

Contribution of ethnic dynamics to intractable conflicts in Laikipia County, Kenya

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<https://doi.org/10.51867/ajernet.7.3.85>

ABSTRACT

Ethnic conflicts remain among the most persistent threats to peace, security, and socioeconomic development in Kenya, particularly in ethnically diverse counties such as Laikipia. Despite numerous government interventions, recurrent inter-ethnic conflicts continue to undermine social cohesion, livelihoods, and sustainable development. This study analyzed the contribution of ethnic dynamics to intractable conflicts in Laikipia County, Kenya. Guided by Relative Deprivation Theory and Conflict Transformation Theory, the study employed a descriptive survey research design using a mixed-methods approach. Data were collected from 312 household heads through structured questionnaires and complemented by key informant interviews and focus group discussions involving government administrators, security officers, village elders, and representatives of non-state actors. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were analyzed thematically. The findings reveal that ethnic dynamics significantly contribute to persistent conflicts through interconnected processes of historical land injustices, Ethnicised politics, unequal distribution of resources, ethnic marginalization, fragmentation and polarization, conflicting cultural practices, and the radicalization of ethnic identities. These factors reinforce perceptions of exclusion, intensify competition over scarce resources, and provide opportunities for political manipulation, thereby perpetuating cycles of violence and insecurity. The findings further support the propositions of Relative Deprivation Theory by demonstrating how perceived inequalities generate grievances, while Conflict Transformation Theory underscores the importance of addressing structural injustices and fostering inclusive institutions to achieve sustainable peace. The study concludes that enduring peace in Laikipia requires comprehensive interventions that move beyond security responses to address the structural, political, and socioeconomic drivers of conflict. It recommends implementation of equitable land and resource governance, inclusive political participation, strengthened local peace building institutions, community dialogue and reconciliation initiatives, youth empowerment programs, and policies that address historical injustices and ethnic marginalization to promote long-term social cohesion and sustainable peace.

Keywords: Conflict Transformation Theory, Ethnic Conflicts, Ethnic Dynamics, Intractable Conflicts, Laikipia County, Relative Deprivation Theory

I. INTRODUCTION

At the global level, issues ranging from social, economic, and political have become recipes for persistent conflicts thus dealing a blow to the ethnically persistent and failed social development of the aboriginal society. During the epoch of the Cold War, there was a concurrence between the capitalist and socialists that inter-ethnic conflicts mirrored a traditional societal set-up where people habited in small communities of varying groups with shared traits (Bond, 2014). In Africa, ethnicity is largely regarded as a socially constructed concept that has been shaped by among other things, European colonization. During colonization, some ethnic groups were enticed with materialistic goodies including money at the expense of other ethnicities. As a result, the empowered communities created a hierarchy based on laws and traditions that distinguished them from other ethnicities (Bond, 2014). This was utilized by the European powers that identify the collaborators as administrators while those that opposed reduced to rebels. Again, in Africa, each ethnic group has its unique cultures, customs, beliefs, and political system. Owing to this ethnic diversity, it is true that the continent has witnessed several inter-ethnic conflicts (Massey & Miller, 2018). These conflicts have witnessed the emergence of civil and an extreme extent, genocides.

Kenya like any other developing country has had a fair share of conflicts involving various ethnic groups or clans. The widely held assertion is that these conflicts stem from the incompatibility between the parties in conflict, mainly inspired by ethno-nationalism. Kenya has been frequently embroiled in several intractable conflicts that have been largely fought along tribal lines (Muok *et al.*, 2021). Most significantly, these conflicts have been fueled by the competitive political environment, especially during the general elections where politicians maximize ethnicity to clinch political positions. This assertion has been upheld by numerous scholars who opine that such conflicts have been frequent in the wake of multiparty politics in the early 1990s (Moler, 2022). Recently, these conflicts have extended from the political discourses to incorporate the cosmopolitan counties of Baringo, Isiolo, Turkana, Marsabit, Laikipia, and Garissa to mention but a few whose major economic activity is livestock rearing.

Laikipia is one of Kenya's cosmopolitan pastoralist counties harboring largely the Maasai ethnic group alongside other ethnicities. In the more recent past, it has been embroiled in inter-ethnic conflicts between the farmers and the herders, large-scale ranchers as well as extremely violent wildlife. Cattle rustling also remain a prevalent predicament that has led to increased inter-ethnic conflicts, especially between the Pokot and Samburu ethnic groups (Bond, 2014). Conflicts in the County have spanned over generations with the traditional conflicts mainly involving accessibility to water and grazing lands for livestock. This has been worsened by the establishment of the conservancies. The latter has been seen as a source of resource capture since their owners continue to own them despite the expiry of their leases (Ndiritu, 2021). The persistent conflict in this area has led to the loss of lives and livelihoods, massive displacements of people, and the destruction of critical infrastructures and properties. Central to this conflict has been among other things the changes in climatic conditions and language. The former has led to the pervasive deterioration of the weather coupled with intense droughts and desertification which in turn has led to reduced access to food and water among the pastoralist communities thus, mass migration in search of the essential needs for both the people and livestock.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Ethnic conflicts present a global phenomenon that is deeply embedded in human history. These conflicts have been based on cultural identity distinctions which are then repackaged and politicized to paint ethnicity negatively (Oyombra, 2021). 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 how ethnic dynamics shape the underlying factors that contribute to intractable conflicts that jeopardized Laikipia's internal security at the community level.

1.2 Research Objective

The study sought to assess the contribution of ethnic dynamics to conflicts 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

Relative Deprivation Theory (RDT) was mainly propagated by Ted Robbert Gurr in 1971 who describes relative deprivation as the tension that develops from discrepancy between the "ought" and "is" of collective value satisfaction which disposes men to violence (Omondi, 2023). 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). In Laikipia County, persistent conflicts 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 anchored on Conflict Transformation Theory (CTT) advanced by John Paul Lederach (1995; 2003). Unlike traditional conflict management and conflict resolution approaches, which primarily focus on containing or ending violence, it perceives conflict as a dynamic social process rooted in structural inequalities, historical injustices, and unequal power relations. The theory argues that sustainable peace cannot be achieved by merely suppressing violence; instead, the underlying political, economic, social, and cultural conditions that generate conflict must be transformed. Conflict is therefore perceived not only as a destructive phenomenon but also as an opportunity to reform institutions, rebuild relationships, and address systemic injustices that perpetuate violence. Lederach posits that durable peace requires transforming the relationships, structures, interests, discourses, and institutions that sustain conflict. This transformation involves promoting inclusive governance, social justice, reconciliation, equitable resource distribution, and meaningful participation of all stakeholders. The theory further emphasizes rebuilding trust among conflicting groups while creating institutional mechanisms capable of addressing historical grievances and preventing the recurrence of violence (Lederach, 1995; Lederach, 2003; Miall, 2004).

