



Village Land Councils and the Management of Land Use Conflicts between Farmers and Pastoralists in Mbarali District, Tanzania

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Abstract

Village Land Councils have been established to resolve land based conflicts in rural Tanzania where farmers and pastoralists are considered to be one of the main conflicting parties. Practical experience reveals that the Village Land Councils fail to attain their institutional goals because of challenges facing the VLC members as individuals and institutions. Such challenges can be examined from the socio-economic and institutional perspectives. Semi-structured and key informants interviews were used to collect raw data from the respondents and key informants respectively. In-depth information was collected through Focus Group Discussions from the VLC members. NVivo software was used to analyze qualitative data for generating objective findings. The study found that the working environment of the VLC members was extremely poor implying that poor performance in the provision of mediation data. Some of the key challenges that were mentioned include: lack of competency among VLC members, political interferences, inadequate resources and absence of legal autonomy. These challenges were outlined as barriers for the attainment of VLCs' goals operating in Mwanavala and Matebete Villages. The study concludes that the respective authorities within the government have to develop sustainable plans and strategies for the supporting daily operations among VLCs. The study recommends that VLCs have to be empowered technically, financially and socially in order to provide quality mediation services for the land disputants. Such initiatives should be supported by the local communities to ensure cooperation and mutual support for the common good.

Keywords: Challenges, Village Land Council, Farmers, Pastoralists, Conflicts

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Introduction

Land is a critical resource for various socio-economic activities worldwide, particularly in the agricultural sector, which encompasses crop farming, livestock rearing, forestry, and fishing. The reliance on land has intensified competition among users, especially between farmers and pastoralists, leading to frequent conflicts over access and utilization. Massay (2017) identifies inadequate grazing reserves, changes in land tenure systems, insufficient pastoral legislation, expansion of agricultural policies, economic factors, and climate change as key contributors to these conflicts.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, millions of farmers and pastoralists depend on land for their livelihoods, contributing to household incomes and food security. However, as Haule (2017) notes, the high demand for land often leads to tensions and conflicts, resulting in loss of lives and property. In Tanzania, land-based conflicts between farmers and pastoralists are common, driven by scarce land resources and exacerbated by climate variability (Ngonyani, 2019). Prolonged droughts, for example, force pastoralists to graze their animals on farmland, destroying crops and deepening poverty among farmers.

The Tanzanian government has implemented various measures to address these conflicts, including establishing Village Land Councils to mediate disputes and promote peaceful coexistence. However, despite these efforts, land use conflicts persist, indicating that VLCs may not be fully effective in their roles (Ringo, 2023). Melles (2021) attributes the continuation of these conflicts to the VLCs' failure to provide effective mediation services. Malisa (2020) points to negative public attitudes towards VLCs as a significant challenge, along with inadequate training, insufficient resources, and lack of unity among VLC members (Ngonyani, 2019).

This study aimed to explore and identify the primary challenges that limit the effectiveness of VLCs in managing land use conflicts between farmers and pastoralists in Mbarali District. By uncovering these challenges, the study sought to provide insights for policymakers and development partners to take appropriate measures to enhance the capacity of VLCs, ultimately promoting social harmony and sustainable land management.



Literature Review

Falanta et al. (2018) observed that conflicts within society often arise when resources, status, and power are unevenly distributed among beneficiaries. This view aligns with the classical social thinker Karl Marx, who perceived conflicts as the result of constant rivalry over economic resources. However, resolving social conflicts requires accountable institutions that can mediate effectively. According to Mohamed (2020), strong institutions are essential for creating a conducive environment where conflicting parties can coexist peacefully for the public good. In Tanzania, the establishment of Village Land Councils aims to reduce tensions among land users competing to access and control land for production. Ringo (2023) reported that land-based conflicts between farmers and pastoralists are common throughout Tanzania, driven by the need for scarce land resources to fulfill socio-economic interests.

