A Comprehensive Desk Review and Situational Analysis of a Scoping Study on Climate change effects and Conflict in Manafwa and Bulambuli Districts, Uganda 2026

Acknowledgement

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1.0 Executive Summary

This comprehensive desk review analyzes the intricate nexus between climate change, human displacement, and conflict risk in the Manafwa and Bulambuli districts of Eastern Uganda. Situated in the fragile ecosystem of Mount Elgon, these districts epitomize a cascading risk landscape where climate stressors act as primary drivers of disaster, which in turn exacerbate underlying socio-economic vulnerabilities and ignite both latent and cross-border conflicts. The main socio-economic activities in these districts is subsistence farming and animal husbandry.

1.1 Core Findings:

The districts face geographically distinct but equally devastating climate impacts. Manafwa district has a population of 186,917 with an area coverage of 237 square Kms. The area is plagued by catastrophic landslides and severe soil erosion on its steep slopes, directly destroying lives, homes, and livelihoods. Bulambuli district is covered by a population of 235,391 on 695.0km area. This area contends with a dual threat: landslides in its highlands and destructive flooding in its lowlands, compounded by spillover violence from the neighboring Karamoja region. These environmental shocks are the principal cause of internal displacement, which is almost exclusively sudden-onset and large-scale, eroding community resilience and social cohesion.

1.2 Critical Systemic Gaps:

Existing policy frameworks, such as the Territorial Approach to Climate Change (TACC) and Ecosystem-Based Adaptation (EBA) projects, are critically undermined by:

a) A near-total absence of functional early warning systems due to a dire lack of meteorological infrastructure.
b) Top-down, poorly consultative relocation policies that disrupt livelihoods and meet profound community resistance.
c) Severe deficits in local government capacity, both financial and human, with Manafwa exhibiting an alarmingly low secondary school transition rate of 12.7%.
d) A fundamental disconnect between climate adaptation planning and conflict sensitivity, leading to unmanaged displacement that risks fueling resource-based conflicts in transition zones.

Strategic Imperative for GPPAC: The situation demands a pivot from reactive humanitarian response to proactive, peace-positive climate adaptation. Interventions must be tailored to district-specific vulnerabilities, bridge the humanitarian-development-peace (HDP) nexus, and prioritize community agency to build sustainable resilience and prevent the escalation of climate-driven conflict.

2.0 Introduction and Methodology

2.1 Purpose and Objectives

This study aims to provide GPPAC with a robust, evidence-based understanding of the climate-security-displacement nexus in Manafwa and Bulambuli. Its objectives are to:

a) Systematically catalog primary climate and conflict stressors.
b) Analyze the scale, drivers, and impacts of displacement.
c) Map the institutional and policy landscape, evaluating its effectiveness.
d) Identify critical gaps in knowledge, capacity, and conflict-sensitive practice.
e) Propose targeted, actionable entry points for peace building programming.

2.2 Methodology

This is a qualitative desk review based on the systematic synthesis of available literature. Sources include:

a) Peer-reviewed research on climate adaptation, migration, and conflict in Uganda.
b) Project reports and assessments from multilateral agencies (UNDP, UNEP, World Bank, IOM).
c) Ugandan government policy documents, including the National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA).
d) Grey literature from research institutes and civil society organizations.

The analysis employs a thematic framework to connect environmental data with socio-political outcomes, focusing on causality and intervention points.

2.3 Geographical and Socio-Economic Context

Mount Elgon region is a highland ecosystem with dense populations practicing intensive, rain-fed subsistence agriculture on slopes exceeding 30 degrees. Manafwa is characterized by extreme population pressure on limited arable land. Bulambuli presents a sharper ecological gradient, with highland communities in direct proximity to lowland plains and wetlands. Both districts exhibit high poverty levels and low

indicators of human development, creating a baseline of vulnerability that climate shocks readily exploit.

