

An Analysis of Local Community Perspectives on How Land Registration Frameworks Influence Land Tenure Security and Contribute to Land Grabbing in Kayunga District

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Abstract: This study explores local community perspectives on how land registration frameworks influence land tenure security and contribute to land grabbing in Kayunga District. Guided by Conflict Theory, Property Theory, and Production Theory, the study analyses the interaction between formal land registration processes and customary landholding systems. The findings reveal that although land registration promotes legal recognition and improves access to financial services, it also contributes to land grabbing due to high registration fees, limited institutional accountability, and procedural gaps. Respondents perceived the process as favouring elites while marginalizing customary landowners and smallholder farmers. The study concludes that the current land registration system in Kayunga District, while offering potential for tenure security and economic empowerment, has exacerbated land-related conflicts and socio-economic inequalities due to corruption, procedural barriers, and exclusion of customary tenure systems. The study recommends integrating customary tenure into statutory law, establishing transparent and accountable governance structures, enhancing legal protections against land grabbing, and promoting community participation and legal awareness to ensure equitable and culturally appropriate land administration.

Keywords: *Local community, land registration, tenure security, land grabbing*

1. Background

Land plays a central role in Uganda's socio-economic fabric, serving not only as a basis for livelihood and identity but also as a critical asset for economic development (Na, 2021). Despite its significance, land tenure security remains elusive, particularly in rural settings where customary and statutory systems operate in parallel, often resulting in overlapping claims and disputes (Adriano, 2023). A large proportion of Ugandans do not possess formal land titles, leaving them exposed to land grabbing—a practice in which land is acquired without the free, prior, and informed consent of its rightful users. This phenomenon, frequently driven by powerful individuals, corporate interests, and government agencies, has led to forced evictions and tenure insecurity in several regions, including Bugiri, Amuru, Kalangala, and Kayunga (Mabikke, 2011).

Land grabbing is not merely a legal or property issue but reflects broader structural challenges (Na, 2021). Economic liberalization and globalization have incentivized the commodification of land, attracting investors and state actors seeking land for commercial agriculture, urban expansion, or infrastructure development. Simultaneously, political patronage systems and weak institutional safeguards have facilitated unchecked land acquisition. These dynamics contribute to the marginalization of rural communities whose customary claims are often disregarded or undervalued in formal legal systems (Ackah-Baidoo et al., 2022).

In response to persistent land conflicts, the Ugandan government and development partners have promoted land registration as a strategy to enhance tenure security and reduce disputes (Ministry of Lands Housing and Urban Development, 2023). However, the process of transitioning from informal customary holdings to formal registration has not been without complications. Vulnerable populations, such as women, indigenous groups, and the poor, often face barriers in accessing registration services due to high costs, limited awareness, or discriminatory practices embedded in local power structures. This has, in some cases, facilitated land speculation and elite capture, thereby exacerbating existing social and economic inequalities. Ackah-Baidoo et al., (2022) illustrated that rather than protecting customary rights, land registration can legitimize dispossession when implemented without safeguards for inclusivity and transparency.

Although substantial scholarship has explored the co-existence of statutory and customary tenure systems in Uganda, there remains a limited empirical focus on how these overlapping systems affect rural communities confronting modern land grabs and state-backed evictions (Anthony, 2022). Specifically, how colonial legacies,

administrative corruption, and weak enforcement intersect to dispossess smallholder farmers and customary landholders has not been adequately documented. This study addresses that gap by focusing on Kayunga District an area deeply affected by historic land reform failures, present-day mailo tenure challenges, and increasing pressure from commercial agriculture. The research aims to deepen understanding of land governance weaknesses by examining grassroots experiences with tenure insecurity and state interventions.

The Development of the Land Law in Uganda

Before colonial rule, land in Uganda was governed by customary norms that varied across ethnic groups, with land primarily held communally by clans or families (Taylor, 1986). Land rights were acquired through inheritance, allocation by elders, or settlement by permission, and disputes were resolved by traditional authorities. Customary tenure systems were diverse, reflecting Uganda's cultural and political structures. In centralized kingdoms like Buganda, Bunyoro, Toro, and Ankole, land was controlled by kings and allocated to chiefs, while Nilotic communities such as the Acholi, Lango, Teso, and Karamoja practiced clan-based governance with collective ownership.

