

Land Conflicts in Bulambuli Constituency, Uganda: Drivers, Consequences and Policy Options for Prevention and Sustainable Resolution- A Policy Brief

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SUMMARY

Land is a fundamental economic, social and cultural resource in Bulambuli Constituency. It supports agriculture, settlement, livelihoods, family reproduction and local development. However, competition over land, historical displacement, competing claims, uncertain boundaries, changing patterns of land ownership, environmental risks and weaknesses in land governance can generate serious and prolonged conflicts. The most important evidence specific to Bulambuli comes from the work of Khanakwa (2022), which demonstrates how the history of cattle rustling and displacement in Bunambutye contributed to later conflicts between returning customary claimants and new claimants possessing formal land titles. The study illustrates a critical policy lesson: contemporary land conflicts may have deep historical roots and cannot always be resolved simply by examining present occupation or documentary ownership. Bulambuli's land-conflict environment is also affected by environmental displacement and resettlement. Bunambutye has become an important government resettlement location for households displaced or threatened by landslides in the wider Mount Elgon region. Government sources show continuing relocation, land acquisition, surveying and allocation processes in the area. Such processes make transparent land acquisition, consultation, demarcation and allocation particularly important for preventing future conflicts between host communities, existing land interests and resettled populations. At the national level, Uganda's legal framework recognizes customary, freehold, mailo and leasehold tenure systems. Customary tenure is therefore legally recognized, but the interaction between customary and statutory institutions can create institutional complexity and uncertainty over authority, evidence and dispute resolution (Constitution of the Republic of Uganda, 1995; Land Act, 1998; Adoko, 2014). Land conflict has significant development consequences. Deininger and Castagnini (2006) found that land conflicts in Uganda can substantially reduce agricultural productivity and that female-headed households and widows are particularly vulnerable. This evidence reinforces the need for land-conflict policy to incorporate economic, social and gender dimensions rather than treating disputes exclusively as legal disagreements. Land conflict can also intersect with criminality. Uganda Police Force data show that reported land-fraud cases increased from 397 in 2024 to 663 in 2025, with common offences including fraudulent procurement of certificates of title, obtaining registration by false pretenses, criminal trespass, obtaining money by false pretenses and forgery (Uganda Police Force, 2025). These national statistics should not be interpreted as measuring crime specifically in Bulambuli, but they demonstrate the wider importance of strengthening safeguards against land-related fraud and criminality. This policy brief recommends a preventive and coordinated approach built around six priorities:

1. Establish a Bulambuli Land Conflict Prevention and Resolution Platform.
2. Map and monitor land-conflict hotspots and high-risk areas.
3. Strengthen documentation, verification and protection of customary and family land rights.
4. Introduce historically informed and community-sensitive land-dispute resolution.
5. Improve the governance of resettlement and government land acquisition.
6. Strengthen access to mediation, justice, public awareness and protection of vulnerable groups.

The central policy message is that Bulambuli requires a shift from reactive management of land disputes to a preventive land-governance system capable of identifying risks before conflicts escalate into displacement, violence, fraud or prolonged litigation.

1. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

1.1 Land as a foundation of livelihoods and social security

Land is more than an economic asset in rural Uganda. It provides a basis for agricultural production, housing, food security, inheritance, family identity and social belonging. Consequently, conflicts over land often involve relationships between families, generations, communities and institutions.

Uganda's Constitution establishes that land belongs to the citizens of Uganda and recognizes four tenure systems: customary, freehold, mailo and leasehold (Constitution of the Republic of Uganda, 1995). The Land Act further recognizes customary tenure

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as a legally valid form of tenure governed by locally accepted rules and capable of supporting individual, family and communal interests (Land Act, 1998).

This legal recognition is important for Bulambuli, where land relations may involve both formal documentation and socially recognized claims based on family, community, historical occupation and customary arrangements.

However, legal recognition does not automatically eliminate conflict. Research on land governance in Uganda demonstrates that statutory and customary institutions frequently coexist, creating what scholars describe as institutional or legal pluralism. Where the responsibilities and authority of different institutions are unclear, claimants may seek favorable decisions from different forums, while vulnerable landholders may struggle to navigate complex procedures (Adoko, 2014).

Policy implication

Bulambuli should not attempt to resolve land conflicts by treating customary and formal systems as mutually exclusive. The policy priority should be to establish clear coordination, referral and verification mechanisms between them.

