LAND-at-scale

Project Brief: Land at Scale Uganda.

Transforming Customary Land Governance in Uganda: Experiences and Lessons from Community-Based Land Registration and Land Use Planning.



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GLOBAL LAND TOOL NETWORK

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Acronyms

ADR	Alternative dispute resolution
ALC	Area Land Committee
RVO	Netherlands Enterprise and Development Agency
CCO	Certificate of Customary Ownership
DLG	District Local Government
DLB	District Land Board
DLO	District Land Office
DPPC	District Physical Planning Committee
EKN	Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands
GLTN	Global Land Tool Network
GPS	Global positioning system
IEC	Information, education and communication
IIRR	International Institute of Rural Reconstruction
JLOS	Justice Law and Order Sector
LAS	Land-at-Scale
LC	Local council
MLHUD	Ministry of Lands Housing and Urban Development
MoFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Kingdom of the Netherlands
NLP	National land policy
PELAM	Participatory Ecological Land-Use Management – Uganda
SPCC	Subcounty Physical Planning Committees
UCOBAC	Uganda Community-Based Association for Women and Children Welfare
VGGTs	Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security

1 Introduction

The United Nations Human Settlements Programme UN-Habitat and the Global Land Tool Network (GLTN) have collaborated for over four years on the Land-at-Scale Programme. The programme is funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of the Netherlands and implemented by the Netherlands Enterprise and Development Agency (RVO).

Since 2021, GLTN has worked in partnership with the Uganda Community Based Association for Women and Children Welfare, Makerere University, and the International Institute of Rural Reconstruction to implement the Land-at-Scale-supported project titled "Scaling up Community-Based Land Registration and Land-Use Planning on Customary Land in Uganda". This initiative is being implemented in the Kyoga Plains (Butaleja) area of south-western Uganda (Kabale and Rubanda), and in the West Nile region (Adjumani), in close collaboration with local authorities and the Ministry of Lands, Housing and Urban Development of Uganda.

Throughout the course of this project, the partners gained unique insights through hands-on work with communities and continuous mutual learning. As part of the knowledge-management component of the Land-at-Scale Programme, the partners engaged in a structured reflection process designed and facilitated by KIT Institute to capture and synthesize these insights. This process included a series of in-person and virtual reflection workshops, culminating in a write-shop in which the team collectively analysed their experiences, methodologies and achievements, distilling them into key lessons learned.

This document contains the outcomes of that reflection and is intended to serve as a valuable knowledge resource for like-minded organizations, governments and donors interested in community-based land registration and land-use planning on customary land.

The document begins with a brief overview of the land tenure context in Uganda and the core issues the project was intended to address. It features an outline of the project's objectives and approaches, followed by the main results and the methodologies used to achieve them. The document concludes with key lessons learned — insights that are critical for the ongoing implementation of the project and for informing future initiatives in similar contexts.

2 Contextual framework

Land is one of the most vital resources for a country's social, economic and political development and plays a central role in empowering women and promoting gender equality. In Uganda, land — including wetlands — is fundamental to the livelihoods of most citizens, as agriculture is the backbone of the national economy. Approximately 64.3 per cent of the country's workforce is employed in the agricultural sector, which contributes about 23 per cent to the gross domestic product and accounts for 70 per cent of export earnings.[1] To achieve food security and reduce poverty, it is essential to resolve issues related to land access, tenure security and the sustainable and productive use of land and natural resources. To do this, any poverty reduction strategy must prioritize the strengthening of rights and opportunities that stem from land ownership and agricultural activity.

The land dispute-resolution system in Uganda functions through two parallel frameworks: the customary system, based on local traditions and norms, and the statutory system, governed by formal legislation. More than 80 per cent of land in the country is held under customary tenure, yet many communities and families do not have formal documentation on their land rights. This contributes significantly to the high incidence of land disputes. In rural Uganda, land conflicts —often between neighbours, family members or clans — are widespread.[2] It is estimated that land disputes constitute around 70 per cent of all legal cases, though many conflicts go unreported, and approximately 25 per cent of rural farms are engaged in some form of land dispute.[3]

Women, young people and vulnerable groups, including persons with disabilities, are disproportionately affected by land-related challenges.[4] Traditional norms, gender roles and discriminatory practices often hinder women's ability to access, own or inherit land. Additionally, unequal access to land administration services and legal structures further restricts their land rights.



Project site in Kabaale Hills where Agriculture is heavily practiced (Source: Makerere University)

1 Uganda Bureau of Statistics (2023). Statistical abstract report. Available at: www.ubos.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/2023-Statistical-Abstract.pdf [Accessed 18 August 2025].
2 Ashukem, J.-C. N. (2020). Land grabbing and customary land rights in Uganda: A critical reflection of the constitutional and legislative right to land. International Journal on Minority and Group Rights, 27(1); pp. 121–147. www.jstor.org/stable/26868025.
3 Armi Korhonen, Martin Gramatikov, Rodrigo Núñez and Borja Gutierrez (2020). Customer Journey. Deep Dive into Land Justice in Uganda. Kingdom of the Netherlands: The Hague Institute for Innovation of Law.
4 Uganda Community Based Association for Women and Children Welfare, National Land Coalition Uganda and Youthplus (2023). Youth and land governance in Uganda: Issues and recommendations.



Rice Farmers in Butaleja District (Source: UCOBAC)

The processes for registering land, particularly under customary tenure, are frequently unclear, inconsistent or contradictory.

A significant portion of the population of Uganda, especially in the Kyoga Plains, depends on wetlands for their livelihoods. However, these wetlands are under increasing threat from encroachment, primarily for rice farming, and this calls for a sustainable approach to wetlands management. Compounding the issue is uncoordinated development, which often goes ahead without adequate planning, resulting in conflicting land uses and disorganized settlements. While the Physical Planning Act (2010) designates the entire country as a planning area, implementation is limited. Most planning is conducted in a top-down manner, hampering effective execution. Institutions responsible for land administration and physical planning — such as district land offices, area land committees, subcounty physical planning committees and district land boards — face significant capacity constraints, including inadequate financial, technical and human resources.

The influx of refugees from South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and, more recently, Sudan has further intensified pressure on land and natural resources in refugee-hosting districts, particularly in the West Nile region. Competing land-use needs for settlement, food production and energy highlight the necessity of integrating refugee concerns into broader land-use planning frameworks. In Uganda, land-use planning and tenure security are often addressed in isolation. However, the two are closely interconnected and must be treated as complementary elements of sustainable development. Although the law provides for the registration of customary land at the subcounty level, many subcounties face barriers to implementation. These include inadequate infrastructure (such as electricity and storage facilities), limited human capacity and the physical security of land records.