The legacy of colonial land policies continues to profoundly influence contemporary land governance in Uganda. The colonial administration introduced hierarchical and exclusionary systems that prioritized titled, individual land ownership over communal and customary forms (Carmody & Taylor, 2016a). These colonial constructs, especially under the Buganda Agreement of 1900 and the Crown Lands Ordinance of 1903, created fragmented tenure regimes that persist today. For instance, the mailo land system, which institutionalized landlord-tenant relationships, remains a major source of tenure insecurity and land disputes. Although legal reforms have been introduced, many colonial-era statutes such as the Registration of Titles Act (1958) remain operational with minimal modification, limiting the effectiveness of current land administration in addressing structural inequality and access challenges (Owor & Dieterle, 2020).

The persistence of these colonial structures reflects not only legal inertia but also political reluctance to dismantle systems that benefit entrenched elites (Carmody & Taylor, 2016). Post-independence governments adopted land frameworks that largely retained the colonial preference for formal titling, without adequately integrating the customary tenure systems that dominate rural Uganda. This legal dualism has entrenched ambiguity over land rights and facilitated the manipulation of customary land through statutory channels. Vulnerable populations, particularly women, youth, and pastoral communities, continue to face barriers to land access because land policies have often privileged those with resources and legal literacy, replicating patterns of exclusion established during colonial rule.

During colonial rule, the British administration transformed Uganda's land tenure system, introducing new ownership categories that undermined customary land rights. The 1900 Buganda Agreement divided land into mailo, crown, freehold, and leasehold, granting large tracts to Buganda chiefs while leaving most people under customary tenure. This dual system created inequalities and conflicts, as mailo tenure introduced dual ownership, where landlords coexisted with tenants (Miti, 1991).

A series of colonial laws further altered land ownership. The Crown Lands Ordinance (1903) gave the British control over unoccupied land, allowing them to lease or sell it without considering customary occupants. The Busuulu and Envujjo Law (1928) regulated tenant rents in Buganda, reinforcing the landlord-tenant system. The Land Boards Ordinance (1937) centralized land administration, favoring formal registration over customary rights. The Registration of Titles Act (1958) introduced a title-based ownership system, but the high costs excluded many indigenous people (Carmody & Taylor, 2016).

These colonial policies favored private ownership over communal rights, prioritizing European and elite interests while marginalizing peasants and customary landholders. The reforms deepened land inequalities, created a class of landlords and landless peasants, and led to land disputes that persist in Uganda today. The Buganda Agreement, in particular, triggered widespread displacement, turning many Ugandans into tenant farmers on land they previously occupied freely. Ultimately, colonialism established a land tenure system that benefited a few while disadvantaging the majority, laying the foundation for Uganda's enduring land conflicts. After gaining independence in 1962, Uganda adopted a constitution that recognized four land tenure systems: freehold, leasehold, mailo, and customary. However, successive governments introduced major land reforms

that altered land administration and ownership structures. In 1967, the Republican Constitution abolished kingdoms and placed all land under presidential control. The Public Land Act of 1969 sought to protect customary land rights. However, in 1975, Idi Amin's Land Reform Decree nationalized all land, eliminating private ownership and making all land leasehold under state control. This decree abolished the Busuulu and Envujjo Law of 1928, which had provided some security for tenants (Mukwaya, 1953).

In 1986, President Museveni's government partially restored customary tenure and allowed former mailo owners to reclaim land if they could prove prior ownership. The 1995 Constitution marked a turning point by reaffirming freehold, leasehold, mailo, and customary tenure while introducing new concepts such as co-ownership by spouses and certificates of customary ownership to strengthen tenure security. The 1998 Land Act was enacted to implement the 1995 Constitution, decentralizing land administration and protecting lawful and bona fide occupants from evictions. Over time, the Act has been amended most notably in 2004 and 2010 to enhance women's land rights, increase security of tenure, and regulate land evictions. Additionally, the National Land Policy (2013) and the Uganda Land Use Policy (2006) were developed to ensure sustainable and equitable land management (Ogola, 2015).

Despite these reforms, land tenure insecurity, evictions, land grabbing, and disputes remain major challenges. The mailo land system, which covers about 10% of Uganda's land, is particularly problematic due to dual ownership conflicts between landlords and tenants. The court ruled in *St Mark Educational Centre Ltd v Makerere University* (CA No. 40 of 1997) that no new mailo titles can be issued beyond those registered before 1928. The government proposed further reforms in 2021, including streamlining mailo tenure, protecting kibanja holders' rights, and improving land dispute resolution. Uganda's land governance framework continues to evolve, shaped by historical inequalities, political decisions, and socio-economic pressures. Despite various reforms, land conflicts, unclear boundaries, corruption, and competing claims over land rights persist, highlighting the need for stronger institutional capacity and enforcement of land policies (Carmody & Taylor, 2016a; Na, 2021).

