

STRENGTHENING LAND & ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE IN UGANDA:

COMMUNITY-INFORMED PRIORITIES FOR THE
NATIONAL LAND POLICY REVIEW (2025)

POLICY BRIEF PREPARED BY:
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DEFENDERS
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Executive Summary

Uganda is undertaking a critical review of its 2013 National Land Policy (NLP), offering a rare opportunity to address deep-seated governance failures in land and environmental management. While the policy framework on paper is sound, its implementation remains weak, uneven, and exclusionary. Communities especially those in ecologically sensitive or resource-rich areas continue to experience illegal evictions, land grabbing, environmental degradation, and systemic exclusion from decision-making processes.

To inform this review, the Land and Environmental Defenders Taskforce (LEDTAF) conducted a nationwide consultation combining survey data and focus group discussions. The study captured perspectives from 68 respondents across multiple regions, with a particular focus on areas affected by infrastructure expansion, extractive projects, and forest encroachment. The results present issues of selective law enforcement, politically motivated land allocations, and increasing threats faced by land and environmental defenders among others.

A key finding was the disconnect between Uganda's legal frameworks and the lived realities of communities. Respondents reported weak institutional coordination, corruption in land administration, and a consistent failure to engage grassroots actors in policy implementation. Environment and land defenders face harassment, intimidation, and lack any meaningful protection under current law, with little consideration for women and youth, whose voices are often silenced by patriarchal and political barriers.

Nonetheless, communities are not passive victims. They have developed powerful, locally grounded solutions from using indigenous conservation methods and traditional dispute resolution systems to adopting digital tools for reporting violations. These community-led innovations offer practical entry points for policy reform that is both just and enforceable.

This brief translates these insights into ten targeted recommendations with concrete implementation plans. It is intended for lawmakers, policy institutions, and local government actors involved in the ongoing NLP review. Implementing these reforms will help align the national land policy with community priorities, improve institutional accountability, and create an enabling environment for inclusive, transparent, and sustainable land governance.

Key Issues



1. Enforcement without equity

While Uganda has strong land and environmental laws on paper, their enforcement is highly selective. Politically connected individuals and companies routinely bypass laws, often with the support or silence of local officials.

Meanwhile, poor farmers, small charcoal traders, and informal land users are disproportionately targeted for minor infractions. This double standard erodes trust in institutions and fuels resentment toward land governance structures.

2. Corruption and political interference

Corruption remains a cross-cutting threat to land governance. Respondents described land officials accepting bribes, environmental officers turning a blind eye to violations, and elected leaders allocating land illegally.

At the national level, powerful actors have influenced land allocation in forest reserves and protected areas. This has created a governance system where land access is dictated more by political networks than by law.

3. Low public awareness and policy literacy

The 2013 National Land Policy remains largely unknown in many parts of Uganda. Most citizens in rural areas, have never seen or heard of the policy, and are unaware of their rights under the law.

The use of English-only documents, legal jargon, and passive dissemination methods has rendered the policy inaccessible to the very people it was meant to protect.

4. Lack of institutional capacity and coordination

Local enforcement bodies like district land boards, forestry departments, and environmental offices operate with limited resources and conflicting mandates.

They often lack vehicles, field staff, or funding to carry out enforcement duties. Inter-agency collaboration is rare, resulting in duplication, delays, and uninformed decisions like allocating land in ecologically protected zones.



5. Systemic exclusion of women, youth, and indigenous communities

Despite their central role in land use and environmental stewardship, women and youth are consistently excluded from land decision-making structures.

Customary norms, discriminatory practices, and weak legal enforcement prevent them from owning or inheriting land. This exclusion is especially pronounced in Mailo and customary land systems.

6. Escalating threats to land and environmental defenders

The land and environment defenders operate in an increasingly hostile environment. Many face arrests, threats, and violence when their advocacy threatens powerful business or political interests.

The lack of legal recognition and protection frameworks leaves them vulnerable and unsupported. Women defenders are especially at risk, often silenced through social and economic pressure.

7. Unjust compensation and forced displacements

Communities continue to report unfair, delayed, or non-existent compensation in cases of resettlement for public projects or private investments.

