

SOCIO-POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, AND HISTORICAL FACTORS INFLUENCING LAND CONFLICTS IN NAKURU COUNTY, KENYA

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the historical, socio-political, and economic factors driving land conflicts in Nakuru County, Kenya. Historically, the findings reveal that colonial land alienation and the subsequent failure of post-independence land reforms entrenched structural injustices that continue to shape land disputes. Socio-politically, political patronage, corruption, and ethnic fragmentation particularly evident during the 2007–2008 post-election violence exacerbated tensions, resulting in widespread displacement and contested claims. Economically, rapid population growth, urbanisation, and the expansion of commercial agriculture intensified competition for scarce land resources, straining relations among small-scale farmers, pastoralists, and urban developers. The research adopted a qualitative design, employing interviews and focus group discussions with landowners, displaced persons, local authorities, and government officials. The study concludes that land conflicts in Nakuru County stem from a complex interplay of historical injustices, socio-political manipulation, and economic pressures. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-pronged strategy that ensures equitable land redistribution, transparent governance, secure tenure systems, and community-based dispute resolution mechanisms.

Keywords: Land conflicts, Nakuru County, socio-political, and economic factors, Land Policies, Land Reforms, social fragmentation, Land-Based Displacement, Land Scarcity, dispute resolution mechanisms

INTRODUCTION

The changing land struggles in Nakuru County have a complicated historical, political, economic, and social dynamic influence. As the population continues to grow in Nakuru, it has put pressure on the land, particularly in other areas like Naivasha and Rongai, which are prone to urbanisation due to economic migrations and the development of industries (Kenya Land Alliance, 2020). These have contributed to a new pattern of land wrangles, which is rooted in the historical injustices of the past that occurred on land and the new contemporary forces of urbanisation, commercial agriculture, and economic inequality. Corresponding to this, the historical trend of land dispossession continues to be harnessed in the modern programmes of land conflicts, thus underlining the need to see the fulfilment of the long-term land conflict process in the region (Kenya Land Alliance, 2020).

Statement of the Research Problem

Land conflicts in Nakuru County represent a persistent and deeply entrenched challenge that continues to undermine social cohesion, economic stability, and sustainable development in the region. Despite numerous interventions and policy measures, these conflicts have not only endured but intensified over time, reflecting the limitations of conventional judicial and administrative approaches. The complexity of these disputes is rooted in a complex interplay of historical, socio-political, and economic factors that remain inadequately understood and addressed. The historical dimensions of these conflicts can be traced to colonial-era land dispossession policies that systematically removed indigenous populations from fertile lands and created structural inequalities that persist to this day (Kanyinga, 2017; Sorrenson, 2016). Post-independence land reforms intended to address these historical injustices have largely failed due to pervasive corruption, political interference, and inadequate implementation, leaving many land tenure issues unresolved. These historical injustices have created enduring patterns of land inequality that continue to fuel contemporary conflicts.

The socio-political landscape of Nakuru further complicates these conflicts, characterized by ethnic competition for resources, political manipulation of land issues, and powerful elite interests that influence land acquisition and distribution (KNCHR, 2013). The county's diverse population, comprising large-scale farmers, pastoralists, and agricultural communities, creates a complex web of competing land interests and claims. Political actors often exploit these divisions, using land as a tool for mobilizing support and consolidating power, thereby perpetuating cycles of conflict and instability. Economically, the pressure on land resources has intensified due to rapid population growth, urbanization, and competing land uses. Agricultural expansion, livestock grazing, and commercial development have created scarce resources that various groups contest through sometimes violent means. The economic value of land, combined with limited alternative livelihood options, has made land conflicts particularly intense and difficult to resolve.

Despite the recognition of these complex historical, socio-political, and economic dimensions, there remains a significant knowledge gap regarding how these factors specifically manifest and interact in Nakuru County's land conflicts. Most existing studies have either focused on general national patterns or examined specific incidents without providing a comprehensive analysis of the underlying structural factors. This limited understanding has hindered the development of effective, context-specific strategies for addressing land conflicts in the region. The persistence of land conflicts in Nakuru County despite various intervention efforts indicates that current approaches are insufficient and that a more nuanced understanding of the historical, socio-political, and economic drivers is essential for developing effective solutions. This study aims to address this critical gap by providing a comprehensive analysis of these factors, thereby contributing to more effective and sustainable strategies for addressing land conflicts in Nakuru County and similar contexts.

