



Challenges and opportunities arising from ethnic dynamics in Laikipia County, Kenya

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Recommended Reference: Aengwony, K. R., & Simiyu, R. (2026). Challenges and opportunities arising from ethnic dynamics in Laikipia County, Kenya. *African Quarterly Social Science Review*, 3(4), 587–600. <https://doi.org/10.51867/AQSSR.3.4.47>

ABSTRACT

Conflicts have affected different parts of the world. Developing countries especially in Africa have been hit hard. Ethnic dynamics such as migration, land sharing and cultural adjustments have been linked to conflicts in different parts of the world. Laikipia County continues to witness recurring and complex conflicts which have been largely attributed to ethnic dynamics. Despite executing various measures to address inter-ethnic conflicts, Laikipia County continues to experience security challenges. This study sought to assess the challenges and opportunities' arising from ethnic dynamics in Laikipia County. The study was grounded in Relative Deprivation Theory and Conflict Transformation Theory. The study utilized descriptive survey research design. It was conducted in Laikipia County. The target population comprised 384 household heads that were sampled randomly and through snowballing randomly sampled and key informants including county and deputy county commissioners, chiefs and assistant chiefs, village elders, police officers, Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and Faith-based Organizations (FBOs) officials who were purposively sampled. Data was collected using questionnaires from household heads, interviews from key informants, and focus group discussions. Qualitative data was analyzed using thematic narrations and presented using descriptions and verbatim quotations while quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS version 25 software and presented using descriptive statistics specifically frequencies and percentages, tables, and pie charts. The findings revealed that ethnic dynamics present significant challenges, including the securitization of ethnic violence, perceived institutionalized discrimination, weak law enforcement, cross-border conflicts and population pressure, and the erosion of traditional governance structures. Competition over land, water, and grazing resources, coupled with mistrust and perceived exclusion, further complicates peaceful coexistence. However, the study also identified opportunities for strengthening collaborative conflict management, local dispute-resolution mechanisms, long-term peacebuilding, institutional and policy frameworks, and the protection of minority rights. The findings suggest that ethnic dynamics can intensify insecurity when grievances and inequalities remain unresolved, but inclusive governance and community participation can transform these challenges into opportunities for sustainable peace. The study recommends impartial law enforcement, coordinated implementation of relevant policies, inclusive dialogue, strengthened local peacebuilding institutions, and interventions addressing socioeconomic and environmental pressures. These measures are essential for promoting social cohesion and sustainable peace in Laikipia County.

Key Words: Ethnic Dynamics, Interethnic Conflict, Laikipia County, Peacebuilding, Resource Competition

I. INTRODUCTION

From a global perspective, inter-ethnic conflicts, mainly driven by ethnic dynamics are rapidly emerging as the new threats to global peace and security. The growing concern over the humanitarian costs associated with these conflicts, their intensity, and the security implications aggravated by the enormous material losses and the reconstruction costs among others remain critical challenges that the international community has to contend with as they ponder into sustainable measures that can be adopted to eliminate inter-ethnic skirmishes. On the other hand, these conflicts have also provided an opportunity for the international community to cooperate in resolving them, marshal the essential resources to empower the marginalized ethnicities, and most significantly, develop peaceful initiatives to address these conflicts (Moler, 2022).

In Europe, the Yugoslavia conflict which was mainly triggered by ethnic dynamics such as language and religion triggered one of the direst humanitarian crises in post-war Europe (Kimani & Masiga, 2020). Millions of civilians were in dire need of humanitarian assistance, something that the Yugoslav government was unable to address, thus triggering external humanitarian assistance. The huge humanitarian cost triggered by the conflict became a burden that was beyond the Yugoslav government and the external humanitarian assistance became unreliable which worsened the humanitarian situation.



The African continent has experienced a fair share of ethnic-based conflicts with the notorious one being Rwanda's genocide of 1994. Rwanda's genocide became a pressing humanitarian concern owing to its intensity and its devastations (Osinubi & Osinubi, 2006). Consequently, Rwanda was challenged by the inability to address the spiraling humanitarian assistance, triggering an external response. A similar incident has been seen in countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan, the Central African Republic, and Mali among others which have been experiencing internal domestic turmoil that mainly involves the struggle for scarce resources among the ethnic groups. The persistence of conflicts in these countries has morphed into a humanitarian catastrophe that the incumbent weak governments have been struggling to address.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Conflicts associated with ethnicities embody a phenomenon that is deeply rooted in human civilization. Like any other developing country, Kenya has been embroiled in numerous inter-ethnic conflicts that have jeopardized its economic growth and development since independence (Mwenda, 2018). Most of these conflicts have been strongly linked to political, cultural, religious, and socioeconomic factors coupled with disenfranchisement, particularly in areas inhabited by pastoral communities. Laikipia has witnessed recurrent inter-ethnic conflicts since 1963, a perpetual problem that has threatened the social cohesion of the ethnically diverse county and incurred untold suffering to the residents including wreaking havoc on the critical infrastructures and loss of lives. Despite executing various measures to address inter-ethnic conflicts, Laikipia County continues to experience security challenges. Existing research with notable ones being Warurii (2015), Mwenda (2018), Leming'ani (2017), Moler (2022) and Chepkoiywo (2010), have majorly focused on the trends on the analysis of conflict trends. However, a crucial gap exists in comprehending the challenges and opportunities associated with ethnic dynamics in Laikipia County.

1.2 Research Objective

The study sought to assess challenges and opportunities arising from ethnic dynamics in Laikipia County, Kenya.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

The study was grounded in relative deprivation theory and conflict transformation theory.

