

# Trigger Factors behind Recurring Conflict in Mt. Elgon Area Between 1945-2008

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***Abstract-*** This study investigates the trigger factors behind the recurring conflict in Mt. Elgon area, Kenya between 1945 and 2008. Mt. Elgon area has experienced persistent inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic conflicts that have affected the social, economic and political aspects of the community. The study aims to identify and analyze the key factors that have consistently contributed to the resurgence of conflict in the area during the specified period. The research adopts a qualitative approach, utilizing a combination of in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and archival research. Purposive sampling was employed to select participants, including community elders, local leaders, and representatives from relevant government agencies and non-governmental organizations. Thematic analysis was used to examine the collected data and identify emerging patterns and themes. The findings reveal that historical land injustices, politicization of ethnicity, cattle rustling, proliferation of small arms and light weapons, poverty and marginalization, and weakened traditional conflict resolution mechanisms are the primary triggers of recurring conflict in Mt. Elgon area. The study concludes that addressing these underlying issues through inclusive land reforms, socio-economic empowerment, ethnic cohesion, and strengthening of local peace-building institutions is crucial for sustainable peace and development in the region. The research contributes to the understanding of persistent conflict drivers in Mt. Elgon and offers insights for policy and practice in conflict prevention and resolution.

***Indexed Terms-*** Conflict, Mt. Elgon, Land, Ethnicity, Poverty, Cattle Rustling, Small Arms, Traditional Institutions

## 1.1 Background and context

Mt. Elgon area, located in western Kenya, has been grappling with recurring inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic conflicts for decades. The region is primarily inhabited by the Sabaot and Bukusu communities, with the Sabaot further divided into the Soy and Mosop clans (Simiyu, 2008). Conflicts in the area have been characterized by land disputes, cattle rustling, political competition, and resource scarcity (Kamoet, 2011). These conflicts have resulted in loss of lives, displacement, destruction of property, and disruption of livelihoods, thereby hindering the socio-economic development of the region (TJRC, 2013).

The roots of the conflicts can be traced back to the colonial era when the British administration alienated land from the Sabaot community for settler agriculture, leading to their displacement and resettlement in the Mt. Elgon forest (Kibaba, 2017). Post-independence governments have failed to adequately address these historical land injustices, further exacerbating tensions between communities (Boone, 2012). Politicization of ethnicity, particularly during election periods, has also contributed to the cyclical nature of the conflicts (Kanyinga, 2009).

## 1.2 Research Puzzle

Despite efforts by the government and various stakeholders to address the conflicts in Mt. Elgon area, the region continues to experience sporadic violence. Existing literature has examined the conflicts from different perspectives, such as historical land injustices (Kibaba, 2017), politicization of ethnicity (Lynch, 2011), and resource scarcity (Kamoet, 2011). However, there is a gap in understanding the specific trigger factors that have sustained the recurring nature

## I. INTRODUCTION

of the conflicts between 1945 and 2008. This study aims to fill this gap by providing a comprehensive analysis of the key drivers of conflict recurrence in Mt. Elgon area during this period.

### 1.3 Objectives of the study

The main objective of this study is to investigate the trigger factors behind the recurring conflict in Mt. Elgon area between 1945 and 2008. Specifically, the study aims to:

1. Identify the historical, political, and socio-economic factors that have contributed to conflict recurrence in Mt. Elgon area.
2. Analyze the role of land disputes, cattle rustling, and small arms proliferation in perpetuating conflicts.
3. Examine the impact of weakened traditional conflict resolution mechanisms on conflict recurrence.
4. Propose recommendations for addressing the identified trigger factors and promoting sustainable peace in the region.

### 1.4 Significance of the study

This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge on the dynamics of recurring conflicts in Mt. Elgon area. By identifying the specific trigger factors and their interplay, the study provides valuable insights for policymakers, peace practitioners, and researchers working on conflict prevention and resolution strategies in the region. The findings can inform the design and implementation of targeted interventions that address the root causes of conflict recurrence, thereby promoting sustainable peace and development in Mt. Elgon area. Moreover, the study's recommendations can serve as a basis for further research and policy dialogue on addressing persistent conflicts in similar contexts.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Overview of existing research on trigger factors for recurring conflict

Existing literature has explored various factors that contribute to recurring conflicts in different contexts. Azar's (1990) theory of Protracted Social Conflict (PSC) highlights the role of historical grievances, identity-based discrimination, and unequal access to resources in perpetuating conflicts. Azar argues that

when basic human needs, such as security, recognition, and access to political institutions, are denied, communities may resort to violence to address their grievances.

