

# **STRENGTHENING LAND AND ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE IN UGANDA: COMMUNITY- INFORMED PRIORITIES FOR THE NATIONAL LAND POLICY REVIEW (2025)**

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**DEFENDERS**  
PROTECTION INITIATIVE

## **Abstract**

This policy analysis report synthesizes findings from a comprehensive nationwide survey conducted by the LEDTAF, aimed at informing the ongoing review of Uganda's 2013 National Land Policy. The research involved data collection through surveys and focus group discussions across various districts, capturing the voices of land users, community leaders, and environmental defenders. The findings reveal significant enforcement gaps, implementation challenges, and systemic injustices affecting land rights and environmental governance in Uganda. Key themes include the politicized enforcement of environmental regulations, the exploitation of wetlands under political patronage, the chronic under-resourcing of enforcement agencies, and the exclusion of local communities from land policy formulation processes. Notably, the study highlights the precarious situation faced by land rights defenders who experience considerable insecurity. Respondents emphasized the need for stronger implementation of existing laws, inclusive policy-making, legal protections for land advocates, and enhanced public engagement in land governance issues. The insights reveal a concerning trend of ineffective redress systems and the marginalization of customary land users and vulnerable groups. Despite these challenges, communities are actively pursuing both innovative and traditional conservation initiatives, leveraging local justice mechanisms, indigenous knowledge, and digital tools for effective environmental monitoring. The report concludes with actionable recommendations aimed at bolstering enforcement mechanisms, safeguarding land defenders, and ensuring that policy reform processes are inclusive. These insights offer critical guidance for developing a more equitable, transparent, and sustainable land governance framework in Uganda.



## **About the LEDTAF**

The LEDTAF is a loose coalition of over 30 CSOs whose work focuses on advocating for environmentally and socially appropriate solutions to forced land displacements, extractives, food security solutions, infrastructure development and land planning raised by its wide network of LEDs across the country. The LEDTAF was formed in 2023 with its secretariat hosted by DPI. The coalition works through four thematic areas namely: Awareness and Protection Services, Psychosocial Support, Legal Services; and Research and Advocacy.

## Acronyms

ADR	Alternative Dispute Resolution
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DPI	Defenders Protection Initiative
EACOP	East African Crude Oil Pipeline
ESIAs	Environment and Social Impact Assessments
FGD	Focus group Discussion
LED	Land and Environment Defenders
LEDTAF	Land and Environmental Defenders Task Force
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NLP	National Land Policy

# SECTION ONE



## Introduction

This study was conducted at a pivotal moment as Uganda's 2013 National Land Policy (NLP) undergoes review. Recognizing the necessity for a more inclusive and actionable land governance framework, LEDTAF aimed to gather insights directly from individuals and communities affected by land-related challenges. The survey concentrated on uncovering enforcement gaps, misapplications of policy, community-driven solutions, and the role of land and environmental defenders. The responses collected reflect the lived experiences, proposals, and recommendations from various regions, especially at the grassroots level. These findings are intended to directly inform policy revisions and legislative reform, ensuring the updated NLP is not only legally robust but also socially responsive and enforceable. This consultation exercise comes at a crucial time in the review of Uganda's NLP (2013). Acknowledging the significance of community perspectives in creating fair land governance, LEDTAF undertook a mixed-method engagement process that combined surveys and focus group discussions with local stakeholders. Participants included land users, defenders, opinion leaders, local authorities, and grassroots organizations. Their contributions provide a nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities related to the enforcement of land policies and legislation.

***In my area, many people are using the leaders to take away people's land.***

The goal of this exercise was to ensure that the revised NLP is not merely a theoretical document but genuinely reflects the practical realities and unmet needs of the communities it is designed to serve. The feedback collected reveals gaps in law enforcement, inadequate protection for land rights defenders, exclusion from planning processes, and ongoing environmental degradation linked to insufficient oversight. This exercise also aimed to amplify these voices in the NLP review process and to develop implementation strategies that are accountable, inclusive, and responsive to community needs.

## Contextual background

Uganda is currently undertaking a review of the NLP first enacted in 2013, a move that presents a critical opportunity to address persistent land governance issues. Land in Uganda remains central to economic development, cultural identity, and environmental sustainability]. However, over the years, communities have continued to experience increasing threats to their land rights, weak enforcement

<sup>1</sup> Pender, J., Jagger, P., et al. Development Pathways and Land Management in Uganda. World Development Vol. 32, No. 5, pp. 767–792, 2004. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2003.11.003>

<sup>2</sup> J. Oloka Onyango. Land Injustice, Impunity and State Collapse in Uganda: Causes, Consequences and Correctives. Human Rights and Peace Centre. 2017. Available at [https://witnessradio.org/download/reports/HURIPCE-Synthesis-Report\\_Land-Injustice-Impunity-and-State-Collapse-in-Uganda.pdf](https://witnessradio.org/download/reports/HURIPCE-Synthesis-Report_Land-Injustice-Impunity-and-State-Collapse-in-Uganda.pdf)

of land and environmental laws, and limited participation in policy design and implementation processes<sup>2</sup>. At the same time, growing pressures from infrastructure development, extractive industries, and rapid urban expansion have exacerbated land conflicts, environmental degradation, and human rights abuses<sup>3</sup>.

Uganda is grappling with profound land issues that have significant implications for the rights and livelihoods of its citizens. The landscape is marked by widespread illegal evictions, aggressive land grabs, and a troubling trend toward the decriminalization of land and environments defenders<sup>4</sup>. These challenges are aggravated by a lack of awareness among community members and local entities about their legal rights, a factor that hinders effective advocacy and response to land-related injustices<sup>5</sup>.

In particular, areas like Bunyoro have emerged as hotspots for land conflict, driven by ongoing evictions linked to the East African Crude Oil Pipeline (EACOP), Kingfisher and Tilenga projects<sup>6</sup>. This situation exposes the vulnerability of local populations, who face the imminent threat of losing their homes and farms without due process. Additionally, rampant charcoal burning, a prevalent source of income in Northern Uganda, contributes to environmental degradation and complicates the already tense land-use dynamics<sup>7</sup>.

Furthermore, the encroachment on reserved land in the northern and northwestern regions by cattle-grazing communities from western and central Uganda pose additional challenges, leading to conflicts over land use and rights<sup>8</sup>. Local government leadership often appears ill-equipped to confront these pressing issues, lacking a clear understanding of their roles in addressing land and environmental concerns<sup>9</sup>.

