

# Land And Environment Rights In Uganda: Experiences From Karamoja And Mid-Western Sub-Regions

# 2024 ANNUAL REPORT



protest 2,600-hectare land giveaway to inv.



chief administrator of the District, Mr Robert Williams, said the district land had been sold to Panacea Investors. Mr Collins' job at Panacea Investors was terminated after he received a letter from the land board stating that the land had given his company a right to it.

wrote a letter

LAND RIG



ALI SSEKATANA  
LEGAL AND  
CORPORATE AFFAIRS  
AT THE PETROLEUM  
AUTHORITY OF  
UGANDA  
corporateaffairs@pau.

houses have been sold to affected persons. As of December 31, 2000, at least 95% of the affected persons have received compensation agreements, with 91% of these compensation agreements completed. The remaining payments are ongoing. There are 116 cases under consideration for compulsory land acquisition and 11 cases for unresolvable individuals, including 11 downer disputes, and 1 case of compensation offers.

is replaced by a new one, the unprecedents, touch will set a bench for other public projects such as road construction, power lines, and water and other public works.



"rarity before executing the deal. " wrote a letter on February 22 advising company and district council to "delay meeting and mobilize" before we agree to give "Gloria said, "sailed, the Aratu "our final move" "land own- reeently with the land owners and engage the district at a later stage." Mr' made such. "During the community meeting no resolved that no land would be transferred to the Ranch because we were not told that it did not indicate that,"

100  
100

ies accounting for 0.8% (42) in number were subjected to the

use to untraceable individuals, landowner disputes, and refusal of compensation offers.

such as road crossings, power lines, and other public infrastructure.



By

# WITNESS RADIO.ORG



MINISTRY OF  
FOREIGN AFFAIRS  
OF DENMARK  
*Danida*

Funded by The European Union

In partnership with:



**NATIONAL  
COALITION OF  
HUMAN  
RIGHTS  
DEFENDERS  
UGANDA**

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This report is co-published in 2025 by Witness Radio, DanChurchAid (DCA) and the National Coalition of Human Rights Defenders Uganda (NCHRD-U) in Kampala, Uganda and co-funded by the European Union.

## **Cover Photograph:**

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## **Acknowledgements:**

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Appreciation goes to the Community Land and Environment Rights Defenders (CLERDs) and Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) who participated in this report compilation and whose experiences have informed the development of this report.

European Union (EU), whose funding through DCA contributed significantly to the overarching objectives of the production of this report, is hereby acknowledged for the financial support that made the report compilation possible.

Witness Radio is looking forward to continue working with you all on the key actions and recommendations provided herein in advancing access to land justice in Uganda.

## **Disclaimer:**

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# ABOUT WITNESS RADIO

Witness Radio (WR) is a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) mandated to carry out activities in the fields of advocating for protection and promotion of human rights, mobilizing and empowering of farming communities, research on land-based development, establishing linkages and networks (with mass media) that would promote research, information development and dissemination. It was established in 2016 by human rights journalists with a long history of farming, lawyers and practicing small-holder farmers to advance and promote economic, social and cultural rights of farming communities in Uganda.

The organization works closely with positive and supportive community-based structures established as Community Land and Environmental Rights Defenders (CLERDs). WR empowers these structures to bridge the shrinking civic space in addressing the confrontational transfer of rights and interests on land which affect the marginalized populations. WR further offers legal aid support to these structures and vulnerable people to defend themselves as well as their rights and interests on land.

Owing to its activism, on 18th November 2022 WR received an Award from the National Land Forum as the Best Land Rights Defender among Civil Society Organizations (CSOs).

In December 2024, WR was duly accredited among CSO observers to the Conference of Parties (COP) of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) according to the provisions contained in paragraph 7 article 22 of the Convention and Rules 6 and 7 of the rules of procedure of the COP, adopted by decision 1/COP.1. This accreditation was confirmed at the UNCCD COP16 held in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, 2–13 December 2024.

# FOREWORD

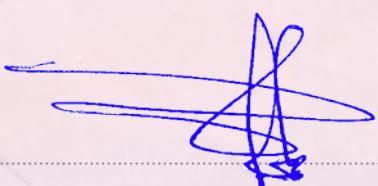
In the haunting land-related transactions in Karamoja and Midwestern sub-regions involving multinational enterprises requiring land tracts for large-scale agricultural projects, carbon off-set tree plantations, oil refineries and mines, Witness Radio has monitored and documented first-hand harrowing cases of forceful land evictions.

These forceful evictions have had consequences manifested as environmental degradation, food insecurity as indigenous communities unjustly lose their family farms and their food crops maliciously destroyed, as well as blatant human rights violations arising from methods deployed to forcefully grab land, including; sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), kidnap, torture, arbitrary arrests and detention, demolition of water sources, schools, hospitals, and worship centers.

Despite this bleak outlook, hope is appearing among some affected communities in these sub-regions. In the districts of Kiryandongo, Kikuube, Hoima, Buliisa and Mubende, Witness Radio is facilitating dialogues and bridge building between hundreds of affected community members and the independent accountability mechanisms (IAMs) of international financing institutions to address the human rights abuses or/and issues emerging from business operations of the clients of these financing institutions.

The poignant stories of land and environmental rights from the Karamoja and Midwestern sub-regions in this report are among those submitted by land and environment defenders (LEDs) to Witness Radio through call-ins and web-based land portal and reports from the NCHRD-U. Witness Radio gathered, analyzed - and, for the first time in November 2024, publicly disseminated -data of the first half of the year 2024 on trends of land evictions and impact on affected communities across the country. The report offered an eye-opening insight into the rapid illegal loss of community lands and adverse social and environmental impact of illegal transfer of interests and rights on land in the name of development.

This publication showcases experiences from Karamoja and Midwestern sub-regions of Uganda in the year 2024 in a simple and insightful way. While not exhaustive, the experiences captured in this publication will act as an inspiration to all stakeholders and ignite their intent towards resilience and collaborative efforts to uphold human and environmental rights in transfer of land rights and interests to large-scale land-based investors.



**Wokulira Geoffrey Ssebaggala**  
**Country Director**  
**Witness Radio - Uganda**

# ACRONYMS

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<b>ACCS</b>	Advisory Consortium on Conflict Sensitivity
<b>CLERDs</b>	Community Land and Environmental Rights Defenders
<b>CSOs</b>	Civil Society Organizations
<b>COP</b>	Conference of Parties
<b>COP16</b>	Conference of Parties Sixteenth Session
<b>DCA</b>	DanChurchAid
<b>EMGs</b>	Ethnic Minority Groups
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>GDP</b>	Gross Domestic Product
<b>HRDs</b>	Human Rights Defenders
<b>ICESCR</b>	International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
<b>LBIs</b>	Land-Base Investments
<b>LEDs</b>	Land and Environment Defenders
<b>MDA-HRU</b>	Monitoring, Documentation and Advocacy for Human Rights in Uganda
<b>MDAs</b>	Ministries Departments and Agencies
<b>MNCs</b>	Multi-National Companies
<b>NAP</b>	National Action Plan
<b>NCHRD-U</b>	National Coalition of Human Rights Defenders Uganda
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Government Organization
<b>OECD</b>	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
<b>PAPs</b>	Project Affected Persons
<b>RDCs</b>	Resident District Commissioners
<b>SGBV</b>	Sexual and Gender-Based Violence
<b>SDGs</b>	Sustainable Development Goals
<b>UDHR</b>	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
<b>UHRC</b>	Uganda Human Rights Commission
<b>UNCCD</b>	United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification
<b>UPDF</b>	Uganda People's Defence Forces
<b>UPF</b>	Uganda Police Force
<b>URA</b>	Uganda Revenue Authority
<b>USE</b>	Uganda Securities Exchange
<b>WR</b>	Witness Radio

# 1.0

# INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Land and Environment Rights

### Internationally;

- Article 17 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) provides for the right to own property by everyone alone as well as in association with others and provides that no one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property. The reference to property rights includes land as property.
- Article 11 of the International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) makes an indirect reference to land when it encourages states parties to develop or reform “agrarian systems in such a way as to achieve the most efficient development and utilization of natural resources.” Agrarian systems involve land reform movements and capitalist expansion, with the situation of peasants and their subsistence economies as cornerstones of the debate, as well as land use and the changes therein.
- Article 14 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights provides that the right to property shall be guaranteed. It may only be encroached upon in the interest of public need or in the general interest of the community and in accordance with the provisions of appropriate laws.<sup>1</sup> Article 21(2) says, “In case of spoliation the dispossessed people shall have the right to the lawful recovery of its property as well as to an adequate compensation.”
- The United Nations Declaration on Social Progress, adopted by the General Assembly in 1969, which recognizes the social function of property, including land, calls for forms of land ownership that ensure equal rights to property for all.<sup>2</sup>

### Domestically in Uganda;

Article 237(1) of the 1995 Constitution of the Republic of Uganda states that “land in Uganda belongs to the citizens of Uganda and shall vest in them in accordance with the land tenure systems provided for in this Constitution”

- Article 26(1) of the 1995 Constitution protects the right to own property either individually or in association with others for instance groups of people who hold land communally.