Within the context of Laikipia County, the theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how ethnic dynamics contribute to persistent conflicts. The theory explains that historical land injustices, ethnic marginalization, unequal allocation of natural resources, Ethnicised politics, conflicting cultural practices, and identity-based radicalization are not isolated drivers of violence but interconnected structural conditions that continuously reproduce conflict. These structural inequalities reinforce perceptions of exclusion, deepen mistrust among ethnic communities, and weaken social cohesion, thereby creating conditions under which violence becomes recurrent rather than episodic.

2.2 Empirical Review

A study by Namunyu (2024) attributed land historical injustices to the puzzling land question in Laikipia. The findings suggest that Maasai who are the original owners of the land in Laikipia are yet to be compensated which has made some of them to become wild and exploiting every possible means to get their land back. This explains the ongoing tensions between them and other communities which also claim the land to be theirs. Mutunga (2021) highlighted the competition of over scarce resources such as water and land were major triggers of conflicts in the semi-arid regions. Similarly, Mwenda (2018) observed that competition for scarce resources contributes to political violence both within and between states. Rutoh *et al.* (2019) found that divisive narratives and stereotypes create anxiety, fear, and hostility among ethnic groups. The study argued that these narratives do not necessarily need to be factual to influence perceptions and behavior. Similarly, Chepkoiyo (2010) established that dwindling natural resources, particularly water and pasture, are major drivers of conflicts among pastoral communities in northern Kenya. Environmental degradation and recurring droughts increase migration and competition for resources, thereby intensifying inter-community violence.

Gakuria (2013) found that access to dry-season grazing areas is a major source of conflict among pastoral communities. The study noted that most conflicts in northern Kenya revolve around the use and control of water points and grazing lands. A study by Warurii (2015) observed that political dominance by certain ethnic groups in Laikipia has generated perceptions of exclusion and marginalization among other communities. The study further established that politicians often use inflammatory rhetoric to incite hostility against rival ethnic groups. The findings indicate that ethnic identities are frequently weaponized to secure political power and access to resources.

Bond (2014) found that social fragmentation weakens social cohesion and limits communities' capacity to collectively address shared challenges. Fragmented societies are more vulnerable to conflict, insecurity, and underdevelopment. Similarly, Mukanda (2025) established that ethnic polarization affects public discourse and policymaking in Kenya. Political debates often become ethnicised, making consensus-building difficult and increasing social tensions. Mkutu (2019) established that economic marginalization significantly contributes to inter-ethnic conflicts. Lack of infrastructure, poor service delivery, and inadequate state presence create conditions conducive to violence. Mutunga (2018) found that Laikipia was vulnerable to politics of ethnicities. This was worsened by the electioneering period as evidenced by the 2007/2008 general elections which turned bloody and erupted because of the ethnic balkanization and political manipulation of these ethnicities by the political elites.

Echelmeyer *et al.* (2023) found that identity-based radicalization can result in xenophobia, intergroup violence, dehumanization, and even genocide. Identity crises often make individuals susceptible to extremist recruitment. A study by Chelang'a and Chesire (2020) noted that the perpetuation of instability in Africa is enabled by negative identity politics that is rooted in the principle of divide and rule. Accordingly, leaders tend to exploit ethnic and religious affiliations to hold on to power, manipulate ethnic identities to secure support and incite conflicts. This is further worsened by ethnic entrepreneurship as exuded in most of the conflicts on the continent.

The research findings by Duursma and Gamez (2023) indicate how global migration patterns are influenced by factors such as economic disparities, political instability, and environmental degradation. Picking up from where they left off, the United Nations acknowledges just how challenging maintaining social cohesion can be while attempting to

integrate people from varying ethnic backgrounds into new communities during times of mass movement across borders. Visintin *et al.* (2020) argue that competition for grazing land, water resources, and cattle ownership often leads to violent clashes. Developing sustainable resource management strategies, implementing conflict resolution mechanisms, and fostering community engagement are essential for addressing these conflicts. Land border disputes are common in African countries and contribute to interethnic conflicts. Disputes over land ownership, boundary demarcation, and resource allocation have resulted in conflicts in regions like the Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes region. Visintin *et al.* (2020) suggest that implementing fair land distribution policies, strengthening institutions for conflict resolution and respecting indigenous land rights can help mitigate land-related conflicts.

Examining ethnic conflicts in East Africa provides valuable insights into the dynamics and factors contributing to these conflicts. Countries such as Kenya, Ethiopia, and Uganda have experienced ethnic tensions that have resulted in violence, displacement, and social divisions. Research conducted by Todorovski and Potel (2019) has shed light on the interconnectedness of ethnic changes and conflicts in this region. The nexus between ethnic dynamics and conflicts in East Africa is evident. The scholars argue that rapid socio-cultural changes, such as urbanization, globalization, and political transitions, have influenced ethnic identities and exacerbated existing tensions. This has created a fertile ground for conflicts rooted in historical grievances, power struggles, and resource competition.

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 (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics [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. Acharya *et al.* (2013) 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 Findings

4.1.1 Contribution of Ethnic Dynamics to Conflicts in Laikipia County

The study sought to assess the contribution of ethnic dynamics to conflicts in Laikipia County.

Table 1

Response Rate

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

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 and 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 2

Ethnic Dynamics Contribution to Conflicts

Statement	Yes		No		Don't Know	
	N	Percentage	N	Percentage	N	Percentage
Historical injustices towards other ethnic groups	302	96.79%	7	2.24%	2	0.64%
Conflicting cultural practices	302	96.79%	8	2.56%	2	0.64%
Ethnic tensions	300	96.15%	10	3.21%	2	0.64%
Radicalization and extremism of ethnic groups	245	78.52%	47	15.06%	20	6.41%
Unequal distribution and allocation of resources	234	75.00%	48	15.38%	30	9.62%
Ethnicized politics	301	96.47%	9	2.88%	2	0.64%
Ethnic fragmentation and polarization	275	88.14%	30	9.62%	7	2.24%

As illustrated in Table 2, the study findings suggest that ethnic dynamics had contributed to historical injustices that targeted other communities as evidenced by 302 (96.79%) respondents, only 7 (2.24%) respondents disagreed while 2 (0.64%) respondents indicating they did not know. 301 (96.47%) agreed with the assertion that ethnic dynamics had contributed to ethnicized politics which have fueled conflicts in Laikipia County. The findings also suggest that ethnic dynamics have contributed to ethnic fragmentation and polarization as revealed by 275 (88.14%). The study also found that 245 (78.52%) respondents concurred with the assertion that ethnic dynamics have contributed to radicalization and extremism of certain ethnic groups which had since been as source of contention. Furthermore, 234 (75.00%) respondents agreed with the assertion that ethnic dynamics have led to unequal distribution and allocation of resources that have led to the perception that other ethnicities are favored to the detriment of other communities. Moreover, 302 (96.79%) and 300 (96.15%) respondents agreed with the assertions that conflicting cultural and ethnic tensions are associated with ethnic dynamics which have contributed to conflicts in Laikipia County.