Currently, customary land registration data have not yet been integrated into the National Land Information System. However, the Ministry of Lands, Housing and Urban Development, with support from the World Bank, is enhancing the system to include Customary Certificates of Occupancy. To address these challenges, the Land-at-Scale project in Uganda features participatory, fit-for-purpose and gender-responsive land tools. These tools are tailored to align with customary norms and practices, ensuring inclusive and sustainable land governance.

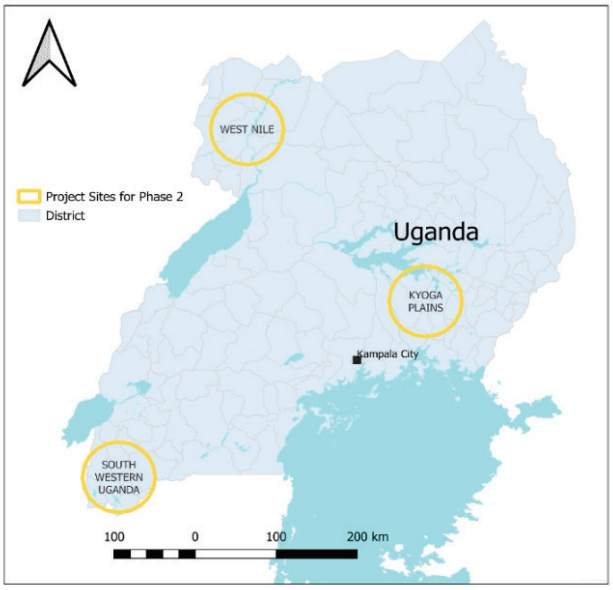
The project was implemented regionally through partnerships with local organizations: the Uganda Community Based Association for Women and Children's Welfare worked in Butaleja and Rubanda districts, while Makerere University led efforts in Kabale and Adjumani districts. In both areas there was close collaboration with local government authorities to ensure alignment with regional needs and priorities.

3 Objectives and approaches

Considering the number of issues described in the previous section, the Land-at-Scale project is intended to enhance the security of tenure and to promote sustainable land use for men, women and young people on customary land by fostering the development of a structured and scalable approach that is achieved using participatory and fit-for-purpose tools and methods. The sustainability of the intervention will be ensured by enhancing the capacity of land-related government institutions at the local and national levels. The project encompasses land registration and land-use planning for host communities in the West Nile region, as land-related conflicts are on the rise. The specific objectives of the project are to:

- Improve tenure security for men, women and young people
- Ensure inclusive, climate-smart and sustainable land-use planning
- Improve capacities and awareness of key land stakeholders on customary land registration and land-use planning

An aim of the project is to improve land tenure security and land use for at least 30,000 smallholder farmers on customary lands in three identified regions: south-western Uganda (Zone 1), the Kyoga Plains (Zone 2) and the West Nile Region (Zone 3).



The Land at Scale Project Sites in Uganda (Source: UN-Habitat - Land-at-Scale, Uganda)

The project features fit-for-purpose land tools and approaches. These tools are participatory and offer a transformative approach to land administration that is particularly well-suited for the unique challenges faced in land registration in Uganda. The fit-for-purpose land administration approach provides a cost-effective, faster and adaptable alternative to traditional land administration methods, which are often expensive, slow and rigid, making them less effective in securing tenure rights for all. The fit-for-purpose approach is inclusive and is designed to meet the immediate needs of people and the environment.

4 Main results and methodological paths

This section contains an outline of the key results achieved by partners during the implementation of the project up to the end of 2024. It provides an analysis of the methodological approaches adopted, highlighting how these have enabled partners to identify key challenges and the most effective strategies to address them. The section also has a critical reflection on the rationale behind these strategies, the changes that have occurred, the challenges that remain, and the underlying reasons explaining why they remain.

4.1 Improved Household Tenure Security.

In Uganda, land is predominantly held under customary tenure and is largely unregistered. This lack of formal documentation undermines tenure security, sustainable land-use planning, environmental and ecosystem management, and effective resolution of land conflicts. Communities often rely on informal sale agreements, which weaken state guarantees and complicate land administration and management. These challenges are further aggravated by negative perceptions of formal land registration and the complex, costly procedures involved in the registration process.

The Land-at-Scale project enabled customary land rights to be registered and documented with the issuance of Certificates of Customary Ownership to community members, and featured fit-for-purpose and participatory methods for land registration, demarcation and documentation. Notably, the concept of joint ownership was introduced, allowing multiple family members —including husbands, wives, children and siblings — to be listed on the certificates. This approach significantly enhanced tenure security for entire households.

The Certificates of Customary Ownership are legally binding and serve as conclusive proof of ownership as stipulated under Section 8(1) of the Land Act (Cap 236). As of December 2024, 18,997 land parcels have been mapped and documented, benefiting 22,372 individuals; of these individuals, 12,104 were male, 10,268 were female, and 6,806 were young people. In total, 13,677 Certificates of Customary Ownership have been issued for 8,079 males, 6,596 females and 5,136 young people, and the remaining 5,320 certificates are in the process of being generated. Support for registration efforts will still be supported through the project until August 2026 to reach the target of 25,000 certificates.

- These results were achieved through several key strategic activities, including the following: community mobilization and stakeholder engagement
- Awareness-raising and sensitization on land rights and gender equity
- Training of key stakeholders, such as: area land committees, district land offices, district land boards, subcounty chiefs, local and district physical planning committees and mediation/ alternative dispute-resolution committees
- Mapping and documentation of land rights using fit-for-purpose tools, including the Social Tenure Domain Model
- Review and approval of applications by physical planning committees and district land boards
- Preparation and issuance of Certificates of Customary Ownership

As a result, local stakeholders actively participated throughout the project, significantly contributing to community awareness, especially on gender equality, women's land rights and land laws. This broad-based engagement encouraged communities to apply for land documentation, leading to the mapping and demarcation of land parcels and the mediation of land disputes.

All mapping and dispute-resolution processes were conducted in the presence of community witnesses, including neighbours, area land committee members, village chairpersons, traditional leaders and other stakeholders. Once approved by the district land board, the Certificates of Customary Ownership were issued, providing legal evidence of ownership.