<sup>1</sup> African [Banjul] Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights, adopted 27 June 1981, OAU Doc. CAB/LEG/67/3 rev. 5, 21 I.L.M. 58 (1982), entered into force 21 Oct. 21 1986.

<sup>2</sup> Declaration on Social Progress and Development, GA Res. 2542 (XXIV), 24 UN GAOR Supp. (No. 30) at 49, UN Doc. A/7630 (1969). United Nations Declaration on Social Progress, 1969.

- According to Article 237(2) of the 1995 Constitution;
  - (a) the Government or a local government may, subject to article 26 of this Constitution, acquire land in the public interest; and the conditions governing such acquisition shall be as prescribed by Parliament;
  - (b) the Government or a local government as determined by Parliament by law shall hold in trust for the people and protect natural lakes, rivers, wetlands, forest reserves, game reserves, national parks and any land to be reserved for ecological and touristic purposes for the common good of all citizens;
  - (c) Non-citizens may acquire leases in land in accordance with the laws prescribed by Parliament, and the laws so prescribed shall define a non-citizen for the purposes of this paragraph".
- Section 24 of the 1998 Land Act details the right to land of communities to graze, hunt, gather honey and other forest resources for food and medicinal purposes, and any other purposes as may be traditional among the community.
- In the National Land Policy 2013, the Government of Uganda commits to pay fair compensation to Ethnic Minority Groups (EMGs) displaced from their ancestral lands - in the past and in the future - which provision is a fundamental step that could see disenfranchised indigenous communities compensated for eviction from their natural habitats that were later gazetted as national parks or/and forest reserves.
- The relationship between lawful and bonafide occupants (tenants) and registered landowners is regulated through the rights and obligations outlined in the Land Act. These regulations ensure protection of land rights of the tenants as follows:
  - Lawful and bonafide occupants enjoy legal guarantee of continued occupancy under the Land Act. They can only be evicted under the following circumstances;
    - (a) Failure to pay ground rent as determined by the District Land Board (discussed in 1.3.3 below) in the locality where the land is situated (section 31 (3) Land Act).
  - The government set the National Environmental Management Authority (NEMA)([https://www.nema.go.ug/new\\_site/](https://www.nema.go.ug/new_site/)) as its environmental ombudsman and the Ministry of Lands, Housing and Urban Development to ensure sustainable land management in the country. (<https://mlhud.go.ug/>). This shows that the Government of Uganda accords high priority to the protection of natural resources in the 1995 Constitution of Uganda, the Land (Amendment) Act,2009, the Local Government (Amendment) Act, 2015, and

the National Environment Act, of 2019 (source p.148). These form part of the legal framework for prosecution and enforcement.

## ● Available remedies to enhance land and environment rights in Uganda

**Reparations:** Reparations should, as far as possible, erase the consequences of the violation and re-establish the situation which would have existed if that violation had not been committed.

**Compensations:** Compensation is a common form of reparation where restitution in kind is not practical. The general rule is that a monetary payment for damage suffered is appropriate.

**Pollution abatement:** It is reasonable to expect that provisions will be made to eliminate or modify environmentally detrimental behaviour.

**Compliance monitoring:** Enforcement provisions should be supplemented by provisions whose goal is the prevention of environmental damage.

**Negotiations:** Negotiation is a process whereby the parties directly communicate and bargain with each other in an attempt to agree on a settlement of the issue through mediation and reconciliation.

**Arbitrations** are a primary means of dispute settlement, should negotiations between the parties prove unproductive.

**Adjudication:** This technique involves the referral of the dispute, by agreement or consent of the parties, to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) or some other standing and permanent judicial body for a binding decision, usually based on international law.<sup>3</sup>

## 1.2 Impact of Irresponsible Land-Based Investments (LBIs)

Land is intrinsically linked to economic prosperity. According to the study by the World Economic Forum in 2020, approximately half of the global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is moderately to highly dependent on nature. Land with its capacity to support life and safeguard ecosystem services is critical to food security, clean water, economic growth, public health and jobs.

However, irresponsible land-based investments (LBIs) involving multinational enterprises requiring land tracts for large-scale agricultural projects, carbon off-set tree plantations, oil refineries, mines and infrastructure projects, are increasingly jeopardizing the enjoyment of land and environment rights.

Irresponsible LBIs are characterized by human-led involuntary and/or forceful land acquisition processes, clearing of vegetation and soil pollution through application of chemicals and/or fertilizers, adversely impacting community land rights.

As such, families unjustly lose their family farms, gardens are plowed down and

food crops maliciously destroyed and water sources, schools, hospitals, and worship centers get demolished, inadequate compensation for loss of land and livelihoods, and defenders of their individual and community lands are subjected to kidnap, torture, arbitrary arrests and detention.

Importantly, irresponsible LBIs has many interdependencies with environmental rights, including the right to a safe, clean, healthy, and sustainable environment, the right to access to clean air, safe water, and adequate sanitation, the right to non-toxic living and working environments, and the right to protection of biodiversity and ecosystems. Irresponsible LBIs lead to negative impacts on these environmental rights, including inadequate availability of surface and underground water, carbon sequestration in the soil, biodiversity loss and climate change.

### 1.3 Purpose of the Information Gathered

Witness Radio and its partners derive its oversight role as enshrined in the 1995 constitution of Uganda which stipulates under the National Objectives and Directive Principles of State **Policy objective XXVII** which stipulates that;

“The utilization of the natural resources of Uganda shall be managed in such a way as to meet the development and environmental needs of present and future generations of Ugandans; and, in particular, the State shall take all possible measures to prevent or minimize damage and destruction to land, air and water resources resulting from pollution or other causes”

Witness Radio has a civic duty as stipulated in article 38(2) of the 1995 Constitution to remind the state and government of Uganda to fulfill its role and responsibilities. This has been done through influencing policy using peaceful action and agency with evidence from a sample of a few districts considered because of time, human resources and financial constraints in the year 2024.

Uganda is one of the most densely populated countries in Africa with 174 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>. and is experiencing a growing pressure on the finite resource of land. Due to the demands of the surpassing population, a myriad of investors, both domestic and international, are funneling capital into diverse sectors such as large-scale plantation agriculture, oil and gas exploration, and mineral extraction among others.

In Uganda, the situation is characterized with an increasing number of investors<sup>4</sup> engaging in illegal land acquisitions or land grabs, with thousands of Ugandans paying the price for defending what is rightfully theirs, being forcibly removed from homes they have inhabited for decades. Indeed, the 2024 Justice Needs and Satisfaction (JNS) survey conducted by the Hague Institute for Innovation of Law

(HiiL) in collaboration with key stakeholders from Uganda's Judiciary, the Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Affairs, and the Governance and Security Secretariat (formerly JLOS), revealed that land issues are the most pressing concerns for Ugandans. The survey found that land problems are the country's most significant issue ranked with 23% of the most serious problem. According to the survey, disputes over land grabbing is one of the most frequently cited as the most critical types of land problems people experience

This report is the first among a series of annual reports for publication under the project titled "Monitoring, Documentation and Advocacy for Human Rights in Uganda (MDA-HRU) Project" implemented in consortium with DCA, NCHRD-U and Witness Radio with co-funding from EU. It is intended to;

- Bring to public attention the magnitude and nature of the trends of land evictions, the social and environmental impact of such evictions and the attacks on those that act on behalf of other community members to defend their land and environmental rights;
- Provide narrative information complementing quantitative values to provide context and tell stories of how irresponsible LBIs affect them and the communities and what actions need to be taken to address to address the effects;
- The information reported herein may be used to monitor the country's progress towards achieving Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 15 and help guide policy formulation at national level on life on land: Protect, restore, and promote the sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems; sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, halt and reverse land degradation, and halt biodiversity loss;
- The information gathered in these series of reports also helps policy makers and implementers to better understand the geographical areas that are most affected to allow targeted measures and interventions to be designed and implemented and;
- Finally, the reported information plays a critical role in amplifying the voices of affected communities, raising awareness of the impact of irresponsible LBIs and their impacts on the populations, advocating for protection and promotion of community land and environmental rights, and holding actors accountable.