This knowledge gap is compounded by the compromises faced by Land and environmental defenders (LEDs), who find themselves pressured and threatened by powerful interests, including private investors and land grabbers which sometimes results in their deaths<sup>10</sup>. The inherent risks associated with advocating for land rights further deter participation, especially among women, who often draw back from activism in response to potential repercussions. In light of these complexities, there is an urgent need to strengthen, financially equip and grow the LEDTAF in Uganda. This will continue streamlined work to protect the fundamental land and environment rights of citizens, enhance community awareness, and foster a collaborative response to the ongoing crisis in land management and environmental stewardship.

<sup>2</sup>Ogwang, T., Vanclay, F. Social Impacts of Land Acquisition for Oil and Gas Development in Uganda. *Land* 2019, 8(7), 109; <https://doi.org/10.3390/land8070109>

<sup>3</sup>Op. Cit. Note 2

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Op. Cit. Note 3

<sup>6</sup>Bamwesigye, D., Kupec, P., et al. Charcoal and Wood Biomass Utilization In Uganda: The Socioeconomic and Environmental Dynamics and Implications. *Sustainability* 2020, 12(20), 8337; <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12208337>

<sup>7</sup>Rugadya, M. Pastoralism and Conservation Studies: Uganda Country Report. IUCN: The World Conservation Union. 2006.

Available at <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/document?repid=rep1&type=pdf&doi=77a1f209a2027dc72f3e56458897444ab1bc7621>

<sup>8</sup>Oosterveer, P., et al. Environmental Systems and Local Actors: Decentralizing Environmental Policy in Uganda. *Environmental Management* (2010) 45:284–295 DOI 10.1007/s00267-009-9423-4

<sup>9</sup>Khanna, S., Le Billon, P. Protecting and supporting defenders: A review of policies for environmental and land defenders. IUCN Commission on Environmental, Economic And Social Policy. 2021.

Available at

[https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Philippe-Le-Billon/publication/364336769\\_Protecting\\_and\\_supporting\\_defenders\\_A\\_review\\_of\\_policies\\_for\\_environmental\\_and\\_land\\_defenders/links/634af9712752e45ef6bb0fd8/Protecting-and-supporting-defenders-A-review-of-policies-for-environmental-and-land-defenders.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Philippe-Le-Billon/publication/364336769_Protecting_and_supporting_defenders_A_review_of_policies_for_environmental_and_land_defenders/links/634af9712752e45ef6bb0fd8/Protecting-and-supporting-defenders-A-review-of-policies-for-environmental-and-land-defenders.pdf)

Ibid

The policy review comes at a time when grassroots land rights defenders face growing risks, with minimal legal recognition or support. Concurrently, the enforcement of laws related to land acquisition, compensation, and environmental protection remains selective and often manipulated for political or economic gain<sup>11</sup>. Therefore, this study, conducted by LEDTAF, helps to integrate perspectives from both a survey and focus group discussion to inform law reform and implementation planning, rooted in community realities.

## Rationale

Despite the existence of robust legal frameworks such as the Land Act (1998), the National Environment Act (2019), and ongoing policy reforms under the NLP (2025), enforcement and implementation of land and environmental rights remain weak and inconsistent. LEDs operate with little protection, and many communities continue to face dispossession, evictions, and environmental degradation driven by both private and state actors. The enforcement gap is compounded by poor public awareness, limited government capacity at local levels, corruption, and lack of inclusive structures for community participation in governance. Environmental policies and land regulations are often misused to criminalize poor land users while allowing powerful actors to circumvent compliance. Furthermore, alternative dispute resolution mechanisms and inclusive land governance practices are either underutilized or absent. These gaps, if unaddressed in the revised NLP, risk deepening existing inequalities and undermining the sustainable use of land and natural resources. Therefore, it was against this backdrop that the LEDTAF carried out a research that would be used to later inform the review and revision of the NLP (2013).

## Objectives

**General Objective** To examine community perspectives on land and environmental governance challenges in Uganda to inform the review of the National Land Policy (2013) and support stronger implementation and law enforcement mechanisms.

### Specific Objectives:

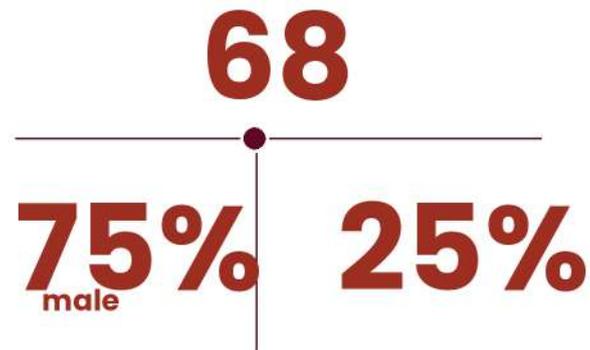
1. To assess enforcement and implementation gaps in land and environmental laws.
2. To identify challenges faced by grassroots land and environment rights defenders.
3. To document best practices and community-led strategies to inform actionable recommendations for the National land policy.

## Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach, combining data collected through a semi-structured survey and a complementary focus group discussion with land and environmental defenders. The survey explored themes such as legal awareness, enforcement experiences, public participation, and environmental protection practices. The FGD provided in-depth narratives to contextualize emerging issues, highlight lived experiences, and strengthen the reliability of

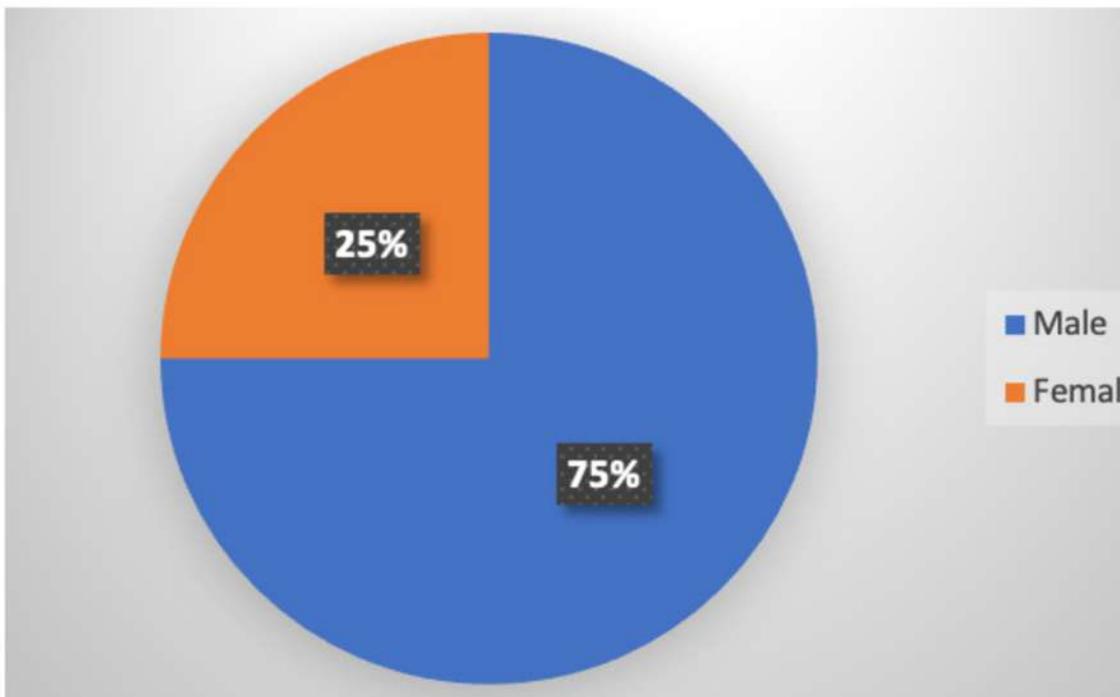
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<sup>11</sup>ibid



themes identified in the survey.

