

# Incidence and impact of land conflict in Uganda

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## Abstract

While a large literature discusses the impact of titles on tenure security in Africa, little attention has been devoted to land conflicts. We use Ugandan data to explore the incidence of land conflicts, the impact of legal changes on their frequency, and their impact on productivity. Results indicate that female-headed households and widows are particularly affected that passage of the 1998 Land Act has failed to reduce their number, and that they have a significant and large productivity-reducing impact. In Africa, attention to land-related conflicts including ways to prevent and resolve them constitutes an important area for policy and research.

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## 1. Introduction

A large literature has described causes and impacts of land-related conflicts in countries that inherited a highly unequal distribution of land ownership, such as Brazil, El Salvador, Guatemala, Zimbabwe, and South Africa (Moore, 1966; Wickham-Crowley, 1991; Kriger, 1992). More recently, evidence from these settings has been complemented by increased awareness of the economic and political importance of land-related conflict even in African countries such as Rwanda, Burundi (Kairaba, 2002), Côte d'Ivoire (Chauveau, 2000), and

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Ghana (Firman-Sellers, 2000) that with relatively low population density, had traditionally been characterized by relatively egalitarian land access.

One of the main reasons underlying the increased incidence of land conflict in these countries is the failure of the prevailing land tenure systems to respond to the challenges posed by appreciation of land in a way that would enhance effective tenure security, and thus provide the basis for higher levels of investment and productivity-enhancing land transfers rather than the dissipation of resources in conflict over land. Such appreciation can come about due to increased population and other exogenous factors including technical change, improved terms of trade for agriculture, or non-agricultural demand for land. Factors that have made an effective response difficult include a lack of clarity about the role of formal and informal institutions in land administration, the limited outreach of the former, and the fact that reaching a consensus on land policies is made difficult by the structural inequalities inherent in these systems, particularly along gender and ethnic lines. As a result, traditional interventions such as titling, which were very effective in other parts of the world, have proven inadequate in many African contexts where, instead of fostering growth, they may even have led to higher levels of conflict.

The increasingly widespread incidence of land conflicts in Africa is well documented in the literature. It has been shown that even limited land conflicts can erupt into large-scale civil strife and violence (Andre and Platteau, 1998), especially if “political entrepreneurs” capitalize on the underlying grievances to further their cause (Fred-Mensah, 1999; Daudelin, 2002; Addison and Laakso, 2003). At the same time, there are few detailed studies of conflicts relating specifically to land or efforts aiming to separate the impact of changes in the legal framework governing land relations as compared with the myriad of other factors that can have an impact on the incidence of conflict. As a result, it is far from undisputed whether land-related conflicts are a serious enough issue to warrant attention by policy makers or outside support. To determine whether this is the case, it is necessary to show that over and above the social problems and direct costs that may be caused by land conflicts, these conflicts affect productivity of land use, and thus reduce the scope for future growth.

This paper uses household-level data from Uganda to explore the economic impact of land-related conflict, its incidence, and the extent to which recent legal measures have helped to bring about a reduction in land-related conflict. The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 provides a review of the literature, a discussion of the conceptual framework, the survey methodology and estimation strategy. Section 3 discusses descriptive statistics on the incidence and possible impact of land conflict. Econometric evidence that accounts for the possibility of conflict being endogenous is provided in Section 4. Section 5 concludes and discusses implications for land policy in other countries.

## **2. Background and conceptual framework**

While increased population density and demand for land can set in motion a virtuous cycle of increasingly precise definition of property rights, investment, growth, and productivity-enhancing exchange of land, failure to respond with the appropriate institutional innovations can lead to a downward spiral of conflict and strife over a rapidly shrinking overall pie. In this section, we draw on the literature to illustrate some of the underlying factors, highlight

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