## 1.4 Methodology

In line with the increasing and pervasive digitalization of society and improved access to open digital platforms, Witness radio launched a web-based land eviction portal<sup>5</sup> with a chatbot on land evictions in Uganda to provide comprehensive geospatial data for reported cases by individuals and LEDs/HRDs.

The portal profiles a time series of consistently produced national maps of land eviction dynamics, national predictions of land and environmental rights violations and abuses, and national population data sets used to calculate the impact of forceful land evictions on social and environmental rights.

The portal also provides the public with an overview of the reported data in a

series of statistics and maps, painting a clear picture of the worsening trends of land and environmental rights.

The report is a result of collated data captured from the portal. The narrative information complementing the quantitative values captured from the portal was gathered through credible sources in public domain, including public media, reports from LEDs/HRDs and monitoring reports of investigated and documented land eviction cases reported nationwide. The monitoring and documentation exercise was conducted by Witness Radio's research team, in collaboration with CLERDs and HRDs.

## 1.5 Report Limitations

This report's perspectives do not represent a large enough sample to conduct an in-depth study across the country. In addition, the majority of cases reported were captured from several fragile and land-related conflict affected sub-regions, including Karamoja, Midwestern and Central sub-regions of Uganda, and the report provides case studies from across these jurisdictions. Due to the limited sample size the findings should not be seen as national wide representative in its entirety.

## 2.0

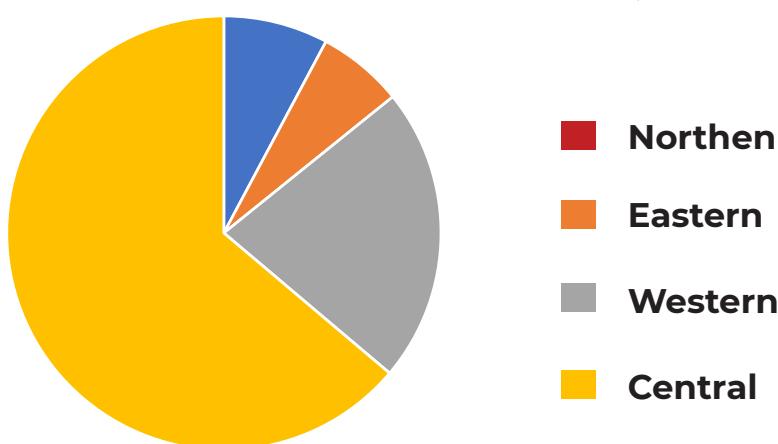
## NATIONAL TRENDS FOR INVOLUNTARY LAND EVICTIONS IN 2024

In 2024, a total of 141 cases of forced evictions were recorded through Witness Radio's land monitoring portal, as detailed in the table below.

No.	Region	Total number of forced land eviction cases
1.	<b>Northern</b>	<b>11</b>
2.	<b>Eastern</b>	<b>9</b>
3.	<b>Western</b>	<b>31</b>
4.	<b>Central</b>	<b>90</b>
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>141</b>

The Western region recorded the second-highest number of forced evictions in 2024, largely due to an influx of land speculators anticipating compensation linked to oil mining and agri-business projects. Many tenants and squatters were misled by fraudulent landlords and evicted without receiving compensation. The region's fragile customary land tenure system, with limited formal land ownership documentation, further exacerbated the situation. The Central region experienced the highest number of evictions, driven by the real estate and industrial demand seeking to lower production costs. In contrast, the Northern and Eastern regions reported fewer evictions, attributed to strong customary land governance systems managed by clans, which offer local protection against land grabs.

### A pie chart showing forced evictions by region under study in 2024.



## Monthly Distribution of Forced Land Evictions in 2024

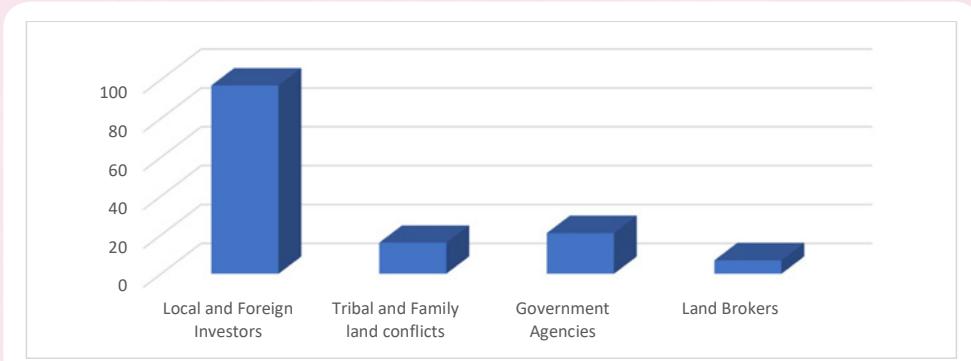


The distribution of forced land evictions across the 12 months of 2024 reflects temporal trends in the occurrence of evictions throughout the year. The number of forced evictions increased during January and February 2024, a period when Witness Radio faced operational restrictions and was not actively intervening. From March onwards, Witness Radio and its partners resumed interventions, a decline in forced evictions was observed across the targeted regions. Slight increases were observed in November and December because the land grabbers took advantage of the Christmas break when most enforcers, activists and defenders were on holiday.

### A table showing actors behind forced land evictions

No.	Main Actors in the Forced Evictions	No. of cases
1.	Local and Foreign Investors	97
2.	Tribal and family conflict	16
3.	Government Agencies	21
4.	Land Brokers	07
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>141</b>

### A bar graph showing actors behind forced land evictions



The findings reveal that both foreign and local large-scale investors in Uganda often violate principles related to business conduct, land rights, environmental protection, and human rights. These violations are facilitated by a weak government response and delayed enforcement of accountability measures. To maintain their public image and operate within a sensitive business environment, many of these companies strategically connive with police, military, private security personnel, and armed groups, to carry out forceful and violent evictions, as outlined in the table below.

<b>No.</b>	<b>Eviction Enforcers</b>	<b>No. of cases</b>
1.	<b>Police</b>	<b>30</b>
2.	<b>Army</b>	<b>23</b>
3.	<b>Security guards</b>	<b>7</b>
4.	<b>Armed gangs</b>	<b>55</b>
5.	<b>No involvement of forces</b>	<b>26</b>
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>141</b>

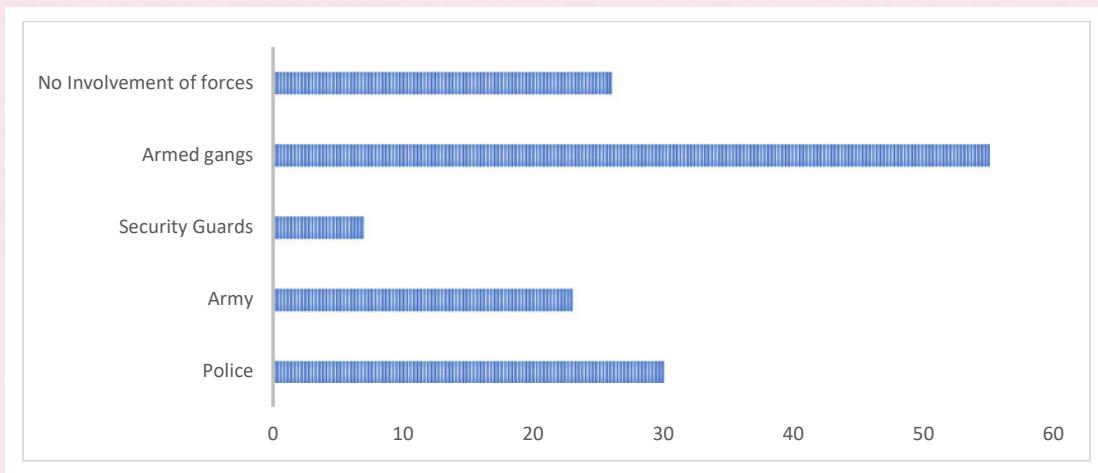
A concerning trend has emerged in which actors behind large-scale land investments are increasingly employing armed gangs equipped with machetes, spears, and sticks to carry out evictions outside formal legal frameworks. This approach is used to bypass established land acquisition procedures and avoid accountability.

