasehold, which can be manipulated and ownership revoked. To mitigate these conflicts, people in Kasese can convert land tenures into freehold, providing secure land titles from the district land office. Government efforts should also be made to open up new boundaries, demarcate, survey, fence, enclose, and issue ownership titles to new occupants. Agricultural modernization can help solve land-related conflicts by practicing on smaller pieces of land, such as zero grazing, which may free some pressure on land. The problem

in Kasese is that the limited legal land available for use is overstretched by many groups of people who want to use it. Modern agriculture requires smaller plots, as it is qualitative rather than quantitative. The best economic activity in Kasese could save the district from land conflicts is industrialization. The district can be turned into an industrial hub, allowing people to survive by working for industries. However, the available land is not enough for all inhabitants to use to their satisfaction, and much of the land is gazetted, leaving the remaining land either dry or unproductive. Finally, the issue of land conflicts in Kasese district should attract more empirical researchers to explore sustainable solutions. While researchers have widely published about the conflicts and their impacts, there is still a need for comprehensive studies on sustainable solutions to foster development in the area.

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