Land Registration in Uganda

Land registration in Uganda is governed by the Registration of Titles Act, Cap 240, which provides a legal framework for obtaining land titles as proof of ownership (Ministry of Lands Housing and Urban Development, 2013). This Act applies to all land tenure systems except customary tenure, which must first be converted to freehold under Section 10 of the Land Act, Cap 236 before registration. Alternatively, customary landowners can obtain a Certificate of Customary Ownership (CCO), though it offers limited rights compared to a registered title. Unlike registered proprietors, CCO holders cannot transfer land or use it as collateral without first converting their tenure. The registration system is based on a centralized register book, where each land parcel has a certificate of title, issued in duplicate. Once registered, land ownership is indefeasible under Section 64(1) of the Registration of Titles Act, except in cases of fraud. However, the land registration process is costly, bureaucratic, and plagued by corruption, making it difficult for many landowners to secure legal tenure. Despite its importance, land titling remains underutilized in Uganda, with only 20% of landowners having registered interests. This leaves the majority vulnerable to land grabbing and tenure insecurity. The failure to expand land registration has excluded many landowners from legal protections, limiting their ability to fully utilize their land for economic and developmental purposes (Ministry of Lands Housing and Urban Development, 2023).

While land registration is theoretically designed to secure ownership and reduce conflicts, in practice, the system remains inaccessible to many due to procedural complexity, high costs, and limited outreach to rural areas. These barriers are not merely logistical but reflect structural inequalities rooted in Uganda's legal history. The centralized titling process tends to favor urban elites and investors who possess the financial resources and legal knowledge to navigate land offices, often at the expense of rural communities. Furthermore, the lack of integration between customary documentation and statutory records creates loopholes that are exploited in fraudulent land transactions. These systemic flaws reinforce tenure insecurity and undermine the potential of land registration to protect legitimate landholders.

Prevalence of Land Grabbing

Land grabbing affects various aspects, including the environment, economy, social welfare, and human rights. Despite its global prevalence, no single definition fully captures its complexity. At the global level, land grabbing

refers to the control of large tracts of land by public or private entities, domestic or foreign, through legal or illegal means for speculation, extraction, or commodification, often at the expense of smallholder farmers, food sovereignty, and human rights (Owusu Ansah & Chigbu, 2020).

In Uganda, land grabbing is defined as the illegal, fraudulent, or unfair acquisition of land by individuals, businesses, or public enterprises, exploiting power imbalances, corruption, and weak law enforcement. It occurs directly through forced evictions without proper compensation, or indirectly by deceiving owners into signing away their land rights. Domestic elites, government officials, and clan leaders often play a role in facilitating land grabs, targeting vulnerable groups (Mabikke, 2011).

In Africa, land is crucial for smallholder agriculture, food security, and economic stability. Smallholder production remains the backbone of the region's agriculture, with many producers relying on land for food production and agricultural productivity. Beyond economic benefits, land holds cultural and social significance, shaping the identities and traditions of many communities in Sub-Saharan Africa. The growing threat of land grabbing poses serious risks to livelihoods, sustainability, and traditional land stewardship across the region (Stenberg & Rafiee, 2018).

Despite ongoing reforms and the presence of formal land governance frameworks, land grabbing persists in Uganda largely due to systemic failures in enforcement, transparency, and accountability. Weak institutional oversight enables politically connected individuals and corporate actors to exploit legal ambiguities and administrative loopholes to acquire land unlawfully. Furthermore, the legacy of dual tenure systems, where customary and statutory claims overlap, creates legal uncertainty that can be manipulated during land transactions. These conditions have allowed land grabbing to evolve into a sophisticated and often normalized practice, facilitated not only by coercion or deception but also through collusion between land officials, elites, and financial actors. As a result, land grabbing has become both a symptom and a driver of deeper structural inequality in Uganda.

Land Grabbing in Kayunga District

Kayunga District is experiencing a rapid agrarian transformation, where small-scale farmers are being displaced to make way for large-scale agriculture. Land disputes have led to armed force, mob justice, forcible evictions, and violent clashes, leaving many without alternative livelihoods. Bbale sub-county has been the epicenter of land conflicts, particularly in Misenga, Kinawanga, and Kayonza parishes (Kajura & Lule, 2017).

