

## ISSUE BRIEF

# Climate-Driven Land Conflict in Rwanda: Challenges, Risks, and Opportunities for Peace

SEARCH  
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GROUND

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**At a Glance:** The changing climate and rapid population growth are impacting the availability of farmland in Rwanda and an increase in conflicts over land use and ownership, especially when coupled with dissatisfaction over government policies. However, investments by the government of Rwanda, Rwanda's network of civil society organizations, and a growing international focus on climate change adaptation present opportunities to prevent and mitigate conflicts over land. Search for Common Ground (Search) convened academics and peacebuilding and policy practitioners in Kigali in November 2021 to examine opportunities to address emerging issues at the intersection of land, climate and conflict. Participants strongly aligned around the need to develop inclusive, participatory, and sustainable responses and adaptation to climate change issues that consider the dynamics of conflict over land in Rwanda.

In the post-genocide period and in reaction to the politicization and inter-communal tensions spurred by land ownership policies during colonial rule, the Rwandan government codified many protections related to land rights, especially for women and related to inheritance. While these efforts set out a framework for land use regulation, current trends like the declining availability of farmable land due to climate change, a lack of understanding of land use policies, and a growing population, combined with intrafamilial tensions over land ownership, continue to fuel conflict over land in Rwanda. Despite the challenges presented by rapid population growth and density, the Rwandan government and development bodies have embarked on sweeping efforts to build future industry and support economic development, but challenges remain that require comprehensive attention from all parts of Rwandan society.

As a component of our ongoing work to identify and amplify the perspectives of local experts on emerging conflict issues in Africa, Search, in collaboration with the University of INES-Ruhengeri and with the support of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, convened a diverse array of Rwandan academics, peacebuilding practitioners, and government representatives (including from the Rwanda Transport Development Authority, Forestry Agency, Ministry of Local Administration, and featuring a presentation by the Rwanda Land Management and Use Authority [RLMUA]) to gather their insights on drivers and dynamics of land conflict in the country, as well as opportunities to address these issues. The findings of this convening are bolstered by interviews and consultations with a wide array of civil society organizations, researchers, and officials from Rwanda and the broader international community.

## Key conflict challenges and risks related to land in Rwanda

Consulted experts identified a variety of present and potential drivers of conflict over land, with the following key risks and challenges related to land standing out as consistent themes:

- **Climate change and agricultural practices degrade farmland, decreasing availability and leading to competition over resources.** Changing rainfall patterns, rising temperatures, soil degradation caused by heavy use of chemical fertilizers and mono-cropping, and a number of other factors associated with climate change and unsustainable agricultural practices have seriously decreased both the amount of arable land in Rwanda and the productivity of cultivated land.<sup>1,2</sup> More than three quarters of the country's area is now threatened by soil erosion, which degrades land productivity. These risks are compounded by rising temperatures and shorter, more extreme rainy seasons, leading to worsening and more frequent floods and droughts. Population growth of

<sup>1</sup> Jennifer Maria Olson, "Land Degradation in Rwanda: Its Extent and Impact," in *Assessing the Extent, Cost and Impact of Land Degradation at the National Level: Findings and Lessons Learned from Seven Pilot Case Studies*, ed. Jennifer Maria Olson (Bonn: The Global Mechanism of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> "Climate Change Profile: Rwanda," Climate Change Profile: Rwanda § (2018), <https://reliefweb.int/report/rwanda/climate-change-profile-rwanda>

around 2.5% per year further exacerbates the pressure on and decreasing availability of land, as residential areas expand into agricultural land.<sup>3</sup> With over 70% of Rwandans reliant on subsistence agriculture,<sup>4</sup> the declining availability and fragmentation of productive land triggers conflict amongst farmers and between farmers and the Rwandan state over land access and rights.<sup>5</sup>