Research Objective

The following research objective guided the study:

- To assess the socio-political and economic historical factors contributing to land conflicts in Nakuru County.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Land conflicts have remained one of the most enduring challenges in Kenya, particularly in Nakuru County, where competing claims over land ownership, access, and use have persisted for decades. The complexity of these disputes cannot be attributed to a single factor but rather to the interplay of historical, socio-political, and economic dimensions that have continuously shaped patterns of land tenure and community relations. Historically, colonial land policies disrupted traditional systems of land ownership, leading to alienation of fertile lands and the displacement of indigenous communities. These colonial legacies were compounded in the post-independence era, where land redistribution programs often favored political elites, entrenching inequalities and sowing seeds of mistrust among communities. The socio-political context has further intensified land-related disputes, especially through politicisation of land issues during election cycles. Ethnic mobilisation around land grievances has been a recurrent feature, particularly evident during the 2007–2008 post-election violence, where Nakuru County emerged as one of the epicenters of ethnic clashes. Political patronage, corruption, and weak land governance mechanisms have not only undermined equitable access but also eroded trust in state institutions mandated to administer land. These dynamics highlight the strong nexus between politics, ethnicity, and land as both a resource and a symbol of identity.

Economically, the pressures of population growth, rapid urbanisation, and expanding commercial agriculture have placed unprecedented strain on limited land resources. Nakuru's position as an agricultural hub and rapidly growing urban center has attracted diverse groups, increasing competition for land and contributing to displacement, land scarcity, and rising land values. For small-scale farmers, pastoralists, and displaced populations, the struggle for access and control of land has been further complicated by speculative land markets and forced evictions, deepening social fragmentation and economic insecurity. This review situates Nakuru County's land conflicts within this broader historical, socio-political, and economic framework. By examining scholarly contributions, policy reports, and empirical evidence, it highlights how colonial legacies, political manipulation, and economic pressures interact to sustain cycles of disputes. The review underscores that understanding the multidimensional causes of land conflicts is essential in developing sustainable strategies for conflict resolution and equitable land governance in Nakuru County.

Historical Overview of Land Conflicts in Nakuru County

The Colonial Period: Pre-1963

Colonial rule in Kenya profoundly transformed land ownership, particularly in Nakuru County. Before colonisation, indigenous communities such as the Maasai, Kalenjin, and Nandi practised communal tenure systems, which formed the basis of their cultural identity and livelihoods. However, the British colonial administration introduced land alienation policies that dispossessed these groups of their ancestral lands to create large settler farms (Sorenson, 2016). Fertile highlands in areas like Naivasha, Gilgil, and Rongai were allocated to European settlers for the cultivation of cash crops such as tea, coffee, and flowers, while indigenous populations were displaced to less productive zones (Kanyinga, 2017).

These policies disrupted customary systems, leaving many communities landless. Deprived of both rights and income, displaced populations were forced into marginal areas or exploited as labourers on settler farms (Kenya Land Alliance, 2020). The historical bond between people and land was irreparably broken, entrenching injustices that persisted long after independence (Mwaura, 2021). Land ownership became concentrated in the hands of settlers and a few local elites, creating sharp socio-economic disparities that still underpin land conflicts (Mubangizi, 2020). Settler dominance was reinforced through political and economic

influence, with colonial laws systematically prioritising their land claims (Kanyinga, 2017). This institutionalised inequality and racial segregation not only excluded indigenous communities but also established enduring patterns of concentrated landholding in Nakuru. Even today, large tracts remain under the control of a few, perpetuating tension and recurrent disputes (Kenya Land Alliance, 2020).

As one respondent noted:

“Land issues in Nakuru County are like bad, deep wounds. Grudges from the 1960s affect even the great-grandchildren today. When the whites took land and shared it among the collaborators, the battlelines were drawn between the haves and the have-nots” (Interview with member of Land Sub-County Committee, May 15, 2025; Kemboi, personal interview, May 16, 2025).