Both public officials and private individuals have been implicated in land grabbing. In 2017, a district chairperson was accused of evicting over 2,000 peasant bibanja holders with minimal or no compensation. District land officials exploit their knowledge of land records to illegally acquire land, while area land committees contribute to confusion by issuing multiple land sale agreements for the same plot. In the private sector, cartels, investors, and predatory money lenders collude with officials to acquire land through fraudulent means (Kajura & Lule, 2017). Kayunga's land tenure system is predominantly mailo, introduced under the 1900 Buganda Agreement, but also includes freehold, Kabaka's land, and customary tenure. The district remains at the center of Uganda's land conflicts, with several people having lost their lives and property due to intensifying land disputes (Mukiibi, 2013; 2021).

Objective of the Study

This study assessed the perspectives of local communities in Kayunga District on the relationship between land registration and land grabbing.

Research Question

What are the views and experiences of local communities in Kayunga District on how land registration and land grabbing impact their land rights and livelihoods?

2. Literature Review

The interface between land registration and land grabbing presents significant tensions in settings where customary tenure dominates, as is the case in much of Sub-Saharan Africa. Bae, (2023), in an analysis of Zambia,

observed that transforming customary land into statutory holdings without community safeguards has enabled large-scale land acquisitions and displacements, particularly where titling costs remain prohibitive. While useful, the study lacks direct relevance to the Ugandan context due to differences in land administration frameworks and socio-political structures. Similarly, Sauls et al., (2022), in a study conducted in Latin America, argued that land registration can grant legal standing to Indigenous groups, but also exposes them to market-driven exploitation and territorial contestations. The transferability of these findings to Uganda remains limited given the contrasting governance dynamics.

Mugambwa, (2007), drawing from Papua New Guinea, emphasized that land is inseparably linked to spiritual and communal identity under customary tenure, and argued that external interventions devoid of legal safeguards erode traditional authority. Although the study supports this position, the lack of methodological detail limits the credibility of that evidence. In Malawi, Bae, (2023) traced colonial land dispossession practices and illustrated how contemporary land acquisition schemes continue to marginalize rural communities through collusion between local elites and state actors. However, the study gives insufficient attention to community-level agency or voice, a dimension that is central to the current study conducted in Kayunga District.

In Uganda, Ashukem, (2020) critically analysed constitutional and statutory provisions related to land, identifying institutional weaknesses and corruption as key impediments to the protection of customary rights. Similarly, Owor & Dieterle, (2020), in a study in the Acholi sub-region, demonstrated the contradictions between communal tenure systems and statutory law, leading to tenure insecurity and land-related tensions. Santiago, (2019), in a study of Bugala Island, revealed the systematic disenfranchisement of local populations through state-sanctioned land acquisitions, where compensation mechanisms were either absent or insufficient. These findings are echoed by Ackah-Baidoo et al. (2022), who underscored how state-backed infrastructure projects continue to undermine land tenure among customary landholders. While relevant, these studies do not specifically interrogate land registration processes in the context of Kayunga District.

Gender disparities in land access have also been critically examined in Ugandan literature. Kasimbazi, (2017) emphasized that rural women face structural exclusions from land ownership under customary tenure, which often privileges male lineage. Akena, (2018) illustrated the cultural embeddedness of land in northern Uganda and the vulnerability of such tenure systems to political and economic pressure. Further, Salcedo-La Viña & Notess, (2017) revealed variations in community responses to land acquisition schemes, shaped by differing degrees of legal awareness and power dynamics. Bottazzi et al., (2016), based on studies in Sierra Leone and Ghana, highlighted that land registration can be manipulated by elites and investors to formalize exclusion, even when it purports to protect local ownership.

Research Gap

Although previous studies have examined the link between land registration and land grabbing, many were conducted in different socio-political contexts such as Latin America, Zambia, and Malawi, which limits their relevance to Uganda's distinct land tenure landscape. Scholars such as Bae, (2023) and Sauls et al., (2022) emphasized the vulnerabilities created through titling reforms and external investment, yet these findings lack direct applicability to Uganda, particularly in rural areas with strong customary land systems. Within the Ugandan context, existing literature including that of Ashukem, (2020), Owor & Dieterle, (2020) and Santiago, (2019) offers useful critiques of institutional weaknesses, policy contradictions, and the consequences of state-sanctioned acquisitions. However, these studies do not adequately explore the perspectives of local communities confronting tenure insecurity during land registration processes.

Further, previous research often focused on legal frameworks and structural failures without incorporating lived experiences of communities subjected to land registration and forced displacement. Limited scholarly attention has been paid to how ordinary land users in rural Uganda interpret, engage with, or resist land registration initiatives. Issues such as the role of local elites, the manipulation of customary rights, and the social consequences of statutory land formalization remain underexplored in site-specific contexts such as Kayunga District. Moreover, gendered experiences and community-level responses are frequently generalized, with insufficient attention to the differentiated effects of registration and land loss on various social groups.