The VLCs serve as public institutions dedicated to conflict resolution, helping rural populations engage in income-generating activities peacefully. However, Haule (2017) emphasized that the ability to mediate land conflicts depends not just on the institutional structure, but also on the willingness of mediators and land disputants to create a peaceful environment through dialogue and reconciliation. Mallya (2019) added that this willingness alone is insufficient; institutional support from responsible ministries and public agencies is crucial to ensuring accountability and transparency in the VLCs' daily operations. The study is guided by the theory of conflict management which reveals that conflicts in human life are common phenomena. However, they become destructive when human beings experience negative livelihood outcomes which affects their wellbeing. Darling and Fogliasso (1999) describe conflict as a situation where the concerns of two or more individuals are perceived as incompatible. It can stem from personality differences, legitimate disagreements, competitive reward systems, or poor norms. Wilmot and Hocker (2011) reported that conflicts often emerge in situations where resources are limited, creating competition for material and immaterial resources (Brockington, 2000). Additionally, the government's failure to address the socio-economic needs of marginalized populations can also generate conflicts due to poor administration and resource distribution.



This theory suggests that conflict arises from struggles for power, resources, and influence, and can lead to significant changes and resolutions. Unresolved conflicts can devastate livelihoods, create suffering, and deteriorate economies. Structural inequality can exacerbate conflicts within societies, particularly those where power and resources are unevenly distributed. Marx's perspective highlights that conflicts are intrinsic to all interdependent human relationships, driven by desires for equality, progression, and resources. While conflicts can lead to violence and chaos, they also offer opportunities for learning and improvement, potentially driving social change. Mohamed (2010) identifies three approaches to conflict resolution: settlement, resolution, and transformation. Settlement aims for a win-win outcome, resolution seeks to address underlying causes to prevent recurrence, and transformation focuses on changing the character and capacity of disputants and their communities.

Methodology

The study employed a descriptive-exploratory cross-sectional design. It was cross-sectional because it involved interviewing a representative sample of the population at a single point in time, allowing for the collection of data from groups with different characteristics and providing quick results. The study was descriptive as it aimed to portray a situation and illustrate how various factors are interrelated as they naturally occur. Additionally, it was exploratory because the researcher sought to explore into the research topics with varying levels of depth to uncover unknown realities. According to Singh (2018), while a descriptive research design is limited in its ability to address underlying realities, an exploratory research design complements it by explaining and accounting for the descriptive information.

A qualitative research approach was employed to gain an in-depth understanding of conflicts between farmers and pastoralists, the daily operations of VLCs, and other related phenomena. According to Kombo and Tromp (2006), a qualitative approach allows researchers to discover unexpected insights and conduct thorough investigations of complex topics.

This study aimed to capture the perspectives of VLC members and community members regarding factors that constrain the capacity of these local bodies in managing land-based conflicts. The detailed information gathered is crucial for informing policy changes and



improving the daily operations of policy implementers within the government and across the country.

The study was conducted in Mbarali District which is located between latitudes 7° and 9° South of the Equator and longitudes 33.8° and 35° East of the Greenwich Meridian. The district is situated at an altitude of about 1,000 to 1,800 meters above sea level, and with temperatures ranging between 25°C and 30°C. It experiences one rainy season from December to April, with annual rainfall between 450 and 650 millimeters. It was chosen as the study area because it hosts Village Land Councils that mediate land use conflicts between farmers and pastoralists, particularly in villages like Mwanavala and Matebete, where such conflicts are prevalent. These councils consist of members with significant experience in managing the dynamics of these disputes in the district. The target population for this study included Village Land Council members and leaders, farmers, pastoralists, and technocrats from the respective Local Government Authority. These participants were chosen for their extensive knowledge of the factors that constrain the capacity of VLCs in managing land use conflicts between farmers and pastoralists in the study area.

The study involved fourteen (14) members of the Village Land Councils, 3 farmers, and 3 pastoralists from Matebete and Mwanavala villages. Farmers and pastoralists were included to provide perspectives on the factors that constrain the VLCs in managing land use conflicts. Key informants were also interviewed, including the District Land Officer, District Agricultural Officer, District Legal Officer, and District Livestock Officer from Mbarali District Council, who were selected for their expertise and knowledge of the research issues being investigated.