Post-Independence Land Policies: 1963–1990s

After independence in 1963, Kenya inherited deep land inequalities rooted in colonial alienation. Large tracts of fertile land in regions like Nakuru remained in settler hands, while indigenous communities such as the Maasai, Kalenjin, and Nandi had been displaced to arid zones (Sorrenson, 2016; Kanyinga, 2017). To address this imbalance, the Kenyatta government introduced settlement schemes aimed at redistributing land to the landless. These programs sought to resettle rural and marginalised populations, enabling them to become self-sufficient farmers (Kenya Land Alliance, 2020). Despite their promise, the schemes largely failed. Land allocation was often influenced by corruption, political patronage, and ethnic favouritism, with government loyalists receiving prime parcels while many remained landless (Kanyinga, 2017; Mubangizi, 2020). A respondent explained: *“Acquiring land is not as simple as back then... the disruption of community setup and the new norm complicates cases, from mere displacement to murder” (Interview with Land Sub-County Committee member, May 15, 2025).*

Beneficiaries also faced major challenges. Many were allocated uneconomical plots, lacked access to credit, agricultural machinery, or extension services, and were settled in areas without infrastructure such as schools, roads, or health facilities (Kenya Land Alliance, 2020). Consequently, many farms fell into poverty, degradation, and abandonment. Meanwhile, elites, including politically connected families, consolidated vast estates, entrenching the very disparities reforms sought to remedy (Kanyinga, 2017).

The introduction of land titling and private ownership further disrupted customary systems. Traditionally, land was inherited communally, but the new system encouraged sales and fragmentation. This shift destabilised extended family structures and triggered inheritance disputes, particularly in rural areas (Mwaura, 2021). Land fragmentation also rendered smallholder farms unviable, intensifying competition in fertile zones like Naivasha and Gilgil. By the late 1980s, redistribution had entrenched inequality: elites controlled vast holdings, while many communities, especially the Kikuyu in Nakuru, remained landless (Kenya Land Alliance, 2020). The transition from communal tenure to individual ownership, while improving tenure security for some, excluded the rural poor and reinforced socio-economic divisions that continue to fuel land conflicts today.

Post-Election Violence of 2007–2008 and Its Contribution to Land Disputes in Nakuru County

The 2007–2008 post-election violence severely worsened land conflicts in Nakuru County. Triggered by the disputed presidential results between Mwai Kibaki and Raila Odinga, the political crisis escalated into ethnic clashes, particularly between the Kikuyu and Kalenjin (Kenya National Commission on Human Rights [KNCHR], 2013). Nakuru’s fertile agricultural lands and ethnic diversity made it one of the epicentres of the violence. According to KNCHR (2013), the violence led to more than 1,200 deaths and displaced over 350,000 people nationwide, with Nakuru alone recording more than 100,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs). The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (2008) notes that many of the displaced lost permanent access to their land, as farms were occupied by rival groups or illegally transferred. In towns such as Naivasha, Molo, and Nakuru, homes were burned, farms destroyed, and families forcefully evicted.

For many IDPs, resettlement proved difficult, as they found their ancestral land already taken by new occupants, further intensifying disputes. Land became both an economic resource and a weapon of war, with ethnic militias targeting Kikuyu farms due to their size and strategic locations. This abrupt change in ownership patterns exacerbated long-standing grievances over colonial and post-independence land distribution. As one respondent recalled:

“In the 2007 election violence, many Kikuyus were displaced and killed... the showground was filled with IDPs and makeshift tents. Most people were hopeless, food was scarce, and tribal divisions deepened” (Odete, personal interview, May 19, 2025).

The violence not only created new dimensions of landlessness but also entrenched ethnic rivalries, leaving lasting scars on land relations in Nakuru County.

Political Contribution to Land Conflicts in Nakuru County

Politics and ethnic interests are strongly intertwined with land disputes in Nakuru County. The Rift Valley region, and Nakuru in particular, has long been a hotspot of land-related conflicts due to its fertile agricultural land, which is both an economic resource and a tool of political influence. Historically, land allocation has been shaped by politicians who often used it to secure ethnic loyalty, thus perpetuating disputes, particularly between the Kikuyu and Kalenjin communities (Kanyinga, 2017; Sorrenson, 2016). Since independence in 1963, land reform was one of the greatest challenges facing the new government. While redistribution was intended to redress colonial-era injustices, it was quickly converted into an instrument of political patronage. Politicians rewarded their supporters with land allocations, particularly among the Kikuyu and Kalenjin, resulting in a sense of ethnic competition and mistrust (Too & Arusei, 2011; Kenya Land Alliance, 2020). In Nakuru, redistribution often favored whichever group’s leaders were politically dominant at the time, deepening perceptions of exclusion and fueling long-term grievances.

