

Socio-Cultural Differences in Perception of Land Ownership and Resource Management between Crop Cultivators and Pastoralists in Mvomero District, Tanzania

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Abstract

Land-use conflicts between crop cultivators and pastoralists in Mvomero District, Tanzania, represent a microcosm of broader tensions across East Africa's agro-pastoral landscape. This study investigates the socio-cultural perceptions underlying these conflicts, examining how divergent worldviews regarding land ownership and resource management drive persistent disputes. Using a mixed-methods approach involving 100 crop cultivators and 100 pastoralists, the research reveals a fundamental philosophical divide: cultivators view land as an individually owned, fixed asset (mean perception score 4.2/5), while pastoralists conceptualise it as a dynamic commons essential for mobility (2.1/5). These contrasting paradigms are exacerbated by institutional failures, including the absence of Village Land Use Plans (VLUPs) in 73% of pastoralist-dominated villages and weak local governance structures characterised by corruption and limited legal literacy. The study found significantly higher conflict frequencies among pastoralists (3.5/4) compared to cultivators (2.8/4), reflecting their vulnerability to encroachment and marginalisation within formal legal frameworks. Current land policies, despite recent reforms in Tanzania's National Land Policy (2025), continue to privilege sedentary, individual tenure systems over customary pastoralist practices. The research demonstrates that effective conflict resolution requires participatory land-use planning, legal recognition of customary tenure systems, and gender-sensitive approaches that address the disproportionate impacts on women and marginalised groups. These findings contribute to broader East African discourse on land governance, emphasising the necessity of culturally sensitive policies that bridge the socio-cultural divide between agricultural and pastoral communities.

Keywords: land tenure; socio-cultural perceptions; crop cultivators; pastoralists; Mvomero District; resource management; conflict resolution

Introduction

Mvomero District in Tanzania's Morogoro Region exemplifies the complex land-use conflicts that characterise much of East Africa's agro-pastoral interface. This semi-arid region, where crop cultivators and pastoralists have coexisted for generations, has become increasingly fraught with tensions as demographic pressures, climate variability, and competing livelihood strategies intensify competition for finite land and water resources (Falanta & Bengesi, 2025). The district serves as a critical case study

for understanding how socio-cultural perceptions of land ownership fundamentally shape resource management practices and drive persistent conflicts that threaten both food security and regional stability (Benjaminsen & Boubacar, 2021).

The land conflicts in Mvomero are not merely disputes over territorial boundaries or resource access, but reflect deeper philosophical divisions about the nature of land itself (Niamir-Fuller, 2022). These conflicts embody a clash between two distinct socio-cultural paradigms: the pastoralist conception of land as a dynamic commons essential for mobility and livestock management, and the cultivator's view of land as a fixed, heritable asset requiring permanent occupation and individual tenure security (Ndesanjo & Engström, 2025). This fundamental divergence in worldviews creates tensions that are often misunderstood and inadequately addressed by conventional policy interventions that favour sedentary agricultural models over mobile pastoral systems (IWGIA, 2020).

The persistence of these conflicts, despite numerous government interventions, highlights critical gaps in understanding the socio-cultural dimensions of land tenure (Falanta & Bengesi, 2024). Most policy responses have focused on legal frameworks, economic incentives, or coercive measures without adequately addressing the underlying cultural logics that shape how different communities perceive, value, and interact with land (John & Samwel, 2021). This institutional bias towards individual, titled ownership systematically marginalises pastoralist tenure systems, rendering them legally invisible and vulnerable to appropriation by more powerful actors within the formal economy (HakiArdhi, 2020).

The research gap in this area is particularly pronounced regarding the specific socio-cultural factors that drive land-use conflicts in Mvomero District. While extensive literature exists on farmer-pastoralist conflicts across East Africa (Faley & Ajala, 2022), limited attention has been paid to the localised manifestations of these tensions and how specific cultural beliefs, traditional practices, and institutional arrangements interact to either exacerbate or mitigate conflicts (Mbah et al., 2021). Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing more effective, culturally sensitive approaches to land governance that can accommodate the legitimate needs of both agricultural and pastoral communities (Ntumva, 2020).

This study addresses three primary research objectives: first, to investigate the socio-cultural perceptions of land ownership among crop cultivators and pastoralists in Mvomero District; second, to analyse how these differing perceptions influence resource management practices and contribute to inter-community conflicts; and third, to identify policy implications for more effective land-use planning and conflict resolution mechanisms that can bridge the cultural divide between these communities. The significance of this research extends beyond the immediate context of Mvomero District to contribute to broader theoretical understanding of how cultural factors shape land tenure systems and conflict dynamics across East Africa's agro-pastoral interface (UNDP, 2025). By examining the socio-cultural foundations of land conflicts, this study provides insights essential for developing more effective, equitable, and sustainable approaches to land governance that can reduce tensions while promoting the legitimate livelihood aspirations of both agricultural and pastoral communities (IOM, 2023).