Regarding the historical injustices towards other ethnic groups, focused group discussions pointed land related disputes that stem from historical land injustices. For instance, a member of FGDs asserted the following;

This land is rightfully ours and treaties signed that blindly evicted us Laikipia are still there. The expectation was that the land would be given back to us after independence, unfortunately, this was not the case...and it is yet to happen. There are several white settlers who own huge pieces of private land besides those who benefited from the commercialization program after independence. Given the overreliance on land by the pastoral communities, you find that most of the time, we are restricted and even denied access to these private assets. We now want our land back... enough of the historical injustices that has been inflicted on us. We have always been hopeful that owing to the changes in laws and policies pertaining to land and their possibility to address the historical injustices, we are unlikely to relent until we get back what is rightfully ours (Focused Group Discussions with Maasai elders held on 15th March, 2025).

Ethnicised politics contributed to conflicts in the study area as reinforced by one of the discussants who asserted the following;

In this region, political game has become a cut-throat competition. This normally worsens during the electioneering period. For example, during the 2017 general elections, political tensions were high. We saw ethnic realignment on the basis of the political parties and this was the work of the politicians. They ensured that they rallied support from their ethnicities to abide by the ideologies of a particular party. Those communities who refused to join their call were often harassed and even branded names. We also witnessed incidences where politicians were inciting their ethnic groups against other ethnicities. Honestly, during that period, several deaths were reported because some ethnic groups, under the patronage of the political elites attacked others and that is how the violence erupted in certain areas. The situation is worsened by the entrenched marginalization of some ethnicities which provides a better ground for the politicians to manipulate them (Focused Group Discussions with Maasai elders held on 18th February, 2025)

Quantitative findings regarding ethnic fragmentation and polarization was reinforced by the FGDs where the discussants highlighted the dangers of ethnic fragmentation as pointed out by one of the discussants who averred the following;

Uhusiano wetu katika jamii ni nguzo muhimu katika kuhakakisha amani unaodumu milele ila umoja wetu unaendelea kusambaratishwa na siasa zingine za kujitambuilisha unaonezwa na baadhi ya wansiasa walafi katika gatuvi letu hili. Kukosekana kwa umoja kwenye jamii kumetufanya tuwe wanyonge sana na pia vile vile imefanya tuchukulie jamii zingine na hata mbaya zaidi ni kuwa saa zingine tunawadhulumu ndio maana unaona engezeko wa ugomvi baina ya jamii wamoishi huku Laikipia". Our unity in the society is a vital pillar in ensuring sustainable stability but this unit has been undermined by identity politics that is propagated by some selfish politicians. Lack of unity in the society has weakened us and has also made us to hate other communities and in extreme circumstances, we have violated their dignity and that is why conflict has increased in Laikipia (Focused Group Discussions with Agikuyu elders, held on 21st February, 2025).

Entitlement of other communities also emerged revealed by another discussant who stated the following;

Laikipia County is best known as one of the most ethnic diversified Counties in Kenya which of course we feel proud about. However, kwa ground vitu ni different (However, things are different on the ground) because some communities feel that so entitled and that they should own everything in the County. Some even contends that jamii zingine zimekuja kuchukua mali yao (Some even contends that some communities have come to take what is theirs)...they even incite young men, especially those idle with nothing meaningful to do to fight and destabilize other communities which in most cases have turned violent and bloody. Mara nyingi utapata familia zao wanaendeleza maisha yao mjini (In most cases, you will find that

their families are continuing peacefully with life in the town) and we as the poor continue to bear the brunt of the conflict (Focused Group Discussions with Maasai elders held on 20th February, 2025).

Both the key informants and FGDs members concurred to the assertion that persistent ethnic marginalization contributed to conflicts in the study area. For instance, a key informant interview with one of the interviewees yielded the following; *At the core of the persistent conflicts in Laikipia County are group rivalries and tensions where divergence in socioeconomic status simmers animosity and distrust. A time, these tensions spiral into violent skirmishes ranging from localized ones to full-blown inter-communal conflicts. The consequences are not restricted to the immediate victims of violence but transcend our entire communities nod regions in Laikipia County leading to enormous displacements and sustained tensions* (Key Informant Interview with FBO head held on 19th February, 2025).

A member of FGDs informed the researcher that marginalization of ethnicities also manifested in the form of unequal opportunities and skewed distribution of the locally available resources which often triggers ethnic tensions which may culminate in violent conflicts. In view of this, the discussant stated the following;

The fact that we belong to the same County does not imply that we are the same. Some of the communities have better opportunities than others. For instance, you will see that some places have better facilities in comparison with others. When it comes to employment, it depends on who do you know...other employers will even be daring to ask about your ethnicity...other ethnic groups are favored than others when it comes to employment. Also, the most painful thing is when it comes to distribution of resources. Politics matters in this case whereby the communities with powerful political figures are likely to get a huge share of the distributed resources. Other communities who are politically underrepresented are always disadvantaged...this is the reason why you will find several incidences of inter-ethnic clashes in this region (Focused Group Discussions with the Agikuyu elders held on 20th February, 2025).

Perceived ethnic favoritism also emerged as one of the factors that fuel ethnic skirmishes in the study area. This was yielded through a key informant interview where the informant asserted the following;

Kenya for quite a long time have been challenged by ethnic favoritism, especially when it comes to employment access and business which has significantly contributed not only to entrenched marginalization but also ethnic fragmentation and act as a reckoning obstacle towards the attainment of economic development and growth. The entrenched practice of ethnic favoritism normally manifests in various forms influencing hiring decisions and determining business prospects on the basis of ethnic affiliations. This egregious practice has perpetuated discriminatory and exclusionary practices in the job market. Generally, the practice has eroded meritocracy and erects barriers for the deserving individuals, especially from the marginalized ethnicities, restraining their access to economic opportunities and undermining their socioeconomic mobility. The situation is even worse at the devolved unit and Laikipia County is not an exception (Key informant interview with the head NGO held on 21st February, 2025).

Qualitative findings reinforced the assertion that the search for opportunities in the study area sometimes made people to participate in radicalization and extremism to secure their needs. This was revealed by a key informant who stated the following;

In this area, the search for belonging is said to have greatly contributed to radicalization and extremism. Many residents in Laikipia County strongly feel that they have been marginalized from the larger society have resorted to extremist beliefs to acquire acceptance. To some in Laikipia County, these beliefs have provided a sense of empowerment promising solutions to perceived grievances. However, you will find that individuals who are radicalized and hold deeply extremism beliefs become difficult to control and, in most cases, end up being ungovernable, thus a source of conflict (Key informant interview with NGO head held on 19th February, 2025).