3.0 Detailed Analysis of Core Dynamics

3.1 Climate and Environmental Stressors: A District Comparison

3.4 Community Adaptation and Coping Mechanisms

Communities in Manafwa and Bulambuli are not passive victims of climate shocks but are actively employing a range of strategies to adapt and cope. These mechanisms can be categorized into three primary types: on-site adaptation to modify the local environment, migration as a form of adaptation, and social coping strategies that rely on community networks.

a) Manafwa District

In Manafwa, farmers are implementing specific on-farm measures to combat soil erosion and unpredictable rainfall. According to a 2017 survey, 45% of farmers are constructing terraces and trenches , while 35% have increased tree planting to stabilize slopes and improve soil health (Mubangizi, Kyazze, and Mukwaya 2017, 154).

However, recognizing that these local measures are often insufficient against catastrophic landslides, a significant portion of the farming population now views migration as a necessary strategy. The same survey found that 48% of farmers are planning for temporary migration and 17% anticipate long-term migration as a proactive coping mechanism (Mubangizi, Kyazze, and Mukwaya 2017, 152).

Socially, households rely heavily on strained kinship networks for post-disaster support. This traditional safety net is under severe pressure, as recurring disasters are eroding the capacity of these systems to provide adequate buffers (Ndejjo et al. 2026, 12-15). A common, detrimental coping strategy is the distress sale of vital assets (like livestock or tools) following a shock to meet immediate needs, which further depletes household resilience.

b) Bulambuli District

In Bulambuli, adaptation strategies are tailored to the district's dual threats of highland landslides and lowland flooding. In landslide-prone highland sub-counties, communities heavily prioritize tree planting to stabilize soils (UNDP and UNEP 2013, 26).

In flood-prone lowland areas, community-led interventions include digging trenches, de-silting rivers, and planting trees and Napier grass along riverbanks to mitigate flood damage (UNDP and UNEP 2013, 30). As an adaptive livelihood shift, farmers in the wetlands of Bunambutye and Muyembe are increasingly cultivating paddy rice as a cash crop, though this is leading to wetland degradation (UNDP and UNEP 2013, 10).
For communities in the highest-risk landslide zones, adaptation often takes the form of forced displacement to government-sponsored resettlement sites, such as the Bunambutye Resettlement Centre, following a catastrophic event.

Social coping mechanisms are robust but overstretched. Households survive shocks through a heavy reliance on kinship and friendship networks, which provide voluntary contributions of food, shelter, and sympathy (UNDP and UNEP 2013, 30). Furthermore, communities employ the traditional practice of communal labor (Bulungi bwansi**)** to undertake labor-intensive environmental protection works, such as digging drainage channels, which also reinforces social cohesion (UNDP and UNEP 2013, 30).

4.0 Conflicts, Social Cohesion, and Access to Basic Needs

4.1 Community Experiences and Climate-Induced Conflicts

a) Bulambuli: Communities face a dual threat of extreme weather and violence. Highland sub-counties experience catastrophic landslides (e.g., August 2011), while lowland areas face floods and dry spells. These environmental shocks coincide with cattle rustling from Karamoja and local farmer-pastoralist conflicts over water, creating a layered crisis of insecurity (UNDP & UNEP 2013; Navarro 2025).

b) Manafwa: The primary experience is of recurrent land loss and agricultural failure due to landslides and pests. This fuels intense competition for stable land, stressor that can fracture community relations (Masiga 2013).

4.2 Early Warning and Preparedness Mechanisms

a) The two (2) districts sit on the slopes of Mt. Elgon that are high-risk for landslides, floods, and extreme weather. The Early warning mechanisms don't always reach remote parishes in time although district & village disaster management committees coordinate local alerts, send SMS in local languages, and conduct radio community dialogues to stakeholders for landslide warnings in the Region.

b) The entire Elgon region has fewer meteorological stations, with none collecting the daily rainfall data required for landslide prediction (Masiga 2013). This represents a catastrophic failure in basic disaster risk reduction infrastructure.

c) Some local grass root communities rely on observational cues (e.g., unusual animal behavior, specific cloud formations, cracking ground). However, these provide only minutes to hours of warning, sufficient for immediate evacuation but not for preventive action or planned relocation.