### Participation and demographics



The study included 68 respondents, comprising 75% male and 25% female, which translates to 51 males and 17 females. This indicates a significant gap in participation regarding gender.

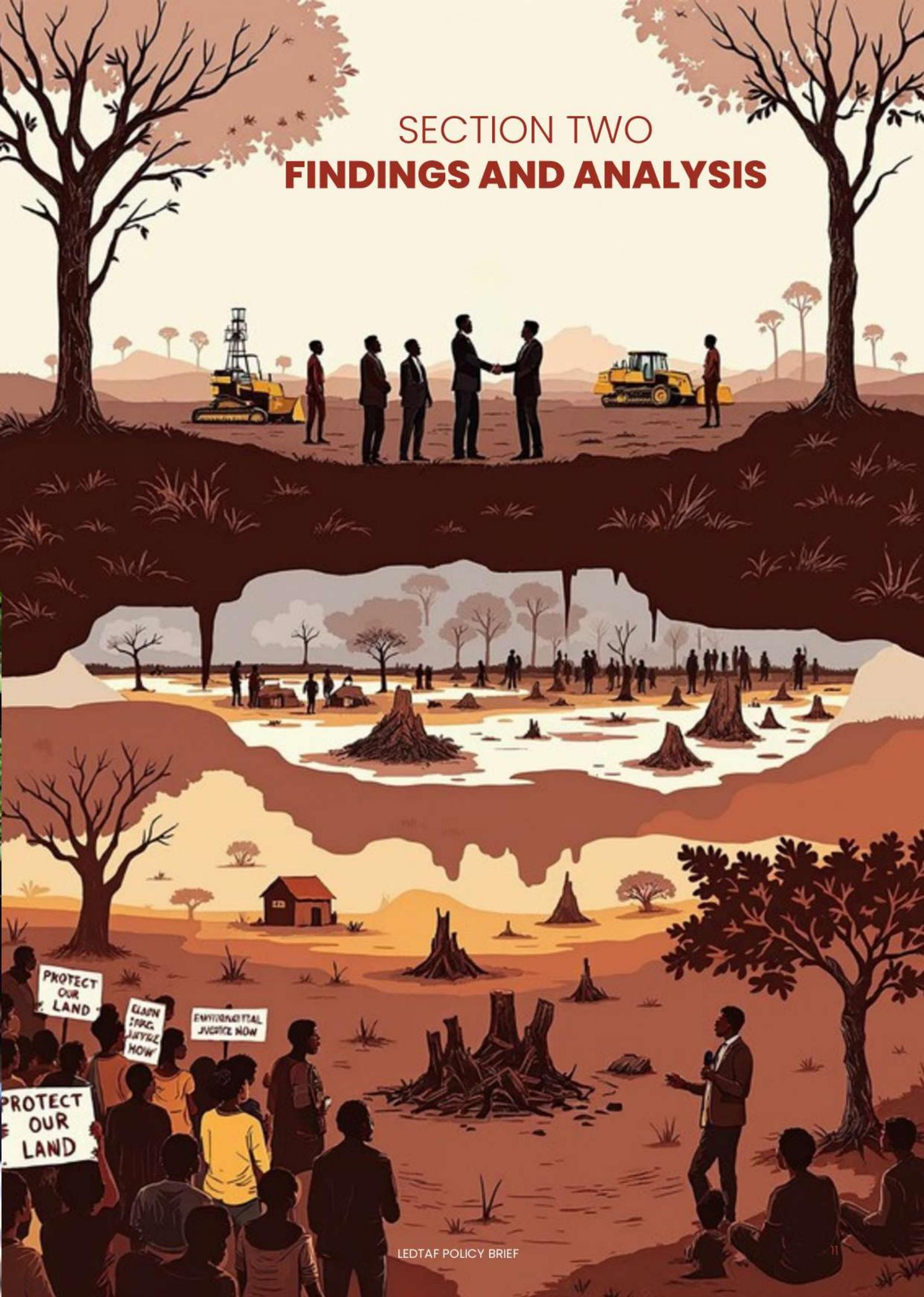
**Analysis** Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data, guided by a coding framework aligned with the study objectives. Responses were clustered into sub-themes, and common patterns were drawn out to support evidence-based recommendations. No external literature was used in this phase to ensure that the analysis was grounded solely in primary data.

## Justification

This study is essential as it captures the voices of communities who are typically excluded from national policy processes yet remain the most affected by weak land governance and environmental degradation. By documenting first-hand experiences and recommendations from community members, land rights defenders, and local leaders, the findings provide an evidence-based foundation for influencing law reform and practical implementation strategies within the NLP (2024). The insights are timely and policy-relevant, offering government and development actors a grounded understanding of where enforcement is failing, what reforms are most urgent, and how to structure community-centered interventions. Moreover, the findings can contribute to the design of protection mechanisms for land defenders, improved dispute resolution systems, and more inclusive governance structures.



# SECTION TWO FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS



## Introduction

Land and environmental governance in Uganda face significant challenges that impede effective management and equitable access to resources. As the country continues with the process of reviewing and revising the NLP in 2024 – 2025, it is essential to incorporate community perspectives that torch into the realities on the ground.

This section explores the perspectives of various stakeholders especially the LEDs regarding the enforcement and implementation of land and environmental laws, shedding light on critical issues such as corruption, political interference, and the selective enforcement of regulations.

By examining these challenges, the aim was to provide insights that can guide policy reform, enhance institutional integrity, and foster more inclusive governance frameworks. Therefore, this study and analysis not only highlight the barriers that communities face but also advocates for solutions that can strengthen land and environmental governance in Uganda.