Discussants, particularly from FGDs also informed the researcher that radicalism and extremism were becoming a worrying trend in the study area as revealed by one of the discussants who stated that;

Radicalization and extremism fueled by other communities in Laikipia County have become rampant. Arguably, these beliefs have provided a sense of empowerment to some residents in this region, providing them with solutions to their perceived problems. However, in as much as these beliefs provide a sense of belonging, it has also contributed significantly to the vicious cycle of violence which in most cases has

pitted several ethnic groups (Focused Group Discussions, FGDS with Samburu elders held on 19th February, 2025).

Qualitative findings reinforced the assertion that conflict cultural practices fueled violent conflicts among several ethnicities in the study area as revealed by one discussant from FGDS who had this say;

In our great County of Laikipia, our cherished customs and traditions revolving around land ownership is interlinked with our identity and culture. To us, land is not just a resource but also most significantly, a reflection of our heritage and the bedrock of our communities. Unfortunately, these traditions are also punctuated with many challenges, especially when it comes to the issue of security. Wrangles over land since time immemorial have been part and parcel of our history which is fueled by factors such as ballooning population and environmental changed over land that overstretched our resources. Sometimes, these disputes transcend into violent conflicts between ethnic groups, each laying a claim of historical rights and determined to safeguard their livelihoods by all means. This is the reason why there exists endless conflict in Laikipia County (Focused Group Discussions with Maasai elders held on 21st February, 2025).

Similarly, a key informant informed that certain ethnicities were identified based on the cultural practices, especially the pastoralists and farmers. These distinct cultures often compete for scarcely available resources. This he explained in the following manner;

Resource competition is a common phenomenon in Laikipia County implicating various groups which compete for resources such as water, pasture and even land in some areas. These competitions have triggered political tensions, conflicts, especially in situations where resources are scarce and are unequally distributed. To worsen the matter is the constant migration of other communities from the neighboring Counties who are pushed to seek grazing lands and water for their livestock, especially during the dry seasons. Some of these communities don't even seek permission to access some of the lands in the area and this in most cases causes the eruption of violence where the invaded communities take initiatives to protect their resources (Key informant interview with a chief held on 18th February, 2025).

The above quote testifies that competition over natural resources was also triggered by cultural identities where pastoralists and farmers often clash over resources such as land. This is worsened by the changes in climatic conditions which have led to among other things, prolonged droughts and erratic rainfall that in turn has triggered pastoralist mobility across the region.

4.2 Discussion

4.2.1 Historical Land Injustices

The researcher established that unaddressed historical injustices have contributed to the conflicts in Laikipia County. The researcher was informed by a section of the respondents, particularly the Maasai that they have suffered several injustices both from the colonial and the post-colonial governments. A discussion with them reveals that that they are aggrieved by the fact that they live like squatters in what they believe is their ancestral land. They informed the researcher that they have tried all possible means, including legal pursuit but nothing has materialized. Some of them confessed that they were sometimes forced to take up arms and fight for what is rightfully theirs. According to them, this has been common during the dry seasons where they are forced to trespass private land to access grazing lands and pastures for their livestock. The study established in most occasions, such encounters were often met with resistance as the private landowners responded to protect their lands. Through interviews and focused group discussions, the researcher established that originally, Laikipia land belonged to the Maasai and they ought to have possessed it in the post-independence. This is contrary to the current situation where large portions of land are owned by the settler communities and the locals. The information received from the respondents reveal that there have been instances where these injustices are propagated through political incitements, especially in ownership and expired leases. These findings align with the assertions of Namunyu (2024) who attributed land historical injustices to the puzzling land question in Laikipia. She points out that Maasai who are the original owners of the land in Laikipia are yet to be compensated and this she argues have made them to become wild and exploiting every possible means to get their land back. This explains the on-going tensions between them and other communities which also claim the land to be theirs.

4.2.2 Ethnicized Politics

Both qualitative and quantitative findings indicate that ethnicized politics was perpetuated by political incitements by the political elites. Politicians and opinion leaders mostly suffered indictment from members of the public as genuine peace crusaders. This is because inter-ethnic conflicts are synonymous with socio-economic inequality for which politicians and elites consistently vow to liberate their individual communities. This dream is achieved by

outwitting the others who compete for similar socio-economic resources. This is justified by wanting state effectiveness, accountability and transparency in handling the demands of diversity within the backdrop of contestable resource distribution and wobbling democratic ideals. The cronies of politicians and opinion leaders often receive huge material benefits when they marshal the public in premeditated direction (Warurii, 2015). A focused group discussions with a section of Samburu elders revealed the following;

The findings corroborate with Mutunga (2018) whose study found that Laikipia was vulnerable to politics of ethnicities. Her research contends that electioneering periods in Laikipia County are likely to turn violent owing to the bad politics perpetuated by the political elites. Her research cites an example of the 2007/2008 general elections which turned bloody and erupted because of the ethnic balkanization and political manipulation of these ethnicities by the political elites.

Assertions by Warurii (2015) reveal that the Kikuyu has dominated the political scene in Laikipia since independence. He explains that political marginalization remains a major source of contention between various ethnicities that are domiciled in Laikipia County. Politics exemplified by insecurity and identity provided the government with a firm argument against pluralism politics. In most occasions, the politicians have incited their communities against others. The interface between power and material gain to preserve their ethnic communities at the altar of resource control necessitates both the politicians and the opinion leaders to utter inflammatory and demeaning remarks by referring some communities that they dislike as *madoadoa*. This is a Kiswahili term implying spotted, embedding ethnic undertones. With such derogatory remarks, these communities are perceived as strangers who must lie low like an envelope. Citing Mkutu (2019), Warurii (2015) states that ethnic animosity against the Bantu communities by the Cushitic/Nilotic communities is worrying. These assertions were held by most of the respondents by observing that often, politicians and opinion leaders incited their own communities to attack other communities which in turn simmers inter-ethnic tensions that at times spiral into violent conflicts.

As observed by Chelang'a and Chesire (2020), the perpetuation of instability in Africa is enabled by negative identity politics that is rooted in the principle of divide and rule. Accordingly, leaders tend to exploit ethnic and religious affiliations to hold on to power, manipulate ethnic identities to secure support and incite conflicts. This is further worsened by ethnic entrepreneurship as exuded in most of the conflicts on the continent. From a Kenyan context, the advent of pluralism politics in 1992 has triggered political mobilization on the basis of ethnic identities leading to pervasive undermining of the fundamental human rights and abuses, especially during the electioneering period (Chepkoiywo, 2010). Identity along the ethnic lines becomes a tool for political manipulation and exclusion, influencing an individual's participation in the issues of national interest and access to resources. Accordingly, ethnic affiliation remains a primary form of identity, shaping sense of security by the citizens and power perceptions, especially during the crisis period. As noted by Elfversson (2019), the comprehension of the devastations of ethnic dynamics on security is vital in addressing the deep-seated communal conflicts and intervention by the government in areas like Laikipia County.