2.1.1 Relative Deprivation Theory

The Relative Deprivation Theory (RDT) was engineered by Ted Robbert Gurr (1971) who conceived relative deprivation as the tension that manifests from discrepancy between the "ought" and "is" of collective value satisfaction which disposes men to violence (Omondi, 2024). RDT postulates that deprivations may manifest in the economic, political, and social domains that are relative, especially when compared to other individuals or groups. Another prominent scholar who contributed to the development of RDT is Garry Runciman. He contends that relative deprivation occurs in two forms namely; egoistic relative deprivation and fraternalism relative deprivation. The former is inflicted by unfavorable social position as compared to other individuals' groups while the latter describes the unfavorable conditions meted on groups in comparison to others. It is premised on the concept of deprivation which describes the existing differences between people's expectations and what they eventually acquire (Mwenda, 2018). Within the context of the study, persistent conflicts in Laikipia is traceable to the colonial era have mainly stemmed from the deep-rooted feelings of deprivation coupled with inequalities regarding the distribution of land and other natural resources. For instance, for many years the Maasai community has viewed other communities including the white settlers as having deprived them off their land on the allegations that they are associated with the government. This has led to deep-rooted animosity that oftentimes has culminated in violent conflicts, especially during the electoral cycles. Additionally, unequal distribution of resources such as land has been a bone of contention between various ethnicities such as the Maasai and Samburu. Such deprivation has constrained access to vital resources such as water and grazing lands have led to constant migrations thus, a source of conflict. While RDT highlights elite manipulation or politicized ethnic identity as the primary sources of deprivation, grievances and mobilization which trigger conflicts, it fall short of comprehending how conflicts that stem from deprivation are transformed and metamorphosed to a full-blown conflict.



2.1.2 Conflict Transformation Theory

The study was embedded in John Paul Lederach's Conflict Transformation Theory, which posits that conflicts consist of both life-affirming and life-destroying aspects, arising from societal contradictions (Omondi, 2024). Within the context of the current study, conflict transformation theory can be applied to comprehend the dynamisms of conflict in Laikipia County and how they can be effectively addressed to attain peaceful coexistence in the region. In order to end conflicts in Laikipia County, it is important to manage effectively ethnic dynamics by executing structural and institutional changes that promote social justice and address underlying contradictions and injustices.

2.2 Empirical Review

A study by Mutunga (2021) found that effective conflict management requires active participation of all stakeholders, including local communities and security agencies. The study established that exclusion of communities from security operations contributes to mistrust and weakens intelligence sharing, thereby reducing the effectiveness of conflict mitigation strategies. Similarly, the study findings reveal that legal loopholes and weak enforcement mechanisms contribute significantly to persistent insecurity in pastoral regions. The study found that offenders often exploit weaknesses in the justice system, reducing deterrence and encouraging repeat offenses.

A study by Leming'ani (2017) examined normative interventions employed by the Kenyan government in conflict-prone regions. The study found that despite the existence of frameworks such as the National Land Policy (2009), Constitution of Kenya (2010), National Land Commission Act (2012), and Land Registration Act (2012), implementation challenges continue to undermine conflict resolution efforts. The study further argued that externally imposed interventions often undermine traditional governance structures, generating additional tensions and resistance among local communities.

Mkutu (2008) observed that failure to involve local communities in addressing insecurity often intensifies conflict rather than resolving it. The study argued that sustainable peace requires collaborative security approaches that recognize local realities and indigenous knowledge systems. Muigua (2014) contends that conflicts become destructive when societal institutions responsible for conflict management break down. The study established that societies characterized by weak institutions and fragile governance structures are more susceptible to cycles of violence. The researcher further noted that resource conflicts often escalate because communities lack effective mechanisms for dialogue, mediation, and consensus-building. The findings by Limo (2024) found that sustainable peace requires long-term peace building strategies aimed at addressing root causes of conflict rather than merely suppressing violence. Such strategies include reconciliation, inclusive governance, trust-building, and institutional strengthening.

Bond (2014) found that ethnic conflicts are multidimensional and affect various dimensions of human security, including food security, environmental security, community security, and economic security. Consequently, military responses alone cannot achieve sustainable peace. The study concluded that governments often fail when they adopt narrow security-centered approaches while ignoring underlying structural grievances. Chepkoiywo (2010) argued that changing demographic patterns in Laikipia present a growing threat to peace and stability. As populations increase, demand for food, water, land, and shelter rises, making competition inevitable.

A study by Mwenda (2018) found that rapid population growth in Laikipia has intensified pressure on finite natural resources, particularly land. Increased population has led to competition among pastoralists, farmers, and ranchers, thereby escalating conflict. The study further established that environmental degradation, food insecurity, and declining productivity are direct consequences of population pressure. Warurii (2015) found that resource-based conflicts in Laikipia are complex and require integrated interventions involving communities, government institutions, civil society organizations, and development partners. The study observed that security-focused interventions frequently produce short-term stability without addressing root causes. The study also emphasized the importance of integrated and stakeholder-driven peace building approaches. The study found that peace initiatives are more effective when local communities participate actively in designing and implementing interventions.

A study by the International Crisis Group (2023) found that government efforts to curb violence through disarmament campaigns, police deployments, and military operations have achieved only limited success. Geographic challenges, porous borders, difficult terrain, and community mistrust continue to undermine security operations. The study further established that pastoral communities often perceive security agencies as heavy-handed and discriminatory, reducing community cooperation. The organization found that cooperative resource management systems, including negotiated grazing arrangements and shared water management frameworks, contribute significantly to reducing tensions among communities.



III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The researcher employed descriptive survey research design. This design allows the researcher to collect information about people's attitudes, opinions and experiences. The researcher deployed this design because it allows for the adoption of a holistic approach in the study, thus enabling and utilizing research tools like questionnaires, interviews and focused group discussion guides.

3.2 Study Area

The research was conducted in Laikipia County. Based on 50% sampling units as supported by Mugenda and Mugenda (2003), 3 out of 6 sub counties were purposely selected due to the magnitude of the recurrence of inter-ethnic conflicts within the area. Karima Sub-county, Laikipia West and Laikipia North Sub-counties were selected as they are the ones with higher prevalence of conflicts in the county.

3.3 Target Population

Laikipia County has a population of 518,560 (KNBS, 2019). The study targeted the following categories of respondents: household heads which comprised both the victims of violence and the perpetrators, County Commissioner, Deputy County commissioners; chiefs; assistant chiefs; police officers from the National Police Service; village elders, and Non state actors including NGOs, CBOs and FBOs also formed part of the target population.