Mapping of Parcels for CCO processing in Butaleja (Source: UCOBAC)

4.1.1. Challenges Encountered and Strategies Employed During Project Implementation

Several challenges were encountered during the project cycle and key strategies were adopted to address them:

a. Slow community buy-in

Community acceptance was slow due to the following factors:

(i) Political interference — some political leaders discouraged support for the project, expressing concerns about potential ulterior motives by the Government of Uganda, such as fears of future taxation or land loss; some perceived government interventions as being a pretext for land acquisition.

(ii) Perceived tenure security — many community members felt secure in their land rights due to generational occupation, despite lacking formal documentation.

(iii) Distrust due to past experiences — unfulfilled, delayed or less impactful promises from previous projects led to scepticism about the project.

Strategy: The project team conducted continuous sensitization campaigns through local radio channels and engaged local leaders to clarify the project's objectives and benefits. Success stories from other districts / subcounties were leveraged to build trust and demonstrate the value of land registration.

b. Community mistrust of the project's legitimacy

Land grabbing and irregular land transactions are common in Uganda and these fuelled mistrust about the intentions of the project implementors. Although the project fee of UGX 10,000 (US$ 3) per certificate was significantly lower than the typical UGX 3 million (US$ 800) fee for processing land titles, the low fee raised suspicion; however, the UGX 10,000 was only an application fee and the project grant covered other expenses such as land inspection and district land board sittings.

Strategy: Local leaders sensitized communities, explaining that other costs were fully covered through the project, which helped alleviate fears and encouraged participation. The fact that fees were paid to local government and were reinvested in community development further built confidence. Success stories within the community also helped to overcome mistrust.

c. Limited capacity and infrastructure of local land institutions

Local land management bodies — area land committees, recorders, district land offices and district land boards — are mandated by law to register customary land but have capacity gaps. Politicized recruitment and inadequate qualification requirements result in the appointment of personnel with insufficient technical skills. Additionally, these institutions lack essential infrastructure, such as storage space, global positioning satellite equipment and physical documents filing facilities.

Strategy: Customized training programmes were created to build technical skills for the registration of Certificates of Customary Ownership, using practical exercises, translated materials and local languages. The project recruited young, motivated, local people as mapping volunteers to support institutions with technology and to give ongoing assistance. Infrastructure was improved through renovations and the provision of filing cabinets, tablets, GPS devices and computers.

d. Bulk processing of applications for Certificates of Customary Ownership

The project's ambitious targets required the processing and approval of large batches of applications for certificates, however existing legal provisions only permitted sporadic approvals, resulting in slower, costlier processes. Some district land boards, such as at Kabale, were initially reluctant to adopt bulk approval, causing delays.

Strategy: Tailored training sessions led by the Ministry of Lands, Housing and Urban Development clarified the bulk approval process. This approach has since been recognized by the ministry as a best practice for project settings.

e. Deeply entrenched discriminatory gender norms

Customary law often excludes women from land ownership, contrary to statutory law, which negatively impacts women's tenure security and hinders project goals.

Strategy: A gender-transformative approach was adopted for the project which featured the design of targeted sessions with local stakeholders — including district land officers, environment officers, gender advocates, and subcounty leaders — on the benefits of equitable land rights. These efforts fostered mindset changes, leading to more families jointly registering land and making collective decisions regarding land use and proceeds.

f. Limited financial resources among beneficiaries

Though willing to contribute to registration costs, some community members had financial constraints and competing priorities.

Strategy: Local leaders allowed for the gradual payment of application fees over time, up to the issuance of the Certificate of Customary Ownership. The UGX 10,000 fee was split into UGX 5,000 as an application fee and UGX 5,000 payable on collection of the certificate, enabling more people to complete payments.

g. Corruption among land actors

Unscrupulous actors solicited bribes for services such as application processing and land mapping, causing community disillusionment.

Strategy: Local authorities quickly intervened by intensifying community sensitization through posters, radio messages and public notices clarifying the official fees and authorized personnel.

Remaining challenges

Despite significant progress, some challenges persist, including the following:

- Absence of legal provisions to support bulk approval of Certificates of Customary Ownership applications
- Insufficient infrastructure for land institutions
- Ongoing land disputes among community members
- Negative attitudes among some communities toward land registration
- High turnover of land institution personnel
- Continued difficulties with community buy-in and political interference

4.2 Development of Physical Development Plans (land and wetland).

Land-use planning is a critical component of land management that promotes organized, harmonious and sustainable land use while safeguarding natural resources, but many areas in Uganda lack formal

physical development plans. Even in areas where plans do exist, implementation of these plans is challenging and as a result there are widespread problems such as disorderly development, informal settlements, excessive land fragmentation and the degradation of fragile ecosystems due to encroachment. The rapid population growth in both urban and rural areas, along with a decline in land per capita and a high influx of refugees, has put tremendous pressure on the country's limited natural resources.