Operating anonymously, these gangs often destroy property with impunity, leaving affected communities many of whom are already vulnerable to rebuild due to financial constraints.<sup>6</sup>

This tactic facilitates opportunistic land grabs, as interested parties exploit delays in the judicial process while awaiting potential court rulings. The legal proceedings are often lengthy, costly, and burdensome, creating opportunities for corruption. As a result, the principle of “justice delayed is justice denied” becomes a harsh reality for affected communities. Investment companies that never involved “armed forces” but used local structures resulted into peaceful land acquisitions.

6 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Uv5nBAQ8zk>

## A bar graph showing the enforcers in the forced land evictions.



# 3.0

## ACCOUNTING FOR LAND & ENVIRONMENTAL RIGHTS IN MIDWESTERN AND KARAMOJA SUB-REGIONS

**This report is of particular concern to the Karamoja and Midwestern sub-regions of Uganda.**

The Karamoja sub-region is composed of the districts of Moroto, Napak, Nakapiripirit, Amudat, Nabilatuk, Abim, Kaabong, Kotido and Kirenga. It is characterized by a mix of land cover types including dry tree savannah, open or wooded grasslands, and areas with thorn-bush vegetation. According to ResearchGate, subsistence farmlands, woodlands, and grasslands are also prominent. Land use patterns in Karamoja are influenced by agro-pastoral activities, with pastoralism being the primary livelihood due to the semi-arid climate and limited rainfall. A Karamoja Aerial survey identified over 50 minerals in the region, with a significant focus on the potential for gold and other high-value minerals like iron ore, copper, and limestone. The potential for gold and limestone in Karamoja sub-region is the major driver for forceful deprivation of land rights and violation environmental rights.

The Mid-Western sub-region is composed of the districts of Bulisa, Hoima, Masindi, Kiryandongo, Kikuube, Kagadi, Kibale and Mubende. According to ResearchGate, the land cover in the midwestern sub-region of Uganda is predominantly agricultural, with farmland dominating the landscape, followed by forests, wetlands, and grasslands. Urban areas and shrublands also contribute to the land cover mosaic. In 2006, commercial oil reserves were discovered in the Albertine Graben region. These discoveries, primarily in the Mputa Albertine region and surrounding areas like Nwoya, Buliisa, and Hoima, are estimated to hold 2 billion barrels of oil, potentially making Uganda the second-largest oil producer in East Africa. The potential for 150,000-200,000 barrels per day of oil production for 10-20 years has spurred development and investment in the region. The exploration activities in the midwestern region are major drivers of several land and environmental rights disputes, pointing to incidences of hushed, cheap and fraudulent land acquisitions and sales.

## MAPS SHOWING THE DISTRICTS IN MIDWESTERN AND KARAMOJA SUB-REGIONS OF UGANDA

### Mid-Western Region



Photo by: Research Gate

The districts include: **Bulisa, Hoima, Masindi, Kiryandongo, Kikuube, Kagadi, Kibale and Mubende**

### Karamoja Region



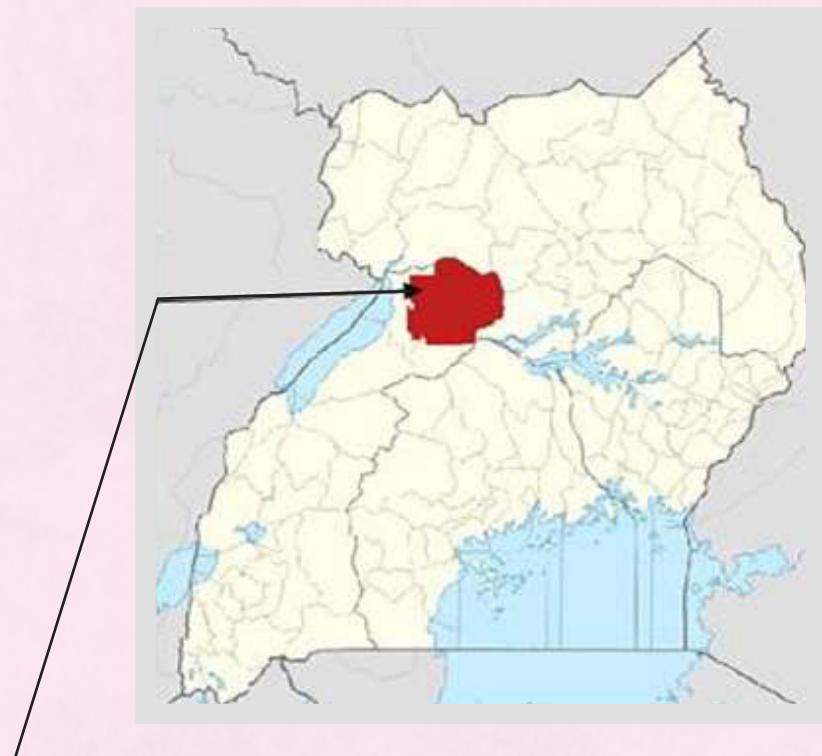
Photo by: Research Gate

The districts include: **Moroto, Napak, Nakapiripirit, Amudat, Nabilatuk, Abim, Kaabong, Kotido and Karamoja**

### **3.1 Land and Environmental Rights in Ranches of Kiryandongo District**

#### **3.1.1 Geography of Kiryandongo District:**

Kiryandongo district is bordered by Nwoya district to the north, Oyam to the North East, Apac to the East, Nakasongola to the South-East, Masindi to the South and South-West, and Buliisa to the North. The district headquarters are located about 225 Kilometres (140 miles) Northwest of Kampala, Uganda's capital city.



Location of Kiryandongo District

The district has a land of 3,624.1 Sq. Km of which 1,747 Sq. Km is arable. Other areas are covered by River Nile, and Murchison falls conservation area which includes Murchison falls national park and the Karuma Wildlife Reserve. These tourist sites occupy the Northern and North Eastern parts of the district. In terms of altitude, the district is generally a plateau land with a sitting of 1,295 meters on average above sea level. Undulating hills with some pronounced high points are located in some localities of the district. One of these high points is Kaduku in Kigumba Sub-County. The land in the Murchison Falls conservation area is flat which provides a good habitat for wildlife.

The natural vegetation of Kiryandongo comprises of savannah woodland including dry and humid Savannah with elephant grass in some areas which favors wildlife. Woodland is dominant in Masindi port, Kiryandongo town council, Karuma, Kibeka, Nyamakere and Murchison falls, but with grassland evenly distributed throughout.

Grassland Savannah is predominant along the northern border with Nwoya district and a few areas of the Western border with Buliisa and other small grassland areas within parts of Kiryandongo, Murchison falls Karuma and Masindi port. Wetlands are

predominant along the South Eastern border with Nakasongola and Apac, and a small part of Mutunda port where they support a variety of plant, animal and plant species.<sup>7</sup>

Shrubs are mainly in Kigumba town council, Bweyale Town Council, and some parts of Masindi port. Open water is found along Masindi port border with Apac and some parts of Mutunda port.<sup>8</sup>

This vegetation is home to birds and animals of different types especially buffalos and baboons.

The existing wetlands are well-known for being seasonal which supports the different plant and animal species.<sup>9</sup> All these displaced the people from this area, leaving it unoccupied for some time. Therefore, when the government was faced with the problem of refugees, it chose to settle them on some of its ranch land in the area. This was so because the presence of these wetlands and large pieces of virgin lands was ideal for refugee settlement. Furthermore, the availability of woodland was also a probable source of wood fuel for the refugees and internally displaced persons to use for cooking food. All these made Kiryandongo area a suitable place for settlement.

<sup>7</sup> Alphonse Mwanamwolho, Charles Lwanga, RMF, Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement, Uganda, June, 4. 2018., p.4.

<sup>8</sup> OSarah Dryden-Peterson and Lucy Hovil, —A Remaining Hope for Durable Solutions: Local Integration of Refugees and Their Hosts in the Case of Uganda, 2004, p.31

<sup>9</sup> Phionah Nassali, The role of non-state actors in refugee social protection: A case of South Sudanese women in Kiryandongo Refugee settlement, Uganda, The Hague, Netherlands. December 2015., p.28-29.