In the context of Kenya, land disputes have been identified as a significant driver of recurring conflicts. Boone (2012) argues that the politicization of land allocation and the failure of successive governments to address historical land injustices have fueled tensions between communities. Kanyinga (2009) notes that the ethnicization of land claims has further complicated the resolution of land disputes in Kenya.

Cattle rustling has also been cited as a trigger factor for recurring conflicts in pastoralist communities. Mkutu (2008) argues that cattle rustling has evolved from a traditional practice to a commercialized and militarized activity, exacerbated by the proliferation of small arms and light weapons. The increasing frequency and severity of cattle rustling incidents have contributed to cycles of violence and retaliation between communities.

Political competition and the instrumentalization of ethnicity have also been identified as drivers of recurring conflicts in Kenya. Lynch (2011) argues that political elites have often mobilized ethnic identities to gain electoral support, leading to heightened tensions and violence during election periods. Kamungi (2009) notes that the politicization of ethnicity has undermined efforts to foster national cohesion and has perpetuated a culture of impunity.

### 2.2 Research gaps

While existing literature has provided valuable insights into the factors contributing to recurring conflicts in Kenya, there are still gaps in understanding the specific triggers of conflict recurrence in Mt. Elgon area between 1945 and 2008. Most studies have focused on the broader national context or have examined conflicts in Mt. Elgon area within limited timeframes. This study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the trigger factors specific to Mt. Elgon area over an extended period, spanning from the colonial era to the post-independence period. Furthermore, existing research has often examined trigger factors in

isolation, without considering their interplay and cumulative impact on conflict recurrence. This study

seeks to analyze how the identified trigger factors interact and reinforce each

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other, creating a complex web of conflict dynamics in Mt. Elgon area.

### 2.3 Theoretical Framework

This study draws on Azar's (1990) theory of Protracted Social Conflict (PSC) as a conceptual framework for understanding the trigger factors behind recurring conflict in Mt. Elgon area. Azar's theory posits that PSCs are characterized by the prolonged and often violent struggle by communal groups for basic needs such as security, recognition, and access to political institutions and economic participation.

The theory identifies four clusters of variables that contribute to the genesis and perpetuation of PSCs: communal content, human needs, governance and the state's role, and international linkages. Communal content refers to the historical, political, and cultural factors that shape the identity groups involved in the conflict. Human needs encompass the basic needs that are often unmet, leading to grievances and conflict. Governance and the state's role highlight the capacity and willingness of the state to address the needs and grievances of marginalized groups. International linkages refer to the role of external actors and influences on the conflict dynamics.

By applying Azar's theory to the Mt. Elgon context, this study aims to analyze how factors such as historical land injustices, politicization of ethnicity, cattle rustling, proliferation of small arms, poverty and marginalization, and weakened traditional conflict resolution mechanisms interact within the four clusters of variables to trigger recurring conflict. The PSC framework provides a holistic lens for examining the complex interplay of factors that sustain conflicts over time, and offers insights for developing comprehensive strategies for conflict prevention and resolution.

## III. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Research design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to investigate the trigger factors behind the recurring

conflict in Mt. Elgon area between 1945 and 2008.

Qualitative research allows for an in-depth exploration of the complex social, political, and historical processes that underpin conflict dynamics (Creswell, 2014). The study employs a case study approach, focusing on Mt. Elgon area as a specific context to understand the factors contributing to conflict recurrence.

### 3.2 Study location and rationale for selection

The study is conducted in Mt. Elgon area, which is located in western Kenya. The area is primarily inhabited by the Sabaot and Bukusu communities, with the Sabaot further divided into the Soy and Mosop clans (Simiyu, 2008). Mt. Elgon area has been selected for this study due to its history of recurring inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic conflicts, spanning from the colonial period to the post-independence era. The region has experienced conflicts related to land disputes, cattle rustling, political competition, and resource scarcity, making it a suitable case for examining the trigger factors behind conflict recurrence.

### 3.3 Study population and sampling procedure

The study population consists of community members, local leaders, government officials, and representatives from civil society organizations in Mt. Elgon area. Purposive sampling is used to select participants who have knowledge and experience relevant to the study objectives. Key informants, such as community elders, local peace committee members, and government officials, are identified through snowball sampling, where initial participants recommend other potential respondents.