- **When perceived as burdensome or onerous, conservation and land protection efforts lead to dissatisfaction or frustration.** Though climate change presents serious risks to livelihoods and food systems, environmental protection or climate change adaptation efforts themselves play a role in exacerbating or triggering violent conflict. Citizens perceive many of the climate adaptation actions promoted by the Rwandan government, such as collecting rainwater for irrigation and using gas instead of wood for cooking, as expensive, unnecessary, or overly complicated, contributing to resentment and frustration toward the government's policies. As in many parts of the world, tensions around land use have often emerged around government-sanctioned parks and protected areas and agriculturalists who want to graze livestock, cultivate the land, or harvest natural resources; in other cases, historically marginalized groups living in forests were relocated from protected land and resettled in other areas, sometimes causing tensions between host communities and the newcomers.<sup>6</sup> Observers report that contested claims between local communities and the Rwandan state over land, water, and timber prove to be persistent drivers of conflict in all of the country's protected areas. While conflicts over protected land in Rwanda generally do not become violent, potential securitization of protected land does pose serious risks.
- **National policies and legal frameworks governing land are misunderstood and inconsistently applied, leading to tensions and grievances.** Rwandan farmers and ordinary citizens lack awareness and understanding of land laws and policies, which frequently results in resentment or distrust of government actions. This is especially true when the Rwandan government deploys its expropriation laws, which allow the government to seize private land "due to public interest" so long as "fair" and "just" compensation is provided to the original property owners.<sup>7,8</sup> Landowners often feel their property is undervalued by the state-contracted valuation companies or that they are unfairly compensated for land seized, and households subject to expropriation often face significant declines in monthly income.<sup>9</sup> In early 2020 the Kigali municipal government built multi-story houses in Nyarugunga, Kicukiro district and offered apartments in the Gasabo district to compensate households whose property was seized; conflict arose between some people targeted for expropriation and the municipal government because people who lost property did not see the housing compensation as equal to the original value of their land, and wanted cash compensation instead. This dispute was drawn out over several months and ultimately required court intervention and a mandated mediation session between the residents of Gasabo and the city government. While expropriation is most often carried out in the interest of infrastructure development, on numerous occasions private property has been seized for the purpose of conserving native wetlands, which raised similar issues related to fair and timely compensation.<sup>10,11</sup>
- **Interfamilial tensions over land, especially involving women and youth, contribute to breakdowns in social cohesion.** While legal frameworks in Rwanda codify women's land ownership rights, many women are unaware of these guarantees or face continued exclusion from decision-making processes, especially in rural areas where laws are not fully implemented. In particular, women in informal domestic partnerships, which account for 34% of couples in Rwanda, lack some of the guarantees to decision-making around land to which

<sup>3</sup> "Population Growth (Annual %) - Rwanda." World Bank Group. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.GROW?locations=RW>.

<sup>4</sup> "Agriculture and Food Security: Rwanda," U.S. Agency for International Development, April 19, 2017, <https://www.usaid.gov/rwanda/agriculture-and-food-security>.

<sup>5</sup> Demetriou, Demetris. "Land Fragmentation." *Springer Theses*, 2013, 11–37. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-02347-2\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-02347-2_2).

<sup>6</sup> Alfred Bizoza and Madina Ndagiza, "USAID LAND Project," USAID (2013),

[https://www.land-links.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/USAID\\_Land\\_Tenure\\_Rwanda\\_Policy\\_Research\\_Brief\\_No-1.pdf](https://www.land-links.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/USAID_Land_Tenure_Rwanda_Policy_Research_Brief_No-1.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> "GOVERNING LAND IN RWANDA," LAW N° 43/2013, Republic of Rwanda (2013).

<sup>8</sup> "RELATING TO EXPROPRIATION IN THE PUBLIC INTEREST," LAW N° 18/2007, Republic of Rwanda (2007).

<sup>9</sup> Hadley Rose et al., "The Implementation of Rwanda's Expropriation Law and Its Outcomes on the Population," prepared for World Bank Conference on Land and Poverty, (Washington DC, March 14-18, 2016).