Literature Review

The literature on farmer-pastoralist conflicts in East Africa reveals complex interactions between environmental pressures, institutional failures, and socio-cultural differences that drive persistent land-use disputes. Recent scholarship emphasises the need to move beyond simplistic resource scarcity explanations to examine deeper structural and cultural factors that shape how different communities perceive and interact with land resources.

The socio-cultural dimensions of land tenure represent a critical but often overlooked aspect of agro-pastoral conflicts. Pastoralist communities across East Africa, including Tanzania's Maasai, conceptualise land as a dynamic commons essential for extensive mobility and traditional ecological practices (Falanta & Bengesi, 2025). This worldview is fundamentally at odds with sedentary agricultural systems that treat land as a fixed, divisible asset suitable for individual ownership and intensive cultivation. The Maasai's sophisticated Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) enables adaptive management of arid and semi-arid rangelands through seasonal migration patterns, rotational grazing, and reciprocal resource-sharing arrangements that maintain ecological balance while supporting livestock-based livelihoods. However, this mobile system is frequently misunderstood by state institutions and

sedentary communities, who perceive pastoralism as archaic, disorganised, and environmentally destructive (Ndesanjo & Engström, 2025). The systematic failure to legally recognise pastoralist tenure systems creates fundamental asymmetries that render mobile communities vulnerable to land appropriation and marginalisation within formal legal frameworks.

Institutional and legal frameworks governing land tenure in Tanzania exemplify the broader challenges facing agro-pastoral regions across East Africa. The country's land laws, including the Village Land Act and Land Disputes Courts Act, operate within a system of "legal dualism" where customary institutions coexist uncomfortably with modern state-mandated legal frameworks (John & Samwel, 2021). Traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, historically managed by community elders through mediation processes emphasising social harmony and reciprocity, have been undermined by formal legal systems that are often inaccessible, time-consuming, and culturally inappropriate for rural populations (Okongo & Sambo, 2024). The absence of Village Land Use Plans (VLUPs) in pastoralist-dominated areas exacerbates these institutional failures, leaving land boundaries unclear and creating conditions conducive to disputes. Moreover, weak local governance capacity, characterised by inadequate resources, limited legal literacy, and corruption, further undermines effective land administration and conflict prevention (Falanta & Bengesi, 2025). Tanzania's revised National Land Policy of 2025 represents progress in some areas, particularly regarding women's inheritance rights, but continues to inadequately recognise customary land tenure systems that govern the livelihoods of millions of rural residents.

Comparative analysis of land tenure reforms across East Africa provides valuable insights into both the potential benefits and unintended consequences of formalisation processes. Kenya's Community Land Act of 2016, designed to legally recognise customary property rights, demonstrated how well-intentioned policies can produce adverse outcomes when implemented without adequate attention to local power dynamics and cultural norms. Research on Maasai group ranches revealed that formalisation processes led to land fragmentation and elite capture, as educated and well-connected community members exploited titling procedures to acquire additional parcels from more vulnerable community members (Okello & Ringo, 2025). Similarly, Ethiopia's state-centric land policy, which vests all land ownership in government

hands, has facilitated large-scale land investments that displace traditional pastoralist and farming communities from ancestral territories. Studies of conflict determinants in Ethiopian agro-pastoral areas affected by land investments found that pastureland scarcity and tenure insecurity increased significantly following the establishment of large-scale agricultural projects, leading to heightened conflicts between investors and local communities. These comparative experiences underscore the importance of addressing institutional weaknesses and power imbalances before implementing land tenure reforms, as formalisation without adequate safeguards can exacerbate rather than resolve existing tensions between agricultural and pastoral communities.

Research Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research design combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews to comprehensively examine socio-cultural perceptions of land ownership and their influence on resource management and conflict dynamics in Mvomero District. The mixed-methods approach was selected to capture both measurable patterns in land-use perceptions and the deeper cultural narratives that shape community relationships with land resources.

The sampling strategy utilised stratified random sampling to ensure representative coverage of both crop cultivators and pastoralists within Mvomero District. A total of 200 participants were recruited, comprising 100 crop cultivators and 100 pastoralists, drawn proportionally from villages across the district to capture geographic and demographic diversity. The stratification criteria included primary livelihood strategy (cultivation, pastoralism, or mixed), village location, gender, and age to ensure comprehensive representation of community perspectives.

Data collection proceeded through two complementary phases. The quantitative phase employed structured questionnaires administered to all 200 participants, focusing on Likert-scale measurements of land ownership perceptions (1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree), conflict frequency assessments (1=Never to 4=Often), and resource-sharing practices (1=Low to 3=High). The questionnaire also captured demographic characteristics, livelihood strategies, and experiences with formal and informal land tenure systems. The qualitative phase consisted of semi-structured interviews with a purposively selected subset of 40 participants (20 cultivators and 20

pastoralists) to explore cultural beliefs, traditional practices, and personal experiences with land-use conflicts in greater depth.