This study has addressed these gaps through a localized investigation that captured the views and experiences of rural community members in Kayunga. It has examined the practical challenges and socio-political dynamics surrounding land registration, explored the structural conditions facilitating land grabbing, and documented the interactions between formal governance mechanisms and customary tenure systems. Through this, the study has contributed a grounded understanding of land governance challenges, reflecting the complex realities facing rural populations in Uganda.

3. Methodology

Philosophical Orientation and research design.

The study is informed by the interpretivism philosophy. Interpretivism philosophy concerns researchers who are attempting to comprehend social happenings through an individual's own experience and the meanings assigned thereafter (Klein & Myers, 1999), such as language, consciousness and common experiences (Walsham, 1995). The interpretivism philosophy tries to understand the subjective meanings embedded in social life and hence tries to explain why people act the way they do (Sartre, 2015).

Interpretivism is used in this study to explore how local communities feel about the relationship between the law on land registration and cases of land grabbing. In addition, this study aims to find out how they see the problem and potential solutions. This study aimed at understanding how they interpret and make sense of the legal framework and economic forces at play. Proponents of interpretivism contend that data is subjective and therefore its clarification is important (Sayer, 2013). To this effect, interpretivism philosophy follows the qualitative approach to give a comprehension of the social and organizational settings, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with texts, reported detailed views of respondents and conducted in a natural setting (Creswell, 2014)

A cross-sectional case study design was adopted. This design was chosen as it captures data at a single point in time, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the issue (Kumar, 2018). The study utilized primary which included laws, regulations, court decisions, and official government reports. The study targeted stakeholders in Kayunga District, including legal professionals, policymakers (land board officials, political leaders, opinion leaders), local communities (landowners and tenants), and representatives from regional land offices.

Sample size and sampling techniques

A total of 90 respondents participated in the study. Purposive sampling was used for policymakers and legal professionals based on their roles and expertise in land registration. Local community members were selected through simple random sampling using village registers to ensure equal representation. To reduce bias, the researcher applied clear inclusion criteria, verified participant roles, and ensured representation across locations and categories.

Data Collection Methods and Analysis

The study employed multiple methods to collect data, including document analysis, archival research, case studies, and focus group discussions (FGDs). Document analysis involved reviewing legal texts, statutes, and case law related to land tenure, while archival research examined historical land records and government reports. Case study methods were used to investigate specific incidents of land grabbing in Kayunga District. FGDs were conducted with local landowners to gather community perspectives. For data analysis, thematic analysis was employed. Transcripts from FGDs and case records were coded manually, with themes developed inductively based on patterns emerging from the data. To enhance credibility, codes were reviewed and refined through peer debriefing, and inter-coder reliability was ensured through cross-checking by an independent reviewer. This approach allowed for a comprehensive and reliable interpretation of the qualitative data.

4. Findings

Introduction

The findings from the focus group discussions and interviews that were conducted with the different participants in the different sub-counties and town councils revealed that the local community in Kayunga District holds diverse and complex perspectives on land registration and land grabbing. While some

participants recognized the benefits of land registration, such as securing tenure, preventing disputes, and enabling access to financial services, others expressed concerns over the high costs, bureaucratic hurdles, and corruption that make the process inaccessible. Many landowners and tenants, particularly those with low levels of formal education, struggled with legal and procedural complexities, leading to widespread mistrust in government institutions responsible for land administration. Traditional leaders and elders highlighted the cultural tensions between formal land registration systems and customary landholding practices, arguing that land commodification undermines communal ownership and spiritual ties to ancestral lands. Additionally, participants noted that land registration often benefits elites and wealthier individuals while smallholder farmers and vulnerable groups face increasing exclusion.

The issue of land grabbing emerged as a critical concern, with many participants linking it to weak enforcement of land laws, population growth, corruption, and poverty. Several respondents described experiences of forced displacement, evictions, and land speculation, which have contributed to food insecurity, loss of livelihoods, and heightened social conflicts. Cases of land grabbing involving powerful individuals, government officials, and security forces were frequently cited, with allegations of local authorities colluding with land grabbers to manipulate land titles and dispossess rightful landowners. Government efforts to curb land grabbing, including legal reforms and community sensitization programs, were perceived as largely ineffective due to poor implementation, lack of awareness, and continued corruption. Participants emphasized the need for stronger legal protections, enhanced transparency, and improved accountability mechanisms to safeguard land rights and prevent further injustices in Kayunga District.