The use of land as an electoral strategy soon became normalized, with leaders promising allocations in exchange for votes. Such practices entrenched disputes, as land ownership and transfers were tied to shifting political alliances rather than transparent legal processes (Kanyinga, 2017).

Nakuru’s ethnic diversity has repeatedly been exploited by politicians during election seasons. Leaders often portrayed land as an ethnic right, weaponizing historical injustices to mobilize their communities. The 2007–2008 post-election violence was a clear example, with Kalenjin militias attacking Kikuyu settlers, whom they accused of occupying ancestral land. This conflict, fueled by political incitement, led to displacement, killings, and destruction of property (Odanga, Iteyo, & Onkware, 2022; International Crisis Group, 2021). One respondent recalled:

“The 2007 violence was among the roughest and was highly influenced by political leaders. It was divided by tribal recognition and identified with either supporters of the elected president or the first runners-up. Most Kikuyus lost their lives and land because they had a similar identity to the elected president” (Chacha, personal interview, May 19, 2025).

This reflects the extent to which political elites manipulated land grievances to generate ethnic hostility, consolidating their political bases at the expense of peace and coexistence. National Government Administration Officers (NGAO) in Nakuru have a formal mandate to mediate land disputes. However, their work is often undermined by political interference and ethnic favoritism. Officers frequently find themselves caught between community pressure and political demands, limiting their ability to act impartially (Emuria & Kiruthu, 2022). Moreover, the lack of political will to implement genuine land reforms further weakens the effectiveness of administrative mechanisms. While NGAOs occasionally facilitate negotiations, political elites typically undermine these efforts by manipulating land allocation for electoral gain. This has transformed land into a political weapon rather than a resource for sustainable development and reconciliation.

Land Reforms Efforts

The implementation of land reform in Nakuru County, which was meant to deal with land ownership problems and correct historical injustices, has, in most cases, resulted in the aggravation of tensions between various ethnic groups competing for land resources (Nyaga, Mose, Ichuloi, & Okeche, 2020). Although the government has tried to solve the land issues through Mau Mau land redistribution and the National Land Policy, these measures have not resolved the land problem in its entirety. This is because the issue is more political than technical, compounded by the ineffective application of policy frameworks (Onguny & Gillies, 2019). Historical injustices, political maneuvering, and differences in land utilization among ethnic groups have accentuated the conflicts (Obioha, 2013).

The history of land disputes in Nakuru County is rooted in colonial policies that facilitated the eviction of indigenous communities from their ancestral territories. The British colonial government implemented biased policies that favored European settlers at the expense of communities such as the Kalenjin and Maasai (Lindén, 2019). After independence in 1963, the Kenyan government attempted land reforms to undo colonial injustices. However, redistribution was poorly executed, often benefitting politically connected elites, leaving indigenous groups with small parcels of land and minimal liberalization in land ownership (Obioha, 2013). These historical injustices continue to fuel grievances, with communities such as the Maasai still facing land tenure insecurity, as much of their ancestral land remains unrestituted. Such unresolved grievances perpetuate conflicts over land ownership and access to resources in Nakuru (Momanyi, Simiyu, & Muchanga, 2023).

Political leaders in Nakuru County have also contributed significantly to land conflicts. Redistributive politics, where leaders manipulate land allocations to gain electoral support, has exacerbated tensions (Nyaga et al., 2020). Land has been used as a political tool to mobilize ethnic groups, particularly during election cycles, thereby fueling inter-ethnic clashes (Onguny & Gillies, 2019). While the National Land Policy, introduced in 2010, sought to address historical injustices and ensure equitable land distribution, its implementation has been undermined by political unwillingness and mismanagement of land titles (Obioha, 2013; Lindén, 2019). As a result, political elites have often acquired disproportionate control over land allocation, further marginalizing vulnerable groups.