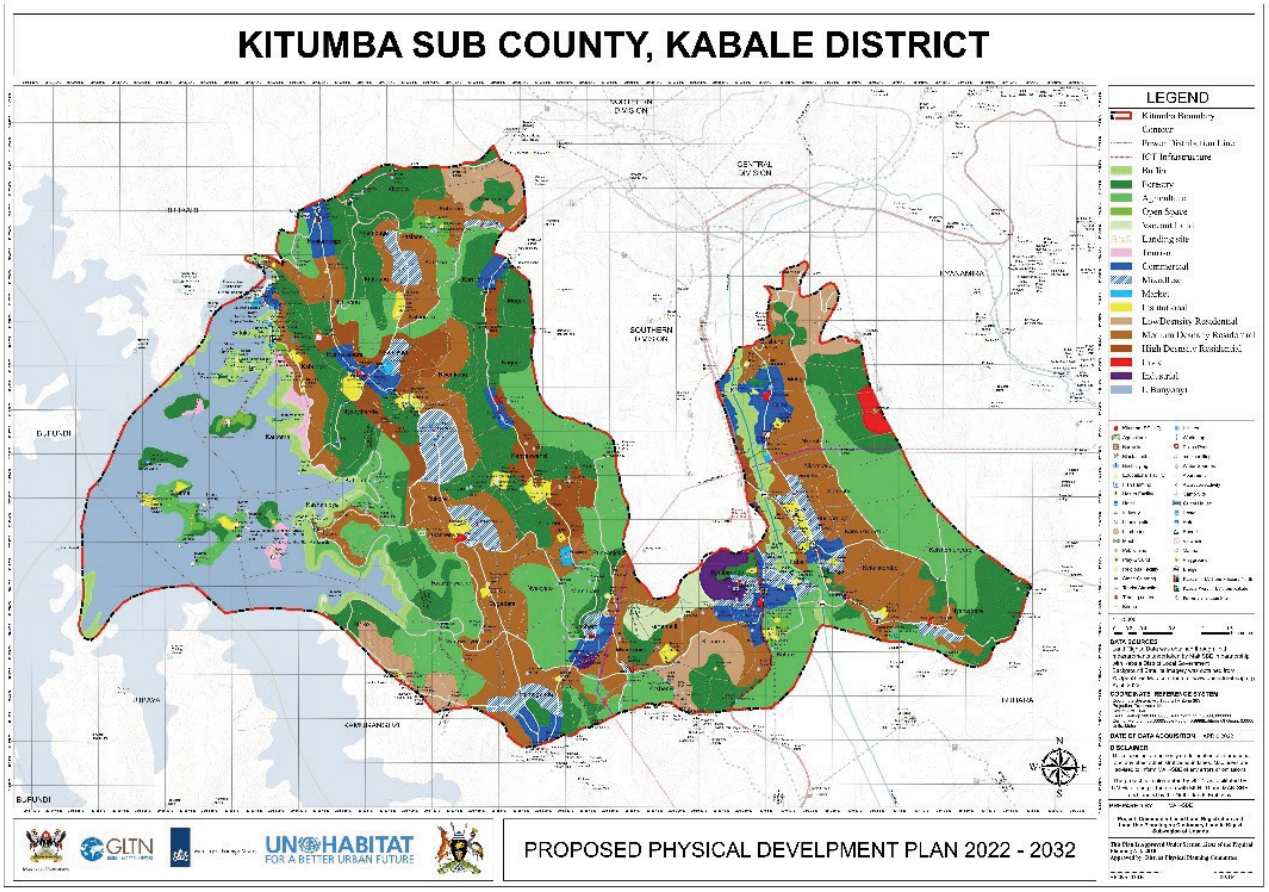
This situation underscores the urgent need for effective land-use planning to ensure the best use of available land and resources while fostering sustainable growth.

The Physical Planning Act (2010) designated the entire country as a planning area. This meant that all land development activities, including land registration, must incorporate physical planning. In response, Land-at-Scale partners have worked on creating both physical development plans and wetland management plans — the latter being especially important in districts where wetlands dominate the landscape. The process of creating these plans is outlined below.

4.2.1. Physical Land Plan

One of the main achievements of the Land-at-Scale project has been the development and approval of a physical development plan for Kitumba subcounty. In addition, a draft physical development plan for Pakele subcounty in Adjumani District has been developed and is currently awaiting approval. This exercise was accomplished through a series of activities that included the following:

- Identification and sensitization of stakeholders on the benefits and processes of land-use planning in accordance with the legal framework in Uganda
- Data collection, which entailed mapping, validation of the existing land uses and stakeholder consultations
- Presentation of the draft plan to stakeholders for comment
- Public display of the physical development plan at the village, parish, subcounty, district and national levels and in the Government Gazette
- Approval of the plan by the subcounty and district council



Kitumba Sub-County Physical Development Plan (Source: Makerere University)

Although it is still too early to fully assess the long-term impacts of land-use planning, the initiative has already had some successes. These include the opening of new roads, an increase in land values, the construction of a planned market and the emergence of new, guided developments.

4.2.1.1. Challenges encountered and strategies employed during project implementation

The project has encountered several challenges, including the following:

a. Delayed preparation of subcounty physical development plans, mapping and adjudication processes

The preparation of subcounty physical development plans and the associated mapping and adjudication processes were delayed, particularly in Kabale District, due to the lack of an overarching district physical development plan. According to the Physical Planning Act (Amended 2020), lower-level plans must align with and conform to higher-level district plans.

Strategy: To address this challenge, a physical development framework was developed using the Rapid Physical Planning Appraisal approach. This was developed by the Ministry of Lands, Housing and Urban Development and offered a quick and cost-effective framework for guiding land-use development and demarcating land rights. Since developing a statutory district physical development plan could have taken a minimum of one year, and the Land-at-Scale project had a short timeframe (18 months for phase 1), the Rapid Physical Planning Appraisal approach was adopted as an efficient solution.

b. Absence of constituted subcounty physical planning committees in Kabale

Subcounty physical planning committees, which are crucial for the development and implementation of subcounty physical development plans, were not constituted in Kabale District as required by the Physical Planning Act. These committees are essential for providing planning guidance and ensuring that land registration aligns with the approved physical development plan.



Community consultations and validation of the existing land use situation in Kitumba sub-county (Source: Makerere University)

Strategy: Fortunately, the officers required to form these committees were already in place. To address the gap in their capacity for land-use planning, the Ministry of Lands, Housing and Urban Development, in collaboration with the district and with support from the project, organized targeted training for the committees on the implementation of physical development plans. Additionally, the Land-at-Scale project featured the development of a document entitled "Guidelines for Tenure-Responsive Land-Use Planning", which had a step-by-step process for preparing physical development plans during customary land registration.

4.2.2. Wetland management plan

There has been significant encroachment onto wetlands in Uganda, primarily by communities living close to these ecosystems. This encroachment has been driven by several factors, including population growth and the heavy reliance on wetlands for livelihoods. In Butaleja District, wetlands cover 40 per cent of the total land area with a large portion of the district being part of two major wetland systems: Doho-Namatala and Mpologoma. These systems traverse the subcounties of Naweyo, Kachonga and Mazimasa. Additionally, the district's location as a drainage area for the Elgon region makes it highly susceptible to flooding.

Wetlands are a critical source of vital goods and services for people and are essential to the functioning of the environment they are part of. They supply water for domestic use and irrigation, pasture for livestock, food and fish, and act as biofilters for industrial waste, particularly from Mbale city. The Namatala and Manafa wetlands are also vital habitats for wildlife, including for the national bird of Uganda, the crested crane, and other bird and animal species. However, these wetlands have been subjected to various harmful practices that threaten their ecological integrity and the critical function they have in the area. Some of these destructive activities include indiscriminate cultivation within the wetlands, overharvesting of grass, digging channels that disrupt water flow, deforestation, overfishing and wildlife hunting.

These actions have led to the drying up of wetlands, the extinction or migration of some species, and an increase in resource-based conflicts. The escalating threats, coupled with growing tensions, highlight the urgent need for a community-led wetland management approach.