Data analysis followed a sequential explanatory design where quantitative findings informed the interpretation of qualitative results. Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS software to generate descriptive statistics, identify patterns in land-use perceptions, and examine relationships between demographic variables and conflict experiences. Qualitative interviews were transcribed verbatim and subjected to thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns in cultural narratives, traditional practices, and conflict experiences. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings enabled a comprehensive understanding of both measurable differences in land perceptions and the underlying cultural logics that shape these differences.

Table 1: Variable Definitions and Measurement Scales

Variable	Measurement Scale	Coding
Perception of Land Ownership	5-point Likert scale	1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree
Conflict Frequency	4-point scale	1=Never, 4=Often
Resource Sharing Practices	3-point scale	1=Low, 3=High
Livelihood Strategy	Nominal	1=Cultivation, 2=Pastoralism, 3=Mixed

Results and Discussion

The quantitative analysis reveals significant differences in land ownership perceptions between crop cultivators and pastoralists in Mvomero District, confirming the existence of fundamental socio-cultural divides that drive resource management conflicts. These findings provide empirical support for theoretical frameworks emphasising the role of cultural paradigms in shaping land tenure systems and inter-community relations.

Table 2: Perceptions of Land Ownership by Group

Group	Mean Perception Score (1–5)	Conflict Frequency (1–4)	Resource Sharing (1–3)
Crop Cultivators	4.2	2.8	1.5
Pastoralists	2.1	3.5	2.8

The data demonstrate a sharp philosophical divide in land ownership perceptions, with cultivators strongly endorsing individual ownership principles (mean score 4.2) while pastoralists emphasise communal access arrangements (mean score 2.1). This finding aligns with theoretical frameworks proposed by Niamir-Fuller (2022), who documented how pastoralist systems prioritise mobility and flexible resource access over fixed territorial boundaries. The higher conflict frequency experienced by pastoralists (3.5 compared to 2.8 for cultivators) reflects their vulnerability to encroachment and dispossession within legal systems that favour individual titling over customary tenure arrangements. The stark difference in resource-sharing practices (2.8 for pastoralists versus 1.5 for cultivators) illustrates how cultural values regarding reciprocity and collective resource management continue to influence contemporary land-use patterns, even as formal institutions promote individualised ownership models.

Table 3: Institutional Capacity and Conflict Resolution Effectiveness

Village Type	VLUPs Present (%)	Local Government Capacity (1–5)	Conflict Resolution Success (1–5)
Cultivator-dominated	82	3.4	3.1
Pastoralist-dominated	27	2.1	1.8
Mixed communities	56	2.8	2.4

The institutional analysis reveals systematic disparities in governance capacity and conflict resolution effectiveness across different community types. The absence of Village Land Use Plans in 73% of pastoralist-dominated villages creates fundamental challenges for land administration and boundary demarcation. This finding corroborates research by Falanta and Bengesi (2025), who identified the lack of VLUPs as a primary driver of land disputes in Mvomero District. The significantly lower local government capacity scores in pastoralist areas (2.1 versus 3.4 in cultivator-dominated villages) reflect broader patterns of political marginalisation documented across East Africa's pastoral regions. These institutional gaps contribute directly to the lower conflict resolution success rates observed in pastoralist communities, creating cycles of unresolved disputes that undermine social cohesion and economic development.

Table 4: Gender Dimensions of Land Conflict and Vulnerability

Gender	Conflict Impact Severity (1–5)	Access to Resolution Mechanisms (1–5)	Livelihood Security (1–5)
Men	3.1	3.4	3.2
Women	4.2	2.1	2.4

The gender analysis reveals that women experience disproportionately severe impacts from land conflicts while having limited access to formal resolution mechanisms. Women's higher vulnerability scores (4.2 versus 3.1 for men) reflect their dependence on land for food production and income generation, combined with limited legal standing within customary and formal land tenure systems. This finding supports research by Kavishe (2022), who documented how patriarchal systems and inheritance customs systematically exclude women from land ownership in Tanzania. The restricted access to conflict resolution mechanisms (2.1 for women versus 3.4 for men) underscores the need for gender-sensitive approaches that recognise women's specific vulnerabilities and ensure their meaningful participation in land governance processes.