3.4 Sampling and Sample Size

The researcher adopted both simple random sampling and snowball sample to sample the household heads. Based on the sample of 384 household-heads were selected randomly from the study population. To get the number of household heads per county, the study utilized proportionate stratified sampling as per the percentage of population in the 3 selected sub-counties. Given the heterogeneous nature of the household heads, the researcher adopted snowball sampling technique. Silverman (2009) defines snowball sampling as a sample technique that allows the existing participants to recruit future participants from their social networks. This process creates a chain of referral process which enables the researcher to access the hardly accessible study participants in a sensitive research context. Household heads including the victims and the perpetrators of violence were sampled using the snowball sampling technique. Purposive sampling was used to sample County Commissioner, Deputy County commissioners; chiefs; assistant chiefs; police officers from the National Police Service; village elders NGOs, FBOs and CBOs officials.

3.5 Data Collection Instruments

The study utilized both primary and secondary data. Questionnaires were used to get information from the household heads. Key informant interviews were conducted on deputy county commissioners, chiefs and assistant chiefs, Police officers, and Heads of NGOs, CBOs, FBOs. Focus Group Discussions was used to collect data from village elders. As recommended by Kothari (2004), homogenous groups on the basis of gender, ethnicity and the setting of the community were formed. In this study, the researcher divided the participants into four groups each comprising five members. Therefore, five FGDs were formed. Various documents such as research publications, policy reports, government reports, reports by various commissions of enquiry and other relevant minutes from meetings such as records from chiefs' office, website searches, newspaper and magazine publications and other relevant literature were reviewed as secondary data.

3.6 Data Analysis

Data analysis was performed to reflect major components of the research discoveries for those variables that will be tackled, and the relation between them. Quantitative data obtained were close-ended survey questions in the questionnaires. SPSS version 25 was used in analyzing the quantitative data. It gave frequency distribution, means and percentages. The analyzed outcomes were presented in diagrams, percentages and tables for clarity in presentation. On the other hand, the yielded qualitative data was transcribed before coding into categories, organized according to the respective research items reflecting the study objectives. The themes were separately structured based on the objectives.

3.7 Ethical Consideration

Approval letter was acquired from Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology (MMUST) to enable the researcher to proceed with the field study. The research permit was then sought from the National Commission for Science



Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) to enable the researcher to legally conduct the research. The researcher ensured that personal details of the respondents do not appear in the questionnaires. The implication is that it would remain anonymous by having no revelations of particulars or contacts of the various respondents. The next ethical concern issue was confidentiality and privacy. The researcher was not by any means revealed whole or part of the information acquired from the target population. The researcher kept the information with no intention of disclosing it to non-authorized individuals.

The third ethical issue is that the researcher acquired information only for study, and nothing else such as prosecution. The researcher preserved the privacy right such that a respondent wishing to get interviewed privately was considered. Those requesting for privacy was accorded with due respect, as well as consideration. The informed consent was vital such that the recording mode will only be applied if the interviewees are willing to accept the given mode.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4. 1 Response Rate

As indicated in Table 1, the researcher administered a total of 384 questionnaires to the respondents, out of which 312 respondents returned their dully filled questionnaires. This represented 81.25% response rate of the targeted population. The unaccounted 18.25 % was as a result of the unwillingness of the respondents to respond to the questions as well as incomplete responses. The validity of the findings align with Mugenda & Mugenda (2003) recommendation who asserted that a response rate of 50% is adequate for data analysis, interpretation and reporting of the findings; a response rate of 60-69% is considered to be good while that above 70% is considered excellent and outstanding.

Table 1

Response Rate

Category	Administered Questionnaires	Duly Filled and Returned Questionnaires	Response rate
Questionnaires	384	312	81.25%

4.1.1 Challenges Arising from Ethnic Dynamics in Laikipia County

The findings revealed that institutionalized discrimination was a major challenge of ethnic dynamics in Laikipia County as shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Challenges arising from Ethnic Dynamics in Laikipia County

Challenges	Yes		No		Don't Know	
	N	Percentage	N	Percentage	N	Percentage
Intense securitization of ethnic violence	299	95.83%	8	2.56%	5	1.60%
Institutionalized discrimination	292	76.60%	17	5.44%	3	0.96%
Weak enforcement of laws	266	85.25%	30	9.61%	16	5.12%
Cross-border conflicts and increased population	234	75.00%	48	15.38%	30	9.62%
Erosion of traditional structures of governance	197	63.14%	72	23.07%	43	13.78%

The findings in Table 2 showed that 292 (76.60%) of the respondents strongly agreed with this statement, 17 (5.44%) respondents disagreed while 3 (0.96%) respondents did not know about this challenge. The household heads data suggest that weak enforcement of laws was a major challenge. Regarding this, 266 (85.25%) strongly agreed with this assertion, 30 (9.61%) respondents disagreed while only 16 (5.12%) respondents were unaware of this challenge. From the findings, 197 (63.14%) respondents agreed to the assertion that erosion of traditional governance structures was a challenge, 72 (23.07%) disagreed while 43 (13.78%) did not know about this challenge. 299 (95.83%) respondents emphatically agreed that intense securitization of ethnic violence was a major challenge of ethnic dynamics with only 8 (2.56%) disagreed. Furthermore, the findings on Table 2 suggest that politicization of ethnicity was a major challenge of ethnic dynamics as evidenced by 301 (96.47%) respondents with only 9 (2.88%) negating this assertion. Institutionalized Discrimination: Respondents identified institutionalized discrimination as a major challenge. In qualitative accounts, Pokot participants described being collectively labelled as cattle rustlers irrespective of individual conduct. One elder stated:

“Not all of us here are cattle rustlers yet other communities in this area continue to label us as cattle rustlers. This has resulted in increased victimization by the so-called agencies and our neighboring communities” (FGD with Pokot elders, 19 February 2025).

Participants also linked perceived victimization to reduced cooperation with police, limited intelligence-sharing, and greater reliance on vigilante groups. For instance, an interview with a key informant yielded the following;

“Our operation area is so huge, fuel allocated still remains the same and yet we are required to fuel the armoured vehicle that consumes a litre of fuel for every two kilometres covered...so you can imagine, if for instance we have to respond to different emergency call in different parts of Laikipia County, how much will we consume...sometimes it becomes absolutely difficult to respond in time as we still grapple with the mobilization of support for the fuel” (Key Informant Interview with a police officer held on 19th February, 2025).