Conflicts in Nakuru are also shaped by land use practices. Different communities employ divergent land utilization methods, intensifying disputes. For instance, agricultural communities such as the Kikuyu, who engage in intensive farming, often clash with pastoralist communities such as the Kalenjin over land access (Momanyi et al., 2023). This disparity in resource use has fueled inter-ethnic violence, particularly in Gilgil, Naivasha, and Njoro. Moreover, land scarcity and environmental pressures, including drought, have exacerbated tensions, as competition over limited land resources becomes more acute (Nyaga et al., 2020). Thus, land conflicts in Nakuru are not merely disputes over ownership but also contests over resource utilization, reflecting deeper structural and historical drivers of violence.

Elections and Land Conflicts

The historical tradition of colonial land allocation in Kenya has ensured that land has become the central point of political strife along ethnic lines. During the colonial period, large tracts of fertile land, particularly in the White Highlands, including sections of Nakuru, Naivasha, and Kericho, were allocated to European settlers, while local communities were forcefully relocated to less fertile regions (Kanyinga, 2009). One respondent noted:

“Historically, minority groups are very defenseless in selecting fertile areas or saying how the system could favor them. That is why there is need for chamas that would help amplify their voices. Anyways, during election seasons, fear over their lives forces them to migrate, hoping it’s just for a while and temporal. The challenge is, rarely do political climate favor their return. And some politicians can really take advantage of these groups and restlessness and influence future owners of these lands” (Leticia Wanyonyi, interview, May 22, 2025).

In the post-independence period, redistribution programmes intended to address colonial injustices were politicized, as the Kenya African National Union (KANU) government under Jomo Kenyatta allocated land preferentially to elites, fuelling further suspicions and marginalisation, especially among the Kalenjin (Onguny & Gillies, 2019). This politicisation of land created deep ethnic fault lines, later reinforced during elections when land was used as a tool for political mobilisation. Leaders often framed land disputes in ethnic terms, with one community portrayed as land grabbers and the other as dispossessed owners (Wanyonyi, interview, May 22, 2025; Kariuki, interview, May 22, 2025). For example, in Nakuru, the Kikuyu, who own significant tracts of land, were depicted as land grabbers during the 2007–2008 post-election violence. Political leaders from the Kalenjin community, with support from militias, framed the violence as part of a land recovery struggle, linking it to historical injustices of colonial allocation (Kenya National Commission on Human Rights [KNCHR], 2013). Consequently, land became both a symbol of political mobilisation and a justification for violence. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (2008) observed that the land issue was central to the large-scale displacements experienced during this period.

The ethnicisation of land has thus been one of the strongest contributors to election-related violence in Kenya. As one respondent explained:

“Influenced by traditional beliefs and entrenched family histories, acquiring land by buying anyhow has been really challenging here in Nakuru. Although it is possible under the Constitution to acquire land anywhere, buyers from different tribes risk losing their lives or buying and never using the land due to hostilities from the host community. Strangers are rarely accepted” (John Odete, interview, May 19, 2025).

Scholars have argued that when property rights are insecure, communities become vulnerable and are often pushed to violent means to defend or reclaim land (Aleksandrovich, 2017). In Nakuru, marginalised communities historically resorted to violence during elections as a way of asserting their perceived rights (Momanyi, Simiyu, & Muchanga, 2023). Recent studies confirm that land evictions and unresolved disputes continue to fuel inter-ethnic tensions and weaken social cohesion in Nakuru County (Steeven, Milimu, & Omuchesi, 2025).

Social Fragmentations and Land-Based Displacement in Nakuru County

Land-related displacement in Nakuru County has contributed significantly to social fragmentation, particularly among marginalized groups. Forced evictions, such as those in Mau Forest, have uprooted families, disrupted long-standing community networks, and left many homeless (Steeven, Milimu, & Omuchesi, 2025, p. 1011). Without adequate policy reforms to address historical land injustices, displaced groups remain vulnerable and insecure. The situation is compounded by illegal land acquisitions, where elites manipulate land registries or exploit corruption in land allocation. In urbanizing areas such as Naivasha and Nakuru, the high demand for real estate and commercial farming has heightened these disputes, forcing small-scale farmers and immigrants into informal settlements marked by poverty, unemployment, and lack of services (Momanyi, Simiyu, & Muchanga, 2023, p. 932). These settlements, such as Bahati and Molo, often lack social amenities, fueling further marginalization and increasing the risk of violent conflict.