Many are displaced without prior notice or consultation, violating both Ugandan law and international standards. Existing compensation frameworks fail to capture community values and ignore the needs of vulnerable groups.

8. Limited use of technology and innovation in land governance

While some communities are beginning to use mobile phones, GIS tools, and social media to document violations, these innovations remain underutilized due to lack of training and support.

Government systems have yet to integrate such tools into land governance mechanisms in a structured and community-accessible way.



9. Underutilization of indigenous and community-based governance

Local justice mechanisms such as those involving elders and cultural leaders who are widely trusted and effective in resolving disputes.

However, they remain outside the formal policy framework. Without integration and support, these systems are unable to scale or deliver consistent justice toward land governance structures.

10. Fragmented policy implementation

Uganda's land governance suffers from too many plans and too little coordination. While several policies exist (Land Act, Environment Act, NLP), implementation is fragmented, underfunded, and often contradictory.

There is an urgent need for a harmonized framework that unites enforcement, participation, and equity under one coordinated system.

Recommendations and implementation plan

Recommendation	Action Steps	Responsible Institutions
1. Establish Independent Environmental Courts	a) Enact legislation to operationalize specialized land/environment courts. b) Train judges and prosecutors in environmental law c) Provide budgetary allocation in Judiciary framework	Ministry of Justice, Judiciary, Parliament
2. Pass and Enforce the Human Rights Defenders Bill	a) Fast-track parliamentary approval b) Design protection protocols for land and environment defenders c) Establish rapid legal aid & response fund	Parliament, Uganda Human Rights Commission, CSOs
3. Strengthen Local Government Capacity for Enforcement	a) Equip environmental and land officers with transport and operational tools b) Create joint monitoring teams across departments c) Rotate officers to minimize local capture	Ministry of Local Government, NEMA, Ministry of Lands
4. Scale Civic Education on NLP in Local Languages	a) Translate NLP into 10+ major local dialects b) Use community radio, school clubs, and theatre to disseminate c) Partner with LCIs and CBOs to lead sessions	Ministry of Lands, Ministry of Education, CSOs
5. Legal Recognition and Support for Community Defenders	a) Designate defenders in national frameworks b) Create district-level ombuds offices to receive complaints c) Provide legal and psychosocial support via justice centres	Ministry of Justice, UHRC, LEDTAF, Legal Aid Providers
6. Institutionalize Customary and Local Dispute Mechanisms	a) Integrate elders' councils into sub-county land tribunals b) Train mediators on legal basics and ADR c) Recognize traditional boundaries in land registration systems	Ministry of Lands, Cultural Institutions, JLOS
7. Ensure Equitable Compensation and Resettlement	a) Revise compensation laws to reflect fair market values b) Make ESIA and valuation processes mandatory and public c) Involve women and youth in all resettlement planning	Ministry of Lands, NEMA, OPM, District Land Boards

Recommendation	Action Steps	Responsible Institutions
8. Digitalize Land Governance Tools	a) Provide GPS and mobile data tools to Area Land Committees and other Land boards b) Develop anonymous online reporting platforms for land disputes c) Train youth groups on environmental data assessments d) Work with Internet Service Providers to reduce data prices	Uganda Communications Commission
9. Institutionalize Stakeholder Platforms for Joint Planning	a) Formalize community-government forums at parish/district levels b) Sign transparent MOUs between CSOs and local governments c) Schedule quarterly joint monitoring missions for the environment	Ministry of Local Government, District Councils, CSOs
10. Gender-Inclusive Land Rights Reforms	a) Require gender quotas in land committees b) Formalize co-ownership models for marital and family land c) Launch legal aid targeting women and PWDs on land related matters.	Ministry of Gender, MLHUD, Equal Opportunities Commission

Conclusion

The revision of Uganda's National Land Policy must not be a technocratic exercise removed from community realities. The findings from LEDTAF's engagement show that ordinary citizens, mostly those most vulnerable to land-related injustices, are ready and willing to participate in reform but they need recognition, protection, and access.

Lawmakers now have the opportunity to close the gap between law and practice. By passing urgent legislation, funding district-level enforcement, and scaling civic education, Uganda can create a land governance system that is not only legally sound but also just, inclusive, and sustainable.



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