Non-probability sampling techniques were used to select relevant respondents in the study area. Purposive sampling was employed to select villages with a history of frequent land disputes between farmers and pastoralists. The same technique was used to select members of the VLCs, who provided mediation services for land disputes and had substantial experience with the positive and negative aspects of their operations. Key informants were also purposefully selected due to their specialized knowledge of the research issues.



The study utilized various data collection tools to gather information from respondents and key informants. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with VLC members, farmers, and pastoralists, while key informant interviews were used to obtain technical information from technocrats serving in Mbarali District Council. These methods were chosen to collect detailed information from the respective participants.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted to gather in-depth information from VLC members in both villages. These were conducted separately in each village: one for VLC members of Matebete Village and another for VLC members of Mwanavala Village, making a total of two FGDs employed to complement semi-structured interviews, which were found to be limited in capturing detailed insights from respondents. Through FGDs, participants shared practical experiences on the factors limiting the capacity of VLCs in managing land use conflicts between farmers and pastoralists in their jurisdictions.

Secondary data were also collected from published and unpublished sources. Published documents included the National Land Policy, Land Acts, Guidelines from the Ministry of Lands, Housing and Human Settlements Development, the National Agricultural Policy, the National Livestock Policy, and relevant reports on land use matters from the respective Local Government Authority. The inclusion of secondary data aimed to capture policy information and legal issues not covered by the semi-structured interviews and key informant interviews.

NVivo software was utilized in this study for coding, analyzing, and visualizing themes derived from the qualitative data. The analysis followed a systematic approach: first, data from interview transcripts were imported into NVivo. Then, key words and phrases were identified by exploring the data from respondents and key informants. These key words were coded using the NVivo node feature, and a query function was employed to search for patterns within the data. The key words were subsequently displayed in visual formats such as graphs or charts, enhancing the interpretability of the findings.

Additionally, the study included a case-by-case analysis to capture the unique aspects of each village studied, particularly Mwanavala and Matebete. A cross-case analysis was also conducted to identify common findings across the two villages. According to Kumar (2011), qualitative



analysis allows researchers to move beyond statistical models, offering a broader perspective that encompasses human behavior, emotions, attitudes, and social phenomena that cannot be captured by numerical data alone.

Results and Discussions

Socio-Economic Characteristics of VLC Members in Mbarali District

The findings presented in Table 1 show that the age of respondents ranged from 38 to 54 years, with the majority being under 50. This suggests that most Village Land Council members from Mwanavala and Matebete villages are young adults, with a strong capacity to provide mediation services. Their relatively young age also aligns with their active engagement in crop production and livestock keeping, which contributes to their economic well-being. These findings align with Mohammed (2020), who emphasized that age is a significant socio-demographic characteristic that can influence a person's ability to provide quality services and participate in productive activities to improve their livelihood. In terms of gender, the study found that VLCs included both male and female members, a gender diversity that fostered collaboration and mutual support, which is critical for acquiring negotiation and conflict resolution skills—key components of effective mediation services.

Regarding education, the findings revealed that VLC members had varying levels of education. Most had completed primary education, while a minority were secondary school graduates. These educational differences provided opportunities for members to share practical experiences and apply mediation skills effectively, contributing to better outcomes for the communities they served. Importantly, all VLC members were literate, meaning they could read, write, and count. Literacy is crucial for their ability to review and understand public documents such as land policies, land acts, and other guidelines, which are essential tools in their mediation work.

**Table 1: Socio-economic characteristics of VLC members in Mbarali District**

Village	Respondents	Age	Sex	Education Status	Occupation
Mwanavala	Member-1	38	Male	Secondary Education	Farmer
	Member-2	52	Male	Primary Education	Farmer
	Member-3	45	Female	Primary Education	Pastoralist
	Member-4	19	Female	Certificate in Community Development	Farmer
	Member-5	50	Female	Primary Education	Farmer
	Member-6	48	Male	Secondary Education	Farmer
	Member-7	52	Male	Primary Education	Pastoralist
Matebete	Member-1	44	Male	Primary Education	Farmer
	Member-2	47	Male	Primary Education	Pastoralist
	Member-3	48	Female	Primary Education	Farmer
	Member-4	38	Female	Secondary Education	Farmer
	Member-5	45	Female	Primary Education	Pastoralist
	Member-6	54	Male	Primary Education	Pastoralist
	Member-7	48	Male	Secondary Education	Farmer

Source: Researcher Survey, 2023

Apart from the educational background of respondents, the study also highlighted that the Village Land Councils included both farmers and pastoralists, who are the primary land users in Matebete and Mwanavala villages. This composition ensures that the councils represent the interests of the dominant productive groups in these areas. In terms of gender representation, the findings showed that the VLCs comprised both male and female members. This inclusion fostered collaboration and facilitated the development of essential negotiation and conflict resolution skills, which are crucial for effective mediation services.