In response, wetland management associations and committees have been established to develop and implement community wetland management plans. These plans represent a community-based perspective on how wetland resources can be managed and conserved in a participatory manner. The approach is grounded in the principles of community-based natural resource management that actively involve local communities in resource management decisions, ensuring their invaluable input is respected.

The management plans outline what activities are permitted and prohibited in different parts of



Members of Muhula Wetland Management Planning Committee display a sketch map of visioning process.

the wetland, offering a structured and sustainable approach to wetland conservation. By emphasizing local involvement, these plans foster confidence and consistency in decision-making, thereby enhancing the long-term conservation and management of these vital ecosystems.

A range of activities was undertaken to develop the wetland management plan, including reconnaissance, stakeholder identification, preliminary consultative meetings with key stakeholders, and identification of the necessary resources and buy-ins. The process also involved community mobilization and awareness meetings, the selection of the wetland management planning teams, wetland management planning sessions, and a transect walk to identify key conservation resources.

Additionally, activities such as drafting and managing the plans, selecting the implementation team, validating the reports and plans, and obtaining approval from local councils (including Local Council III and the district council) were integral to the process.

A notable outcome of the project has been a shift in the community's attitude towards wetland ownership and usage. Initially, the local communities perceived the wetlands surrounding them as their personal property — an extension of family land they had traditionally used for livelihood activities. During the life of the project, this perception changed and communities began to appreciate the Government's role in holding wetlands in trust for the benefit of all citizens.

This transformation in mindset, paired with the empowerment of local communities to lead in managing their own wetland resources, has had a positive impact on wetland health. By promoting sustainable practices and wise use, communities have contributed significantly to wetland regeneration and ecological restoration.

For instance, along the Namatala Wetland in Butaleja District, community members worked together to map out common conservation areas that support wetland regeneration and restore its ecological functions.

As a result of these efforts, the vegetation in the mapped conservation zones along the Namatala River has regenerated, particularly in the buffer zones. This has had the following benefits:

- Riverbank stabilization: the regeneration has helped stabilize the riverbanks, reducing soil erosion
- Flood reduction: flooding in the area has been significantly reduced, contributing to better land and water management
- Increase in fish catch: local fishermen have reported an increase in fish catches, benefiting their livelihoods
- Increase in grazing space for livestock: the wetland regeneration has also created additional grazing space for livestock, supporting the agricultural activities of the local communities

4.2.2.1. Challenges encountered and strategies employed during project implementation

Several challenges were encountered during the development of the wetland management plan, including community resistance, negative counter-messages from some political leaders, and unfavourable attitudes towards project implementers.

a. Community resistance

The targeted wetland-user communities were initially fearful and resistant to any changes due to political pronouncements from the President of Uganda calling for all wetland encroachers to vacate wetlands. Since wetlands have traditionally been used and regarded as part of family land, the project was perceived as an attempt to deny communities their customary rights to use the wetlands for their livelihoods, leading to significant resistance.

Strategy: To address this, rigorous community mobilization was facilitated through the project and multiple awareness meetings were held close to the affected areas. Local leaders and village influencers were actively involved in raising awareness, supported by district staff such as those from the district natural resource and community development offices. Additionally, media channels — especially local radio stations — were used to disseminate information, targeting community members who were unable to attend meetings. These efforts helped increase knowledge, counter misinformation and, most importantly, build trust and confidence among community members.

b. Negative counter-messages from political and opinion leaders

At times, community members expressed concerns that "the Government is using the project to take

away our land". This mistrust stemmed from a lack of understanding of the existing laws governing wetland use, misinformation spread by some community leaders, and poor attendance at early open community awareness meetings.

Strategy: Despite these obstacles, the strategies that were employed eventually empowered community members to take ownership of the process and they provided leadership in management planning and implementation. Large community meetings were successful and participants elected wetland management planning teams for each wetland plan, comprising of over 30 representatives of those using resources.

Progress and ongoing challenges

While the broader goal[6] of the Wetland Management Plan has been achieved — with six management plans developed to protect the Doho-Namatala wetland and community-based implementation teams established — some challenges remain in fully implementing some of the plans. For example, actions such as tree planting in catchment areas and supporting community members affected by conservation zones with alternative livelihoods have not yet been fully realized. Many community members vacated these areas to allow natural regeneration but still require sustainable livelihood options.

c. Continuing challenges to address

- Inadequate funding: Many wetland management activities, particularly those beyond the community's capacity — such as tree planting and providing alternative livelihoods — require external financial support. Limited funds also hinder regular supervision and monitoring by lead agencies, including the district natural resource office, the National Environment Management Authority and the Ministry of Water and Environment.
- Limited capacity: The local wetland management implementation teams face challenges enforcing the management plans, primarily due to insufficient funding and lack of technical expertise.
- Threats to implementation committees: Some wetland users who do not comply with management regulations have threatened members of the community wetland management committees. This intimidation has caused some committee members to withdraw or become inactive in their roles.

4.3. Reduction in land disputes.

Land is a major resource for human survival and as a result there has been increased pressure on land use. This has led to several and increasing land conflicts in Uganda that have deep historical and socioeconomic roots, often tied to customary land tenure systems, population pressure and agricultural dependence. A study conducted by Moses Musinguzi, Professor of Geomatics and Land Management at Makerere University,[7] under a pilot project which this project builds on, revealed some of the contributing factors to these disputes. These included the sale of land without family consent, land grabbing, forgery of documents pertaining to ownership, trespass and malicious damage to property, in addition to population growth, oil and mineral exploration, urbanization and the lack of or poor land documentation.

The non-registration of land due to the lack of documentary evidence of ownership is a key cause of land conflicts. For instance, documentation of land rights in south-western Uganda is impeded by the high land fragmentation; in the north and east, it is constrained by communal land-ownership norms and high poverty levels.[8] The focus of the Land-at-Scale project has been regions that are mainly affected by high fragmentation and communal ownership, especially large extended families.

With interventions through the project, land disputes have been significantly reduced, in part due in particular to the effective land adjudication and demarcation processes as well as the use of alternative dispute-resolution mechanisms, specifically the mediation process. This has led to an increase in the number of land disputes that have been successfully resolved.

4.3.1. Challenges Encountered and Strategies Employed During Project Implementation

During the project's implementation, there were several challenges in promoting alternative dispute resolution mechanisms, particularly mediation.

