

Survival at Stake

VIOLENT LAND CONFLICT IN AFRICA

In Africa, land is not only an economic good, but also the very basis of security and survival for much of the population. A primary source of livelihood for many, land is directly linked to agriculture and production, while also intimately tied to the politics of the countries, the social dynamics of the people, and the status, power, wealth, and security of those who control it.

Land disputes are ubiquitous in Africa as a result of competition for land use, poorly understood means of ownership, inadequate legal frameworks, unequal distribution of access, and the politicization of land; in addition, modernization and population pressures bring new constructions of ownership and force together competing users of land.

Almost every major episode of violence in Africa has had a land dimension.

Access to land increases security and reduces the vulnerability of the individual, the family, and the community. Yet competition for scarce resources, the political manipulation of access to land through ethnic, religious, and economic discrimination, and the forced removal of the poor from productive lands have sown the seeds of violence for decades.

The chapter reviews the factors that have contributed to the increasing costs of land conflict in Africa in recent years and suggests that land disputes are most volatile, and at highest risk of violence, when grievances are high, security is threatened, mechanisms for adjudication are absent, and violence entrepreneurs are able to mobilize aggrieved populations.

Three types of violent land conflict are highlighted: resource conflicts, which take place at the national and local levels; communal conflicts, which are localized conflicts; and social conflict events, which include protests and riots. The discussion focuses on violent conflicts that have a clear relationship to land but that are not typically considered *wars* or *armed conflicts* in the traditional sense.



A member of the Dinka tribe protects his cattle from raiders, Rumbek, South Sudan. January 2009. © Joerg Boethling

The chapter provides more in-depth examination of the relationship between land and violent conflict in places such as the Kivus in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, post-conflict Côte d'Ivoire and Liberia, the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, and the pastoralist areas of East Africa, including Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, and the two Sudans.

Land represents a lucrative prize and an important tool in violent political struggles.

The death tolls from land-related conflicts range from tens to thousands killed, sometimes over long periods of time, but sometimes within days or weeks. In addition to loss of life, communities also suffer injuries, kidnapping, the destruction of housing and land, the marginalization of conflict areas, and rising insecurity. The situation is likely to worsen as populations grow, resources become scarcer, competition over land increases, and small arms become more widely available.

Among the chapter's key conclusions are the following:

- Almost every armed conflict in Africa has had a land dimension to it, but in almost all cases land is only one of many contributing factors—such as economic inequality, political competition, discrimination, and exclusion—that fuel violence.



Maasai protesters demand that land leased to British settlers be given back to them, Uhuru Park, Nairobi, Kenya, August 2004. © Radu Sighet/Reuters

- Violent land conflict in Africa has resulted in tens of thousands of direct conflict deaths and the displacement of hundreds of thousands over the past decade.
- Violent land conflict results from community clashes over ways of life, political struggles for power, and economic struggles for wealth.
- The failure to manage communal conflicts over land, the inability of states to provide basic security, the resulting cycles of retaliatory violence, and the availability of small arms are all factors that have contributed to increasing the costs of violent land conflict over the past decades.

The chapter emphasizes that violent land conflict can take many forms, but in all of its guises it remains a widespread, common, and deadly phenomenon in Africa. 🇰🇪