### 3.1.2 Ranch Schemes in Kiryandongo District:

Range lands in Uganda were primarily governed by customary rules. During colonial times, they were viewed as unproductive lands which led to their individualization through schemes that leased them out to those who met certain criteria set by the government.<sup>10</sup> Large tracts of lands were allocated in this way in an attempt to make more effective use of these range lands by creating individual ranching schemes.

Ranches were expected to promote the adoption of sustainable resource management practices. The government conceptualized that commercial ranching would stimulate cultural and social transformation of pastoral communities and that ‘modernized’ animal husbandry practices of pastoral communities would facilitate their integration to the “developing sector of the Ugandan economy”.<sup>11</sup>

It was hoped that ranches would facilitate the effective utilization of land, which, coupled with improved animal husbandry practices would increase beef and milk production to satisfy local and foreign demand. Private ownership of the ranches also meant that the government could levy fees and taxes.

Initially, five regional ranching schemes were established for the central, western and Ankole regions. The process of allocating ranches favored political elites and wealthy pastoralists while poor pastoralists and cultivators received little or no land.<sup>12</sup> They were often unaware of the process for applying and advertisements were run in English national newspapers which had limited circulation in rural areas.<sup>13</sup>

This created widespread land inequality, concentrating large extents of lands in the hands of a wealthy few while deepening the marginalization of the poorer communities.

Limited access to grazing land for pastoralists led to conflicts with commercial ranchers. It also led to landless pastoralists with large herds of cattle to migrate to forest reserves, game parks and other private ranches in search of pasture and water.<sup>14</sup> As pastoralists continued to struggle with limited access to graze lands, some were forced to take up crop farming.

In an attempt to address increasing conflicts, the government introduced a ranching reform agenda and established the Ranches Restructuring Board in 1990.<sup>15</sup> The aim was to ensure orderly and harmonious resettlement of squatters within the areas covered by ranches. The Board was mandated with wide powers to revoke leaseholds of ranches which have not been developed as per the conditions of allocation,

<sup>10</sup> Patrick Byakagaba and others, ‘Uganda’s Rangeland Policy: Intentions, Consequences and Opportunities’ (2018) 8 *Pastoralism*.

<sup>11</sup> Kisamba-Mugerwa, ‘Rangeland Tenure and Resource Management: An Overview of Pastoralism in Uganda’ (n 64).

<sup>12</sup> Patrick Byakagaba and others (n 70). Kisamba-Mugerwa, ‘Rangeland Tenure and Resource Management:

<sup>13</sup> An Overview of Pastoralism in Uganda’ (n 64). p.21

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> General Notice No. 180 of 1990

restructuring and sub-division of ranches as well as resettlement of squatters within areas covered by ranches. This led to the take-over of lands belonging to ranch owners and redistributing it to landless pastoralists. However, it provided only a short-term solution as the Board was accused of operating arbitrarily and some of the conflicts led to threats of violence and legal action against the government.<sup>16</sup>

In Kiryandongo District, the Bunyoro Ranching Scheme was established by the government in 1970s. It comprises of 37 ranches allocated to individuals while the government retained power to levy fees and reallocate land where the conditions of the lease were not met. However, in the 1980's the development of the ranches was hindered by political instability in Uganda and internally displaced persons (IDPs) squatting on ranch land. In 1986, the President of Uganda allowed internally displaced persons to settle in ranches in Karuma, Bweyale and Kigumba situated in the Kiryandongo District and to cultivate on them. This led to many conflicts between the ranchers and squatters.

The Bunyoro Ranches Restructuring Board (BRRB) was established in 1995 by a Presidential Directive and was tasked to restructure the Bunyoro Ranching Scheme by allocating part of the ranch lands to squatters living on them. In 1997, the Bunyoro Ranch Restructuring Board allocated land to landless people in two central reserves of Nyamakere (3,898ha) and Kibeka (9,570ha).

The BRRB identified 8 ranches situated within these reserves as being more suitable for human settlement than for ranching. The Ministry of Lands also approved this process and took steps to issue the gazettes that enabled the settlement process. A total of 13 ranches was allocated to squatters while 14 ranches were subdivided between ranch owners and squatters. Some ranches were not subdivided at all while others have been recently allocated to three companies, namely; Agilis Partners, Great Seasons SMC Limited and Kiryandongo Sugar Limited for agribusiness.

Although the Board sought to recognize the people's rights considering their length of occupation of the land and the developments they have made, cases of forced evictions have been reported on seven ranches occupied by the three investment companies. The squatters in all these ranches have since been evicted although the companies deny their involvement in the evictions and claim that the government was responsible for compensating the squatters.

### **Allocation of Ranches to ranch owners, squatters and companies**

- Entire ranch allocated to squatters (Ranches 5, 6, 7, 12, 14, 16, 22, 24, 26, 27, 32, 33 and 36)
- Ranches subdivided between ranch owners and squatters (A and B) (Ranches 2, 3, 4, 8, 9, 10, 13, 17, 19, 25, 31, 34 and 35)
- Ranches not restructured and still unallocated (Ranch 11)
- Ranches allocated to Agilis Partners (Ranches 20 and 21)
- Ranches allocated to Kiryandongo Sugar Limited (Ranches 23, 28, 29, 30)
- Ranches allocated to Great Seasons (Ranch 15)
- Ranches allocated to the Office of the Prime Minister (Ranches 1 and 37 for Refugee Settlement and Ranch 18 for Bududa IDP's and Refugee Settlement)

### **3.1.3 Land Acquisition Process Infringing on Fundamental Rights in Ranches**

Although compulsory land acquisition falls within government powers in Uganda, the companies which were allocated land in the Ranches have been left with the responsibility to manage much of the process, and these companies and their agents were responsible for setting the compensation values.

Members of the affected communities have reported serious problems with how the land acquisition process was being conducted, resulting in severe impacts on affected communities, which have infringed on the rights to property, housing, earning a livelihood, food, private and family life, and trading and disposing of natural wealth and resources.<sup>17</sup>

Reports from the affected communities reveal that the land acquisition process did not comply with the laws, policies and standards on land acquisition and involuntary resettlement, which provide for minimized displacement, compensation (either monetary or land-based compensation) at full replacement cost, and stakeholder engagement.

In particular, during the quarterly monitoring and documentation of the plight of land and environment rights in the region, it was established that the land acquisition/ allocation process in the Ranches of Kiryandongo district was marred by the following:

17 <https://witnessradio.org/download/reports/UN-Special-RapporteurE28099s-report-on-the-situation-of-kiryandongo-community-land-rights-defenders..pdf>

(i) Deception of the companies' legal advisers, in consultation with conniving officials from local government and national government agencies, that the occupants of the Ranches were living on it illegally (without legal tenure). Section 29 (2) of The Land Act, Cap 227 as amended stipulates that:<sup>18</sup> "Bona fide Occupant" means a person who before the coming into force of the Constitution: (a) Had occupied and utilized or developed any land unchallenged by the registered owner or agent of the registered owner for twelve (12) years or more before coming into force of the 1995 Constitution. (b) Had been settled on land by the Government or an agent of the Government which may include a local authority. In this regard, the victims of the affected communities had inherited the land from their fore parents while others had provisional authorization from the Ministry of Lands, Housing and Urban Development to stay on the land while government makes arrangements for their resettlement.

(ii) In order to sustain the above deception, there was the use of politically and militarily connected people with connections, either as politicians and some members of the security establishment, including private security guards, the Uganda Police Force (UPF) and the Uganda People's Defense Forces (UPDF) to demolish community dwellings, water sources, farms and service institutions including schools, churches and health facilities, and to torture, sexual assault<sup>19</sup>, kidnap and criminalize victims and community land rights defenders in order to facilitate land grabbing. Using this strategy, affected community members were dispersed, some were forced to sign compensation agreements while others were freed to save their lives without any compensation. Other community members who resisted displacements without adequate compensation are constantly detained, charged with criminal trespass and portions of their lands grabbed during their stay in arbitrary detention.<sup>20</sup>

(iii) Over 10,000 residents in Jerusalem, Kisalanda, Canan, Kololo, Kamisoni, and, Kapapula villages in both Kiryandongo and Kitwaala Sub counties in Kiryandongo district are affected by the heavy use of agrochemicals on the company's plantations, burning crops of residents who resisted displacement, compromising health of the children and women and contaminating sources of water for livestock and domestic use. Consequently, some residents migrated leaving behind their land which they tilled for food and household income.