## Enforcement and Implementation Gaps in Land and Environmental Laws

**Corruption and Political Interference** There is a direct correlation between systemic corruption and break down in rule of law especially in the extractive mining industry<sup>12</sup>. This breakdown is usually exemplified through foreign investors that are powerful enough to buy political favours when they have been found on the wrong side of the law<sup>13</sup>.

Corruption and political interference emerged as dominant and recurring barriers to the effective enforcement of land and environmental laws in Uganda. Respondents described numerous instances where politically connected individuals or powerful investors violated land laws with impunity, often with the protection or indifference of local authorities. This created a climate in which laws exist but are not consistently applied when enforcement would affect elite interests. One participant emphasized,

*“The problem is not the legal framework, **but enforcement**, in Uganda, everything now rotates around **political gains**.”*

These statements underscore the reality that even well-crafted policies are rendered ineffective in the absence of institutional integrity.

<sup>12</sup>Pasculli, Lorenzo, Foreign Investments, the Rule of Corrupted Law and Transnational Systemic Corruption in Uganda's Mineral Sector (March 26, 2020). L. Pasculli (2020) 'Foreign Investments, the Rule of Corrupted Law and Transnational Systemic Corruption in Uganda's Mineral Sector'. In: R. Leal-Arcas (ed.) International Trade, Investment and the Rule of Law. Chisinau: Eliva Press. 84-109, 2020, Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3786197>

<sup>13</sup>ibid

A vivid illustration of this is the Bugoma Forest conflict in Hoima District, where Hoima Sugar Ltd. was controversially allocated land for sugarcane growing in a protected forest reserve. Despite public outcry and evidence of environmental risks, the company proceeded with minimal consequences. This and other cases highlight a growing trend in which government-linked companies and foreign investors exploit legal loopholes or rely on backdoor political influence to access protected land, displacing communities and degrading ecosystems.

Respondents stressed that corruption is not limited to the highest levels of government; it also permeates local governance structures. Land officers, forestry staff, and environmental police were said to sometimes accept bribes in exchange for turning a blind eye to illegal activities. This undermines public confidence in enforcement institutions and reinforces a perception that land and environmental governance is a tool for enriching the powerful at the expense of the vulnerable. Participants called for targeted anti-corruption reforms, including asset declarations for public officers in land and natural resource management, transparent audit systems, and regular rotation of enforcement staff to reduce collusion.

### Selective Enforcement Against the Poor

Stakeholders repeatedly observed that enforcement of land and environmental laws disproportionately targets the poor. In many districts, respondents reported that smallholder farmers, charcoal burners, and community forest users were fined, evicted, or criminalized for minor offenses, while wealthy individuals continued illegal activities with impunity. In Kole and Otuke districts, for instance, authorities destroyed rice fields and confiscated charcoal from locals despite similar, large-scale operations being run by influential businessmen in the same areas. One participant noted,

***"They are not effective thus the rich build in wetlands while the poor are evicted."***

This double standard not only violates principles of justice and equity but also undermines public support for environmental conservation. Communities perceive enforcement as an arbitrary exercise of power rather than a shared responsibility. Such resentment has fueled resistance to environmental regulations, with some people deliberately defying rules out of protest or desperation.

To address this, respondents proposed the introduction of environmental ombudsmen or independent watchdogs at the district level. These institutions would receive complaints, investigate cases of selective enforcement, and hold public officers accountable. This would help restore trust in environmental governance and ensure that laws are applied fairly across all socio-economic groups.

## Weak Institutional Coordination and Logistical Gaps

Institutional capacity was another major challenge raised by stakeholders. Respondents from across the country reported that environmental officers, land inspectors, and forestry officials are often under-resourced and poorly supported. In many districts, officers lack access to transportation, making it difficult to conduct field inspections or respond to violations.

*“Several [officers] complained that they do not even have means of transport to do supervision,”* one respondent shared, pointing to the logistical barriers that cripple enforcement.

Furthermore, inter-agency coordination is weak. District land boards, environment offices, forest departments, and natural resource committees often work in silos, leading to duplication of effort, conflicting mandates, and bureaucratic delays. In some cases, land is allocated by district land boards without consulting environmental officers, resulting in developments being approved in wetlands or forest reserves. This lack of integration hinders timely enforcement and creates confusion over roles and responsibilities.

Respondents called for integrated environmental governance structures that facilitate regular communication and joint planning among different government entities. Suggestions included quarterly coordination meetings, shared information systems, and cross-departmental task forces to monitor and act on environmental threats collaboratively.

*“The [district] land boards...are inactive because they are not facilitated”* another respondent reflecting on the logistical gaps that exist at the local government level

## Policy Evasion and Bypassed Environmental Assessments

A significant number of participants expressed concern over the failure to conduct or enforce Environmental and Social Impact Assessments (ESIAs) before land development projects commence. In theory, any major project that could affect land, water, or forest resources is required by law to undergo an ESIA. However, respondents reported numerous instances where this process was ignored, fast-tracked, or manipulated to benefit developers.

*“So at the end of the day, most of the ESIs that have been submitted to NEMA ... are lacking on three critical areas... Number one, the issue of **ecological restoration**, ... to ensure ... **ecological equilibrium, stability and restoration**. Secondly, issues of **biodiversity [conservation]**. Then the other issue is the requirement for carrying out ... **periodic environment audits**”* – reflection by one of the respondents.

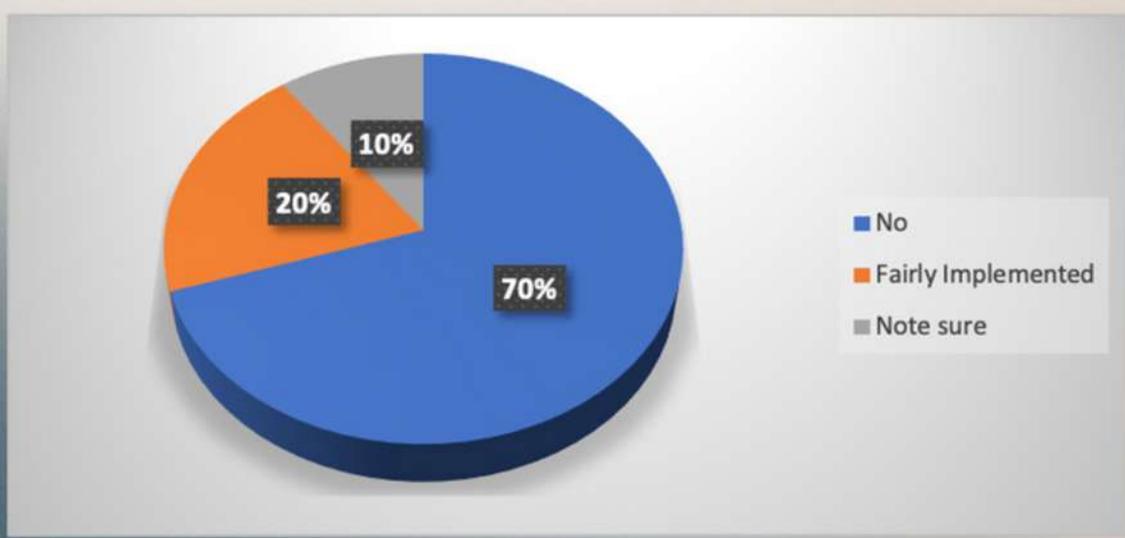
Another stakeholder warned, *“Factories and buildings are coming up in swamps and protected areas in disregard of the law.”* Civil society organizations described how developers sometimes begin construction before EIA reports are submitted or use consultants who produce biased assessments that overlook environmental risks. In such cases, communities are left uninformed and powerless, only realizing the extent of environmental harm when it is too late.