Another key informant bemoaned that;

“Our police officers are not properly equipped to help the communities, they feel demotivated and majority feel discriminated by their bosses, especially when assigned responsibilities of responding to an attack, especially livestock theft, considering that they are ill-equipped to handle heavily armed raiders and bandits, there are incidents where communities rally behind the law enforcement officers who are sometimes overwhelmed by the heavily armed raiders making us to wonder who between us needs security” (Key Informant Interview with a police officer held on 19th February, 2025).

These responses expose not only the problem of weak cooperation between certain ethnic groups with the law enforcement officers but also reveal the status of the operations by the security officers. For instance, it was evidenced that the police officers were ill-equipped and lacked the necessary resources in responding to the insecurities in the study area. Such deplorable conditions of the law enforcement officers coupled with disconnect with the cooperation with the local communities presented a twin challenge that needs to address.

Weak enforcement of laws: The qualitative findings established that serious actions ought to be taken against the political elites who fuel ethnic violence in the study area, especially during the electioneering period. The study also found that the menace of cattle rustling was frequent because of the inefficient laws and poor enforcement of the existing laws that pertain to the movement of animals. Additionally, the qualitative data revealed that laws relating to trespass to private properties were lenient and by extension were inconsistent with their utility to arid and semi-arid areas (ASALs), especially those that are unoccupied. Accordingly, the researcher established that legal litigations on trespass were pervasive. Responses from both the key informant interviews and FGDS established that the existing laws fuelled the conflict in the study area by tolerating offenders and being complicated. An interview with one of the police officers stated that;

“Honestly, the existing laws have wider gaps that need to be addressed for effective conflict resolution. In this area, the low penalty for offenders remains one of the factors that contribute to the persistent insecurity in the area because those who violate them are rarely jailed and if fined, then only a small amount is imposed. This makes deterrence of offences quite difficult because most if not all people believe that even if they involve themselves in criminal acts, they will rarely be jailed or imposed little fines. I think this need to be addressed if we are really serious in our quest to address the insecurity in this area and other regions as well” (Key informant interview with a Police officer held on 20th February, 2025).

Apart from the existing weak laws, the respondents also pointed out to the way the law enforcement officers in the study area also contribute to the violation of the same laws. Applying human rights as the guiding principle, the security officers tend to be less coercive to repel encroachment. A key informant from the National Police Reservist within the study area pointed out the following;

“Sometimes, the law enforcement officers fear enforcing the laws and this contributes to the persistent conflict in the area since the officers’ fear reprisal, especially by the Independent Police Oversight Authority (IPOA). Consequently, this tends to give the aggressors enough time and confidence to use the illegally acquired firearms with impunity” (Key Informant Interview with a National Police Reservist held on 21st February, 2025).

These assertions reveal that laws governing the conduct of police officers, including NPR present a balance of probabilities that officers in uniform must consider before enforcing the law. This is against the backdrop of free marauding young traditional warriors who do not operate from any legal framework. Additionally, the aggressors have a good understanding of the geographical terrain and exploit this to exchange fire with the law enforcement personnel. This finding corroborates with present body of literature, where researchers have argued that even though there exists a need to respect



human rights, law breakers continue to leverage this existing gap in law by advancing heinous acts, such as extortion, brinkmanship, and killing of civilians (Mutunga, 2021).

Additionally, respondents pointed out that the ineffective coordination among the different government security agencies who sought to stop the conflict, for example, the police and KDF. Data from security officers in Laikipia County showed that the government has deployed 200-300 armed NPR in the County to protect ranches and prevent armed invasion of private land. However, without proper coordination this could be fruitless. Key security personnel recounted that (Mutunga, 2021). A key informant interview with a police officer recounted that;

“The persistent conflict shall continue to exist unless there is a proper coordination among the law enforcement officers. This implies that with proper coordination between the police and the National Police Reservist (NPR), the crisis can be contained eventually because the NPR understands the conflict dynamics and how to respond to them” (Key informant interview with a police officer held on 21st February, 2025).

Ineffective coordination among the state security agencies in Laikipia County indirectly worsens the conflict owing to low deterrence. Moreover, police and the army are from different departments which make it difficult to organize a comprehensive approach to thwart escalation of violence. Additionally, police and NPR face coordination challenges since intelligence from the latter is not handled with the professionalism it requires, leading to preventable security breaches. Worse still, police intelligence is not always relayed to the NPR personnel and so, the police and NPR do not share a homogenous perspective and/or approach of tackling insecurity. This finding agrees with Mkutu (2008) who identified cultural explanation, legal and structural issues, communication, and leadership as challenges facing interagency coordination. Some of the regular inhibitors to coordination between and among security agencies include skewed guidance by the government on interagency synergies, sharing of confidential information and insufficient precision on the various levels of command, distinct structures of the agencies and legal barriers.

Furthermore, the researcher established that lack of law enforcement by security agencies was as a result of gaps in the law. The leadership was inclined to safeguard support base compared to solving the vicious cycle of violence. A key informant interview with the one of the heads of NGOs observed the following;

“Let us admit that there seem to be a vacuum in law because activities relate to cattle rustling has been on-going with little resistance despite the existence of these laws. When the culprits are brought to face the law, the fines are lenient which of course makes the deterrence of the vice to be quite difficult” (Key informant interview with an NGO head held on 21st February, 2025).

Based on the above statement, it is noteworthy that the existing laws are not effective enough since the trend of pasture conflict keeps ballooning, partly because of perceived infringement of human rights as offenders' rights and liberty must be respected.

Erosion of traditional structures of governance: The quantitative findings were reinforced by qualitative findings which were yielded by the key informants. From the findings, it emerged that the main methods used in conflict resolution in Laikipia were mainly traditional and alternative dispute resolution mechanisms. There are also instances where the cases are referred to courts or taken to the police to resolve them. The court system was taken as an option by the respondents with only the elites in the society embracing it. When asked why this was the case, one of the members of FGDS had the following to say;

“The courts are generally okay. However, the process takes so long in some instances. At times, a matter that is referred to court never comes to conclusion, and the matter may get complicated overtime. Additionally, for one to access courts, one has to walk several distances because the County has two courts based in Nanyuki and Nyahururu, making their access quite difficult” (FGDs with Agikuyu elders held on 19th February, 2025).