The study revealed that VLC members had varying levels of education, with the majority having completed primary education and a smaller group having attained secondary education. These educational differences allowed members to share practical experiences and apply mediation skills to improve conditions for conflicting parties. Notably, all VLC members were literate, capable of reading, writing, and counting. This literacy is crucial as it enables them to effectively



review and utilize public documents such as land policies and acts, which are essential tools for providing mediation services.

Challenges Facing the Village Land Councils in Managing Land Use Conflicts

Lack of Competency among VLC Members

The study identified a significant challenge in the lack of competency among VLC members in delivering effective mediation services. Many members lacked essential skills in negotiation and conflict resolution, which are crucial for their role. This deficiency often stemmed from a lack of formal training. During focus group discussions, one VLC member highlighted that the quality of mediation services is closely linked to the skills and willingness of the service providers. Without appropriate training, the effectiveness of the mediation was compromised, leading to ongoing land-based conflicts in the communities. As noted by a VLC member from Mwanavala village: *“We have been chosen to mediate land-based conflicts between farmers and pastoralists. While we are committed to serving our community, our lack of competency hinders our progress and achievement of institutional goals.”* (Interview with a VLC member, Mwanavala Village, Mbarali DC).

Similarly, a VLC member from Matebete Village expressed: *“The low competency level among VLC members, due to insufficient training, negatively impacts the quality of mediation services, which in turn perpetuates land-based conflicts.”* (Interview with VLC member, Matebete Village, Mbarali DC).

Although VLC members demonstrated a strong commitment to public service, their effectiveness was limited by their lack of technical skills. Arkadie (2016) highlighted that the ability of VLC members to deliver quality mediation services relies heavily on their competency in dialogue, negotiation, and conflict resolution. The District Legal Officer echoed this need, emphasizing the importance of capacity-building initiatives to improve VLC members' technical abilities. The officer remarked: *“VLC members play a crucial role in resolving land use conflicts, yet complaints about their capacity have been frequent. This underscores the need for technical support to enhance their service quality for the marginalized rural population.”* (Interview with District Legal Officer, Mbarali DC).



On the matter of gender, the involvement of both male and female members in VLCs has fostered collaboration and a balanced approach to mediation. Additionally, the educational background of VLC members varied, with most having primary education and a few holding secondary school qualifications. Despite these differences, members were generally literate, and capable of interpreting public documents such as land policies and acts, which are vital for effective mediation.

Lack of Willingness of Local People to work with VLCs

The findings revealed that in some villages, particularly Mwanavala and Matebete, there is a tendency among local people to resolve land-based conflicts through their own means, bypassing the Village Land Councils. This behavior stems from the negative attitudes that villagers in these areas have developed towards VLCs. Face-to-face interviews with VLC members highlighted that the constrained legal authority of these councils is a significant obstacle, limiting their effectiveness in enforcing decisions and ensuring compliance with conflict resolution measures. One VLC member from Mwanavala village remarked: *"Some people in our village do not trust us because they believe that our committees are extremely weak and incapable of enforcing decisions and ensuring accountability among land disputants. This kind of attitude is harmful, as it discourages the use of available institutions and pushes people towards relying on formal courts and other legal entities in the country."* (Interview with a VLC member, Mbarali DC).

A similar sentiment was expressed by a farmer from Mwanavala village who remarked: *"We are aware of the presence of the Village Land Council, but we doubt its capacity to resolve the land-based conflicts in this village. As a result, we rely on the Ward Land Tribunals and formal courts, which have the power to enforce decisions and ensure accountability under the law among land disputants."* (Interview with a farmer, Mbarali DC).