This situation has prompted calls for greater transparency in the ESIA process. Respondents recommended that all ESIA reports be made publicly accessible, that local communities be involved in the review process, and that public hearings become a mandatory step before approval. Moreover, they called for the creation of independent oversight bodies to audit EIAs and investigate cases of non-compliance.

In conclusion, this subsection illustrates the multiple layers of systemic failure from political interference and corruption to institutional incapacity and policy evasion that hinder the implementation of land and environmental laws in Uganda. Addressing these issues will require not only legal reforms but also deep structural changes in how enforcement institutions operate, engage communities, and uphold justice.

### Limited Awareness and Dissemination of Legal and Policy Frameworks

A consistent message across stakeholder responses was the limited public awareness and understanding of the National Land Policy (NLP 2013) and related environmental laws. Approximately 80% of respondents believed that the 2013 NLP had not been effectively implemented, primarily because most communities were unaware of its contents and implications. The failure to disseminate the policy through accessible and inclusive means has severely undermined its potential to influence change.



This knowledge gap is particularly pronounced in rural communities where literacy levels are low and access to printed materials is limited. Respondents shared that the NLP 2013 remains largely a document for elites and urban policy actors, with limited efforts to engage ordinary citizens in understanding their land rights. As one respondent noted,

*"The National Land Policy has remained in offices... it has not reached the people on the ground."*

The knowledge gap is not limited to only rural communities but extends to the local leadership as well. One respondent reflected on the lack of knowledge regarding the NLP process

*"When I called my District Land Board Chairperson this morning, he was green, about what is happening"*

The absence of mass communication strategies such as use of local radio, school programs, and public barazas (community meetings) has exacerbated this situation. Without targeted awareness efforts, key stakeholder groups such as farmers, youth, women, and traditional leaders remain uninformed about the laws intended to protect their land rights.

## **Inaccessibility Due to Language and Jargon**

Language barriers further hinder the effectiveness of the NLP and related policies. Respondents highlighted that the policy is written in complex legal jargon that is difficult for non-specialists to understand. Many recommended that the NLP be translated into local languages to make it more accessible. As one participant stressed,

*"Translate the policy into local dialect for easy understanding."*

*"The Constitution talks of being itself to be translated in the local languages. I am not seeing that being done. Is it being deliberate? We could have some of these policy documents also translated in the same manner."*

The current reliance on printed English-language materials excludes a significant portion of the population, especially in linguistically diverse regions such as Karamoja, Acholi, and West Nile. To bridge this gap, community-based organizations have suggested the use of visual tools, pictorial booklets, community theatre, and storytelling formats to communicate key legal concepts. Such culturally sensitive methods could significantly enhance policy uptake and understanding.

## Lack of Civic Education and Grassroots Engagement

Beyond the need for translation and simplification, stakeholders stressed the importance of proactive civic education. Many respondents criticized the passive dissemination strategies of government institutions and called for a more engaged approach that includes training sessions, community dialogues, and school-based programs. One participant remarked,

**“Even NGOs should be encouraged to talk about it, to have a person in charge, such need training and mentorship.”**

There was a strong consensus that local councils, religious institutions, and community-based organizations should be equipped and supported to serve as policy ambassadors. These actors are trusted in their communities and could be instrumental in educating the public about their land and environmental rights. Respondents also proposed integrating land and environmental education into school curricula to foster a generation that is aware of, and capable of defending, its natural resources.

Some communities noted successful awareness-raising efforts led by local leaders and environmental activists. In Arua and parts of West Nile, radio campaigns were used to sensitize the public about the charcoal ban and land demarcation procedures. These localized efforts provide promising models for national replication.

Overall, the findings highlight that the mere existence of a policy is insufficient without deliberate, inclusive, and sustained engagement with the communities it is meant to serve. Bridging the awareness gap through language inclusion, civic education, and community mobilization will be essential to ensuring the successful implementation of the revised National Land Policy.

## Land Access and Use Challenges Land tenure dilemma

According to the survey, 70% of respondents reported encountering challenges related to land access and use. This high percentage reflects widespread structural and socio-cultural bottlenecks within Uganda’s current land governance framework. These concerns highlight the urgency of policy revisions in the forthcoming National Land Policy (NLP 2013).

A significant portion of respondents raised concerns about family conflicts over customary land, which continue to impede development and secure land use. Such disputes were described as persistent and poorly resolved due to informal inheritance systems and lack of documentation. One respondent explained, “It delays everything.”

Encroachment was another common issue. Respondents noted that land occupied by squatters or encroachers often leads to prolonged disputes, and in many cases, it obstructs plans for land development. A few respondents emphasized the need for compensation mechanisms to be addressed in the

revised policy. Concerns specific to the Mailo system, vary from person to person and from region. While the non-central people find it hard to understand the tenure system entirely, and how it operates, some fear to actually purchase and have economic development schemes on the tenure. A respondent from an FGD noted that;

*"I personally have challenges understanding what Mailo property is, rather what Milo tenure is, we have questions about Mailo land and want to understand it clearly."*

The raised questions about Mailo tenure showcase the lack of awareness, failure to interpret the law as it is and a requirement by the Ministry of Lands to actually have some sort of open days to discuss these tenures and land-related laws to the publics for clarity and fair trade.

## Title duplication and double sales

Respondents reported frequent cases of land being sold multiple times, often due to duplicate land titles. This problem has intensified mistrust in land registration processes and highlights the weaknesses in title verification systems. In districts with limited administrative coverage, many respondents pointed out a lack of access to land-related information and services, noting that government structures were "spread too thin." This has led to misinformation and limited awareness of land rights, especially in rural areas.