6 The goal of the community-based wetland management component of the project is to enhance sustainable and inclusive management of wetlands through active community participation, capacity-building, and collaboration with local institutions.
7 Musinguzi, M. (2017). Land tenure and its impacts on food security in Uganda: Empirical evidence from ten districts. Unpublished manuscript.
8 Rugadya, M. A. (2009). Escalating land conflicts in Uganda: A review of evidence from recent studies and surveys. Rome: International Land Coalition.

Below is a summary of the key challenges and the corresponding strategies used to overcome them:

- **Preference for litigation over alternative dispute resolution**

Many disputing parties preferred litigation, believing that formal court judgments were more authoritative and legally binding than mediation outcomes. This preference was also shaped by legal advice, the perception that mediation is for the poor, and the belief that alternative dispute resolutions lack enforceability.

Strategy: To address this, the project conducted sensitization and training for key local actors including area land committees, district land boards, local council leaders (LC I, II, III), religious leaders and cultural institutions. These actors, once trained, successfully applied mediation during parcel mapping and adjudication processes. Community trust in these local leaders enhanced the legitimacy and uptake of alternative dispute-resolution processes.

- **Limited knowledge and accessibility of alternative dispute-resolution mechanisms**

Local institutions had limited knowledge of alternative dispute-resolution mechanisms due to the lack of accessible training materials. Most of the documentation was only in English, which effectively excluded illiterate or semi-literate stakeholders from understanding or applying mediation processes.

Strategy: Information, education and communication materials were developed, including translated posters, flyers and radio messages, and community role plays and dramas were used to explain mediation processes using real case stories. In addition, key legal mediation provisions were translated into local languages to make the information more inclusive and actionable.

- **Alternative dispute resolution as a new and under-developed approach**

Alternative dispute resolution mechanisms were newly introduced in the project context and had limited documentation and few trained practitioners, and the process was not widely embraced by land experts, in part due to its lower financial incentives compared to litigation.

Strategy: The Ministry of Lands, Housing and Urban Development developed a draft guide to alternative dispute-resolution processes with support from development partners such as UN-Habitat and GLTN. The ministry and the judiciary, mandated to lead land dispute-resolution, began promoting these guidelines to build legitimacy; development partners also made mediation a requirement in supported projects and funded the formation and training of subcounty and parish-level mediation committees.

- **Structural barriers identified through capacity needs assessments**

Assessments revealed the following systemic barriers:

- Limited knowledge and capacity of local institutions to facilitate alternative dispute-resolution mechanisms
- Conflicts of interest in family-based dispute resolution
- Lack of awareness of land justice systems
- Fear, intimidation (for example, witchcraft) and unaffordable court costs
- Corruption in the formal justice system
- Geographical distance to legal services
- Lack of legal knowledge, especially among women

Strategy: A multisectoral approach was adopted to build the capacity of political, cultural and technical leaders. Activities included training in alternative dispute-resolution processes, formation of mediation committees, radio campaigns and community engagement sessions. Follow-up and monitoring systems were instituted during the project to support mediation efforts. In Butaleja, 22 out of 24 reported disputes were resolved through mediation, and only two escalated to being decided in court, thus demonstrating the approach's effectiveness.

- **Persistent preference for litigation**

Despite these efforts, some disputants — particularly those with financial means — still prefer litigation to resolve disputes and alternative dispute resolution continues to be perceived as a process for low-income individuals. This has contributed to a backlog of unresolved land cases in the courts.

Strategy: To reduce this burden, the courts have introduced mandatory, court-aided mediation for all land cases before litigation can proceed. This institutional move supports the wider adoption of alternative dispute resolution and is intended to decongest the formal justice system.

4.4. Improved capacity of land institutions

As discussed earlier in this paper, one of the key challenges to achieving land tenure security was the limited capacity of land institutions. The study by Musinguzi confirmed this gap, highlighting that many stakeholders involved in customary land registration lacked essential skills and knowledge. The assessment pointed to several inefficiencies: high illiteracy among land actors (especially area land committee members), outdated laws and policies, short training duration, and inadequate infrastructure and funding to support land registration and land-use planning.

To address this, a capacity needs assessment was conducted during the Land-at-Scale project's inception phases in 2022 and 2024. The assessment was of institutions such as area land committees, subcounty chiefs (recorders), subcounty physical planning committees, alternative dispute-resolution committees, district land offices, district physical planning committees, and district land boards. Based on the results, training was given on legal and policy frameworks for customary land registration, physical planning and environmental conservation.

A key result was the establishment of trainers of trainers at national, regional and district levels, ensuring continuity despite frequent staff turnover in district, subcounty and parish offices. This trainers of trainers approach was critical for the sustainability of land registration and land-use planning processes.

4.4.1. Challenges Encountered and Strategies Employed

a. Incomplete and non-functional land institutions and inadequate infrastructure

Some districts lacked essential land institutions, particularly subcounty physical planning and alternative dispute-resolution committees, notably in Kabale and Rubanda. In some areas, alternative land committees had expired terms or were non-functional. Even where institutions existed, they lacked operational experience, such as issuing Certificates of Customary Ownership. Basic infrastructure — office space, furniture, equipment, and tools — was lacking at both subcounty and district levels.

Strategy: The project fast-tracked the reappointment of expired area land committees, facilitated by the involvement of appointing authorities in project inception and implementation. Land offices were equipped with necessary tools and infrastructure:



Training of Stakeholders in Pakele sub-county, Adjumani District (Source: Makerere University)

tablets, desktop computers, GPS units, filing cabinets, land certificate printing supplies, and more. This enabled land institutions to become fully functional and able to support project activities effectively.

b. Limited knowledge of legal frameworks and land-use planning processes

Many land actors were more familiar with freehold, mailo and leasehold systems than with customary tenure. Subcounty physical planning committees lacked experience in developing physical development plans. Existing laws and policies were often outdated, written in legal jargon and not accessible in local languages. Dissemination to grassroots levels was weak and many area land committees relied on outdated legal references.

Strategy: The project established partnerships with key actors (for example, UN-Habitat, GLTN, Makerere University, the International Institute of Rural Reconstruction and Uganda Community-Based Association for Women and Children Welfare) to develop targeted training and awareness materials. These materials were translated into Indigenous languages and widely disseminated. Customized training was conducted based on identified gaps, combining practical, hands-on learning with information, education and communication materials to ensure consistent messaging. This strategy effectively enhanced institutional capacity at district and subcounty levels, while promoting awareness at the community level.

c. Low academic qualifications and motivation among area land committee members

Many area land committee members lacked formal education (minimum required: Grade 11), basic computer skills, and were mature adults (average age 50+). Participation by young people was minimal and selection for jobs was often politically motivated rather than competency based.