Pastoralists who have experienced land use conflicts with farmers are equally skeptical about the VLCs' effectiveness in managing such conflicts. They pointed out that the VLCs lack the institutional capacity to enforce their decisions for the public good. One pastoralist from Matebete village expressed: *"I commend the Government of Tanzania for establishing Village Land Councils to provide mediation services for marginalized people in peripheral areas."*



However, these institutions operate without the legal powers necessary to execute their decisions, rendering them largely ceremonial entities with limited ability to ensure accountability among land disputants. Due to these weaknesses, we prefer formal courts over VLCs, as the court system has the legal authority to ensure the effective implementation of its decisions for the public good." (Interview with a pastoralist, Mbarali DC).

These findings underscore the importance of fostering positive relationships between community members and VLCs, as mutual support is essential for the effective functioning of these councils. Local leaders and elders, who hold institutional and cultural authority, play a crucial role in creating an environment conducive to cooperation and collaboration for the common good. As Malisa (2020) pointed out, the efficiency of local institutions in providing mediation services depends significantly on the support from local community members, particularly in areas where formal court services are neither available nor accessible.

External Influences from Various Stakeholders

The study revealed that external influences from various stakeholders, both from formal and informal institutions, posed significant challenges that overshadowed local initiatives, thereby impeding the implementation of effective solutions. Through FGDs with VLC members in both villages, it was reported that interference from district authorities often created tensions among VLC members, hampering their ability to provide mediation services to those in need. One member from Mwanavala village explained: *"Members of the Village Land Councils are chosen to mediate land conflicts for marginalized individuals living in remote areas. However, we sometimes struggle to perform our duties effectively due to external influences that inject bias among decision-makers for private gain. This discourages us, as we require the freedom to exercise our institutional powers."* (Interview with the VLC Member, Mbarali DC).

Key informants, particularly the District Land Officer, also acknowledged that certain government officials occasionally interfered with the decisions made by VLC members for their own benefit. Such practices discouraged village-level actors, leading to favoritism and biased decision-making. The District Land Officer commented: *"I recognize that Village Land Council members need the freedom to exercise their institutional powers in the public interest. However,*



they are sometimes hindered by interference from certain government officials within the Council, who aim to instill fear among VLC members and force them to favor particular land disputants for personal gain." (Interview with the District Land Officer, Mbarali DC).

These concerns were echoed by farmers and pastoralists, who were clients of the mediation services. They observed that most VLC members genuinely aimed to promote peace and harmony in their communities, creating an environment where conflicting parties could collaborate and support each other to enhance productivity and stimulate economic growth through agricultural development. One pastoralist shared: *"Some civil servants in the Local Government Authorities interfere with decisions made by VLC members to serve their own interests. These actions undermine the performance of the VLCs, as the actors are pressured to align with the needs of those with vested interests in the ongoing conflicts between farmers and pastoralists in Mbarali District."* (Interview with the pastoralist, Mbarali DC).

In addition to interference from technocrats, VLC members also expressed concerns about political interference that undermined their ability to make fair and objective decisions for the common good. A member from Mwanavala village reported that some political leaders supported ongoing conflicts between farmers and pastoralists for personal gain, sometimes even preferring that such conflicts persist to serve their interests.

These undesirable practices have fueled misunderstandings between farmers and pastoralists, leading to prolonged conflicts. The interference has created tension among VLC members, diminishing their morale and effectiveness in serving the target beneficiaries, who often lack the capacity to access formal legal services. One respondent noted: *"Local politicians frequently influence the decisions of VLC members for their own benefit. These unprofessional practices create fear among the actors, weakening their resolve to make objective and fair decisions. As a result, some VLC members are coerced into making decisions that align with the interests of local politicians, exacerbating hatred and perpetuating land conflicts in the district."* (Interview with the VLC Secretary, Mbarali District).