4.2.3 Ethnic Fragmentation and Polarization

The findings based on the interactions with the respondents established that one of the ways ethnic dynamics contributed to conflict in Laikipia County was through fueling fragmentation and polarizing as indicated by 22.6% of the respondents. This was not a shocking result since the two can undermines the unity and stability of a society. The respondents opined that identity politics many a times emphasizes divisions on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, gender alongside other identities. Significant emphasis on diversity was cited to have been creating tensions that often lead to conflict in the society. It is instructive to note that a fragmented society based on cultural diversity often leads to a profound problem such as conflict, discontent, misunderstanding which affects the stability of a society. Notably, factors including perceived inequality coupled with negative attitude towards the outer-group members culminate in fragmentation. The devastations of fragmentation present numerous adversities in the society. For instance, some of the respondents argued that fragmentation in certain instances constrains the collective purpose that is essential in confronting deep-rooted factors that undermines the social fabric of the society. This they argued can culminate in social fragmentation and polarization within societies.

Qualitative findings from the FGDs members established that ramifications of fragmentation jeopardizes the stability of a society which in turn denies the local communities the opportunity to embrace collectivity to improve ameliorate their livelihood. A socially fragmented community implies a weakening bond which in turn may increase the vulnerability of the community to both internal and external attacks; especially those pertaining to pastoralism whose main economic practice is livestock rearing. The respondents admitted that fragmentation and polarization was rife in Laikipia County and has since contributed to the weakening of the communities inhabiting the County, making them unable to defend themselves in case of an attack by the neighboring communities, especially those from the neighboring Counties. This has made conflict to be common in the study area. Assertions by researchers like Mutunga (2021), Bond (2014) and Limo (2024) is that the fragility that manifests in the form of socials destabilization constrains members'

ability to live a peaceful and a dignified life. Members of the community divided along ethnic lines many a times fail to secure an opportunity to learn from each other owing to the fact that they rely on social imaginations that perpetuate offensiveness which can potentially undermine the cohesiveness of the community. Accordingly, dissatisfied members may rise to fight for their perceived rights culminating in violent confrontation with other members of the community. Researcher's own observation was that as a result of social fragmentation and polarization, other communities were still lagging as evidenced by underdevelopment of some areas. For instance, areas that were experiencing constant violent banditry and cattle rustling had most of their schools shutdown suggesting that students were out of school due to fear of being attacked by the bandits and the cattle rustlers which obviously undermines the prospective development of these areas. The researcher was also informed by the respondents that other communities were feeling highly entitled which in turn made other communities to feel less important. This was unraveled in a focused group discussions with a group of Maasai elders where one of the members asserted the following;

Articulations drawn from the FGDS reveal that Laikipia County plays a host to many communities. From them, it dawned on the researcher that some communities feel entitled of being the owner of the County while others are perceived as intruders. This feeling according to the respondents own assertions contributes to incitement that mainly involve youths who are mobilized to fight each other to defend what they perceive as their land. It became evident that these divisions were perpetuated to dozens of individuals who may be driven by materialistic quest. As captured in one of the quotes above, some of the inciters alongside their families have decent life, mainly in urban areas. To this end, it may be suggested that the perpetrators who fuel animosity in the community many a times reside in cosmopolitan towns making it possible to conclude that ethnic balkanization in Laikipia County is attributed to self-driven interests that perceived some ethnic groups to be less important than others (Warurii, 2015).

The study also established that the suffering was not restricted to the outer group but also the inner groups. As explained by the respondents, this was because some young energetic men disregarded development and directed their energy in fighting an imaginary enemy. Reflecting on human security (Bond, 2014), issues pertaining to food security, environmental security, community security and personal security are often ignored or undermined in Laikipia County as communities violently confront each other to meet the interest of a handful political elites in the County who are predatory culminating in the issues of insecurity. These assertions corroborate with Dewa *et al.* (2023) cited by Limo (2024) who contend that although social entrepreneur may create opportunities for growth, lack of proper information from the community members may create opportunity in which a few may act as predators to exploit others. Indeed, as already argued, public goods institutions, such as schools is not effectively operational which in turn has steered some communities into the vicious cycle of underdevelopment and redundancy as few communities who reside in other areas are flourishing and continuing their business with little or no harm.

The qualitative findings from the FGDs reveal that fragmentation and polarization were common phenomenon among the communities domiciled in Laikipia County. The concept of an "outsider" in this context suggests the outer group. However, this poses dismal reality in the country. As per the promulgated 2010 Constitution, any Kenyan is entitled to reside in any part of the country regardless of their ethnic background. However, as suggested by both Warurii (2015) and Rutoh *et al.* (2019) narratives must not necessarily be based on facts to be prove powerful, instead, they only need to provide an account that could be easily graspable to trigger anxiety and anger. Indeed, ethnicity is undoubtedly a powerful factor that influences all facets of human life and manifests in a plethora of ways including the distribution and of resources, opportunities and politics. Therefore, it is less shocking that the above sentiment is seen to fragment the society. It only downplays the collective approach to addressing the deep-seated problems in the society as reinforced by one member of the same.

Therefore, it can be summed that fragmentation and polarization of ethnicities in Laikipia County is driven largely by factors such identity politics whereby the members of the community shift focus on the environmental challenges and divert attention in fighting other community members. This erosion of shared identity and common purpose has undermined social cohesion, a concern highlighted in local studies and echoed by Rutoh *et al.* (2019), Bond (2014), Warurii (2015) and Namunyu *et al.* (2024) whose studies by extension illustrate how diminishing social capital leads to a decline in political efficacy, restricts social mobility, and heightens social unrest.

As asserted by Mukanda (2025), ethnic divisions many a times permeate public discourse and policy debates. They further postulate that consensus building on critical issues are often undermined by polarization and fragmentation of ethnic groups. During an interrogation of a key informant, the researcher was informed that ethnic polarization in Kenya has existed since the country attained its political sovereignty in the 1960s significantly contributing to fragmented Kenyan societies and undermines the realization of the country's economic development and peaceful coexistence of Kenya's ethnic groups. Additionally, the informant asserted that public discourse in Kenya has many at times been polarized on the basis of ethnicities with political rhetoric and inflammatory media reporting amplifying ethnic identities, grievances and divisions. The informant further submitted that ethnic polarization in regions like Laikipia County have been exploited by the political elites who use it to advance their own selfish interest, entrenching ethnic polarization. According to the key informant's own opinion, this creates a division and tense environment where

critical issues that affect the communities domiciled in Laikipia County are viewed through the lens of ethnicity which in most cases hinders economic advancements and serves as a potential trigger of inter-communal violence in the region.

4.2.4 Entrenched Ethnic Marginalization

Based on the findings drawn from the field data, the study established that cultural identities among the communities in Laikipia County influenced the persistent conflicts being experienced in the region. Specifically, the respondents explained that in extreme cases, grievances based on ethnic identities would escalate into violent conflicts. History is inundated with violent conflicts among various identities. Ethnically or religiously driven conflict where cultural identity becomes a launching pad for violence and aggression has been witnessed in different parts globally and our country is not an exception. A classic example is the post-election violence of 2007/2008 which was fought on the basis of ethnic identities. Accordingly, structural factors where some groups feel that they have been marginalized have fueled intergroup grievance leading to vicious cycle of violence in communities that are domiciled in Laikipia County.