Perspectives of the Local Community on Land Registration

The findings presented below reflect the diverse experiences and perceptions of local communities in Kayunga District regarding land registration and land grabbing. Through thematic analysis of focus group discussions and case data, different key themes emerged, each illustrating the complex interaction between customary practices, institutional frameworks, and community realities.

Conflicts Arising from Land Registration

Many participants shared experiences of conflicts arising from attempts to register land, particularly where generational land claims were not documented. The transition from customary to statutory land tenure created disputes over boundaries and ownership, leading to mistrust in the formal registration system. Some community members felt that registration erased historical agreements and customary rights, increasing tensions within families and communities. Additionally, corruption in land transactions was a significant concern, with reports of influential individuals using loopholes in the registration process to displace rightful landowners. One participant noted, *"People used to know whose land it was without papers. Now even families are breaking up because someone has a title"* (FGD participant, 2023). This highlights the need for legal reforms that integrate customary tenure systems and ensure transparency in land governance.

Cultural Perceptions and Communal Values

Cultural values play a crucial role in shaping attitudes toward land registration in Kayunga District. Many participants expressed concerns that land registration might disrupt communal landholding structures, which have traditionally facilitated shared farming, grazing, and resource use. The individualization of land ownership was seen as a potential threat to social cohesion, as it could lead to the fragmentation of communal ties. Some residents worried that the commercialization of land through formal registration would erode cultural identity and spiritual connections to ancestral land. One respondent emphasized, *"Land is more than property; it is where our ancestors are buried. Registration makes it seem like just a commodity"* (Female Tenant, personal communication, October 2023). These concerns highlight the necessity of balancing modern legal frameworks with customary land practices to maintain cultural integrity while providing security of tenure. The government must develop land policies that respect traditional landholding systems while ensuring they align with legal protections.

Economic Opportunities and Financial Barriers

Economically, land registration was seen as both an opportunity and a challenge. Many participants acknowledged that registered land provides access to credit facilities, investment opportunities, and legal protection against encroachment. Farmers noted that a registered land title allowed them to secure loans for

agricultural development and business expansion. A participant shared, *"A title helped me get a loan to expand my farm, but now land is too expensive for my sons"* (FGD participant, 2023). However, some expressed fears that registration would encourage land speculation and drive up land prices, making it unaffordable for smallholder farmers. Additionally, procedural inefficiencies and corruption within land offices discouraged some landowners from pursuing formal registration. The high costs of surveying, valuation, and processing fees further marginalized rural communities, preventing them from reaping the economic benefits associated with land registration. Addressing these financial barriers is essential to ensuring equitable access to land registration services.

Institutional Challenges and Governance Barriers

Institutional challenges in land registration were also highlighted, with participants pointing to inefficiencies within land governance bodies. Many landowners faced long delays due to the fragmented nature of the registration process, which required multiple approvals from different offices. The concentration of land offices in urban centers also created logistical barriers, making it difficult for residents in remote sub-counties to access registration services. Corruption within land offices was another major concern, with reports of officials demanding bribes to process applications. A participant noted, *"They asked for money just to move my file. I waited for months without any response"* (FGD participant, 2023). Additionally, inadequate resources and understaffing in land offices contributed to service delays, further frustrating landowners. Strengthening institutional capacity, decentralizing land services, and enhancing accountability measures are necessary to improve the efficiency and fairness of land registration processes in Kayunga District.

Challenges in the Land Registration Process

The findings further revealed a range of systemic challenges that hinder effective land registration and contribute to land insecurity in Kayunga District. These challenges were grouped into four major thematic areas, as outlined below.

Bureaucratic Inefficiencies in Land Registration

The study found that bureaucratic inefficiencies hinder land registration, with lengthy procedures, unclear guidelines, and excessive paperwork discouraging participation. Respondents reported delays caused by administrative bottlenecks, lack of coordination among land offices, and inconsistent legal interpretations. A participant in Nazigo stated, *"The process takes too long, and every time you go back, they ask for a new document, making it expensive and frustrating"* (Participant in the FGD, 2023). The requirement to visit multiple government offices, often located far from rural communities, further deters landowners from registering their land, leaving many without legal protection.

Financial Barriers to Registration

Furthermore, financial constraints emerged as a major barrier to land registration, particularly for low-income landowners. Participants highlighted the cumulative costs involved in surveying, valuation, legal fees, and administrative charges as unaffordable. Many respondents noted that informal landowners, especially those under customary tenure, struggle to meet these financial demands. A farmer in Bbaale remarked, *"Even if I wanted to register my land, I cannot afford the surveyor fees, let alone the other costs they keep adding."* (Participant in the FGD, 2023). This financial burden leaves many vulnerable to land disputes and potential land grabbing, as they lack legal documentation to support their claims.