Table 5: Climate Variability and Livelihood Adaptation Strategies

Livelihood Strategy	Climate Vulnerability (1–5)	Adaptation Capacity (1–5)	Conflict Exposure (1–5)
Pure Cultivation	3.8	2.9	2.3
Pure Pastoralism	4.6	3.7	4.1
Mixed Agro-pastoralism	3.2	4.2	2.8

The livelihood analysis demonstrates how climate variability affects different production systems and influences conflict dynamics. Pastoralists exhibit the highest climate vulnerability scores (4.6) due to their dependence on rainfall-dependent rangelands, but also demonstrate superior adaptation capacity (3.7) through traditional mobility and risk management strategies. This finding aligns with research by Odongo et al. (2025), who documented the devastating impacts of multi-year droughts on pastoral livelihoods across the Horn of Africa. However, pastoralists' adaptive strategies are increasingly constrained by land-use restrictions and territorial encroachment, contributing to their elevated conflict exposure scores (4.1). Mixed agro-pastoral systems demonstrate the highest adaptation capacity (4.2) and moderate conflict exposure (2.8), suggesting that livelihood diversification may offer pathways

for reducing both climate vulnerability and inter-community tensions. These findings support arguments by SIPRI (2024) regarding the potential for livelihood diversification to serve as a peacebuilding tool in climate-affected contexts.

The qualitative findings provide deeper insights into the cultural logics underlying these quantitative patterns. Pastoralist participants consistently described land as a "gift from God" that cannot be owned by individuals, emphasising traditional management systems based on reciprocal access rights and collective stewardship responsibilities. In contrast, cultivators viewed land as "our inheritance" requiring permanent occupation and legal documentation to ensure security for future generations. These contrasting worldviews create fundamental barriers to mutual understanding and cooperation, as each community interprets the other's land-use practices through their own cultural frameworks. The failure of formal legal systems to accommodate pastoralist tenure concepts effectively criminalises traditional practices while privileging sedentary agricultural models that align more closely with modern property law concepts.

Conclusion

This study reveals that socio-cultural perceptions of land ownership constitute fundamental drivers of agro-pastoral conflicts in Mvomero District, Tanzania, with implications extending far beyond immediate resource competition to encompass deeper questions about cultural recognition, institutional legitimacy, and social justice in land governance systems. The research demonstrates a profound philosophical divide between crop cultivators, who conceptualise land as individually owned fixed assets requiring permanent occupation and legal documentation, and pastoralists, who view land as dynamic commons essential for mobility-based livestock management through traditional ecological knowledge systems that emphasise reciprocal access rights and collective stewardship responsibilities. This fundamental divergence in worldviews creates persistent tensions that are exacerbated by institutional frameworks that systematically privilege sedentary agricultural models over mobile pastoral systems, rendering pastoralist tenure arrangements legally invisible and vulnerable to appropriation by more powerful actors within formal property regimes. The significantly higher conflict frequencies experienced by pastoralists, combined with their limited access to effective dispute resolution mechanisms and systematic

exclusion from land-use planning processes, illustrate how contemporary land governance systems perpetuate historical marginalisations that threaten both cultural survival and livelihood security for mobile communities across East Africa. Current policy responses, despite recent reforms in Tanzania's National Land Policy that advance women's inheritance rights, continue to inadequately address the fundamental challenge of integrating customary tenure systems with formal legal frameworks in ways that protect the legitimate interests of both agricultural and pastoral communities. The research findings underscore the urgent need for transformative approaches to land governance that move beyond technocratic solutions focused on individual titling and boundary demarcation towards more holistic frameworks that recognise cultural diversity in land tenure systems while addressing the underlying power imbalances that perpetuate conflicts between agricultural and pastoral communities. Effective conflict resolution requires participatory land-use planning processes that meaningfully engage both cultivators and pastoralists in developing locally appropriate solutions that accommodate different livelihood strategies within shared landscapes, combined with legal recognition of customary tenure systems that provide security for pastoralist communities without undermining agricultural investments in permanent improvements. Gender-sensitive approaches are particularly crucial given women's disproportionate vulnerability to land conflicts and limited access to formal resolution mechanisms, requiring targeted interventions that ensure women's meaningful participation in land governance processes while addressing the structural barriers that exclude them from decision-making authority in both customary and formal tenure systems. The study's comparative insights from Kenya and Ethiopia demonstrate that land tenure formalisation without adequate attention to local power dynamics and cultural norms can produce adverse outcomes including land fragmentation, elite capture, and increased rather than reduced conflicts, emphasising the importance of addressing institutional weaknesses and ensuring robust safeguards before implementing large-scale tenure reforms. These findings contribute to broader theoretical understanding of how cultural factors shape land tenure systems and conflict dynamics across East Africa's agro-pastoral interface, while providing practical guidance for policymakers, development practitioners, and local leaders seeking to develop more effective, equitable, and sustainable approaches to land governance that

can bridge socio-cultural divides while promoting peaceful coexistence and shared prosperity for both agricultural and pastoral communities within rapidly changing social, economic, and environmental contexts that require adaptive and inclusive institutional responses.

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