[https://www.land-links.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/USAID\\_Land\\_Tenure\\_World\\_Bank\\_2016\\_Rwanda\\_Expropriation\\_Law.pdf](https://www.land-links.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/USAID_Land_Tenure_World_Bank_2016_Rwanda_Expropriation_Law.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> James Peter Nkurunziza, "Government Earmarks Rwf11bn to Expropriate Swamp Dwellers," *The New Times | Rwanda* (*The New Times*, May 9, 2019), <https://www.newtimes.co.rw/news/government-earmarks-rwf11bn-expropriate-swamp-dwellers>

<sup>11</sup> Daniel Sabiiti, "MPs Concerned about Poor Expropriation Plan of Gikondo Industrial Park," *KT PRESS* (KT PRESS, October 21, 2021), <https://www.ktpress.rw/2021/10/mps-concerned-about-poor-expropriation-plan-of-gikondo-industrial-park/>

married women have legal rights. Intimate partner violence is also linked to tensions or disputes over land rights: in a recent study, some Rwandan women reported experiencing violence after disagreeing with their partner's decision to sell land and being perceived as "siding with [their partner's] enemy in a land dispute."<sup>12</sup> Additionally, young people's access to land is predicted to be a growing driver of conflict in the future. With families forced to divide their already modest land holdings into smaller plots, conflict often arises between siblings or children and parents over the size and quality of land partitions and ownership decisions. As in many middle income countries, youth (people under age 35) make up the majority of the population of Rwanda,<sup>13</sup> and the country's remarkable population density - the highest in Africa - only compounds the conflict risks associated with land fragmentation.<sup>14</sup> As a result, many young Rwandans face a future of limited economic prospects and competition with peers and family over land.

*Declining availability and productivity of farmland - exacerbated by a changing climate and rapidly growing population - will increasingly drive conflict in Rwanda, but the international focus on climate adaptation, combined with civil society participation in land use reform efforts, offer opportunities to address and prevent conflict over land.*

## Opportunities and recommendations for preventing and transforming conflict related to land

Convening participants and consulted experts offered a number of **recommendations** for national, regional, and international actors to stem these risks and capitalize on identified opportunities:

- **Develop inclusive, participatory, and sustainable responses and adaptation to climate change that consider the dynamics of conflict over land in Rwanda.** The Rwandan government has already identified opportunities to address climate change. For example, as part of its "Vision 2020" development framework, the Rwandan government committed to reverse deforestation by increasing tree cover in the country to 30%, a goal reached by 2019.<sup>15</sup> Rwanda's "Nationally Determined Contributions" climate action plan, published in 2020, includes ambitious plans to reduce carbon emissions by 38% in a wide variety of sectors, including land use, and allocates more than 11 billion USD towards climate change resilience and adaptation.<sup>16</sup> Through these plans and adaptation efforts, Rwanda is establishing itself as a leader on sustainable development in East Africa and drawing support from actors around the globe. With international policymakers similarly seized with and dedicating attention to these issues - demonstrated in the African Union's Agenda 2063, Sustainable Development Goals, Glasgow Climate Pact, and USAID's climate strategy for 2022-2030 - there is an opportunity for collaborative approaches to address land conflict within climate adaptation. International organizations and financial institutions also have a critical role to play in addressing the impacts, and should support Rwandan society to meet the challenges of climate change and peacefully resolve conflicts that will inevitably arise.
  - In implementing its climate action plan, the Rwandan government should consult civil society organizations, academics, and expert practitioners to design climate actions that consider potential conflicts over land and enact preventative or mitigation measures. This plan should be complemented by strategic communications to increase public understanding of and buy-in to its policies and initiatives.
  - Private sector companies and regional and international actors, such as the East African Community (EAC) and Common Market for East and Southern Africa (COMESA) should invest in conflict sensitive and climate responsive adaptations to farming technologies and techniques, land use for agriculture and livestock, and other practices, and identify joint plans for climate adaptation.