These findings highlight the need for a capacity-building program for local politicians to familiarize them with the principles of good governance. Politicians must understand their rights,



duties, and limitations, as well as the critical role of Village Land Councils in resolving land conflicts. They should be encouraged to support these institutions in their efforts to provide effective mediation services. Similarly, Ngonyani (2019) emphasized the importance of recognizing VLCs as independent entities tasked with resolving land disputes. It is imperative that both politicians and technocrats respect the autonomy of VLCs and other related institutions, such as Ward Tribunals, the District Land and Housing Tribunal, the Land Division of the High Court, and the Court of Appeal, all of which are mandated to provide justice in the land sector.

Corruption among Village Land Council Members

The study identified corruption among VLC members as a significant barrier to the delivery of quality mediation services. Corruption undermined social justice, leading to biased decision-making that favored individuals with higher financial status and marginalized those with fewer resources. Farmers and pastoralists reported that corruption created divisions among beneficiaries, with wealthier clients receiving preferential treatment.

Interviews with the District Legal Officer highlighted that corruption was linked to increasing income inequality. Wealthier clients often used their financial resources to influence VLC members, leading to decisions that favored them and discouraging poorer clients from seeking mediation. As one key informant noted: *"Corruption has eroded the institutional autonomy of VLCs, allowing wealthier clients to receive favorable decisions due to their financial influence. This discourages poorer clients from using VLCs and drives them to seek resolution through other legal avenues"* (Interview with the District Legal Officer, Mbarali District).

Corruption was reported in both Matebete and Mwanavala villages, although not all VLC members were involved. Those engaged in corrupt practices were often driven by financial difficulties exacerbated by inadequate salaries or allowances. A VLC member from Matebete stated: *"Corruption is prevalent among VLC members due to poor working conditions. Without incentives or financial support from the District Executive Director's office, some members resort to corruption to attend to their financial crises"* (Interview with the VLC member, Mbarali District).



To address these issues, it is crucial for authorities to develop strategies to improve the working conditions of VLC members and their household living standards. Implementing capacity-building programs could help mitigate corruption and enhance the effectiveness of VLCs.

Poor Working Environment with Limited Support from Local Government Authorities

The study found that local government authorities had inadequately supported Village Land Councils in their administrative and mediation roles. Resources and planning efforts were primarily directed toward constructing schools, health centers, and other infrastructure, neglecting land management and VLC support. This lack of support reflects a broader issue where land management is undervalued compared to more visible projects.

Interviews with VLC members revealed that planners favored projects with quick, tangible results over those with longer-term impacts, such as land management. One VLC member from Mwanavala observed: *"It is unfortunate that the District Planning Unit focuses on projects with immediate results, neglecting land issues that are crucial for sustainable development. The lack of sustainable plans for VLCs undermines their ability to support community well-being effectively"* (Interview with the VLC member, Mbarali District).

Another member from Matebete shared similar concerns: *"The District Planning Unit's tendency to allocate resources selectively has created gaps in implementing comprehensive programs. An inclusive approach that supports both productive and non-productive sectors, including land issues, is essential"* (Interview with the VLC member, Mbarali District).

Another member from Matebete shared similar concerns: *"The District Planning Unit's tendency to allocate resources selectively has created gaps in implementing comprehensive programs. An inclusive approach that supports both productive and non-productive sectors, including land issues, is essential"* (Interview with the VLC member, Mbarali District).

These findings suggest that VLCs receive limited support due to skepticism about their effectiveness and the difficulty in measuring their impact. Engaging planners in designing land-related projects and developing sustainable plans for VLC support could enhance the quality of mediation services and better serve marginalized communities.



Conclusion

The study concludes that while Village Land Councils are established to mediate land-based conflicts, their effectiveness is undermined by poor working conditions. The failure of public authorities to provide adequate support, including training, infrastructure, and incentives, has resulted in unsatisfactory mediation services. Rather than focusing solely on projects with immediate impact, authorities should prioritize developing comprehensive national plans to improve the working environment for VLC members in order to ensure efficiency in their daily operations.

Recommendations

The study recommends that relevant ministries, agencies, and local government authorities collaborate to create a conducive environment for VLC operations. This includes constructing adequate offices, procuring necessary facilities, and providing financial support. Additionally, institutional reforms are needed to grant VLCs the legal authority to make and enforce decisions, ensuring accountability and enhancing their ability to resolve land disputes effectively.

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