Corruption in Land Offices

The study also found that corruption within land offices significantly undermines the integrity of the registration process. Participants reported widespread bribery, with officials demanding illegal payments to fast-track applications or resolve disputes. Some respondents claimed that individuals with financial influence could manipulate land records to acquire fraudulent titles. A participant in Kayunga Town shared, *"If you don't pay a bribe, your file will never move, and sometimes they even say your documents are lost so that you pay again."* Such systemic corruption fosters inequality, as wealthy individuals and companies exploit the system at the expense of ordinary landowners.

Incidences of Land Grabbing

Land grabbing was reported as a growing concern in Kayunga District, with cases involving illegal acquisitions by investors, companies, and politically connected individuals. Respondents described instances of forced evictions, destruction of homes, and displacement without compensation. A resident in Kitimbwa recounted, *"We woke up to surveyors marking our land, and within days, we were told to leave because someone else had bought it."* (Participant in the FGD, 2023). The absence of clear land documentation exacerbates the problem, as fraudulent claims and manipulated land records often override customary ownership rights.

Cases of land grabbing

The study also reviewed cases of land grabbing in Kayunga District, including the case of State House officials accused of grabbing forest reserves, the 2022 case of a police chief allegedly siding with land grabbers, and the 2009 case of a landlord burned to death by angry tenants. These cases highlight how power struggles, institutional weaknesses, and legal loopholes contribute to unlawful land acquisitions. The allegations against State House officials regarding forest reserves illustrate how government directives can be manipulated to facilitate private land deals, undermining constitutional protections and the public trust doctrine. Similarly, the accusations against law enforcement for siding with land grabbers emphasize the systemic failure of state institutions to uphold property rights and protect vulnerable landowners. The violent response of tenants in the case of John Kibuuka further demonstrates the deep-seated tensions between formal land ownership structures and generational occupancy rights under customary tenure. These incidents emphasize the urgent need for strong legal frameworks, transparent land governance, and enforcement of land rights to prevent future conflicts and protect marginalized communities from exploitation.

Role of Law Enforcement in Land Grabbing

The study revealed that law enforcement agencies frequently fail to protect local landowners from land grabbing, with allegations of bias toward powerful individuals. Participants expressed frustration over the police siding with land grabbers during evictions and failing to investigate fraudulent transactions. A participant in Kangulumira observed, *"Police officers protect those taking our land instead of helping us. Even when we report cases, they do nothing"* (Participant in the FGD, 2023). Such institutional failures deepen mistrust in legal mechanisms, leaving communities feeling helpless against land dispossession.

The transition from customary to formal land registration was found to create tensions within communities, as traditional landholding practices do not always align with statutory land laws. Participants emphasized that land is deeply tied to heritage and social identity, and some feared that registration promotes commercialization and individualization of land ownership. A respondent in Busaana stated, *"Land is more than property; it is where our ancestors are buried. Registration makes it seem like just a commodity"* (Participant in the FGD, 2023). This resistance to formalization highlights the need for policies that integrate customary tenure systems into the legal framework to ensure inclusivity and community acceptance.

Discussion of Findings

The study findings confirm that land registration plays a crucial role in securing tenure and preventing disputes, aligning with Ackah-Baidoo et al., (2022), who argued that formal land titles reduce conflicts and enhance investment opportunities. In Kayunga District, participants acknowledged that registration provided legal proof of ownership, enabling access to credit and protection from encroachment. However, the study also revealed that access to land registration services is uneven, reinforcing inequalities among socio-economic groups. This supports Ojambo, (2023), who noted that formalization may disadvantage the poor when costs and bureaucracy render the process inaccessible. Mechanisms such as high transaction costs, technical procedures, and distance to urban land offices effectively exclude rural and low-income populations, deepening tenure insecurity. As Deininger & Castagnini, (2006) emphasized, without deliberate inclusion measures, land registration may reinforce rather than correct existing socio-economic disparities.

Corruption within land administration was another major barrier highlighted in the findings. Participants described systemic bribery, lost documents, and favoritism in processing applications. These observations are consistent with Boone, (2014), who argued that weak land governance structures in Africa often serve as enablers for land grabbing. The study confirmed that individuals with financial and political influence were more likely to bypass procedures or obtain fraudulent titles, which Abdulai & Ochieng, (2017) warned

significantly erodes trust in state institutions. Respondents also expressed concerns over law enforcement bias toward land grabbers, affirming Chimhowu, (2019) claim that legal systems in many African contexts often protect elite interests while leaving the poor with limited access to justice.