The sample size for the study is determined by the principle of data saturation, where data collection continues until no new themes or insights emerge (Guest et al., 2006). However, a minimum of 30 participants is targeted, including 15 community members (5 from each of the Sabaot, Bukusu, and Mosop communities), 5 local leaders, 5 government officials, and 5 civil society representatives.

### 3.4 Data collection methods and instruments

The study employed three primary data collection methods: in-depth interviews, focus group discussions

(FGDs), and archival research. In-depth interviews are conducted with key informants to gather detailed information on their perspectives and experiences

related to conflict triggers in Mt. Elgon area. Interview guides are developed to ensure consistency in the

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topics covered while allowing for flexibility to probe emerging themes.

FGDs are conducted with community members to capture collective narratives and experiences related to conflict triggers. The FGDs are composed of 6-8 participants and are moderated by the researcher using a discussion guide. The discussions explore community perceptions of historical grievances, land disputes, cattle rustling, political competition, and the role of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms.

Archival research involves the review of relevant documents, such as government reports, newspaper articles, and academic publications, to gather historical and contextual information on the conflicts in Mt. Elgon area. The archival data is used to triangulate and supplement the primary data collected through interviews and FGDs.

### **3.5 Data analysis techniques**

The data collected through interviews and FGDs is transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis process involves familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing and refining themes, and defining and naming themes. The themes are organized around the key trigger factors identified in the literature review and conceptual framework, while also allowing for the emergence of new themes from the data.

The archival data is analyzed using content analysis, focusing on identifying patterns, trends, and historical events relevant to the study objectives. The findings from the primary and secondary data are integrated to provide a comprehensive understanding of the trigger factors behind recurring conflict in Mt. Elgon area.

### **3.6 Ethical considerations**

Ethical approval for the study is obtained from the relevant institutional review board before data collection commences. Informed consent is sought from all participants, and they are informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time.

Confidentiality and anonymity of participants are maintained throughout the research process, with identifying information removed from transcripts and reports.

The researcher is mindful of the sensitive nature of the topic and takes measures to minimize potential harm to participants, such as providing referrals to support services if needed. The findings are disseminated in a manner that promotes understanding and dialogue, while avoiding the exacerbation of existing tensions or conflicts.

## **IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **4.1. Historical land injustices**

The study reveals that historical land injustices, rooted in the colonial era, have been a significant trigger factor for recurring conflict in Mt. Elgon area. Participants highlighted the alienation of Sabaot land by the British administration for settler agriculture, which led to the displacement and resettlement of the Sabaot community in the Mt. Elgon forest. The post independence governments' failure to adequately address these land injustices has perpetuated feelings of marginalization and grievances among the Sabaot.

### **4.2 Politicization of ethnicity**

The politicization of ethnicity, particularly during election periods, emerges as another key trigger factor. Participants narrated instances where political leaders mobilized ethnic identities to gain electoral support, leading to heightened tensions and violence between the Sabaot and Bukusu communities. The study finds that the instrumentalization of ethnicity has undermined efforts to foster peaceful coexistence and has contributed to the cyclical nature of conflicts in the area.

### **4.3 Cattle rustling and proliferation of small arms**

Cattle rustling, fueled by the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, is identified as a significant driver of recurring conflict in Mt. Elgon area. Participants described how traditional cattle rustling practices have evolved into commercialized and militarized activities, with the involvement of criminal elements and political actors. The easy access to illicit

firearms has escalated the severity and frequency of cattle rustling incidents, leading to cycles of violence and retaliation between the Sabao and Bukusu

communities.

#### 4.4 Poverty and marginalization

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The study reveals that poverty and marginalization have created a fertile ground for conflict recurrence in Mt. Elgon area. Participants highlighted the lack of economic opportunities, poor infrastructure, and limited access to basic services as factors that have exacerbated feelings of exclusion and grievances among the communities. The study finds that the unequal distribution of resources and development initiatives has contributed to inter-communal competition and tensions.

#### 4.5 Weakened traditional conflict resolution mechanisms

The weakening of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms emerges as another trigger factor for recurring conflict. Participants described how the authority of community elders and traditional institutions in resolving disputes has been eroded over time, partly due to the interference of external actors and the changing socio-economic dynamics. The study finds that the diminished role of traditional mechanisms has created a vacuum in conflict management, allowing for the escalation of tensions into violence.