(iv) Residents of households who resisted illegal evictions are being restricted by the companies' security guards and workers from accessing their farms and homes by establishing barriers in access roads, cattle being confiscated as they graze near the companies' plantations with unaffordable conditions that lead to loss of both cattle and land upon failure to meet the conditions. Their crops are harvested by the companies' workers and produce is taken forcefully. They

<sup>18</sup> Abdullah & Others Vs. Collector for City Council of Kampala (1958) EA

<sup>19</sup> <https://witnessradio.org/rape-and-sexual-assault-new-tools-in-kiryandongo-forced-land-eviction/>

<sup>20</sup> <https://uganda.oxfam.org/latest/press-release/civil-society-organizations-call-robust-quick-response-government-ugajnda>

have been frequently arbitrarily arrested and SLAPPED with criminal charges and approached by the companies' agents to surrender their lands if they want peace.

- (v) The process never provided sufficient regard to the period of notice for eviction and relocation. According to the compensation agreements, the affected community members were given 3 days' notice to vacate the land.
- (vi) The process provided inadequate compensation rates, which limited replacement of land of the same value for those that accepted compensation which has resulted into deprivation of livelihoods and adequate production of subsistence farming that the affected communities have depended on for generations. The process adopted by companies for compensation included documentary evidence of people who claimed to have rights or interests on the land in the ranches, valuation of their properties, recorded amounts of compensation paid for each property and five witnesses for every transaction including the village chairperson. The companies claimed that those who accepted the amounts offered, were paid their compensation at a public place, upon which they vacated the lands. Some families who claimed that the compensation offered were inadequate, refused to accept the amounts offered continued to remain on the ranch. They have made counter claims by obtaining private valuations from the Kiryandongo District Agricultural Officer which have been approved by the District Land Board. However, companies disregarded their counter claims. There are reports of mistreatment of people remaining on the land and cases of forced evictions by the security agencies using tear gas and gun shots.<sup>21</sup> The compensation rates were inaccurate and incomplete and the rates were insufficient, falling below the market value for their property.
- (vii) The process never allowed for meaningful consultations (in accordance with human rights requirements) and has not provided adequate information on the compensation process, and there are reports that people have been forced to sign consent forms for land acquisition.
- (viii) The process did not give sufficient regard for local customs, including relocating and moving sacred sites and graves.

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/statement-report/front-linedefenders-condemns-continued-harassment-land-rights-defenders>

### **3.1.4 Significant Risks to Water Sources, The Environment, and Food Security**

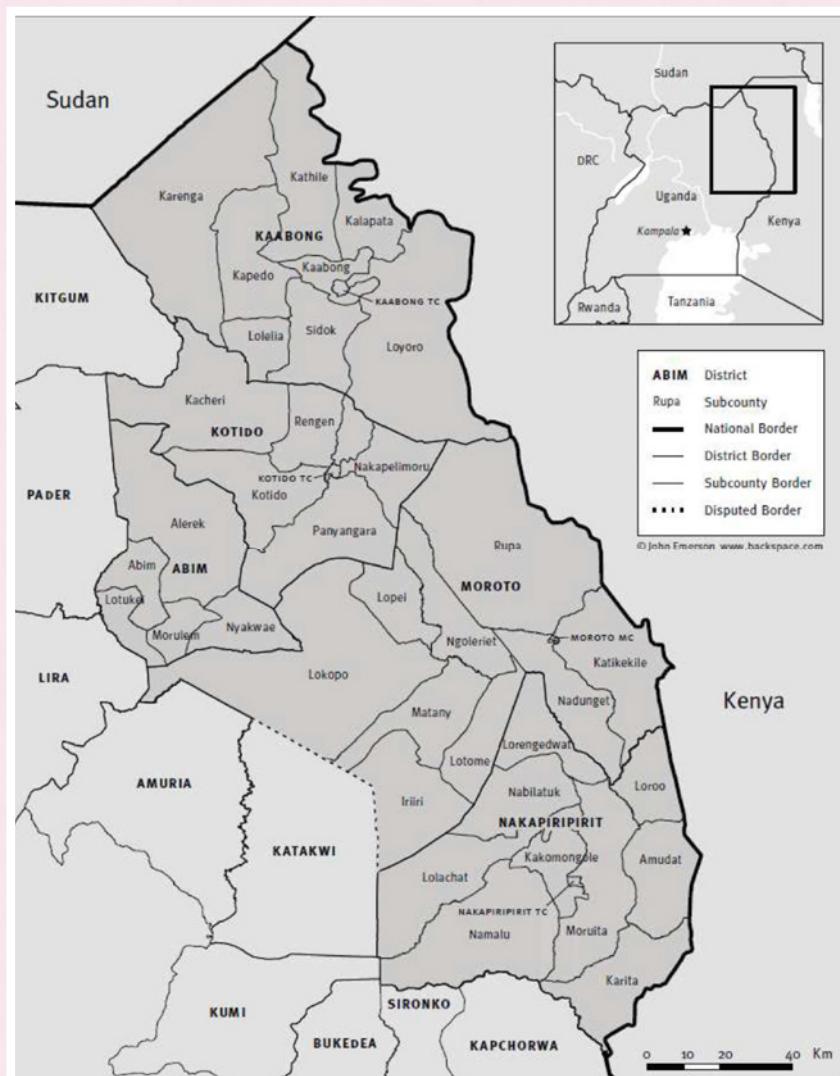
The main plantations of the companies are situated around the Nile River. Sugar cane plantations of Kiryandongo Sugar LTD are located in Ranches 23, 28, 29, 30 along River Nile, with a sugar factory located along the River on Ranches 13 and 14. Agilis Partners LTD has plantations of sun flowers, soya beans and maize along this river. The contamination from the agrochemicals applied by these companies and the sugar factory pollution poses a significant threat to the water resources, the environment, and food security in the region. In particular;

- i. The plantations extend to the shores of the River Nile water body relied upon by the local communities including drinking water and watering of animals, which put at risk of pollution from the agrochemicals carried by the rains. The affected water body, the Nile River is the largest contributor to Uganda's fishing industry estimated at 43% of the country's fisheries.<sup>22</sup>
- ii.. The communities around the companies' projects are pastoralists and dependent on subsistence agriculture which depend upon this critical water source. The risk of pollution to small watercourses also needs special attention because these watercourses are frequently important as a source for drinking water and watering animals as majority of the affected community members are pastoralists.
- iii. The Ranches are located in a drought-prone region, which makes the potential impact of contamination of water supplies even more severe given that droughts are likely to increase in severity due to climate change.
- iv Notwithstanding the reported cases of skin diseases and health complications of affected community members and their animals being attributed to the agrochemicals that have contaminated the critical water sources, the companies' operations pose several foreseeable risks to the health and safety of community members, and does not conform with the standards on Resources Efficiency and Pollution Prevention, and on Community Health, Safety and Security.

v. Land clearing to pave way for grain and sugar cane plantations in the Ranches is envisaged to contribute to increased emissions of greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxide, ozone, and water vapour. These activities are accelerating global warming, particularly in drought-prone areas like Kiryandongo and Buliisa districts in the Midwestern sub-region. The resulting climate stress disproportionately affects pastoral communities in these regions, who rely heavily on rainwater for their livelihoods.

## 3.2 Land and Environmental Rights in Karamoja Sub-region

### Map of Karamoja Sub-region



The Karamoja sub-region of Uganda, faces significant land conflicts due to a combination of factors including competition for pasture and water, cattle rustling, and displacement. They also grapple with challenges like lack of basic needs, insecurity, and limited infrastructure.

### **3.2.1 Conflicts over minerals**

A Karamoja aerial survey identified over 50 minerals in the region, with a significant focus on the potential for gold and other high-value minerals like iron ore, copper, and limestone. There has been a rise in conflicts over minerals in sub-counties where these resources are found, which have taken an increasingly militarised and violent character, conforming to the Advisory Consortium on Conflict Sensitivity (ACCS) Situation Report.<sup>23</sup>

Lack of public awareness about the exact location and abundance of valuable resources has led to speculation and rumours, while private investors' exploration activities, though often within the bounds of the law, are perceived with suspicion by local communities and is leading to conflicts. LEDs established that there is inadequate consultation and participation of local communities in the process of exploration and exploitation of resources found in their community lands is creating resentment and driving conflicts within their respective communities. Whereas existing efforts through the police land desk, office of the President, offices of the District Residential Commissioner, and the Ministry of Lands, Housing and Urban Development have successfully dealt with smaller rural land disputes involving members of the same community, larger disputes involving investors and/or the government have proven resilient to resolution.