Migration patterns further complicate land access. Pastoralist groups, particularly the Maasai and Kalenjin, migrate in search of grazing land, often clashing with sedentary farmers who view such intrusions as land invasions. These disputes are not merely economic but also cultural, since land is tied to identity and heritage (Onguny & Gillies, 2019, p. 53). A respondent noted: “There is clash between pastoralists and farmers coz commercialization has discouraged farmers and pastoralists who need large spaces of land for their activities and people are now saying we better sell land and buy milk at kiosks” (Muchori, interview, May 22, 2025). Climate change has exacerbated this tension by increasing the scarcity of water and pasture, intensifying competition between groups. The urban dimension is also evident. In-migration to Nakuru Town has swelled peri-urban slums, where insecure tenure exposes residents to eviction. Encroachment on conservation areas

and water catchments by informal settlements has created further conflict between residents, landowners, and local authorities (Steeven et al., 2025, p. 1012). This overlapping contest for land resources has deepened inter-ethnic rivalries, reinforcing land as both an economic and symbolic resource.

Exclusion of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)

The post-election violence of 2007–2008 created thousands of IDPs in Nakuru, many of whom remain without secure tenure. According to the Kenya National Commission on Human Rights (2013, p. 24), families in Naivasha and Molo still live in temporary shelters years later. A respondent explained: “Even after resolving tribal clashes, the county still feels like a ticking time bomb... although cosmopolitan, the Kikuyu and Kalenjin remain in conflict over land ownership” (Branice Mweli, interview, May 2025). IDPs are often excluded from formal land markets dominated by politically connected elites, leaving them highly vulnerable.

Landlessness and Economic Marginalization

A legacy of skewed land distribution has concentrated fertile land in the hands of a few wealthy elites, pushing many households into landlessness. This has fostered poverty, exclusion, and reliance on precarious informal settlements (Momanyi et al., 2023, p. 102). For most households engaged in subsistence farming, the inability to access land translates into food insecurity, reduced incomes, and heightened vulnerability to exploitation.

Implications for Social Stability

The exclusion of IDPs, landless groups, and pastoralists creates a cycle of marginalization that fuels recurrent conflict. Politicians often exploit land grievances during elections to mobilize ethnic support, framing disputes as struggles over ancestral land or recovery of stolen property (Onguny & Gillies, 2019, p. 53). This politicization of land has heightened mistrust, perpetuated violence, and made land ownership a central driver of instability in Nakuru.

Land Scarcity and Economic Pressure

Economic Pressure and Population Growth

Nakuru County, located in Kenya’s Rift Valley, is a fertile and strategically positioned region. Since the 1960s, Kenya’s population has more than doubled, dramatically intensifying competition over limited arable land (Patton, 2009). As families subdivide inherited plots and sell portions under economic pressures, land fragmentation has become a pressing challenge, often creating fraudulent transactions and disputes. A respondent noted that fragmentation has not only reduced productivity but also fueled criminal activities in land dealings (Adan, personal communication, May 22, 2025). The economic pressure associated with shrinking parcels has worsened inter-ethnic conflicts. In Nakuru, Kikuyu farming communities face rising competition from neighboring groups such as the Kalenjin, while land becomes a political bargaining chip during elections (Detges, 2012). Politicians often exploit grievances over scarcity, framing land disputes as ethnic struggles and mobilizing supporters around narratives of dispossession (Kanyinga, 2017). This dynamic has repeatedly fueled violent confrontations, especially during election seasons.

Social Cohesion and Conflict Dynamics

Inequalities in land distribution deepen ethnic divisions. Groups with privileged access to fertile land wield disproportionate power, while land-poor communities feel marginalized (Nyaga, Mose, Ichuloi, & Okeche, 2020). Land insecurity undermines trust and weakens social cohesion, as disputes over inheritance, boundaries, and property rights easily escalate into violence. A respondent emphasized that unequal land access creates resentment and a sense of exclusion, intensifying local hostilities (Adan, personal communication, May 22, 2025). This imbalance extends beyond economics; land embodies identity and belonging. In Nakuru, elites manipulate ethnic narratives around land to consolidate political support, portraying ownership disputes as struggles for ethnic recognition (Momanyi, Simiyu, & Muchanga, 2023). The ethnicization of land grievances has made social coexistence precarious, reinforcing cycles of mistrust

and violence (Detges, 2012).