Qualitative findings reveal that distrust and animosity among the communities in Laikipia County are fueled by variations in the socioeconomic status of the communities. As argued by Mwenda (2018), animosity is created when some members of the group perceive that they have been excluded or marginalized when it comes to development. This leads to distrust and in the community and may act as a bottleneck to forging a collective approach to address the challenges that are bedeviling the residents of Laikipia County. Violent clashes that stem from the community tend to inflict harm to every resident and by extension, may culminate in the displacement of people. The situation may get worse in the event that there is a deployment of law enforcement officers to address the conflicts leading to further instability and insecurity as other groups may feel that they are being targeted by the security forces. It has proven beyond reasonable doubt that conflict and violence between communities inflict profound challenges to social stability and cohesion, many a times springing from the deep-seated unresolved grievances, historical animosities or stiff competition over the scarcely available resources

The findings indicate that not everyone is entitled to enjoy any opportunity associated with economic development in Laikipia County. Some communities are perceived to be favored to the detriment of others. This is to suggest that economic disparities, skewed distribution of resources, unemployment and underemployment, disparities in resource allocation such as infrastructural development, educational facilities, health facilities, access to clean water and sanitation services are some of the key challenges faced by the residents of Laikipia with lack of the aforementioned resources leading to conflicts. The views corroborate World Bank (WB, 2020) as cited by Limo (2024) which observed that underdevelopment in some regions traceable to colonial period packaged with a legacy of ethnic divisions have pitted groups against each other. As such, political actors have exploited identity politics to mobilize support or deflect attention from governance failures, continuing a cycle of division and conflict within Laikipia County. Economic disparities have also played a significant role, with certain ethnic groups perceiving themselves as marginalized compared with others, leading to struggles over land, jobs, or access to basic services. Similarly, these views corroborate with Oyombra (2021) as cited by Limo (2024) who further observed that marginalization, real or perceived, of certain groups and regions based on any distinctions, breeds hatred, erodes trust, undermines national development and may ultimately escalate into open hostilities thereby undermining national cohesion. For example, the resources that could be used for development in the country are now used to mitigate the rising insecurities in the region.

In a way of summary, inter-ethnic conflicts being experienced in Laikipia County has severely affected education, health, and social infrastructure, particularly in rural areas. Conflict has often resulted in displacement, which has exacerbated issues of hunger due to the destruction of fields, markets, and resources. In their studies, Okapu (2013), Warurii (2015), Mutunga (2021) and Rutoh *et al.* (2019) highlighted in their studies on communal conflict and violence that such conflicts damage critical social amenities, resulting in serious development setbacks for affected communities, with ultimate end of undermining security in the region.

Also, the respondents added that ethnic marginalization was fueled by the perceived ethnic favoritism of some ethnicities in Laikipia County. As noted by Mukanda and colleagues, ethnic affiliations potentially influence hiring practices and business opportunities, leading to nepotism and discrimination. The study however observed that by extension, this restrains employment access and business prospects for other ethnic groups which not only affect the general economic productivity but also acts as a potential source of tensions between the favored and the marginalized ethnic groups.

The findings further indicate that ethnic marginalization in Laikipia County is fueled by perceive ethnic favoritism where some communities who are politically well represented receive many opportunities compared to the marginalized communities. Ethnic favoritism is also entrenched in the skewed distribution of resources where other communities are accorded more resources than others. Ethnic favoritism has fueled anger and dissatisfaction by some communities which in turn has become a source of tension among the ethnicities who are domiciled in Laikipia County. The findings corroborate with Mukanda (2025) whose study asserted that ethnic favoritism of some ethnic groups deepens ethnic divisions and fosters a sense of exclusion and marginalization among underprivileged communities.

Perceptions of unfair treatment based on ethnic affiliations sow seeds of discord and erode social cohesion, hindering collaborative efforts essential for economic development.

4.2.5 Radicalization and Extremism of Ethnic Groups

The study participants perceived that some communities in Laikipia County were propagating radicalization and extremisms among their members which in turn they exploited to launch an attack against other ethnic groups thus, contributing to the perpetuation of conflicts in Laikipia, especially those that are fought on the basis of ethnic lines. Radicalization and extremism among and between community members represents ambiguous social phenomenon that has a significant repercussion across the societies globally. As defined by Limo (2024), radicalization connotes the adoption of extreme ideologies by an individual or a group which on most occasions lead to the willingness to unleash violence in the pursuit of their interests. Citing Echelmeyer *et al.* (2023), Limo (2024) postulate that identity influences all intra- and intergroup dynamics, including nationalism, xenophobia, dehumanization, intergroup violence, and genocide can ensue because of radicalization. The authors add that in situations where identity problems emerge, peoples' social and personal functioning can be significantly affected. This process is not limited to any particular demographic but can affect individuals from diverse backgrounds, including religious, political, or social contexts. This can manifest in forms of extremism including banditry, where identity-based grievances are used to justify violent acts against perceived adversaries.

The study participants indicate the search for belonging often attract people to radicalization. A sense of belonging to a particular group offers platforms for emotional anchorage and social value thus promoting their self-concept. This resonates with Mutunga (2021) and Warurii (2015) whose studies observed that sense of belonging offered a strong sense of self worthiness which is associated with wellbeing of individuals. To this end those that perceive to be devalued within the society may join groups that will find them valuable for what they do including engaging in criminal activities. Accordingly, individuals with fused identity that is those who identify themselves from a group perspective may be willing to do anything for the community. Therefore, it is not surprising that those who perceive that they are marginalized would easily be radicalized.

As previously highlighted, radicalization process induces individuals or groups to adopt extreme ideologies; often leading to a willingness to use or endorse violence to achieve their goals is perceived to enhance devalued identities. Radicalization and extremism among community members have become significant concerns in today's society, particularly in areas like Laikipia County. Community members in the region who feel marginalized and oppressed have been more susceptible to extremist narratives that promise a sense of belonging. Accordingly, extremism may be seen a tool of empowerment, especially by those who are radicalized, and this encourages them to get involved in activities that may inflict harm on other communities. They do this with the hope of reclaiming their lost power or even to avenge for the atrocities committed to their community.

Accordingly, the advocates of extremism perceive that they could reclaim lost resources such as lost land water, and grazing rights through violent means. Accordingly, violence as a result of radicalized perceptions in the region may be seen as reactions to perceived transgressions such as discrimination and denial of opportunities based on a motivation to restore or develop a sense of power. To this end, violent behavior is exercised against other communities, including government authorities or rival ethnic groups thus the continued violence in the region.