The findings of this study resonate with existing literature on the trigger factors for recurring conflict in various contexts. The historical land injustices in Mt. Elgon area mirror Azar's (1990) concept of communal content in Protracted Social Conflicts (PSCs), where historical grievances and identity-based discrimination fuel ongoing tensions. The politicization of ethnicity in the area aligns with Azar's notion of governance and the state's role, highlighting how political elites manipulate ethnic identities for their own interests, thus perpetuating conflicts.

The prominence of cattle rustling and small arms proliferation as conflict triggers in Mt. Elgon area corroborates the findings of Mkutu (2008), who argues that the commercialization and militarization of cattle rustling have intensified conflicts in pastoralist communities. The study's findings on poverty and

marginalization as drivers of conflict recurrence resonate with Azar's emphasis on human needs, where the denial of basic needs and unequal access to resources can lead to grievances and violent struggles.

The weakening of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms in Mt. Elgon area aligns with Azar's

concept of communal content, where the erosion of traditional social fabric and institutions can exacerbate conflict dynamics. The study's findings highlight the need for a comprehensive approach to conflict resolution that incorporates both formal and informal mechanisms, as well as addresses the underlying structural causes of conflict.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 5.1 Summary of the main conclusions

This study has investigated the trigger factors behind the recurring conflict in Mt. Elgon area between 1945 and 2008. The findings reveal that historical land injustices, politicization of ethnicity, cattle rustling and proliferation of small arms, poverty and marginalization, and weakened traditional conflict resolution mechanisms are the key drivers of conflict recurrence in the area.

The study concludes that addressing these trigger factors requires a comprehensive and multi-faceted approach that takes into account the historical, political, socio-economic, and cultural dimensions of the conflicts. The findings underscore the need for inclusive and participatory processes that engage all stakeholders, including communities, local leaders, government agencies, and civil society organizations, in the design and implementation of conflict prevention and resolution strategies.

The study highlights the importance of addressing the underlying structural causes of conflict, such as land inequalities, political marginalization, and unequal access to resources and development opportunities. Failure to tackle these root causes may lead to the resurgence of conflicts, even after temporary periods of peace.

## 5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. The government should prioritize the resolution of historical land injustices in Mt. Elgon area through
2. Political leaders and parties should be held accountable for any acts of ethnic mobilization or incitement to violence. Strengthening the legal and institutional frameworks for preventing hate speech and promoting peaceful political competition is crucial.
3. The government, in collaboration with local communities and civil society organizations, should invest in disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs to address the proliferation of small arms and the militarization of cattle rustling. These programs should be accompanied by efforts to provide alternative livelihoods and economic opportunities for youth.
4. Development interventions in Mt. Elgon area should prioritize the equitable distribution of resources and benefits to all communities. This may include targeted investments in infrastructure, education, health, and agricultural support services, with a focus on the most marginalized areas.
5. Traditional conflict resolution mechanisms should be strengthened and integrated into formal peace building and conflict management processes. This may involve capacity building for community elders, the documentation of traditional practices, and the creation of spaces for dialogue and reconciliation.
6. Further research should be conducted to explore the long-term impacts of conflict on communities in Mt. Elgon area, as well as to evaluate the effectiveness of various conflict prevention and resolution interventions. Longitudinal studies that track changes in conflict dynamics over time would be particularly valuable.

## 5.3 Conclusion

This study makes a significant contribution to the understanding of the trigger factors behind recurring conflict in Mt. Elgon area. By providing a comprehensive analysis of the historical, political, socio-economic, and cultural factors that fuel conflict recurrence, the study offers valuable insights for

inclusive and transparent processes that involve all affected communities. This may include land reforms, restitution, and compensation mechanisms that address the grievances of the displaced and marginalized groups.

policymakers, peace practitioners, and researchers working in the region.

The findings of this study can inform the design and implementation of targeted interventions that address the root causes of conflict and promote sustainable peace in Mt. Elgon area. The recommendations provided offer practical guidance for stakeholders involved in conflict prevention and resolution efforts. Moreover, the study contributes to the broader literature on protracted social conflicts and the dynamics of recurring violence in marginalized communities. The application of Azar's (1990) theory of Protracted Social Conflict to the Mt. Elgon case study demonstrates the utility of this framework for understanding the complex interplay of factors that sustain conflicts over time.

Overall, this study underscores the importance of adopting a holistic and context-specific approach to conflict analysis and resolution, one that takes into account the multiple dimensions of conflict and engages all relevant stakeholders in the search for lasting peace.

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