Respondents also emphasized the economic limitations created by land without formal title. Inability to use untitled land as collateral for credit or business development was a recurring frustration, with one participant stating that,

*"Without a title, you can't borrow, and without borrowing, you can't grow."*

## Gendered barriers and customary land tenure

Customary tenure systems in regions like West Nile continue to be untitled and male-dominated, significantly affecting women's land ownership rights<sup>14</sup>. Patriarchal<sup>14</sup> customs and limited formal recognition restrict women from claiming, transferring, or inheriting land.

*"Yeah, the issue around gender and land ownership we very well know that communally, like in our traditions, **women are not allowed to own land**. I mean, the national land policy, what has it brought in to ensure that **women also have rights to own land**, even before we think of proposing these proposed reforms in the Land Policy?"*

<sup>14</sup>Burke, C., Kobusingye, D., Oxfam. (2014) *Women's Land Rights in Northern Uganda*.

Some respondents had doubts in the efficiency of the National Land Policy 2013, in excavating women's land rights and thought the reforms would have been proper if the systems would also change to support easier access, use, acquisition and registration of land by both women and men. Both women and persons with disabilities were highlighted as facing systematic exclusion from land access due to cultural norms and inadequate legal protections. This reinforces the need for the revised NLP to take a stronger equity-based approach to land rights.

*“Clearly there were **inadequacies around our land tenure systems.** There were issues to do with **gender and land ownership**”*

## Challenges Faced by Grassroots Land Rights and Environmental Defenders

### Harassment, Intimidation, and Persecution

Grassroots defenders, especially those protecting land and natural resources, often operate in a climate of fear and danger. Many respondents described how activists are routinely harassed, threatened, or framed for crimes in an effort to silence them. These threats are especially acute for youth and community leaders who challenge illegal land acquisition or environmental degradation by politically connected actors. In Adjumani, for instance, youth defending Zoka Forest reported persecution from government-linked individuals. As one participant stated,

*“**Persecutions especially of the Youth Activities in Adjumani who fight the battle of conserving Zoka Forest with mafias in Government.**”*

This hostile environment is worsened by the lack of formal protection mechanisms for defenders. Arrests, intimidation, and even physical violence go unpunished, while victims have limited avenues for redress. Many defenders lack access to legal aid, making it difficult to fight back in court. Stakeholders emphasized the need for a rapid-response system, including emergency legal assistance, psychosocial support, and protection shelters for those at risk.



## Lack of Legal Protection and Recognition

Beyond threats and intimidation, many defenders face institutional neglect. Their work is rarely acknowledged within formal environmental governance structures, making it difficult for them to participate meaningfully in decision-making. This lack of recognition undermines their legitimacy and leaves them isolated. Respondents called for legal reforms to formally recognize environmental and land rights defenders as key stakeholders in governance.

The Human Rights Defenders Protection Bill 2020 was frequently cited as a potential solution. If passed, it would provide a legal framework for the protection and support of individuals who advocate for the promotion, protection or realisation of other people's human rights and fundamental freedoms as guaranteed under the Constitution including the right to own property and the right to a clean and healthy environment<sup>15</sup>. As one respondent urged,

*"Protection mechanisms should be promoted by the State... this can be possible with the adoption by Parliament of the Human Rights Defenders [Protection] Bill."*

## Barriers to Participation for Vulnerable Groups

The youth age group account for 77% of the total household population with half of the total population being aged 18 and younger. Women make up 51% of the total population according to the same population numbers. Yet despite these demographic strengths, there are little efforts to include gendered considerations in land decision making.

Stakeholders emphasized that women and youth are consistently excluded from land-related decisions, even though they are often the primary users and stewards of land resources. This systemic exclusion limits their ability to shape land policies and weakens the inclusivity of land governance. A respondent pointed out,

<sup>15</sup>Parliament Watch. *The Human Rights Defenders Bill (2020)*. Available at <https://parliamentwatch.ug/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Human-Rights-Defenders-Protection-Bill-2020.pdf>

<sup>16</sup>Uganda Bureau of Standards. (2024) *Uganda National Population and Housing Census*.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid

***“Women and youth have limited decision-making power even though they are the major users of land for farming and fuel.”***

This disconnect leads to decisions that do not reflect the needs or realities of these groups. For example, resettlement and compensation programs rarely consider women’s rights to land, and young people often lack formal ownership due to patriarchal inheritance systems. Respondents called for deliberate policy reforms to ensure that youth and women are represented in land committees and other decision-making bodies.

## **Displacement and Inequitable Compensation**

Forced land evictions are rampant largely due to the imbalance of land rights held by those with property rights and those with rights in equity. In Karamoja and Teso, various people were displaced to make way for important infrastructural projects thereby violating their rights to property in the process<sup>18</sup>.

Forced evictions and unfair compensation practices were widely reported. Participants described cases where communities were evicted to pave way for infrastructure, mining, or agricultural projects, often without prior consultation or fair recompense. One participant observed,

***“There are instances of forceful evictions of communities without compensation [sic]. This is at the expense of the poor who are displaced in the quest for development by individuals and government.”***

In many instances, even where compensation is offered, it is inadequate, delayed, or mismanaged. Respondents recommended revising compensation frameworks to ensure fairness, transparency, and community participation in valuation processes.

<sup>18</sup>Murphy, S., Carmody, P., & Okawakol, J. (2017). When rights collide: land grabbing, force and injustice in Uganda. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 44(3), 677–696. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2016.1259616>

## Access and Resource Limitations

A recurring issue for vulnerable groups is lack of access to resources that enable them to participate in environmental conservation or land governance. Respondents cited the absence of training, legal literacy, start-up capital, and materials like seedlings for reforestation. As one community leader noted,

*“The vulnerable cannot challenge the rich business people engaged in sugarcane and Waragi brewing.”*

These inequalities contribute to environmental degradation, as the poorest communities are often forced to overexploit resources for survival while being excluded from sustainable alternatives. Proposals to address this included seedling distribution programs, community grants, and environmental education targeted at marginalized populations.

## Capacity and Resource Constraints

Most community-based defenders operate without adequate training in land and environmental laws. This knowledge gap hampers their ability to hold violators accountable or defend their rights effectively. Respondents called for regular training workshops on legal provisions, environmental monitoring techniques, and conflict resolution strategies. One person stated,

*“Training on some of the laws to be enforced to protect the environment and rights of individuals to acquire and access land” is essential.*

They also emphasized peer learning, where more experienced defenders mentor younger activists, and the integration of these trainings into existing community meetings or parish development structures. Such programs would not only empower individuals but also build a culture of rights awareness and accountability at the grassroots level.

## Inadequate Legal and Financial Support

Nearly all participants mentioned that financial constraints severely limit their advocacy. Many defenders are unable to travel to court hearings, compile documentation, or pay legal fees. Others reported being dragged into legal battles they could not afford to fight.