### **3.2.2 Allegations of forest resource mismanagement**

Land and Environment Defenders (LEDs) consulted by Witness Radio alleged that forest resource mismanagement by the authorities is also driving conflict in Karamoja, as communities and environment defenders have accused the National Forestry Authority (NFA) of corruption. The allocation of forest land for commercial exploitation has brought local communities across the sub-region into conflict with the NFA, while the enforcement of protection measures for the established natural reserves has fueled conflicts between local communities and the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) as communities have been cut off from traditionally harvested forest resources. These issues are compounded by the comparatively higher poverty rates, and prevalent perceptions by communities and environment defenders that investors are plundering their wealth in collusion with the authorities.

### **3.2.3 Property rights abuses and exposure to violent conflicts**

The resource-rich land of Karamoja sub-region is highly contested and insecurity of tenure is widespread. LEDs consulted by Witness Radio during quarterly monitoring to document land and environment related abuses and violations, revealed that conflicts over land increased in numbers and intensity in 2024 due to investors and the government's move in the sub-region to exploit the gold and limestone mineral resources. Widespread extreme poverty and a complex tenure system is leaving communities vulnerable to property rights abuses and exposed to a growing risk of violent conflicts. The incidence and severity of land disputes over resources across the sub-regions depends upon the type of resource found and its value, the status of the land where the resource is found, the participation of local communities, and the roles of local government and private investors.

### **3.2.4 Environmental Pollution**

In Moroto District, sub-counties such as Lotisan, Kosoroi, and Tapac face additional environmental challenges from mining activities, where limestone deposits were found on grazing lands and in water sources during the dry and rainy seasons respectively. This pollution causes respiratory complications in both humans and animals.



# 4.0

## CONCEALED IMPACT OF THE LAND-BASED INVESTMENTS (LBIs)

The Government of Uganda's private sector-led economic growth has attracted several private investors into the country, especially those interested in commercial agricultural ventures that require large tracts of land. These investors often seek support from government to acquire land cheaply or at no cost in order to minimize their initial investment costs.

It was generally observed that investment companies often disregard land and environmental rights in their operations, due to cost considerations and risks, which they believe are sufficiently managed by the government during land allocation. This narrow focus overlooks the broader social and environmental impacts their activities have on the communities in which they operate. Such negligence has led to:

### 4.1 Loss of employment and Household incomes

In both the midwestern and Karamoja sub-regions, agriculture and animal rearing serve as the primary sources of employment. The loss of land and crop gardens due to forced evictions is envisaged to escalate food insecurity, increased malnutrition, and deepening poverty across the two sub-regions.

### 4.2 Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV)

As men migrate in search of alternative livelihoods, households are often left under the care of women and children. In the absence of viable economic opportunities, some vulnerable women have been driven to engage in transactional sexual relationships as a means of survival.

Besides, sexual and physical violence have reportedly been used as tools of intimidation and subjugation by private security guards of the companies, armed personnel, and some men against women who resist unjust land acquisitions. These women, who primarily relied on subsistence farming and artisanal mining to support their families, have been particularly targeted for their resilience in defending their livelihoods.

In Nakarwa village, Amudat subcounty, Amudat District. A man beat and took money from his wife that she had sold the aggregates she mined. Yet the money he took was to buy food at home since he doesn't provide anything for the family.

Women continue to face gender-based violence because of cultural stereotypes and patriarchal dominance in decision-making at the family and community levels.

**Such overgrown maize can be a hiding spot for rapists and a breeding place for mosquitoes**



Displaced and vulnerable women in Kiryandongo have increasingly turned to transactional sex as an alternative means of livelihood to support their families. This was mentioned by the LEDs as one of the factors contributing to a rise in the transmission of sexually transmitted infections such as HIV/AIDS, syphilis, and gonorrhea within the neighbouring districts of Hoima, Masindi and Buliisa.<sup>24</sup> Some women have contracted these infections as a result of sexual violence. Victims have shared personal accounts of these challenges.

**“One day after we had been evicted, I went to collect firewood with other women. The other women ran away and left me behind. That’s when that soldier raped me.”**

Dina was not the only one. Others experienced the same fate. One of them was a young girl named T.A\* was raped by a male stranger. “My daughter had gone to collect firewood. After the other girls had left, he forced himself on my daughter under a broken tractor and raped her,” said the mother of T.A. The impact of the tragic incident left Tara with a mental illness and syphilis.

demand for Antiretroviral Therapy (ART) drugs, condoms, and antibiotics, despite a constrained health budget facing reduced aid from key donors such as the USA.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, the shared use of water sources and consumption of meat treated with antibiotics is increasing the risk of antimicrobial resistance (AMR) among displaced populations.<sup>26</sup>

## **4.3 Destruction of Community Infrastructure**

The companies' private security guards and armed groups were reportedly central to the demolition of community dwellings and the obstruction of roads, footpaths, water sources, farms, and essential service institutions such as schools, churches, and health facilities. These actions occurred under the apparent indifference of the Uganda Police Force (UPF) and the Uganda People's Defense Forces (UPDF). During the forced evictions, some primary schools were destroyed, infringing on children's right to education and raising serious concerns about their safety and welfare. School-going girls have been particularly affected, facing heightened risks of physical, sexual, and emotional harm, including threats of rape and abuse allegedly by company workers. The long distances they must now travel to attend school, coupled with overgrown maize plantations, are potential hiding spots for perpetrators, which further increases their vulnerability.

## **4.4 Biodiversity loss and desertification**

The areas under study especially Kiryandongo, Hoima, Buliisa and Karamoja are located within or surrounded by Murchison National Park<sup>27</sup> and Kidepo National Park<sup>28</sup> with scenic beauty of physical features like mountains, rift valleys and waterfalls.

Following the forceful evictions, large-scale land clearing for agribusiness and mining led to the destruction of indigenous trees, animals, birds and insect species. These played a vital role in rainfall formation and provided critical habitats for diverse wildlife. Several species either perished, migrated to neighbouring regions, or became threatened. Notably affected species include the birds of the Nile stock on river Nile.

This creates gaps in tourism foreign exchange earnings and bio-research potentials from these birds and tree species.

25 [https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/presscentre/featurestories/2025/march/20250319\\_Uganda\\_fs](https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/presscentre/featurestories/2025/march/20250319_Uganda_fs)

26 Namubiru, S, et al (2021) Increasing trends of antibiotic resistance in Uganda: analysis of the national antimicrobial resistance surveillance data, 2018–2021

27 <https://shorturl.at/cgdSv>

28 <https://ugandawildlife.org/national-parks/kidepo-valley-national-park/>

The distortion of the ecosystem has caused human-wildlife conflicts in areas of Gul-Alere gold mining site in the Abim district, Morulem sub-county where reptiles have been threatening local miners due to the hot weather.



Photo by Witness Radio: Scenes of massive deforestation in Kiryandongo to pave the way for monoculture farms in Ranches

## 4.5 Public Health Threats

The use of inorganic pesticides and herbicides like glyphosates, cypermethrin, and mancozeb to spray large-scale crop farms threatens the lives of farm workers, consumers and neighbouring communities through air and water pollution.<sup>29</sup>

Of the pesticides used, 49% are highly toxic to bees, 20% are carcinogenic and reproductive toxicants, 18% are probable carcinogens, and 9% are highly persistent in water and soil, causing high toxicity to aquatic organisms.

In the Abim district, Chamkok sub-county, the opening up of the Dubai mining site, attracted a high population size with no existing latrines and shelters which exposes the people to communicable diseases.



Photo by Witness Radio: Kiryandongo Communities that had well-built homes resorted to sleeping in shacks, such settings lacked proper sanitation facilities, exposing displaced people to infectious diseases.