Another member of the group added that;

“There is a lot of corruption in some of these cases. The judgment may be in favors of someone depending on some variables rendering the process absolutely unfair. Most of all, you will find that majority if not all of us here are familiarized with the court processes and might even be reluctant to honor the verdict by the court if it fails to favor either of the party” (FGDs with the Agikuyu elders held on 19th, February, 2025).

These assertions reveal that the main methods that were embraced by the residents of Laikipia were mainly the use of traditional and alternative conflict resolution. The former involved the use of council of elders and community leaders which in most cases, security officers such as the County Commissioners and the police were present. Barazas are then held where the accused and the accuser are subjected to dialogue. A member of FGDS with the Maasai elders had the following to say;

“When we have conflict related to trespass and pasture wars, we have barazas whereby the aggrieved and the accused person are all brought and the discussion of what transpired is brought on the table. This is done in

the presence of the council of elders, nyumba kumi leaders and the administrative officials like chiefs. A discussion is held on what happened and judgment is made. And since most people respect the informal conflict mechanisms set up, the judgments are often adhered to. There exist even private ranch owners who have been integrated into this and they abide by it” (FGDs with the Maasai elders held on 20th February, 2025).

Just like the traditional barazas, the residents of Laikipia used negotiation and arbitration where there was conflict related to natural resources. They may involve the administrative officers and community leaders to come into a consensus. The CBOS with foothold in the area have also stepped in certain instances to help in conflict resolution and management. The utility of these methods has however been met with several limitations that have rendered them ineffective. As per some of the informants, there are certain issues that cannot be resolved by the Traditional Dispute Resolution Mechanisms (TDRMs) and ADR. Additionally, there are those who do not believe in the courts, there are settlers and a dozen of elites that does not believe in the both TDRMs and ADRs processes. This has further been compounded by the cases emanating from the neighboring Counties, some of which are complex and are beyond the purview of ADRs and the TDRMs.

From the FGDS held with various respondents, the responses were unanimous on the methods used to resolve conflicts in Laikipia County. There was the use of chiefs and council of elders who were the primary actors in conflict resolution. These FGDS revealed that majority of the residents in Laikipia County depended on the council of elders or chiefs whenever there was a dispute associated with lands in the area. They admitted of having committees and *nyumbi kumi* leaders which led to the effective conflict resolution. These informal dispute settlement mechanisms they said deliberated on the conflict and even imposed fines on the wrong doers. Additionally, they asserted that the elders were respected and that is why they adhered to the decisions reached without any resistance.

Regarding their effectiveness, majority of the respondents viewed traditional conflict resolution mechanisms as effective despite the reoccurrence. This was revealed through a series of FGDS with the respondents. For instance, they pointed out that negotiation and mediation pertaining to land conflicts is quite effective to some extent. However, they pointed out several challenges that were constraining the effectiveness of these methods.

Intense securitization of ethnic violence: Responses from the field reveal that the national government has adopted mainly the conventional approaches including the deployment of law enforcement officers to mitigate the recurrent conflict in the area. However, some of the respondents were dissatisfied with the government approach to the persistent insecurity in Laikipia by eluding it that it was highly securitizing the issue and ignoring other underlying causes of the conflict. Others cited that such intense securitization of the conflict made other communities not to cooperate with the law enforcement officers. These assertions were echoed by one member of FGDS who postulated the following;

“Some of the conflicts that we are facing here cannot be resolved by the deployment of law enforcement officers and I think this where the government misses a point. The issue has been worsened by the fact that the government has increasingly deployed security officers despite the little success...security means alone cannot resolve our problem. You see, the decision by the government to securitize the conflict has worsened the situation and that is the reason as to why you are seeing the conflict repeating itself. Worse still, other ethnicities have also failed to cooperate with these officers because they feel some of their issues have not been resolved. For instance, we as the Maasai, we do not see any need by the government to deploy law enforcement officers if our past historical grievances have not been addressed” (Focused Group Discussions with Maasai elders held on 21st February, 2025).

These assertions reveal the missing gap on how the government has responded to the recurring conflicts in Laikipia County and why it has often achieved little success. Cross-border conflicts and increased population: The respondents cited cross border conflicts as one of the challenges of ethnic dynamics. Specifically, the respondents identified cross-border conflicts that mainly involved the pastoralist communities which heightened tensions in the study area. The respondents, especially the pastoralist explained that cross border conflicts often created competition over the scarcely available resources, especially water and pasture and the situation was worsened by the unpredictable weather patterns which in most cases was punctuated by severe droughts. Regarding this, they noted that the migration of these communities during the dry seasons often triggered ethnic tensions which in turn led to increased ethnic violence in the area. Secondly, they explained that when their grazing lands are invaded, their livelihoods were threatened which may lead to poverty which in most cases fueled ethnic skirmishes in the area as these communities would compete to find means of survival. Some of the respondents also mentioned radicalization of young generation as the effect associated with cross-border conflicts. Particularly, they eluded that cross border conflicts often lead to the influx of other groups such as militant groups and criminal gangs which they argued that in most cases, they were likely to exploit the on-going ethnic tensions to their advantage.

Other respondents who sought anonymity revealed that some groups in the area were recruiting young people to join their camps and use them for cattle raiding. This may suggest why cattle rustling have recently been flooded by the

unemployed youths who often meted violence on the communities, especially during the raids. The respondents also narrated how cross border conflicts have led to the frequent displacement of people which has sparked an endless humanitarian crisis and led and rendered dozens of residents to internally displaced persons (IDPS) in their own areas. For instance, a group discussion with some of the Samburu elders revealed that some of them have been displaced by the on-going inter-ethnic rivalry which they argued were perpetuated by the neighboring communities who were raiding their grazing lands, destroying their properties and stealing their cattle. These assertions were reinforced during a focused group discussions (FGDS) with a group of the Samburu elders where one of the members stated the following;

“Ethnic tensions and violence experienced in this region is not internal. This means that other pastoral communities from the neighboring counties who often migrate in search of pasture and water, especially during the dry seasons also contribute to the persistent inter-ethnic rivalry as they compete with over local communities for the scarcely available resources. The situation is often worsened by the fact that some of these groups tend to engage in criminal acts, thus contributing to the growing criminality in the area. The youths, particularly the unemployed ones have not been spared...taking advantage of their unemployment status, these groups have recruited them into cattle raiding by promising them too many incentives most of which are never fulfilled. Let it be known that the bloody violence that is often witnessed in this region is not only caused by the residents of Laikipia but also by the neighboring communities that encroach our lands” (Focused Group Discussions with the Samburu elders on 22nd February, 2025).