The findings further reveal that even the security officers are not insulated from the menace of extremism and radicalization. Indeed, media reports have been flooded with news of fatalities among security agents and County government officials in the region. Adopting extreme beliefs and ideologies that justify the use of violence to achieve their goals appear to have become the order of the day. This explains why there is a prevalent of guns in the region, and the frequent use. This phenomenon poses a threat not only to national security but also to the social fabric of communities, including those in Laikipia County. Accordingly, feelings of being disenfranchised affirm to these ideologies taking root within the region's communities, socioeconomic disparities, political grievances, discrimination, and feelings of social isolation persists. The aftermath has been destabilization of communities and eroding trust in institutions, at both the Laikipia County, the communities from neighboring counties such as Turkana people, the Pokot community, the Samburu people, the Maasai, the Samburu, Kikuyu, the Kipsigis community of the Kalenjin people, and at the national level. It is important to take cognizant that trust, once broken can take years to rebuild, if it ever does, leading to long-term fractures in community relationships. This is perhaps what haunts Laikipia County, as the cycle of violence continues unabated in the region.

4.2.6 Conflicting Cultural Practices

The study respondents identified conflicting cultural practices and identities as a major cause of conflict in Laikipia County. Specifically, they related these traditions with the emotive and sensitive issue of land ownership. Therefore, this suggests that ethnic traditions and customs related to land ownership wields profound influence over security dynamics because many a times, they often dictate communal rights and responsibilities pertaining to land use,

tenure, and management practices, forming the bedrock of cultural identity and socioeconomic stability within communities. However, the interplay between these customs with contemporary challenges such as population growth, resource scarcity, and political dynamics can escalate tensions and Laikipia County is not an exception as depicted in the following sentiments;

In Laikipia County, ethnic traditions and customs associated with land ownership are deeply embedded in the social fabric and livelihoods of its diverse communities. Land in this region is not only a resource but a sense of heritage and foundation of the communities that are domiciled in the area. This has the implication, that ethnic dynamics will dictate the way land is used. Land is a critical resource for pastoralist and agricultural activities alike; therefore, the competition for it is quite intense owing to the fact that the region is mainly semi-arid. Ethnic groups that coexist in Laikipia County have developed intricate systems of land tenure and management based on centuries-old customs, which govern rights to access, use, and transfer land within their communities. These traditions not only define individual and communal identities but also serve as mechanisms for maintaining cohesion among the communities and peaceful resolution of conflicts. Accordingly, community land and private ranches own the largest portions of land in Laikipia County with the former held in trust by the County Government but with a few residents having private land ownership. Accordingly, community land ownership has been a source of conflict in the region. This is perhaps community owned land suggests that everyone is entitled to use, creating opportunity for in equal use based on individual or group capability. With foregoing assertions that that which is socially legitimate, community land has always been subjected to competition which makes it possible for the unequal power relations to continue unabated which in turn leads to violent conflicts. This suggests that conflict over the available scarce resource in Laikipia is not a shocking issue.

Resources remain the gateway to sustainable development, environmental stewardship, and geopolitical stability. Traditional economic practices many a times revolve around natural resources like land, water and pasture. When different ethnic groups compete for access to these resources, tensions can escalate into conflicts. Disputes over grazing land or agricultural plots can potentially undermine intergroup relations and threaten stability. Accordingly, Laikipia County being a semi-arid coupled with increase in population and changes in unpredictable climatic conditions is grappling with resource scarcity culminating in tensions which sometimes may turn bloody. To this end, resource-based conflicts are highly likely to take place in Laikipia County. The urge to control natural resources in the region appears to trigger tensions that lead to conflict hence insecurity. Accordingly, competition for scarce resources as depict in the sentiments coupled with disputes of ownership and ethnic transboundary disputes all combine to create conflicts in the region. The findings corroborate with Mutunga (2021) who observed that competition over scarce resources more specifically land, and water is a major source of conflict in semiarid areas. Similarly, Mwenda (2018) observed that competition for scarce resources contributes to political violence both within and between states. Indeed, Laikipia County has experienced insecurities for a significant period.

Historically, inter-ethnic tensions in Laikipia County have sparked owing to the fierce competition over natural resources, especially land and water. Laikipia County domiciles various ethnic communities, including the Pokot, Tugen, Maassai, Agikuyu, Kamba to mention but a few each with distinct cultural identities and resource needs. Consistent with these views are the assertions by Le *et al.*, (2022) cited by Limo (2024) who argue that fractionalization which describes the magnitude of diversity in a society, measured as the probability of two random individuals not being from the same group, creates tension in the distribution of resources that leads to conflict. Arguable, each group claiming right to resources amid scarcity heightens resource competition with possible conflict as a result. Further, land scarcity and the arid climate have been exacerbating these tensions, as pastoralist communities rely heavily on grazing land and water sources for their livelihoods. This coupled with population growth has intensified and climate change impacts worsen, pressure on these resources increases, often leading to disputes and sporadic violence.

As explained by Kut (2022), the issue of land conflict is still prevalent in Laikipia County due to contradictory land ownership. Land ownership and distribution have been a source of conflict for many years, especially between the pastoralists, ranchers and agriculturalists. Grazing lands have depreciated and with the presence of ranches, the pastoral land has become scarce and the mobility that was once enjoyed by the pastoralists has been restricted. This is informed by the fact that the commercial ranches have erected boundaries and is fenced thus, preventing access to grazing lands and water. This implies that when the pastoralists are in need of pasture, they are forced to trespass to access them. The changes in climate and competition for land resources have led to the encroachment on private lands which in most cases have turned violent as the ranch owners take measures to protect the ranches. The perennial drought in Laikipia County has to be blamed for the continuous violent confrontation between the pastoralists, agriculturalists and the ranch owners.

As explained by Chepkoiywo (2010), competition over scarce and dwindling natural resources that include water and pasture particularly in areas inhabited by pastoralists is a major factor that triggers conflicts. Natural resource degradation and competition has led to deadly conflicts particularly in Northern Kenya. Environmental scarcity leads to factors that propel conflict such migration, heightened sense of marginalization and ethnic tensions, pervasive poverty

and the decline in agricultural production. Worsening the situation is the lack of capacity of state institutions to respond to environmental scarcity, which results in focus being on survival rather than on innovative technologies that will respond to environmental crisis.

According to Warurii (2015), pastoralism, a socio-economic system adapted to thrive in marginal environments characterized by climatic variability and resource scarcity, presents significant economic value and holds latent potential, especially in arid and semi-arid regions. However, the state of knowledge concerning this sector remains weak. Economic constraints confronting pastoral communities give rise to numerous challenges with far-reaching ramifications, notably exacerbating tensions among inhabitants. Transaction costs incurred by these communities give rise to a complex web of interrelated issues, fostering an environment characterized by resource scarcity and heightened competition, ultimately precipitating conflict dynamics. At the very heart of these challenges lies fierce competition among pastoralist groups, driven by limited access to grazing lands and water sources. This competition worsens by limited access to processing facilities and markets due to prohibitive costs, fuels a cycle of overgrazing and resource depletion, threatening the sustainability of pastoral livelihoods. Moreover, intensified competition often escalates into violent clashes as herders vie for dwindling resources, underscoring the urgent need for intervention to avert further conflict escalation.