1.2 Historical roots of land conflict in Bulambuli

The history of insecurity and displacement is particularly relevant to understanding land conflicts in Bulambuli. Khanakwa's (2022) study of Bunambutye demonstrates how chronic cattle rustling from the 1960s disrupted communities and contributed to displacement. Residents who had been separated from their land later returned to find competing claimants, including individuals holding formal title documents. The resulting disputes were therefore connected not simply to contemporary land transactions but to historical processes of displacement, occupation, return and competing forms of legitimacy (Khanakwa, 2022).

This finding has broader relevance for Bulambuli Constituency. It suggests that land conflicts may involve several overlapping questions:

- Who occupied the land historically?
- Was occupation interrupted by insecurity or displacement?
- Who subsequently occupied or acquired the land?
- How were subsequent transactions documented?
- What customary claims continue to exist?
- Are formal documents consistent with the historical circumstances under which competing claims emerged?

A dispute-resolution process that considers only the most recent transaction or current possession may therefore fail to understand the origins of the conflict.

Policy implication: Major or long-standing land disputes in Bulambuli should be subjected to a historical land-claim assessment, particularly where displacement, insecurity or interrupted occupation is alleged.

2. THE NATURE OF THE LAND-CONFLICT PROBLEM

Land conflicts in Bulambuli Constituency are unlikely to have a single cause. They emerge from the interaction of historical, institutional, demographic, environmental and economic factors.

2.1 Competing claims to land

Different individuals or groups may claim the same land based on:

- customary ownership;
- inheritance;
- family rights;
- long-term occupation;
- purchase;
- lease arrangements;
- registration;
- historical occupation; or
- government acquisition and resettlement processes.

The difficulty arises when different institutions recognize different forms of evidence. One claimant may possess a title or sale agreement, while another may rely on family history, customary allocation or evidence of long-term occupation. Research on customary tenure in Uganda demonstrates that formalization and statutory recognition do not eliminate the role of customary institutions; instead, multiple institutions may continue to operate simultaneously (Adoko, 2014).

Policy implication

Land-dispute mechanisms should evaluate the chain of claims and transactions, rather than automatically assuming that one category of evidence is sufficient in every dispute.

2.2 Boundary uncertainty

Boundary disputes can occur between:

- neighboring households;
- families;
- clans or communities;
- villages;
- administrative units; and
- landholders with competing survey information.

Boundary disputes are especially likely to intensify where land values increase, population pressure grows or previously informal boundaries become commercially important.

The National Land Policy identifies unclear and insecure land rights, weaknesses in land administration and unresolved land disputes as important land-governance challenges requiring institutional reform (Ministry of Lands, Housing and Urban Development, 2013).

Policy implication

Bulambuli should prioritize participatory boundary identification and technical verification in areas with recurrent disputes rather than waiting for conflicts to reach courts or police.

2.3 Customary tenure and documentation challenges

Customary land is legally recognized under the Constitution and the Land Act. However, many customary interests may not be documented in ways that are easily understood or verified by formal institutions.

This creates a potential gap between:

- **socially recognized land rights**, and
- **formally documented land rights**.

Research on Uganda's land tenure system has cautioned against assuming that formal titles alone capture the full reality of ownership and control. Doss et al. (2014), for example, found that documentation and reported ownership may produce different pictures of land rights, particularly for women.

Policy implication: The solution should not be indiscriminate formalization. Instead, Bulambuli should promote accessible, affordable and legally appropriate documentation of legitimate rights, combined with effective verification and protection against fraudulent documentation.

2.4 Environmental displacement and resettlement

Environmental risk is increasingly relevant to land governance in Bulambuli and the wider Mount Elgon region. Government programs have used Bunambutye as a location for the temporary and permanent resettlement of households displaced or threatened by landslides. Government reports indicate continued acquisition, surveying and allocation of land for affected households, including the relocation of more than a thousand households to Bunambutye in recent years (Office of the Prime Minister, 2024, 2026).

Resettlement is necessary for protecting lives, but it can generate land-governance pressures if:

- land is acquired without adequate verification;
- existing interests are insufficiently identified;
- host communities are inadequately consulted;
- allocation processes are unclear;
- boundaries are not properly demarcated; or
- beneficiaries do not receive clear information concerning their land rights.