4.3 The Impact on Access to Food, Water, Shelter, and Economic Activities

a) Food & Water: Disasters destroy standing crops and stored food, leading to immediate famine. Siltation pollutes water sources. Dry spells in Bulambuli directly reduce water availability for both domestic use and livestock.

b) Shelter: Homes are obliterated by landslides or washed away by floods, forcing survivors into temporary camps or overcrowded host families.

c) Economic Activities: Destruction of crops, loss of livestock (to rustling or disease), and damage to roads/markets cripple local economies. The shift to survival-focused, short-cycle crops reduces income potential and degrades land further.

4.4 The Gender and Social Inclusion Impacts of climate change effects on Manafwa and Bulambuli Districts

a) Women and Girls bear increased burdens of care for the injured and displaced, spend more time collecting water and fuel from degraded sources, and face heightened risks of gender-based violence in crowded displacement settings.

b) The Youth lose homes, schools and farmland which affects their future prospects due to the loss of family land and capital, driving some towards migration, idleness, or potential recruitment into criminal or armed groups.

c) The Elderly & Disabled are disproportionately affected during sudden-onset disasters due to mobility constraints and are often left behind in strained kinship support systems.

4.5 Peaceful Local Mechanisms to Address Climate-Conflict Risks

a) Elders' Councils (Kooti ya Nze): Traditionally mediate disputes over land, property, and minor conflicts. Their authority could be strengthened to handle climate-related resource conflicts.

b) Communal Labor (Bulungi bwansi): Used for communal adaptation works (trench digging, terracing). This practice reinforces social cohesion while building physical resilience.

c) Kinship Networks: Provide the primary safety net, offering food, shelter, and cash after a shock. Strengthening these networks is key to community resilience.

5.0 Institutional and Policy Context

5.1 Collaboration between CSOs, Government, and Communities

a) Platforms Exist: Structures like the Mt. Elgon Stakeholders' Forum and the Mbale Climate Action Platform (Mbale CAP) facilitate dialogue and joint action among CSOs (e.g., World Vision, Uganda Red Cross), district departments, and community representatives.

b) Nature of Collaboration: CSOs often lead on-ground implementation (e.g., tree distribution, training), while government provides (limited) political backing.

Communities provide labor and local knowledge. However, collaboration is often project-based and donor-driven, not systemic.

5.2 Critical Gaps and Challenges in Policy Implementation

a) Data & Early Warning Gap: The lack of meteorological data is the single biggest technical failure, making a mockery of preparedness planning.
b) The Financial & Human Resource Gap: District budgets are absorbed by recurrent social service expenditures (salaries, schools, health), leaving near-zero funding for climate adaptation. Low technical capacity compounds this.
c) Integration Gap: Climate plans (ITCP) are not integrated into legally binding District Development Plans (DDPs). Disaster management, climate adaptation, and conflict prevention are handled by separate, uncoordinated offices.
d) Conflict-Sensitivity Gap**:** Policies and projects do not systematically analyze or mitigate conflict risks arising from interventions (e.g., how relocation might spark tensions with host communities).

5.3 CSO Contributions to Policy Accountability and Implementation

CSOs can enhance accountability by:

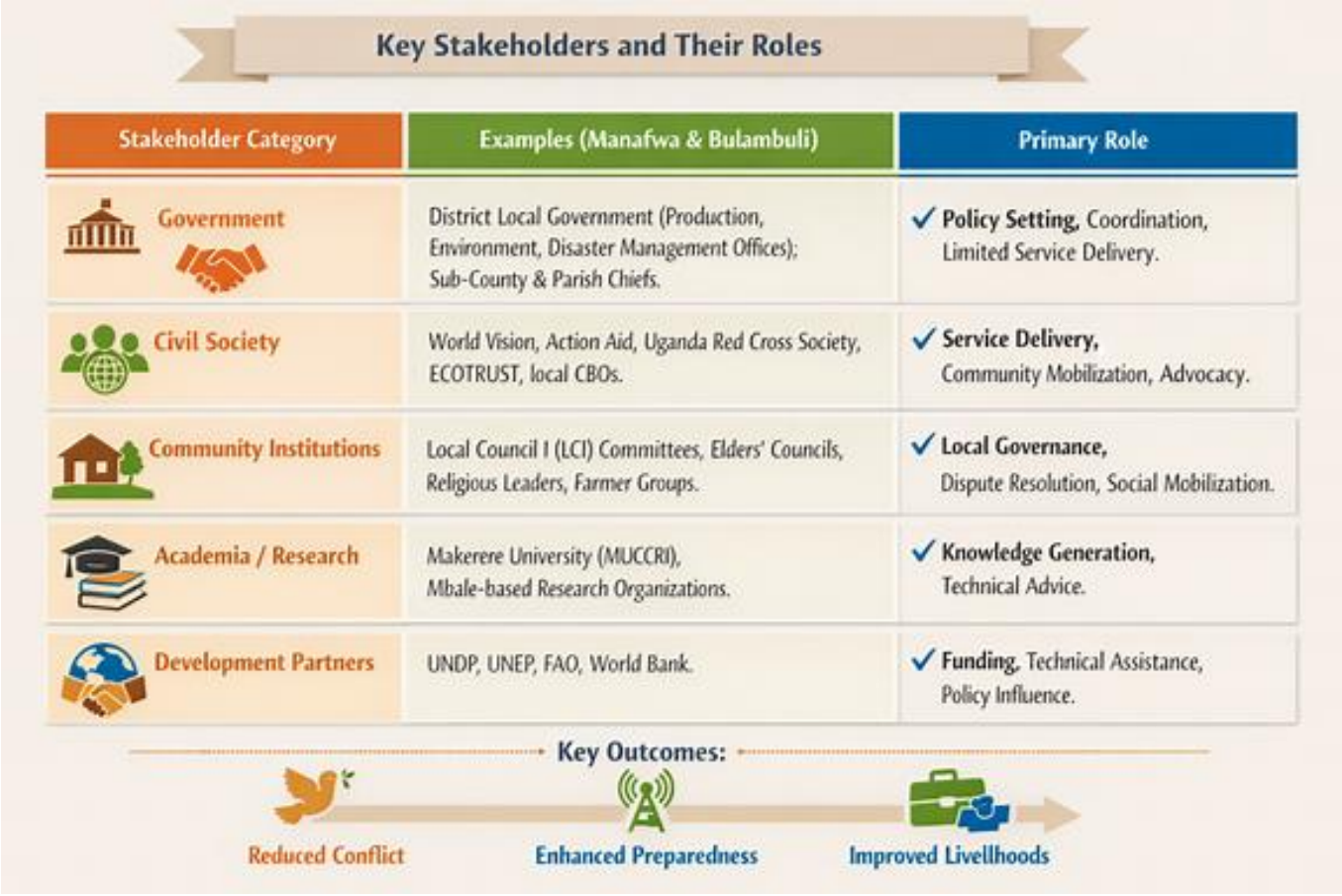
a) Independently Monitoring/Tracking budget allocations and expenditure for climate and disaster risk management activities.
b) Conducting Community Advocacy Support through capacity building of community groups to engage with and demand accountability from local councils.

c) Conducting action research to document the human impacts of policy failures (e.g., on displacement, conflict) and presenting findings to policymakers.

d) Demonstrating effective, conflict-sensitive approaches (e.g., community-led relocation, integrated peace-climate forums) that government can then adopt and scale.