Strategy: The project recruited land administration field assistants — young people aged between 18 and 30 from local communities who had a basic education, computer literacy, motivation and local knowledge. These assistants were trained in open-source geospatial tools, including GPS use, tablet-based data collection, and the Social Tenure Domain Model. They supported area land committees in field mapping, enumeration and demarcation as mapping assistants. Their local roots and language skills made them highly effective, and the inclusive recruitment approach ensured alignment with project objectives.

Despite these achievements, gaps remain. In districts such as Kabale, Rubanda, Butaleja, and Adjumani, subcounty physical planning committees are not fully operational. Existing committee members are not always selected for their technical capacity, but rather for their government positions (for example, they are subcounty chiefs, agricultural officers or public health officers). This presents a challenge for capacity-building in physical planning. Ongoing training and support, along with a review of selection criteria and procedures, are needed to ensure committees are composed of technically qualified members capable of developing and implementing local physical development plans.

4.5. Increased knowledge and mindset change on land rights, natural resource management, gender and inclusion

Knowledge of land rights and natural resource management on customary land has historically been limited among various stakeholders in the project's target communities. This has contributed to widespread land rights injustices and misuse of natural resources, including the exclusion of women and girls from participating in land registration processes.

The Land-at-Scale project has addressed these challenges by improving knowledge and shifting mindsets around land rights, natural resource management and gender inclusion. This has been achieved through ongoing training, awareness-raising and stakeholder sensitization. These activities were informed by data collected using the Gender Evaluation Criteria (GEC) tool for gender inclusion, the Youth and Land Responsiveness Criteria tool for young people's engagement, and the Tenure Responsive Land-Use Planning tool for sustainable resource management.

As a result, communities have increasingly embraced formal land registration through applications for Certificates of Customary Occupancy. This enhanced awareness has also led to key gender-transformative actions, such as joint or family land registration and a growing willingness to write wills. Furthermore, community members — especially those living near or using wetlands — have shown a greater appreciation for sustainable wetland use. Many have taken proactive steps, such as vacating buffer zones, to support wetland regeneration in line with local management plans.

Several core activities contributed to these outcomes, including stakeholder mapping, stakeholder dialogues, community sensitizations



Sensitization and Awareness Creation at Kitumba Sub-County (Source: Makerere University)

and the production of a video documentary.

Stakeholder mapping helped the project team identify key actors and understand their interests, ensuring more effective engagement. Dialogues with local leaders at district and subcounty levels created platforms to share project goals and approaches, and to collaboratively develop strategies. One key outcome was the creation of a community sensitization plan and roadmap, which helped guide awareness efforts and build trust between the project team and local authorities—an essential element for successful implementation.

Village-level community sensitizations enabled project facilitators to reach remote areas and have direct engagement with local populations. Their meetings focused on the benefits of formal land registration, the risks of informal documentation, women's land rights, gender equity and sustainable resource management. Sensitizations were led by technical officers from local government—such as senior land management, environment and gender officers—accompanied by subcounty political leaders. Their involvement added credibility, as community members have a high level of trust in their local leaders. This approach also fostered close interaction between technical staff and community members, encouraging open dialogue and supporting lasting mindset shifts.

4.5.1. Challenges encountered and strategies employed

Throughout this process, the following were the key challenges:

a. Low turnout and participation in community sensitization meetings

This was largely due to poor mobilization and competing community priorities, such as burials and parish development model meetings.

Strategy: To address this, alternative mobilization strategies were adopted, including the use of village chairpersons and mobile announcements via megaphones. This approach proved to be effective, attracting participants with diverse interests — including those initially opposed to land registration.

b. Negative political interference and misinformation

Some local leaders actively opposed land registration efforts and they spread misinformation, which deepened community mistrust of the project's objectives.

Strategy: The project team engaged with these leaders directly to understand their concerns and clearly communicate the intentions with implementing the project. This approach fostered mutual respect, leading to a change in attitude among many leaders.

c. Limited knowledge of the legal framework and entrenched cultural norms

Many stakeholders and community members lacked adequate understanding of land-related laws, and rigid customs often conflicted with best practices in natural resource management and gender inclusion. For example, in some communities, inheritance customs favour male children, allocating them individual land portions while all female children receive a single shared — and often smaller — portion. Additionally, land inherited by a man is sometimes deemed ineligible to be passed on to his spouse.

These deep-seated norms are difficult to change, especially in the context of high illiteracy and poverty levels. In some cases, communities were unwilling to stop unsustainable resource use such as wetland degradation due to the lack of alternative livelihoods.

Strategy: The project implemented continuous and targeted mobilization, sensitization and training on land rights, gender inclusion and natural resource management. These efforts were intended to promote social norms transformation and were delivered through stakeholder dialogues at national, regional and local levels, as well as through the dissemination of awareness-raising materials. Gender guidelines were also developed to support behaviour change toward gender equity.

Importantly, all interventions were grounded in detailed community and stakeholder analyses using custom-made UN-Habitat/GLTN tools, including the Gender Evaluation Criteria, Youth and Land Responsiveness Criteria, and Tenure Responsive Land-Use Planning tools. This ensured that mobilization, sensitization and training were based on the real experiences and needs of the communities. For example, communities were taught that everyone—regardless of gender—has a right to own land.

d. Historically inappropriate land allocations by the Government

Past government land allocations often failed to take into consideration gender equity or environmental sustainability. In some cases, settlement plans favoured men or contributed to the degradation of fragile ecosystems. These actions conflicted with the good practices promoted in the Land-at-Scale project and created confusion in communities affected by such interventions.

Strategy: The project facilitators conducted targeted dialogue initiatives with government institutions. These were implemented in addition to community sensitization and mobilization, which alone were insufficient to fully resolve this issue.

5. Key lessons learned

51. Timing, active and tailored stakeholder engagement

Effective stakeholder engagement is essential at all levels and throughout every stage of project implementation. Conducting stakeholder mapping and analysis at project inception is crucial to identifying key actors, their interests and their influence, allowing for the design of tailored engagement strategies that vary according to stakeholder type. This is particularly important given the diversity in community cultures, social norms and power dynamics, which can significantly affect engagement and the success of project activities.

Ensuring that stakeholders are informed and actively participate at different stages has proved to be vital in achieving the results outlined in this document. Tailored and continuous engagement fosters stakeholder ownership, enhances trust and increases the likelihood of achieving the project's goals, including lasting mindset shifts and the sustainability of outcomes.