4.2.7 Ethnic Tensions

Regarding this, the respondents cited traditional economic livelihoods such as livestock rearing which they explained had a significant role in shaping and reshaping the security land scape of Laikipia County. Most of the communities domiciled in Laikipia County heavily rely on pastoralism to sustain their livelihood. This practice is intertwined with socio-cultural and economic dimensions. The close relationship between traditional economic activities and peaceful coexistence of the communities is epitomized by challenges such as inter-ethnic conflicts over grazing lands and water resources, incidents of cattle rustling, and the occasional weaponization of cultural norms to justify violence. These assertions were echoed during a focused group discussions with a group of Maasai elders where one of them posited the following;

Qualitative findings indicate that one of the main traditional economic activities in Laikipia is livestock rearing which not only serve as the main source of livelihood but also form part of the identity and heritage of these communities. However, dependence of livestock rearing as the main economic activity has intertwined with other security challenges that undermine the stability of the region. Specifically grazing lands and water sources create conflicts that lead to violent clashes. The resultant effect is cattle rustling which continues to undermine the security of Laikipia owing to its dynamic and complex nature. The findings corroborate with Warurii (2015) and Mutunga (2021) whose findings suggest that the pervasiveness of cattle rustling which has since turned bloody posts significant threat to the health and wellbeing of communities in North Rift region of Kenya. From the quote, with cattle rustling and retaliatory attacks becoming all too common, suggesting that all communities engage in fighting each other causing disharmony. The views further resonate with Lemin'gani (2017) and Mwenda (2018) whose studies observed that few communities, such as Tugen, who coexisted peacefully with Marakwet, have started attacking each other heightening insecurity in the region.

According to Gakuria (2013), patterns of conflicts can be discerned by the kind of occupation residents involve in. Regions occupied by the nomadic pastoralists have perennial conflict though not necessarily continuous. Nomadic pastoralists trigger conflict in other areas as they are in constant movement in search of pasture and water. The wide plains often experience conflict as they form points of contact between different nomadic pastoralists. For instance, agro-pastoralists and semi-nomadic pastoralists who may have exhausted their pastures and wanted further access may engage in conflict. To some extent recent attempt by the Government to create a settled life among the pastoralists has created a pattern whereby, people fight to own land individually as opposed to traditional communal ownership system. On the other hand, various groups that are engaged in activities such as roadside banditry, cattle raid and territorial control create another pattern of conflict. Bandits, mercenaries and raider create a situation of insecurity which further aggregate conflicts.

Additionally, the norms and traditions that govern livestock ownership in Laikipia County have worsened security risks. Cultural practices in the region that uphold the honor and prestige associated with cattle ownership have sometimes been manipulated to justify acts of aggression or retaliation, further complicating efforts to mitigate conflicts. Making the situation further complex is the proliferation of small arms and light weapons heightening insecurity in the region. The influence of guns in the militarization and insecurity amongst cattle rustlers of North Rift (Mkutu, 2019)) has been closely linked to insecurity in Laikipia County. These weapons are not only used in conflicts over resources but also contribute to a broader culture of violence and lawlessness. The easy availability of firearms has empowered criminal elements within these communities, leading to instances of cattle rustling, banditry, and attacks on settlements (Bond, 2014). Consequently, such dire situations have made residents to live in constant fear of being targeted which has weakened the trust in law enforcement personnel as well as local structures of governance.

The findings further suggest that Laikipia County is constantly under threat, especially that which emanates from cattle rustling. The overreliance on livestock farming as the main economic activity denies the residents of Laikipia County opportunities for economic prosperity. Lack of economic diversification is associated with increased vulnerability as overexploitation of resources leads to depletion that influences degradation of resources and climate change. This dilemma of climate change and environmental degradation raises several security concerns as it significantly increases the likelihood of food insecurity, conflicts, and crimes and forced displacement (Chelang'a, & Chesire, 2020; Bond, 2014; Warurii, 2015). Laikipia County has experienced some of these challenges. For example, there has been forced displacement of population in some sections of the County. Field observations made by the researcher reveal that there were several wards that were sparsely populated with many abandoned homes, and without a single chief's, sub-county or county officer's office operating. This could be due to forced displacement. As previously stated displacement is intertwined with conflict and is linked to other drivers of social instability such as cultural discords, inequalities and injustices among others.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

The study analyzed the contribution of ethnic dynamics to intractable conflicts in Laikipia County, Kenya. The findings demonstrate that persistent conflicts in the county are not merely manifestations of ethnic diversity but are products of deeply embedded structural, political, socioeconomic, and historical factors that reinforce ethnic divisions. Specifically, the study established that unresolved historical land injustices, Ethnicised politics, unequal distribution of resources, ethnic marginalization, ethnic fragmentation and polarization, conflicting cultural practices, and the radicalization of ethnic identities collectively sustain cycles of violence and insecurity in the county. The findings further reveal that these ethnic dynamics are mutually reinforcing. Historical grievances and perceived marginalization intensify competition over land, water, and grazing resources, while political elites exploit ethnic identities to mobilize support and perpetuate divisions during electoral and resource allocation processes. Consequently, social cohesion, trust, and inter-community cooperation have significantly weakened, thereby creating fertile ground for recurrent conflicts and undermining socioeconomic development. Conclusively, sustainable peace in Laikipia County cannot be achieved solely through coercive security interventions. Rather, durable peace requires comprehensive structural transformation that addresses the underlying political, economic, institutional, and historical drivers of conflict.

5.2 Recommendation

The Government of Kenya and the County Government of Laikipia should prioritize the resolution of historical land injustices through transparent land governance, equitable resource allocation, and effective dispute resolution mechanisms to reduce longstanding grievances that fuel inter-ethnic conflicts. The National Cohesion and Integration Commission (NCIC), county government, religious organizations, and civil society should strengthen inter-community dialogue, reconciliation programs, and peace building initiatives to foster social cohesion and rebuild trust among ethnic communities. The government should promote inclusive governance by ensuring equitable representation, fair distribution of development resources, and equal access to employment and public services to address perceptions of ethnic marginalization and exclusion. National and county governments should invest in education, infrastructure, livelihood opportunities, and youth empowerment programs to reduce socioeconomic inequalities, unemployment, and vulnerability to ethnic radicalization and violence. Finally, security agencies, National Government Administration Officers, and local peace committees should strengthen community-based early warning and rapid response systems to detect emerging tensions and prevent conflicts before they escalate into violence. The study recommends that both the national and devolved government of Laikipia should initiate programs that foster inter-ethnic dialogue that promotes peaceful coexistence and harmony. These programs should be well-coordinated and all-inclusive and their implementation should be expedited.

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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