<sup>12</sup> Hughes, Ailey K, and Amanda Richardson, "Land and Gender-Based Violence: Experiences from Rwanda and Liberia," Focus on Land in Africa, January 2015.

<sup>13</sup> "Rwanda demographic and health survey 2019-20," National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda - NISR, Ministry of Health - MOH, and ICF, 2021.

<sup>14</sup> "Population Density (People per Sq. Km of Land Area) - Sub-Saharan Africa," The World Bank | Data (World Bank Group),

[https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/EN.POP.DNST?locations=ZG&most\\_recent\\_value\\_desc=true](https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/EN.POP.DNST?locations=ZG&most_recent_value_desc=true)

<sup>15</sup> Michel Nkurunziza, "Rwanda Reaches 30% Forest Cover Target," *The New Times*, November 2, 2019.

<https://www.newtimes.co.rw/news/rwanda-reaches-30-forest-cover-target>

<sup>16</sup> "Updated Nationally Determined Contribution," Updated Nationally Determined Contribution § (2020).

- International development cooperation agencies and financial institutions should support the Rwandan government and society to address climate-related challenges by providing funding, technical assistance and expertise, equipment, and capacity building to enable transitions to climate-adaptive practices.
- **Coordinate dialogue and engagement between Rwandan academics, CSOs, and state actors on new approaches to land conflict issues.** Rwanda hosts a robust community of researchers and practitioners ready and interested to engage in productive dialogues focused on land and land conflict. Throughout Search's consultations with 49 Rwandan stakeholders, participants consistently emphasized the need for sustained dialogue and integrated approaches combining different sectors on the topic of land conflict.
  - The Rwandan government, with the support of private sector and regional and international partners, should engage in and commission thorough evaluations of the impact of land use policies on Rwandan farmers and landowners, especially as climate stressors increase.
  - Rwandan academics and civil society organizations, with the support of international donors and aid agencies, should continue to engage in research on key sources and impacts of land conflict in Rwanda and share recommendations directly with government ministries.
  - Supported by international donors, peacebuilding organizations, Rwandan civil society groups, and state actors should continue to foster sustained engagement to resolve land-related disputes at the community level. This could include training mediators and government representatives at the sector and cell levels, strengthening understanding and application of dispute resolution strategies in communities, and working with the Rwandan government to promote local solutions to emerging tensions.
- **Promote consistent implementation, thorough monitoring, and adaptation of land laws and policies in Rwanda.** For nearly two decades, the government of Rwanda has engaged in broad reforms to the country's land laws, policies, and management systems, resulting in: implementation of the National Land Policy in 2004 and a revised version of the policy in 2019, which retooled the country's land administration, planning and mapping, and land use management; the passage of the Organic Land Law in 2005 (revised in 2013 and reviewed in 2021); a country-wide digital land mapping and titling project completed between 2008 and 2012; and the establishment of Land Commission representation at cell and sector levels, as well as the RLMUA. With these efforts, the Rwandan government demonstrates a willingness to reform laws and policies related to land, and should seek inputs from civil society organizations and individual citizens in adapting and implementing these policies, especially with a view to adapt to climate change.
  - The RLMUA, in collaboration with the Ministry of Agriculture and private sector companies, should provide opportunities for farmers and landowners, as well as civil society organizations, to comment on existing laws and policies, share feedback on new or revised frameworks, and influence how these mechanisms are implemented. The RLMUA should also work with academics and civil society organizations to deploy information campaigns about land laws and policies to ensure wider understanding of these frameworks.
  - Rwandan civil society organizations and women's networks, in collaboration with the RLMUA and the Gender Monitoring Office, should strengthen efforts to ensure that rights and protections granted to Rwandan women are well understood and enforced, and that women are provided avenues to seek support when tensions over land ownership arise.
  - The international community, including institutions like the World Bank and regional bodies like the EAC, should support the Rwandan government to harmonize its land use policies and facilitate shared learning from conservation and environmental protection efforts.