Policy implication

Every resettlement program affecting Bulambuli should incorporate a Land Conflict and Social Impact Assessment before land acquisition, allocation or settlement.

3. KEY DRIVERS OF LAND CONFLICT

3.1 Historical displacement

Displacement can separate communities from land without necessarily eliminating their social or customary claims. Returning populations may subsequently encounter new occupants or competing documents. The Bunambutye case demonstrates how displacement and return can produce conflict between historical claimants and later title holders (Khanakwa, 2022).

Policy response: Establish procedures for reconstructing the historical sequence of occupation, displacement, transactions and registration.

3.2 Increasing pressure and value of land

As land becomes more economically valuable, competition over ownership and control may increase. Land may be sought for:

- agriculture;
- settlement;
- commercial activity;
- infrastructure;
- environmental resettlement; and investment.

Research across Uganda demonstrates that increasing competition over land can expose weaknesses in tenure systems and intensify conflict where institutions are unable to adapt effectively (Deininger & Castagnini, 2006).

Policy response: Introduce early monitoring of high-value or high-risk land transactions.

3.3 Institutional fragmentation

Land disputes may pass through several institutions, including:

- Local Council structures;
- customary leaders;
- district land institutions;
- land registration authorities;
- police;
- courts; and
- political offices.

Institutional multiplicity can provide citizens with options, but it can also generate inconsistent decisions and opportunities for forum shopping (Adoko, 2014).

Policy response: Establish a common referral protocol defining which institution should handle which category of dispute.

3.4 Family, inheritance and gender relations

Land conflict is frequently connected to family relationships, marriage, widowhood, divorce and inheritance. Deininger and Castagnini (2006) found that female-headed households and widows were disproportionately affected by land conflicts in Uganda. More recent scholarship similarly demonstrates that statutory legal protections may coexist with customary practices that can make women's land rights difficult to assert in practice (Kabahinda, 2017; Namuwaya, 2025).

Policy response: Land-dispute mechanisms should require meaningful participation of women and protect the rights of widows, divorced women, children and other vulnerable household members.

4. CONSEQUENCES OF LAND CONFLICT

4.1 Reduced agricultural productivity and livelihoods

Land disputes discourage households from investing in land improvement where future access is uncertain. Deininger and Castagnini (2006) found a significant negative relationship between land conflict and productivity in Uganda. For a constituency substantially dependent on land-based livelihoods, unresolved conflict can therefore contribute to:

- reduced agricultural investment;
- lower household incomes;
- food insecurity;
- loss of productive time; and
- increased legal and administrative costs.

4.2 Social fragmentation

Land conflicts can divide:

- family members;
- neighbors;
- clans;
- communities; and
- generations.

The consequences can continue long after formal legal proceedings have ended because disputes may involve identity, historical memory and social belonging.

The Bunambutye evidence demonstrates that land disputes may be deeply connected to historical experiences of displacement and community identity (Khanakwa, 2022).

4.3 Violence and criminality

Although not every land dispute is criminal, conflicts can create circumstances in which threats, violence, intimidation, forgery, fraud or criminal trespass occur. National police data show a substantial increase in reported land-fraud cases between 2024 and 2025. Common offences included fraudulent procurement of certificates of title, registration by false pretenses, criminal trespass and forgery (Uganda Police Force, 2025).

Important qualification

These figures are national statistics, not Bulambuli-specific prevalence data. They should therefore be used to demonstrate the broader policy significance of land-related criminality rather than to estimate the scale of crime within Bulambuli.

5. POLICY GOAL

To establish a preventive, transparent, inclusive and coordinated system for managing land relations in Bulambuli Constituency in order to reduce land conflicts, protect legitimate land rights, strengthen access to justice and prevent disputes from escalating into violence, displacement or land-related criminality.

6. RECOMMENDED POLICY ACTIONS

1. *Establish a Bulambuli Land Conflict Prevention and Resolution Platform*

Establish a permanent multi-stakeholder coordination mechanism for identifying and responding to emerging land conflicts.

Membership

The platform should include representatives from:

- Bulambuli District Local Government;
- relevant land administration institutions;
- local political leadership;
- customary and community leaders;
- Uganda Police Force;
- the Judiciary or appropriate justice-sector representatives;
- civil society organizations;
- women and youth representatives; and
- representatives of communities affected by displacement or resettlement.