*“Funding, legal assistance, and training are all crucial to my work,” summarized one respondent.*

In response, stakeholders proposed the establishment of legal aid clinics specifically for environmental and land-related cases. They also recommended the creation of emergency funds to support defenders facing immediate threats or litigation. Donors and civil society partners were encouraged to provide more flexible, long-term support tailored to the specific needs of rural defenders.

Together, these findings illustrate the difficult operating environment for land and environmental defenders in Uganda. Without legal protection, financial support, and inclusive decision-making, defenders remain exposed and disempowered. Addressing these structural barriers will be essential to ensuring that local voices can contribute meaningfully to land governance and environmental protection.

## **Political Interference and Lack of Political Will**

A prevalent issue in the discussions was the failure of political leadership to adhere to conservation principles. Many respondents highlighted that certain government institutions are complicit in undermining environmental protections. This manipulation of land and environmental issues often marginalizes vulnerable communities, leveraging state resources to safeguard the interests of a privileged few. For instance, the situation regarding Apaa land in Uganda exemplifies these political challenges. Local politicians often seek favours from the President, which directly impacts the land rights of residents in the region. This dynamic of elite capture, combined with a culture of impunity, not only erodes public trust but also disempowers local conservation advocates, further complicating efforts to protect the environment and promote social equity.

## **Community-Led Strategies to Inform Actionable Recommendations**

### **Community-Driven Conservation Practices**

A strong theme emerging from respondents was the importance of traditional and indigenous ecological knowledge in promoting sustainable land use and resolving conflicts. Many communities, especially those in rural areas, continue to rely on customary norms to guide land management. These traditions often include the use of culturally significant plants, such as Orukoni, to demarcate boundaries and prevent encroachment. Respondents noted that these practices not only help preserve land heritage but also reduce the number of disputes that would otherwise overwhelm formal legal systems. In Entebbe, local communities have used their indigenous knowledge to protect the Nambirigwa swamp, a vital ecosystem threatened by urban expansion. Residents mobilized to replant native vegetation, conduct public awareness campaigns, and resist land-grabbing attempts. This initiative has become a model of grassroots-led conservation blending traditional wisdom with civic activism.



## Use of Elders and Local Justice Systems

Respondents expressed strong confidence in local justice systems, especially the role of elders in resolving land disputes and promoting environmental stewardship. Elders are often seen as impartial, knowledgeable, and deeply connected to the land and community values. These attributes make them effective mediators in disputes that formal legal systems may find too costly or time-consuming to address.

*Participants summarized this by saying,*

*“The use of traditional justice systems helps in early resolution and minimizes costly legal battles.” “Most of these land issues and land disputes end up in courts of law, but the whole question is, how accessible is justice when it comes to land related issues. The litigation is very costly, hiring a lawyer, doing the right things to do comes at a very colossal costs of money, yeah, and I think it’s one of the issues that we need to address.”*

The accessibility and social legitimacy of these systems make them a vital component of land governance, especially in areas where trust in formal institutions is low as stated in one of the quotes. Additionally, the overarching costs of case or dispute handling have not only led to backlogs but also frustration among the citizens. Respondents recommended integrating these customary mechanisms into broader national frameworks to complement formal courts and tribunals. And reworking the costs and payment systems for the same.

## Innovations and Use of Technology

### Digital Monitoring and Reporting Tools

Technology was identified as a promising tool for environmental protection and community advocacy. Respondents highlighted the growing use of mobile phones, GPS-enabled devices, and internet-based platforms to report land-related violations and mobilize support. Tools such as WhatsApp groups, SMS alerts, and citizen reporting apps were credited for helping communities monitor deforestation, wetland encroachment, and illegal mining activities. As one participant explained,

*“Online reporting, pictures and videos can alert police and environment officers to swing to action.”*

These digital approaches not only improve surveillance but also promote transparency and hold authorities accountable. Some civil society organizations are training community monitors on how to use smartphones for real-time documentation and reporting of environmental offenses.

Participants suggested government interventions to reduce the prices of data bundles to enable more people to use technology in order to use national land management systems. Across the East African region, Tanzania had the cheapest data bundles with Uganda the highest<sup>19</sup>. One participant remarked, Respondents expressed strong confidence in local justice systems, especially the role of elders in resolving land disputes and promoting environmental stewardship.

Elders are often seen as impartial, knowledgeable, and deeply connected to the land and community values. These attributes make them effective mediators in disputes that formal legal systems may find too costly or time-consuming to address.

**Participants summarized this by saying,**

*... days. Then you are there, going through your email, then you get a message, the data is done"*  
*"You see, you buy data, then they tell you it's 1 GB or 2 GB for three*

## GIS Mapping and Awareness Campaigns

Geospatial technologies such as GIS and satellite imagery were reported as instrumental in demarcating boundaries and tracking environmental changes. Several respondents cited the benefits of community mapping exercises that help residents understand the extent of their land and natural resources, reducing intra-communal disputes. GIS tools also support conservation planning by identifying critical areas that require protection. In addition, awareness campaigns using radio, community theater, and school eco-clubs were praised for increasing knowledge about environmental laws and best practices. Platforms like community radio stations and village public address systems were effective in reaching illiterate populations with relevant messages.

<sup>19</sup>Faustine Ngila. "Tanzania remains the place to be for cheap data in East Africa". Dally Monitor. April 28, 2021. Available at <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/tanzania-remains-the-place-to-be-for-cheap-data-in-east-africa-3380538>

## Collaboration and Multi-Stakeholder Platforms

### Joint Monitoring and Stakeholder Engagement

Collaboration across government, civil society, and community structures was cited as critical for effective environmental governance. Respondents called for the establishment of inclusive platforms where all stakeholders could contribute to policy implementation and monitoring. These could take the form of regular community Barazas, joint field visits, and multi-stakeholder forums.

*“There should be continuous engagements and an established platform for effective engagements,”*

one stakeholder emphasized. Respondents also suggested formalizing partnerships through Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) between CSOs and local governments to foster shared accountability and resource pooling.

## Role of Local Councils and Committees

The Local Government Councils are the highest political authority within a designated local area with legislative and executive powers<sup>20</sup>. They are established at district level, and lower local government councils. Among the functions for which district councils are responsible for include land administration<sup>21</sup>. Local Councils (LCs), parish chiefs, and Area Land Committees were

consistently recognized as essential players in land and environmental management. Their proximity to communities enables them to mediate disputes, track violations, and disseminate legal information effectively. However, these institutions often lack training and operational resources.

Participants recommended that LCs receive structured training on land laws, conflict resolution, and environmental regulations. They also proposed equipping these local leaders with reporting tools and transport facilitation to enhance their responsiveness and reach.