Beyond institutional weaknesses, the study drew attention to the cultural implications of formal land registration. Many participants perceived registration as a force that undermines indigenous landholding systems and weakens community cohesion. Anthony, (2022) argued that formal titling disrupts the relational and spiritual value of land in African societies, and the present study supports this view. For instance, respondents worried that converting communal lands into individually titled plots threatened traditional forms of shared use such as grazing, cultivation, and burial grounds. As Wily, (2011) noted, the failure to integrate customary norms into statutory frameworks often results in increased social fragmentation and conflict. These findings suggest that land registration reform must go beyond legal inclusion and address the symbolic and cultural meanings attached to land, especially in rural contexts.

The findings also show that land grabbing remains a serious issue in Kayunga District, consistent with broader global patterns documented by (Hall, 2011). Cases of forced evictions and land loss to politically connected individuals reflect Cotula', (2009) observation that large-scale acquisitions often displace smallholder farmers and deepen rural poverty. Respondents described losing land to investors without consultation or compensation, which supports Mabikke, (2011), who highlighted the risk of elite capture in Uganda's land governance. Furthermore, the failure of law enforcement to intervene supports Borrás et al., (2011), who noted that weak institutional checks create an environment in which land dispossession continues unchallenged. These findings call for legal and institutional reforms that prioritize transparency, community consultation, and the protection of customary land rights to prevent further marginalization.

5. Conclusion

The study established that the relationship between land registration and land grabbing in Kayunga District is characterized by both opportunities and vulnerabilities. While land registration was acknowledged as a mechanism for enhancing tenure security, enabling access to credit, and mitigating land-related conflicts, the process remains inaccessible to many due to corruption, procedural inefficiencies, and excessive costs. These barriers have enabled elite capture and have marginalized customary landowners, thereby intensifying land insecurity. Moreover, the study demonstrated that the ongoing transition from customary to statutory tenure has disrupted traditional communal systems, threatening cultural identity and community cohesion. Reports of land grabbing, forced evictions, and institutional complicity underscore the failure of existing frameworks to safeguard the rights of vulnerable populations. The findings therefore underscore the urgent need for institutional reforms, cultural integration, and legal safeguards to ensure that land registration contributes to justice, equity, and sustainable land governance in Uganda. The study contributes to legal and policy discourse on land administration in sub-Saharan Africa and provides a foundation for future scholarly and legislative inquiry into inclusive land reform.

Recommendations

Institutional reform within Uganda's land governance system is necessary to ensure efficient, accountable, and transparent registration processes. Adoption of integrated land management systems, such as those implemented under Rwanda's Land Administration Information System, may address bureaucratic delays, improve public access, and limit discretionary corruption. Strengthening internal controls and instituting independent oversight mechanisms would support the integrity of land offices and reinforce public trust.

Legal recognition and incorporation of customary tenure into the formal statutory framework are essential to securing the rights of indigenous and communal landholders. The Ghanaian model of Customary Land Secretariats illustrates how traditional systems can function in parallel with national legislation, provided that adequate legal backing, community participation, and capacity-building measures are in place. However, challenges such as intra-community disputes and competing claims may arise, requiring culturally sensitive dispute resolution mechanisms and participatory mapping processes.

The establishment of a specialized and decentralized land tribunal would facilitate the timely and impartial adjudication of land disputes. Such a tribunal should be composed of judicial officers, land experts, and representatives of customary institutions to promote legal pluralism and improve access to justice for rural populations.

Legal safeguards against land grabbing must be strengthened through legislative amendments that criminalize fraudulent land transactions, reinforce the requirement of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC), and introduce procedural transparency for all large-scale land acquisitions. The legal framework governing community land in Kenya offers a reference point for embedding community consent and public participation in land governance processes.

Public awareness and legal literacy campaigns must be institutionalized to inform citizens of their rights, registration procedures, and avenues for redress. Targeted outreach to rural and marginalized populations is critical to ensuring equitable participation in land administration processes. Through such comprehensive and context-responsive reforms, the land registration regime in Uganda can be transformed into a system that upholds tenure security, cultural legitimacy, and justice for all stakeholders.

Declaration of Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest related to this study. This research was conducted independently, without any financial, professional, or personal influences that could have affected the objectivity of the findings and conclusions. The study is solely for academic purposes and aims to contribute to knowledge on land registration and land governance in Uganda.

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