Land as a Source of Livelihoods

Land remains central to livelihoods in Nakuru, where most households depend on subsistence farming, livestock keeping, and small-scale commercial agriculture (Kenya Land Alliance, 2020). However, fragmentation and scarcity push smallholders toward marginal lands or force them into non-farm activities, increasing vulnerability to poverty. As Steeven, Milimu, and Omuchesi (2025) show, displacement from land weakens social cohesion, deprives households of dignity, and exacerbates poverty. Moreover, loss of land threatens community resilience. Without access to productive farmland, families face economic shocks that destabilize their livelihoods, potentially fueling further conflicts (Mwaura, 2021). Thus, land scarcity directly affects not only economic wellbeing but also broader patterns of peace and stability.

Urbanization and Land Use Changes

Rapid urban growth in Nakuru town has transformed land use from agriculture to urban settlement. Developers and real estate investors increasingly compete with smallholder farmers for land, intensifying tensions (Willkomm, Follmann, & Dannenberg, 2021). Urban agriculture vital for food security in peri-urban areas faces eviction pressures due to speculative sales and unclear regulations (Foeken, 2006). The commercialization of agriculture, particularly through large-scale flower farming, has also escalated competition with smallholders. This dynamic pits resource-rich elites against marginalized farmers, reinforcing land-based inequalities (Ongowo, Wokabi, & Kibet, 2015). Such conflicts highlight how urbanization and commercialization complicate land tenure, creating overlapping claims and increasing violence.

Land Appreciation, Inequality, and Political Manipulation

The sharp rise in land value in Nakuru's urban and peri-urban areas has deepened socio-economic inequalities. As property prices soar, elites and politically connected actors acquire land, while smallholders and internally displaced persons (IDPs) face dispossession (Nyaga et al., 2020). This commodification of land has widened the gap between wealthy landowners and marginalized communities, fueling resentment (Cherotich, Obulinji, & Karanja, 2024). Politicians exploit these grievances, using land allocation promises as electoral tools. Land has become not only an economic asset but also a political instrument, mobilizing votes and inciting ethnic divisions (Onguny & Gillies, 2009). The manipulation of land grievances perpetuates violence during elections, as leaders cast disputes in ethnic and political terms rather than addressing structural inequalities (Mwaura, 2021).

Environmental Stress and Resource Degradation

Beyond political and economic factors, environmental degradation exacerbates land conflicts. Soil erosion, water shortages, and deforestation reduce agricultural productivity, increasing pressure on scarce arable land (Momanyi et al., 2023). Pastoralists and farmers frequently clash over water and grazing resources, while climate change further destabilizes resource availability (Momanyi et al., 2023). Conservation efforts such as protecting the Mau Forest and Lake Nakuru National Park aim to safeguard resources, yet poor enforcement and encroachment undermine their effectiveness (Foeken, 2006). These environmental stresses amplify land disputes, linking ecological degradation to broader patterns of social conflict.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to examine the use of Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) mechanisms in land conflict management within Nakuru County, Kenya. Data was collected through 45 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with a purposively and snowball-sampled cohort of stakeholders, including government officials, community leaders, landowners, and farmers. This primary data, capturing firsthand experiences and community perceptions, was triangulated with secondary data from historical records, government reports, and academic journals to

provide historical context and validate findings. The research adhered to strict ethical protocols, including informed consent and confidentiality, to ensure reliability and validity.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The results and findings of this study reveal that land conflicts in Nakuru County are driven by a combination of historical, socio-political, and economic factors. Evidence from literature and interviews shows that the roots of the conflict lie in the colonial period, where vast tracts of fertile land were alienated for European settlers, creating the “White Highlands” and leaving indigenous communities dispossessed. Following independence, the government’s resettlement schemes attempted to address this imbalance, but the process was marred by favoritism, political patronage, and ethnic bias. As a result, instead of healing the historical injustices, these initiatives entrenched divisions between communities, sowing seeds of mistrust that continue to influence land relations in Nakuru today. Interview data confirmed this, with one respondent observing that the displacement of local communities during the colonial era left a deep wound: “The colonial government displaced communities from their ancestral land, and even after independence, the land was never returned fairly. This created a wound that has never healed” (John Odete, Interview, May 19, 2025).