## **4.6 Loss of Cultural Heritage, family bonds and Religion**

The forced evictions disregarded local customs and traditions. The sacred sites and burial grounds were not relocated, causing distress among affected communities. While Ugandan law permits development on burial grounds, it criminalizes unauthorized exhumation, commonly interpreted as “disturbing the peace of the dead.”<sup>30</sup> Some evicted families now lack burial sites for their loved ones. Additionally, pastoralist communities, once united through clan-based homesteads, have been fragmented by the evictions, resulting in cultural disintegration and an increase in single-parent households.



A man washes clothes near his makeshift structure in Kiryandongo district. Land in the districts have made many children to drop out of school. **Photo/BILL OKETCH**

In the Karamoja sub-region, the marginalization of minority tribes such as the Tepeth has been further exacerbated by land rights violations. The Tepeth face forced displacement and limited political representation, with most local leadership positions occupied by the dominant Matheniko group. This exclusion has driven the Tepeth to migrate, leaving behind their ancestral lands and cultural heritage. This situation has been worsened by government agencies like the National Forestry Authority (NFA), which allegedly appropriated their land to gold investors without offering them compensation.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/karamoja-block-nfa-plan-to-cut-trees-1728204>

# 5.0

## TURNING THE TIDE ON VIOLATION OF LAND AND ENVIRONMENTAL RIGHTS

The affected communities have taken several measures to resolve the disputes and human rights violations that have arisen as a result of the land-based investments. These have measures have had several challenges as discussed in this section.

### 5.1 Accounting for the channels of redress

LEDs also lamented the challenges in seeking redress and remedy at the local level for communities affected by land and resource-related disputes. Traditional dispute resolution mechanisms are not recognized or supported by the authorities, while the formal system faces challenges of its own, such as the back logs in courts of law, corruption, among others, and the court procedures are undermined by questions about their delayed rulings, some taking over 10 years.

Members of affected communities and LEDs consulted on land dispute mechanisms at the local level noted that since the court rulings take long, communities were losing confidence in the local justice system.

The rise in the incidence and severity of land resource-related disputes coupled with the erosion of local-level dispute resolution systems has undermined peacebuilding efforts and presents a risk of renewed conflicts.

### 5.2 Attacks on Land and Environment Defenders

Community land rights defenders face arbitrary arrests, torture, and public humiliation, often in the presence of their families. These arrests involve illegal detentions, denial of legal representation, and violations of the right to a fair and speedy trial. Many are held in police custody with fabricated criminal charges, beyond the legally mandated 48-hour period before being presented in court. While in custody, they are often coerced by companies' agents to relinquish their land in exchange for peace. Such actions violate Article 28 of the 1995 Constitution of Uganda,<sup>32</sup> which guarantees the right to a fair hearing. One notable case involves Mr. Okidi Pius, a 20-year-old secondary school student, who was detained beyond the 48-hour legal limit. He was allegedly beaten and left bleeding in his cell after being accused of stealing a CCTV camera—a charge believed to be linked to his opposition to land acquisition efforts.

## **5.3 The call for alternative dispute resolution mechanisms**

The insights obtained from the affected established the following proposals from communities about the concerns for their rights to guide stakeholders and duty-bearers on appropriate remedial actions:

- i. The primary concern of the affected communities is their loss of livelihoods and the associated adverse impacts on their standards of health and education. Accordingly, the community members make a request that a comprehensive livelihood restoration plan be developed with the participation of the affected communities and agreed upon by the affected communities. The affected communities whose lands have been located to investors and degraded by extraction activities consider that the most effective means of redress would be to identify alternative lands for resettlement.
- ii. The affected communities also wish to secure meaningful recognition of and redress for their lost property and economic resources, including the opportunities they have been denied since the evictions took place, such as lost income, lost education, and the inability to afford health care, in addition, the affected communities seek recognition and redress for the nature of the evictions and for the abuses they have suffered.
- iii. The communities must be provided with sufficient compensation and resettlement assistance to restore their livelihoods. To accomplish this, companies and the Government of Uganda must conduct a new survey consultation that includes all affected people and follow proper protocols.

- iv. An inclusive effective and impartial grievance mechanism should be established to cater to the affected persons' concerns. This should be established through fair voting of the affected persons. However, it is only prudent that the local governance of the affected be included in the committee.
- v. Where the investor is unable to promptly, fairly, and adequately compensate the affected community, the community should be restored on their land
- vi. Resettlement assistance should be designed in consultation with local people to avoid the mistakes made in past resettlement programs that fell short of restoring livelihoods. The affected communities have lived on fertile land and their source of food and income was through agriculture hence the resettlement plan should be to resettle the affected communities on fertile land.
- vii. Compensation processes should be aimed at ensuring that families are included and able to share in the benefits, rather than being provided to the head of household only, which can contribute to conflicts. For example, the companies should encourage both spouses to sign compensation documents and attend related meetings and it should provide compensation funds into jointly owned bank accounts.
- viii. Affected people should be provided with livelihood support during the transition period after they are relocated and until they can establish an alternative livelihood, including scholarships for their children.
- ix. Affected people should be provided with effective compensation at full replacement cost for loss of assets.

- x. The resettlement assistance should include social support programs such as stress management, anger management, and domestic violence sensitization programming to reduce common social problems that can accompany physical displacement.
- xi. Any resettlement assistance should include support to start up a Women's Savings Co-operative which are self-support groups that can be used by the affected community members

xii Respect the environmental guidelines for the sustainable use of the water resources by the companies

xiii Project to support restoration of livelihoods and education and worship centers in the new resettlements

xiv Independent investigations in sexual abuse and torture to bring perpetrators to account or to book

# 6.0

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### **6.1 National Banking and Insurance Sectors.**

Uganda's banking and insurance sectors must be integrated as additional regulatory layers to safeguard against environmental and land-related risks in investment projects. By enforcing compliance through assurance policies, requiring environmental sustainability insurance plans to be a prerequisite for loan access would further strengthen adherence to environmental standards.

### **6.2 Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs).**

Line ministries, departments, and agencies within the environment and land sectors must engage in coordinated, joint planning to prevent conflicts over resource allocation. Establishing a shared database for land, mines, and water resources would address the challenges of working in silos.

### **6.3 Uganda Revenue Authority (URA)**

The Uganda Revenue Authority must expand and strengthen the Polluter Pays Principle (PPP). This policy should require investors to disclose expected pollution levels. Higher taxes are to be imposed for exceeding the established limits, which are never reflected in the goods produced. The revenue collected would support environmental rehabilitation and restoration efforts. This approach is of great importance in cases involving oil spills, deforestation and excessive carbon emissions.

### **6.4 Uganda Human Rights Commission (UHRC)**

The Uganda Human Rights Commission (UHRC) must take a leading role in conducting thorough investigations into human rights violations in the Midwestern and Karamoja sub-regions, ensuring conclusive resolutions in an efficient and timely manner. Additionally, the UHRC should advise Parliament on necessary legal reforms, promote public awareness, and educate citizens on business and human rights, reinvigorating the National Action Plan (NAP).

## **6.5 Civil Society Organizations (CSO's) and Non-Government Organizations (NGOs)**

Civil society and non-governmental organizations should actively engage in dialogue and roundtable discussions with the government to align national laws with international human, land, and environmental rights standards.

The CSO's effort can share briefing materials with global media to raise awareness. In this way, multinational corporations will be held accountable for rights violations along their supply chains.

Civil society should make greater use of non-judicial redress mechanisms and traditional processes as viable alternatives to the often slow and costly judicial system. Leveraging the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) frameworks through the National Contact Points (NCPs) in countries where multinational companies are registered is also essential for pursuing accountability.

## **6.6 Parliament of Uganda**

Parliament should prioritize the passage of the Human Rights Defenders Protection Bill, 2020, to enhance the safety and security of human and environmental rights defenders. These individuals play a vital role in monitoring and holding multinational companies accountable for their operations.

## **6.7 Uganda Securities Exchange (USE)**

The Uganda Securities Exchange (USE) should mandate human and environmental rights impact assessments for companies seeking to list. This would improve the practices of publicly listed companies in Uganda, ensure they adhere to human rights standards, and enhance their corporate responsibility.

## **6.8 Land-Based Investment Corporations**

Land-based investment corporations must have comprehensive livelihood restoration, gender assessment and resettlement action plans if their projects are to affect communities. Project-affected persons (PAP) grievance redress mechanism committees should be established, ensuring 98% local representation. This approach will help address the needs of those impacted, preventing re-settling them on unproductive or uninhabitable land.



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