Core functions

The platform should:

1. identify emerging land-conflict hotspots;
2. coordinate institutional responses;
3. develop a referral mechanism;
4. monitor high-risk transactions and disputes;
5. promote mediation;
6. identify cases requiring technical survey or legal determination; and
7. monitor implementation of agreed resolutions.

Rationale

Institutional multiplicity is a recognized challenge in Uganda's land governance. Coordination can reduce duplication, contradictory decisions and forum shopping (Adoko, 2014).

2. *Develop a Bulambuli Land Conflict Early-Warning System*

Land conflicts should be identified before they escalate.

Proposed indicators

The system should monitor:

- repeated disputes over the same parcel;
- competing ownership claims;
- sudden increases in land transactions;
- boundary disagreements;
- allegations of fraudulent documentation;
- disputes involving displacement;
- proposed government acquisitions;
- resettlement pressures; and

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- threats or violence associated with land.

Implementation

Local Council leaders, community leaders and district officials should submit periodic reports to a central district-level coordination mechanism.

Expected outcome

Earlier intervention and reduced escalation.

3. Introduce Historical Land-Claim Assessments

For disputes involving long-term occupation, displacement or historical claims, institutions should establish the history of the dispute.

Assessment should examine:

- original occupation;
- customary allocation;
- displacement;
- subsequent occupation;
- land transactions;
- inheritance;
- registration; and
- current possession.

Evidence should include:

- formal documents;
- survey records;
- oral testimony;
- family histories;
- customary knowledge; and
- other legally relevant evidence.

This approach is strongly supported by the Bunambutye case, where historical displacement was central to understanding the contemporary disputes (Khanakwa, 2022).

4. Strengthen Documentation and Verification of Land Rights

Bulambuli should expand public awareness regarding legally available mechanisms for documenting customary and family land interests.

The Ministry of Lands has continued to develop procedures and guidance concerning customary land transactions and Certificates of Customary Ownership.

Priority actions

- increase community awareness of documentation procedures;
- support lawful recording of customary rights;
- ensure family interests are identified before transactions;
- strengthen verification of titles and transaction histories;
- improve access to technical survey services; and
- establish procedures for reporting suspected fraudulent documentation.

Safeguard

Documentation programs should not simply convert complex customary relationships into individual ownership without adequate consultation and protection of family and community interests.

5. Strengthen Community-Based Mediation and Alternative Dispute Resolution

Not every dispute should immediately proceed to litigation. Mediation may be appropriate for:

- family disagreements;
- inheritance disputes;
- boundaries;
- neighbor disputes;
- occupation disputes; and
- customary claims.

However, mediation should not replace formal justice where:

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- serious violence has occurred;
- fraud is alleged;
- rights are being systematically violated; or
- there is a substantial imbalance of power.

Key safeguards

Mediation processes should be:

- voluntary;
- impartial;
- properly documented;
- gender-sensitive; and
- subject to referral where formal legal determination is necessary.

6. *Strengthen the Governance of Resettlement and Land Acquisition*

Given Bunambutye's continuing role in disaster resettlement, land acquisition and allocation should be governed by transparent procedures.

Government reports confirm continuing resettlement and land allocation processes affecting Bunambutye and the wider Mount Elgon region.

Before acquisition

Authorities should:

1. verify ownership and existing interests;
2. identify tenants, occupants and other legitimate claimants;
3. conduct adequate consultation;
4. document agreements and compensation processes; and
5. establish a clear grievance mechanism.

Before allocation

Authorities should:

1. complete surveying and demarcation;
2. communicate eligibility criteria;
3. maintain transparent beneficiary records;
4. provide documentation to beneficiaries; and
5. establish accessible complaints and appeals procedures.

Rationale

Resettlement can save lives but poorly managed land acquisition or allocation may create new conflicts. Preventive land governance must therefore be integrated into disaster management.

7. *Protect Women and Other Vulnerable Groups*

The policy response should specifically address the vulnerability of:

- women;
 - widows;
 - divorced women;
 - children;
 - elderly persons;
 - persons with disabilities; and
 - households affected by displacement.
- Ugandan research demonstrates that women can face particular difficulties in asserting land rights despite statutory protections, particularly where customary norms and household power relations affect inheritance and decision-making (Deininger & Castagnini, 2006; Doss et al., 2014; Kabahinda, 2017).