The findings also indicate that land conflicts in Nakuru are not only historical but are sustained through socio-political fragmentation and recurrent cycles of violence. Literature highlights that Nakuru has been one of the main hotspots of ethnic clashes, especially during electoral periods such as 1992, 1997, and the 2007–2008 post-election violence. These violent episodes resulted in large-scale displacement, with thousands forced into camps and unable to return to their land. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (2008) reported that IDPs were placed high on the national agenda, yet many continue to face unresolved resettlement challenges. Interviews reflected similar realities, with participants stressing that displacement created long-lasting mistrust between communities. One community leader explained that: “Displacement has made people feel insecure. Those who lost land see others as intruders, while those who gained fear revenge. This cycle of mistrust makes peaceful coexistence very fragile.” Such testimonies reinforce the Kenya National Commission on Human Rights (2013) findings that land and displacement were central drivers of violence in Nakuru, especially during the 2007–2008 crisis.

The findings further reveal that economic pressures, particularly land scarcity, continue to fuel tensions in Nakuru County. The county’s fertile land is highly valued both for farming and for expanding urban settlements, making it a contested resource. Rapid population growth, increasing demand for agricultural production, and youth unemployment exacerbate the situation, creating heightened competition over land. Interviewees consistently emphasized the centrality of land to livelihoods, with one respondent noting: “Here, land is everything your home, your farm, your wealth. When you lose land, you lose your future. That’s why people are ready to fight for it.” These narratives align with scholarly observations that land scarcity and unemployment among youths make them susceptible to political manipulation and violent mobilization, thereby perpetuating cycles of land-based conflict in the region.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that land conflicts in Nakuru County cannot be attributed to a single cause. Instead, they emerge from the intersection of historical injustices, ethnic fragmentation, displacement, and persistent economic pressures. The colonial alienation of land laid the foundation for grievances, post-independence land policies deepened divisions, displacement undermined social cohesion, and present-day land scarcity magnifies the intensity of conflict. Together, these factors highlight that land in Nakuru is not merely an economic resource but a deeply political and social asset, whose contestation continues to shape the county’s trajectory of conflict and insecurity.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the historical, socio-political, and economic dimensions underpinning land disputes in Nakuru County, Kenya. The findings underscore that the roots of conflict can be traced back to colonial land

alienation policies that dispossessed indigenous communities such as the Maasai, Kalenjin, and Nandi while reserving fertile areas for European settlers. These policies disrupted traditional land tenure systems and laid the foundation for contemporary grievances. Post-independence resettlement and redistribution programs, rather than correcting historical injustices, were undermined by corruption and political patronage, entrenching inequality and marginalization. The study also highlighted how socio-political tensions, particularly during periods of electoral competition, have exacerbated land disputes. The 2007–2008 post-election violence in Nakuru County exemplifies how ethnic divisions, especially between the Kikuyu and Kalenjin, were mobilized around access to land, resulting in mass displacement and cycles of mistrust. These findings reveal that land has functioned not only as an economic resource but also as a powerful tool for political bargaining and ethnic mobilization.

Furthermore, economic and demographic pressures rapid population growth, urban expansion, and labor migration have intensified the demand for land. This has heightened competition in fast-growing areas such as Naivasha and Rongai, where agricultural, residential, and industrial needs converge. Displacement linked to land grabbing, forced evictions, and weak governance has deepened poverty and created conditions for recurring conflict. Land in Nakuru has also emerged as a form of cultural capital, making its scarcity especially contentious among farmers, pastoralists, and urban developers. In conclusion, the study demonstrated that land disputes in Nakuru County are driven by an interplay of historical injustices, political manipulation, ethnic fragmentation, and economic pressures. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach that combines equitable redistribution, transparent governance, legal security of tenure, and community-driven mechanisms for dispute resolution. Without such comprehensive reforms, land will remain a volatile source of conflict and insecurity in Nakuru County.

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