It is evidenced from the above quote that ethnic dynamics in the region shaped inter-ethnic relations and in extreme cases triggered cross border migration which in turn worsened the conflict in the study area.

4.1.2 Opportunities arising from Ethnic Dynamics in Laikipia County

The findings in Table 3 revealed that a long-term peace building strategy was one of the opportunities associated with ethnic dynamics.

Table 3

Opportunities arising from Ethnic Dynamics in Laikipia County

Opportunity	Yes		No		Don't Know	
	N	Percentage	N	Percentage	N	Percentage
Collaborative approaches to conflict resolution and management	301	96.47%	8	2.56%	3	0.96%
Strengthening of localized conflict management resolution mechanisms	301	96.47%	8	2.56%	3	0.96%
Long-term peace building strategies	298	95.51%	10	3.20%	4	1.28%
Strengthening existing laws, policies and institutions	297	95.19%	9	2.88%	6	1.92%
Minority Protection	277	88.78%	30	9.61%	5	5.12%

From the findings, 298 (95.51%) respondents agreed with this assertion, 10 (3.20%) respondents disagreed while only (1.28%) respondents were not sure whether it was an opportunity. The findings suggest that 277 (88.78%) respondents were of the opinion that the protection of minority groups was a potential opportunity, 30 (9.61%) indicated no with only 5 (5.12%) of the respondents indicating they did not know. Also, from the findings, 301 (96.47%) emphatically agreed to the assertion that ethnic dynamics presented an opportunity for collaborative approaches to conflict management and resolution with only 8 (2.56%) respondents indicating a disagreement. Furthermore, the findings revealed that 297 (95.19%) opined that strengthening of the existing laws, policies and institutions was a major opportunity presented by ethnic dynamics. Additionally, 301 (96.47%) respondents were of the opinion that ethnic dynamics presented an opportunity to strengthen the localized conflict management resolution mechanisms.

Long-term peace building strategies: The respondents concur that the protracted conflict in Laikipia County would necessitate the introduction of long-term peace building strategies which majority of them considered as the most appropriate in measure to achieve sustainable peace and stability in the region. This was corroborated by subjective views from interviews as stated below;

“In as much as Laikipia has been ravaged by persistent conflicts that continue to threaten the livelihoods and the coexistence of people, I feel that such conflicts also provide the window for a long-term peace building strategy. Long-term peace building is more than just putting an end to the fighting. It is about understanding the underlying triggers of conflicts and addressing them holistically. This implies to the healing of historical

wounds and divisions through truth and reconciliation efforts and ensuring that every voice is heard during the process. We have witnessed how bringing on board civil society, women, youth and traditional leaders in Laikipia County can rebuild trust and establish inclusive governance that is capable of withstanding future challenges” (A Key Informant Interview with the head of NGO held on 21st February, 2025).

Another key informant added that;

“We have seen various efforts mounted by the government in its quest to bring peace and stability in the region. In as much as some people feel that the government has not done enough to bring peace, I hold a contrary opinion because I have been a beneficiary of the government peace efforts in the region. Nevertheless, I hold the view that the persistent conflicts, especially inter-ethnic conflicts experienced in the area presents the government with yet another opportunity to invest heavily in long-term peace building strategies which in turn can deliver a sustainable peace and enhance permanent peace and stability in the area. To effectively do this, I think there is a need by the government to involve all actors in the process and make it inclusive. Additionally, the government should also come up with innovating peace building strategies such as fostering inter-ethnic collaborations through measures such as cultural exhibitions where different cultural groups converge continuously to showcase their unique cultures. This I think will go a long way in encouraging cultural tolerance” (A key informant interview with a CBO head held on 19th February, 2025).

These observations reveal that stopping communities from physical wrangle is not necessarily creating peace. Instead, it's the addressing of the underlying grievances that trigger wrangles that is vital. Minority Protection: The respondents identified the protection of minorities as an opportunity that was associated with ethnic dynamics in Laikipia County. They argued that despite being a trigger of the protracted conflicts in the study area. Ethnic dynamics had the potential of providing an inclusive society that cultivates peace that work to enhance a pacified coexistence. Therefore, engaging in activities that addresses the minority's rights can bring peace as argued by a member of a focus group discussions, FGDs held with a group of the Maasai elders who submitted the following;

“Minority groups in Laikipia remains the most vulnerable group that is disproportionately affected by the recurrent conflicts in this region, protecting their rights remains a critical aspect in ensuring peace and security in the region. It is equally important to recognize and respect the diverse identities of individuals regardless of their minority status. Through the promotion of inclusivity and diversity in this area, there is a possibility of building a tolerant and understanding community that is well equipped to prevent extremism and radicalization. This is to say that ensuring active participation of all members including the minorities in key decision-making processes is essential in building trust, legitimacy and cohesion within our society” (FGDs with Maasai elders held on 18th February, 2025).

The above sentiments is a clear indication that ensuring the security of the minority is not limited to the prevention of the physical harm and violence but also safeguarding their socio-cultural identities, political participation and socioeconomic prospects. Collaborative approaches to conflict resolution and management: The qualitative findings of the study reveal that the respondents agreed that the protracted conflict in Laikipia provided an opportunity to expand conflict management by incorporating collaborative methods. In light of this, the findings indicate that cooperative methods were essential for resolving disputes between pastoralists and ranchers. The creation of local peace committees to promote agreements on land use and grazing, mediation and community dialogues were important strategies. These strategies employ structured negotiations to increase coexistence, decrease encroachment and promote mutual understanding. Particularly, cooperative management of grazing grounds and water sources contributed to the reduction of tensions by guaranteeing sustainability and fair access. These assertions were echoed during an interview with a CBO head who postulated the following;

“Community dialogues provide critical platforms where the aggrieved parties can voice their complaints and identify points of concurrence which promotes harmonious coexistence. Perceived neutral third parties facilitating mediation efforts contribute to the effectiveness and impartiality of conflict resolution. Through the resolution of disputes over resources like land tenure and grazing, local peace committees have been critical in minimizing tensions and encouraging sustainable community practices” (Key Informant Interview with the CBO head held on 18th February, 2025).