Policy measures

- require representation of women in community land-resolution mechanisms;
- provide legal awareness programs;
- strengthen consent procedures for family-land transactions;
- establish confidential complaints mechanisms; and

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- monitor the outcomes of disputes affecting vulnerable groups.

8. Distinguish Land Conflict from Land-Related Crime

A clear institutional protocol should distinguish between disputes requiring civil, administrative or customary processes and independently identifiable criminal offences.

Issue	Primary institutional response
Boundary disagreement	Survey, mediation and appropriate land administration
Family or inheritance dispute	Mediation and competent legal processes
Customary ownership dispute	Appropriate customary and statutory mechanisms
Fraudulent documents	Investigation and legal action
Forgery	Criminal investigation
Violence or threats	Immediate security and criminal justice response
Competing titles	Land administration and judicial determination
Government acquisition dispute	Administrative review, grievance and lawful dispute resolution

National police statistics confirm that land-related crime can involve fraud, forgery, false registration and criminal trespass (Uganda Police Force, 2025).

Policy principle

Police should investigate genuine criminal conduct, but criminal justice institutions should not become substitutes for determining ordinary land ownership.

7. IMPLEMENTATION FRAMEWORK

Policy priority	Lead actors	Key activity	Expected outcome
Conflict prevention platform	District Local Government	Establish multi-stakeholder forum	Improved coordination
Early-warning system	District and local leaders	Identify and report hotspots	Earlier intervention
Historical claim assessment	Land and justice institutions	Reconstruct claim histories	Better-informed decisions
Documentation	Land institutions	Support lawful recording and verification	Improved tenure security
Mediation	Local government and community institutions	Strengthen ADR	Faster dispute resolution
Resettlement governance	OPM, MLHUD and district authorities	Improve acquisition and allocation procedures	Reduced resettlement-related disputes
Protection of vulnerable groups	District and civil society actors	Legal awareness and representation	More equitable outcomes
Crime prevention	Police and land institutions	Detect fraud and forgery	Reduced land-related criminality

8. MONITORING AND EVALUATION

Progress should be assessed using indicators that measure both conflict reduction and institutional performance.

Conflict indicators

- Number of reported land disputes.
- Number of recurrent disputes.
- Number of disputes resolved through mediation.
- Number of disputes escalating into violence.
- Average time required to resolve disputes.

Land-governance indicators

- Number of land claims documented or verified.
- Number of disputed boundaries surveyed.

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- Number of high-risk areas mapped.
- Number of suspected fraudulent transactions detected.

Inclusion indicators

- Proportion of women participating in dispute-resolution processes.
- Number of vulnerable claimants receiving legal or mediation support.
- Number of disputes involving women, widows or displaced households resolved.

Institutional indicators

- Number of coordination meetings.
- Number of cases referred through the agreed protocol.
- Number of local leaders trained.
- Level of compliance with resettlement and land-acquisition procedures.

9. CONCLUSION

Land conflicts in Bulambuli Constituency should be understood as a significant challenge to peace, livelihoods, agricultural productivity and local development. Available scholarly evidence from Bunambutye demonstrates that contemporary disputes can be rooted in historical insecurity and displacement, creating complex interactions between customary claims, later occupation and formal land documentation (Khanakwa, 2022).

At the same time, current disaster-resettlement programs in Bunambutye demonstrate the importance of integrating land-conflict prevention into environmental and humanitarian policy. Continued acquisition, surveying and allocation of land require transparent procedures that protect both existing land interests and the rights of displaced households.

The most effective response is therefore not simply to increase litigation or intervene after conflict has become violent. Bulambuli needs a preventive land-governance strategy based on:

- early identification of disputes;
- historically informed assessment;
- clear boundaries;
- secure and verifiable land rights;
- coordination between customary and statutory institutions;
- accessible mediation and justice;
- transparent resettlement and land acquisition;
- protection of vulnerable groups; and
- effective action against genuine fraud, forgery and violence.

Central Policy Message

Sustainable peace and development in Bulambuli Constituency depend on preventing land conflicts before they escalate. This requires institutions that understand the history of land claims, protect legitimate rights, manage resettlement transparently, coordinate dispute resolution and ensure that access to justice is available to all landholders.

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