5.2. Strengthening land management institutions

There is a critical need to strengthen the capacity and functionality of land management institutions through training, mentorship, technical support and the provision of essential equipment. These institutions play a central role in land registration and strengthening them should be informed by periodic capacity-needs assessments focused on skills, knowledge, equipment, infrastructure and institutional environment.

At the lower local government level, institutions such as area land committees would benefit from support by young, technology-literate land administration field assistants, particularly as digital technologies become more integral to land adjudication and mapping. Additionally, the subcounty chief's office — responsible for maintaining the registry of Certificates of Customary Ownership — should be fully operationalized. This includes formally integrating land registration responsibilities into their terms of reference and equipping them with the necessary training, tools and infrastructure to facilitate effective customary land registration.



UCOBAC project officer, Mark Katusiime, training Mapping Team in Mazimasa Sub-county (Source: UCOBAC)



Public Display of the Land Use Plan and Explanations to UN-Habitat/GLTN and RVO Representative in Kitumba Sub-County (Source: Makerere University)

5.3. Integration of land-use planning into land registration to aid proper development

Land tenure and land-use planning are strongly interconnected but are often approached separately. The Physical Planning Act (CAP 142) of Uganda declares the entire country to be a planning area, meaning all land development must be preceded by planning.

Integrating land-use planning into land registration initiatives is key to promoting orderly development and the sustainable use of land and related resources. For customary land registration, the preparation of basic land-use plans prior to registration is critical. These can be developed later into detailed statutory physical development plans following land rights adjudication and mapping. Such integration also ensures that land-use decisions are participatory and reflect the tenure security of local communities.

5.4. Conduct regular legal and policy assessment

The legal framework of Uganda combines statutory and customary law, with the 1995 Constitution as the supreme authority. While this framework provides a solid foundation for land management, project implementation has introduced several practices that have legal implications — such as systematic demarcation, bulk approvals, co-option of mapping assistants, use of digital mapping tools, and Rapid Physical Planning Appraisal.

To align these practices with national law, regular legal and policy assessments are necessary. These assessments can guide the development or revision of legal guidelines, ensuring that implementation strategies remain within the legal framework.

Additionally, legal provisions must be supported by effective enforcement mechanisms. This includes providing sufficient resources, trained personnel and institutional capacity. Strengthening enforcement agencies and equipping them adequately is essential for ensuring legal compliance and successful implementation.

5.5. Government support and coordination is paramount for project sustainability.

The sustainability of project outcomes depends heavily on government support and coordination. Project conceptualization and design should prioritize the development and implementation of sustainability strategies that can outlive the project lifecycle. Although some progress has been made in this area, implementation is still a challenge — largely due to limited funding and the low prioritization of land registration activities at the local level.

This can be addressed through coordinated engagements between central and lower local governments to ensure that sustainability strategies are budgeted for and prioritized in government plans.

Additionally, during the implementation of wetland management and physical development plans, some individuals may be displaced, impacting their livelihoods. There is therefore a need to develop alternative and sustainable livelihood strategies for these affected individuals. This requires collaboration between government and development partners to identify and support viable livelihood options for displaced persons.

5.6. Importance of strong partnerships and coordination

Strong partnerships among government agencies, civil society and academic institutions are essential for achieving the objectives of land registration and physical planning projects. Such collaborations enhance communication, promote accountability and foster coordinated action.

Implementing partners should work closely with government actors by participating in planning, budgeting and other relevant processes. These partnerships can be formalized through memorandums of understanding, which clearly define roles, responsibilities, duration of engagement, key contact persons and modes of facilitation. The memorandums should be developed in consultation with all affected stakeholders and shared transparently among partners.

The experience during the project was that strong partnerships lead to greater complementarity in implementation. Different organizations bring unique strengths based on their expertise, which, when coordinated effectively, enhance overall project impact.

6. Conclusions

The scaling up of community-based land registration and land-use planning on customary land under the Land-at-Scale project has had a significant impact on addressing persistent challenges related to land tenure, land-use planning and natural resource management in Uganda.

The project was implemented through strategic partnerships between UN-Habitat/Global Land Tool Network, the Uganda Ministry of Lands, Housing and Urban Development, Makerere University, Uganda Community-Based Association for Women and Children Welfare, the International Institute of Rural Reconstruction and local government authorities, and the following approaches were adopted to achieve the project objectives: a participatory approach, an inclusive approach, and fit-for-purpose and gender-responsive approaches.

The Land-at-Scale project in Uganda is:

- Improving tenure security for men, women and young people
- Developing inclusive, climate-smart and sustainable land-use plans
- Enhancing the capacity and awareness of key land stakeholders and institutions in customary land registration and land-use planning

Key achievements include the registration of customary land rights and the issuance of Certificates of Customary Ownership to communities. Through the project, physical development plans for Kitumba subcounty in Kabale District were approved and developed, and similar plans are being developed for Pakele subcounty in Adjumani District. In Butaleja, wetland management



CCO Issuance by the Prime Minister and the Minister of Lands, in Kyanamira Sub-County (Source: Makerere University)

plans are being developed for selected communities. These efforts have been supported by training, mentorship, sensitization, technical backstopping and the provision of basic infrastructure and equipment, resulting in strengthened institutional capacity.

Challenges such as political interference, community resistance and institutional capacity gaps have been addressed during the term of the project through rigorous community mobilization, regular awareness meetings and the engagement of trusted local leaders and influencers.

The project's successes are rooted in strong partnerships among government, civil society and academia, and the application of innovative, fit-for-purpose tools developed by GLTN and partners, including the Social Tenure Domain Model, Tenure-Responsive Land-Use Planning, Rapid Physical Planning Appraisal, Gender Evaluation Criteria, and the Youth and Land Responsiveness Criteria.

Key lessons learned highlight the importance of:

- Engaging stakeholders at all levels
- Strengthening land management institutions
- Integrating land-use planning with tenure security initiatives
- Conducting regular legal and policy assessments to ensure alignment with national frameworks
- Securing ongoing government support and coordination for sustainability

The Land-at-Scale project is a significant step toward achieving Uganda Vision 2040, which is intended to improve tenure security through systematic land titling. The project outcomes show that it is both feasible and effective to register customary land rights and develop physical and wetland management plans through participatory and inclusive processes. It has also been demonstrated that land disputes can be addressed through alternative dispute-resolution, and that the capacities of land institutions can be meaningfully enhanced to support sustainable land governance.

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