The above verbatim note emphasizes how successful community dialogues and mediation efforts are at settling disputes involving resources. By using impartial mediators like local administrators, NGOs and elders, conflicts are resolved fairly and stakeholder trust is increased.

The respondents cited the sharing of resources like water and grazing lands as one of the most successful strategy. Through agreements made possible by relevant actors like NGOs and local governments, rotational grazing systems were established, guaranteeing resource balance and halting environmental degradation. To demonstrate a collaborative approach



to crisis management, the study established that ranchers set aside portions of their property for pastoralist grazing during droughts. These systems decreased competition for limited resources while increasing resilience and efficiency in impacted communities. These assertions were reinforced by a key informant interview postulated the following;

“Conflicts between ranchers and pastoralists over shared resources, such as grazing grounds and water sources, are reduced when collaborative management is deployed. Local governments and NGOs contribute to ensuring fair access and advancing environmental sustainability by installing formal agreements and rotational grazing systems. These cooperative agreements benefit the land and communities by increasing resilience and improving resource use efficiency, as demonstrated by ranchers providing grazing areas during droughts” (Key Informant Interview with NGO head held on 19th February, 2025).

The sentiments reinforce the vitality of shared resource management as a tool for conflict mitigation is emphasized in the verbatim note. Stakeholders promote long-term sustainability by preventing resource depletion and over-exploitation by guaranteeing controlled access to grazing areas. Strengthening existing laws, policies and institutions: The qualitative findings obtained from the field indicate that majority of the respondents were acutely aware of the existing laws and policies adopted by both the national and the County government of Laikipia. The respondents highlighted that the sensitive issue of land has attracted numerous laws such as the Land Acts which among other things aim to address the bedevilling problems of land which has since been a bone of contention between the pastoralists, farmers and the ranchers. Additionally, the respondents also acknowledged the existence of policies and laws that seek to address environmental challenges such as the National Environmental Policy, Water Act among others. However, they noted that these laws had gaps that need to be addressed and further posited that it is because of the existing gaps coupled with their weak implementations that contributed to the persistent conflicts that bedevil Laikipia County. Majority of them were however optimistic that the weaknesses in these laws present presents an opportunity where the government can strengthen the existing gaps and if possible, eliminate the inconsistent ones to enhance effective conflict resolution. These views were echoed by a key informant who posited the following;

“We have so many beautiful laws and policies that have been adopted by the Kenyan government to address various challenges that are affecting the societies. The problem we have is that most of these laws exit on paper and are poorly implemented, thus the reason why the challenges have persisted. This is a wakeup call for the government to scrutinize these laws to ascertain their efficacy. Such should also extend to strengthening them and if possible, do away with those that have been redundant and unresponsive. In Laikipia, the challenges herein present an opportunity for the devolved government of Laikipia to find innovative measures, especially relevant policies and laws to address the problems faced by the residents of this great County” (Key Informant Interview with a CBO head held on 19th February, 2025).

4.1.3 Strengthening of localized conflict management resolution mechanisms

The qualitative findings indicate that the majority of the respondents agreed that in recent years, the region's traditional dispute resolution mechanisms have eroded. For years, Kenya's herders settled disputes over cattle theft or access to land and water among themselves. Community elders with the authority to negotiate access to resources or calm tensions over cattle theft usually led such talks. They also regulated the use and maintenance of open grasslands, ensuring the availability of pasture to accommodate grazing animals in drier periods. Community elders' status has waned, however, undermining their ability to manage disputes. The proliferation of weapons and criminal groups has further diminished the impact of local dialogue. Despite the diminished authority of elders, a number of locally rooted initiatives have recorded success, helping establish migration corridors to give herders access to safe pasture and avert violence. In light of this, majority of them were still optimistic that despite the rapid erosion of the traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, an opportunity window remains inevitable. Particularly, the respondents argued that owing to the vitality of these traditional conflict resolution mechanisms and their wider acceptance by the societies, the government alongside other relevant actors may work towards strengthening them and appreciating their remarkable role in mitigating the conflicts that continue to ravage various parts of the country. Most of the respondents were optimistic that despite the rise of modernity, these institutions could exploit it by coming up with innovative measures which when properly harnessed could help with the effective conflict resolution. These sentiments were further reinforced by a key informant who submitted the following;

“Most of the ethnic groups in Laikipia still rely heavily on the traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, mainly presided over by the council of elders despite the rapidly growing concern pertaining to their erosion. In my own view, I do not see the erosion of these institutions as a challenge but rather an opportunity whereby the government, cognizance of their essential role in conflict resolution will continue to empower them. I am also envisaging a possibility where these institutions will harness the benefits associated with globalization



and come up with innovative solutions to conflict resolution” (Key Informant Interview with NGO head, held on 19th February, 2025).

4.2 Discussion

Regarding institutionalized discrimination and ethnic victimization, the qualitative accounts suggest that ethnic identity can become a basis for generalized suspicion and unequal treatment. Respondents linked perceived victimization to reduced cooperation with police, limited intelligence-sharing, and greater reliance on vigilante groups. This is consistent with Mkutu (2008), who argues that excluding local communities from security responses can intensify conflict, and Mutunga (2021), whose work highlights mistrust and weak community participation as barriers to effective mitigation. Relative Deprivation Theory helps explain how perceptions of unfair treatment may deepen group grievances and antagonistic relations.

Weak enforcement of laws and institutional coordination; the evidence indicates that the problem concerns not only the existence of laws but also their implementation, consistency, and enforcement. This supports Mutunga (2021) on legal loopholes and repeat offending, Mkutu (2008) on structural and communication barriers affecting interagency coordination, and Leming’ani (2017) on implementation challenges in land and governance frameworks. Legal reform is unlikely to be sufficient unless accompanied by fair enforcement, clear agency mandates, and reliable information-sharing.