## Proposed Legal and Policy Reforms

Respondents widely agreed that Uganda needs dedicated environmental courts to handle the growing number of land and environmental disputes. Such courts would allow for more specialized and efficient handling of complex cases that require technical understanding. Stakeholders emphasized that current penalties are too weak and inconsistently applied, encouraging repeat offenses.

*“Enforcement of penalties and fines against those who breach laws”*

was seen as a deterrent that must be upheld through a well-resourced judiciary. Respondents also called for the mandatory involvement of environmental experts in adjudicating such cases.

<sup>20</sup>Section 8 of the Local Governments Act Cap. 138 Updated Laws of Uganda  
<sup>21</sup>Second Schedule of the Local Governments Act

## **Inclusive and Localized Law Reforms**

Respondents argued that reforms must reflect the lived experiences of rural and marginalized communities. This includes translating laws into local languages and incorporating feedback from regional consultations. Representation of youth, women, and indigenous groups in law and policy formulation processes was seen as essential for legitimacy and impact. Doing so would not only foster ownership but also align national frameworks with local realities.

## **Strengthening Land Tribunals and Dispute Mechanisms**

Finally, participants stressed the need to institutionalize and resource Area Land Tribunals and alternative dispute resolution (ADR) mechanisms. These structures are critical for delivering timely and culturally relevant justice in rural areas. Proposals included decentralizing tribunal functions, training local mediators, and integrating customary dispute mechanisms with formal ones to reduce case backlogs. Respondents also advocated for legal aid to be extended to land-related matters, especially for the poor and vulnerable who are often at risk of land loss or exploitation. Strengthening these systems was seen as a foundational step toward equitable and just land governance in Uganda.



## Key Take Home Messages

Uganda's land and environmental governance framework is robust in policy but weak in practice. Despite the presence of comprehensive legal instruments such as the National Land Policy (2013), implementation remains inconsistent and skewed by political interference, corruption, and institutional limitations. Communities perceive land laws as favoring the powerful and marginalizing the poor, leading to distrust in the rule of law and disengagement from state-led initiatives. Equally concerning are the threats faced by grassroots land and environmental defenders. These individuals operate in an environment marked by harassment, intimidation, and a lack of institutional support. The absence of formal recognition and protection mechanisms for defenders leaves them vulnerable and excluded from formal decision-making processes. Women, youth, and ethnic minorities remain marginalized in governance spaces, even though they are central to land use and community conservation efforts. Nonetheless, there is hope. Community-led solutions including indigenous conservation practices, local justice mechanisms, and technological innovations demonstrate the potential for sustainable and inclusive governance. Initiatives such as community-based swamp restoration, digital reporting platforms, and collaborative stakeholder forums show that when communities are empowered, they can effectively manage and protect their environments. To achieve meaningful reform, the 2025 National Land Policy review must address the systemic weaknesses identified by communities. This includes establishing environmental courts, enhancing civic education, digitalizing land systems, and building the capacity of local councils and land committees. Equally important is the need to pass legislation such as the Human Rights Defenders Bill to safeguard the individuals risking their lives to defend Uganda's natural resources. In conclusion, Uganda's path to equitable and sustainable land governance lies in centering the voices of its citizens especially those most affected by land injustices. The future of the country's environment and its development goals depends on how well it listens, protects, and partners with its people.

## Appendix Participating Organizations and Stakeholder Groups

Organization Name	Description / Area of Focus
tndNews, a GLCSMS media brand	A media platform likely affiliated with the Greater Lango Civil Society and Media Strategy (GLCSMS); focuses on community reporting, governance, and public awareness.
Oil Refinery Residents Association (ORRA)	A community-based organization representing people affected by the development of Uganda's oil refinery project, especially those displaced from Hoima District.
Outcast Activism Forum Uganda	Involved in advocacy group working with marginalized populations, including landless people or those considered "outcasts" due to social or political exclusion.
Centre for Media Literacy and Community Development (CEMCOOD)	Promotes media literacy, civic education, and community empowerment. Often works with rural populations on rights awareness.
Nakuya & Co Advocates	A legal or consultancy firm engaged in land rights and public policy advocacy. May offer legal assistance and representation in land matters.
Mid-Western Region Anti-Corruption Coalition (MIRAC)	A regional CSO focused on transparency in natural resource governance.
The Franklyn Institute of Public Management and Leadership Development	Involved in training public officials and civil society in leadership, policy, and governance. Could be supporting land rights education.
MAYANK Anti-Corruption Coalition	An anti-corruption watchdog focused on land governance, environmental protection, and transparency in public service delivery.
Southern and Eastern Africa Trade Information and Negotiations Institute (SEATINI) – Uganda	A well-known policy advocacy institution focusing on trade, investment, and development with an emphasis on economic justice, land, and environment.

## Organizations Thematic Focus

Thematic Area	Organizations
Land Rights & Displacement	ORRA, Outcast Activism Forum, Nakuya & Co, MIRAC
Environmental Advocacy	MAYANK Anti-Corruption Coalition, SEATINI, MIRAC
Media & Civic Engagement	tndNews, CEMCOD, Franklyn Institute
Legal Aid & Anti-Corruption	Nakuya & Co, MIRAC, MAYANK Anti-Corruption Coalition
Policy & Governance Training	Franklyn Institute, SEATINI



District / Area	Context in Responses
Lira	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cited in relation to differential treatment of farmers and charcoal producers.</li> </ul>
Otuke	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mentioned as a location where rice gardens were destroyed; related to enforcement challenges.</li> </ul>
Oyam	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Referenced alongside Lira and Otuke in relation to community evictions and policy abuse.</li> </ul>
Kole	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Highlighted in reference to rice garden destruction and enforcement inconsistencies.</li> </ul>
Hoima	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mentioned in relation to Bugoma Forest and conflicts involving Hoima Sugar Ltd.</li> </ul>
Masindi	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Noted for environmental pollution related to Waragi brewing and sugarcane farming (Mile 10, Kina village).</li> </ul>
Mbale City	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reported cases of swamp encroachment and issuance of illegal building permits.</li> </ul>
Fort Portal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provided a case of wetland encroachment and arrest of a businessman by environmental police.</li> </ul>
Arua	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Known for banning charcoal production, though enforcement has been poor; also praised for successful community awareness.</li> <li>• Mentioned as a region where customary land is largely untitled and the presidential ban on charcoal was not enforced.</li> </ul>
Adjumani	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Highlighted for persecution of youth activists protecting Zoka Forest.</li> </ul>
Karamoja region	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Referenced in connection with mining licenses and displacement of local communities.</li> </ul>
Entebbe city (Nambirigwa Swamp)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A conservation initiative noted for protecting the swamp along the Expressway.</li> </ul>





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