Erosion of traditional governance structures; the findings point out tensions. For instance, traditional institutions remain locally legitimate, yet their authority and capacity are perceived to be weakening, while formal court processes may be slow, distant, or inaccessible. This is consistent with Chepkoiywo (2010), who identifies the marginalization of traditional dispute-resolution institutions and their limited enforcement capacity, and Muigua (2014), who links conflict escalation to weakened institutions and inadequate dialogue. Conflict Transformation Theory helps explain why durable peace requires strengthening institutions that can address disputes before they escalate.

Intense securitization of ethnic violence; the results point to two connected limitations: security operations may be perceived as indiscriminate, and security agencies may lack the resources and community trust needed for effective responses. This accords with Bond (2014), who argues that resource conflicts affect multiple dimensions of human security and cannot be resolved through narrow security approaches alone. It also supports Warurii (2015) and the International Crisis Group (2023) on the limited success of security-centered interventions where mistrust, difficult terrain, and resource competition persist. Security measures need to be combined with accountable policing, community participation, and action on underlying grievances.

Cross-border conflict and population pressure; these accounts frame conflict as shaped by movement across administrative boundaries and competition over finite resources, rather than as an exclusively local ethnic dispute. The result corroborates Warurii (2015) and Mwenda (2018), who connect resource competition and population pressure with conflict in Laikipia, and Chepkoiywo (2010), who highlights growing demand for land, food, water, and shelter. Because the study is descriptive, these findings reflect respondents’ perceptions and do not independently establish causal effects.

Regarding the potential opportunities from ethnic dynamics, the emphatic support for long-term peacebuilding aligns with Limo (2024), whose work emphasizes reconciliation, inclusive governance, trust-building, and institutional strengthening, and Warurii (2015), who argues for integrated and stakeholder-driven peacebuilding. It also reflects Conflict Transformation Theory: sustainable change requires addressing relationships and structural contradictions that reproduce conflict. Support for minority protection similarly supports the reviewed work of Warurii (2015) and Mutunga (2021), which emphasizes inclusive participation and the involvement of affected communities in peace and security interventions. The data establish respondents’ support for minority protection as an opportunity, but do not measure the impact of particular protection policies.

Similarly, the overwhelming support for collaborative approaches aligns with Mkutu (2008) on local knowledge and community participation, Warurii (2015) on stakeholder ownership, and the International Crisis Group (2023) on negotiated grazing and shared water management. Collaboration appears to be a practical opportunity, although its effectiveness depends on fair representation, clear agreements, monitoring, and dispute-resolution procedures. Support for strengthening laws, policies, and institutions is consistent with Leming’ani (2017), who highlights implementation weaknesses in land-related frameworks, and Mutunga (2021), who identifies legal loopholes and weak enforcement as contributors to insecurity. Stronger localized mechanisms also align with Chepkoiywo (2010) and Muigua (2014), who emphasize the potential of community-led mechanisms and dialogue. A complementary model would reinforce locally legitimate mechanisms and connect them to formal institutions, while ensuring inclusion, fairness, and referral of serious criminal matters to appropriate authorities.



V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

The study concludes that ethnic dynamics in Laikipia County present interconnected challenges that contribute to insecurity and undermine peaceful relations among communities. The most prominent challenges reported by respondents were the securitization of ethnic violence, perceived institutionalized discrimination, and weak enforcement of laws, cross-border conflicts and population pressure, and the erosion of traditional governance structures. The quantitative findings, supported by interview and focus-group accounts, suggest that these challenges should not be treated as isolated problems. Perceptions of unequal treatment and ineffective law enforcement can deepen mistrust of state institutions, while competition over land, water, and grazing resources can intensify tensions and complicate cooperation between communities and security agencies. The findings therefore point to the need to address both immediate security concerns and the historical, institutional, and socioeconomic grievances that sustain conflict.

The study also concludes that the challenges associated with ethnic dynamics create opportunities for more inclusive and sustainable conflict management. Respondents strongly supported collaborative approaches, long-term peacebuilding, stronger laws and institutions, protection of minority rights, and revitalization of localized conflict-resolution mechanisms. These opportunities will only translate into lasting outcomes if they are implemented consistently, inclusively, and transparently. In line with Relative Deprivation Theory, the findings underscore the importance of addressing perceived exclusion and unequal access to resources. From the perspective of Conflict Transformation Theory, sustainable peace requires more than suppressing violence: it requires changing relationships, strengthening legitimate institutions, and establishing trusted mechanisms through which communities can negotiate grievances. The overall conclusion is that durable peace in Laikipia depends on coordinated security measures combined with equitable resource governance, community participation, and sustained dialogue.

5.2 Recommendations

The study recommends an integrated approach to managing ethnic dynamics and promoting sustainable peace in Laikipia County. First, security agencies and county authorities should combine impartial law enforcement with dialogue and community engagement to address ethnic tensions and prevent violence. Security interventions should be transparent, accountable, and respectful of human rights to strengthen public trust. Second, relevant government institutions should improve the implementation and coordination of existing laws and policies addressing ethnic conflict, discrimination, land disputes, and access to natural resources. Clear institutional responsibilities and effective complaint-handling mechanisms are essential for addressing grievances fairly.

Third, county authorities and local peacebuilding actors should strengthen community-based conflict-resolution mechanisms by involving elders, women, youth, minority groups, and other affected stakeholders. Inclusive peace committees and negotiated arrangements for sharing grazing land and water resources could help reduce competition and recurring disputes. Fourth, the national and county governments, together with development partners, should address socioeconomic and environmental pressures that intensify ethnic tensions. Priority should be given to livelihood diversification, youth economic opportunities, and collaborative management of scarce natural resources, particularly during droughts. Finally, relevant institutions should establish participatory monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess the effectiveness of peacebuilding initiatives. Indicators should include public perceptions of fairness, inclusiveness in decision-making, disputes resolved, and the recurrence of ethnic violence. These measures would support evidence-based interventions and strengthen long-term peace, institutional legitimacy, and social cohesion in Laikipia County.

Declaration of Interest

The authors declare that they do not have any known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Funding Declaration

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.



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