6.0 Stakeholder mapping and Capacity Analysis

6.1 Key Stakeholders in the Project Area



6.2 Observed Capacity and Knowledge Gaps

A critical barrier to effective climate-security programming in Manafwa and Bulambuli is a pervasive deficit in specialized skills and technical knowledge across key stakeholder groups. These gaps severely limit the ability to design, implement, and sustain conflict-sensitive interventions.

a) Local Government Officials are District and sub-county technical staff often lack the specialized expertise in climate science, Geographic Information Systems (GIS) for hazard mapping, and conflict analysis required to develop evidence-based, spatially targeted plans. Furthermore, financial management capacity for complex, multi-year adaptation and peacebuilding projects is a significant constraint, hindering the absorption and effective utilization of potential climate finance.

b) Civil Society Organizations (CSOs**):** While local and national CSOs demonstrate strong competency in community mobilization and service delivery, many lack deeper, applied skills in conflict-sensitive program design, mediation and negotiation techniques, and the practical integration of climate adaptation objectives with peace building outcomes. This often results in programming that addresses either climate or conflict in isolation, missing critical nexus opportunities.

c) Community Leaders (Local Councilors, Elders, and Religious Leaders) are frontline actors required to enhance skills in facilitative leadership, participatory planning methodologies, and basic conflict mediation to effectively broker community agreements on resource use and relocation. They need stronger advocacy and engagement skills to negotiate with district officials and NGOs on behalf of their communities.

d) Cross-Cutting Systemic Gap: A fundamental weakness across all levels is the systemic lack of capacity in data collection, analysis, and utilization for informed decision-making. This includes the technical ability to interpret climate projections, systematically track displacement patterns, and establish community-based early warning systems for both environmental hazards and conflict incidents. The result is reactive, rather than proactive, planning.

6.3 Potential Contributions of GPPAC Partners

GPPAC partners, with their core expertise in peacebuilding and conflict prevention, can make unique contributions to bridge these gaps:

a) Build the Capacity of stakeholders by providing trainings for CSOs, local government, and community leaders on conflict-sensitive climate adaptation, mediation in resource-based conflicts, and peace-responsive displacement management.

b) Facilitate Dialogues as neutral facilitators by convening difficult dialogues—e.g., between highland communities and lowland hosts regarding relocation, or between farmers and pastoralists in Bulambuli.

c) Act as Knowledge Brokers by Synthesizing and translating the global best practices on the climate-security nexus into practical tools and approaches usable by local actors.

d) Advocate for Peace-Positive Policies at national and district levels for the integration of conflict-sensitivity and social cohesion indicators into climate change and disaster risk management policies and budgets.

7.0 Learning, Adaptations, and Best Practices

7.1 Lessons Learned and Best Practices from Past Interventions

Participatory Planning is Non-Negotiable:

a) The failure of top-down relocation schemes underscores that community ownership is the cornerstone of sustainable adaptation. Successful elements of the EBA project in Bulambuli involved communities in developing bylaws and selecting tree species.

b) Integration over Silos: Projects that treat climate, livelihoods, and conflict in isolation have limited impact. The most resilient interventions are those that integrate ecosystem restoration with livelihood diversification and conflict mediation.

c) Build on existing systems with effective early warning and response hybridize indigenous knowledge with modern science, and interventions to strengthen, rather than bypass, existing social structures like kinship networks and elders' councils.

d) Gender and Inclusion as a Lens, Not an Add-On: Projects that proactively address the specific vulnerabilities and capacities of women, youth, and the disabled from the design phase show more equitable and sustainable outcomes.

7.2 Replicable and Scalable Community Mechanisms

Several community-led practices from the study area hold promise for replication and scaling with support:

a) Communal Labor for Adaptation (Bulungi bwansi): The tradition of communal work can be formally harnessed and supported with technical guidance and tools for large-scale trench digging, terracing, and tree planting.

b) Farmer-to-Farmer Knowledge Exchange: Local adaptation champions (e.g., those successfully using terraces) can be supported to train others, creating a scalable, low-cost extension system.

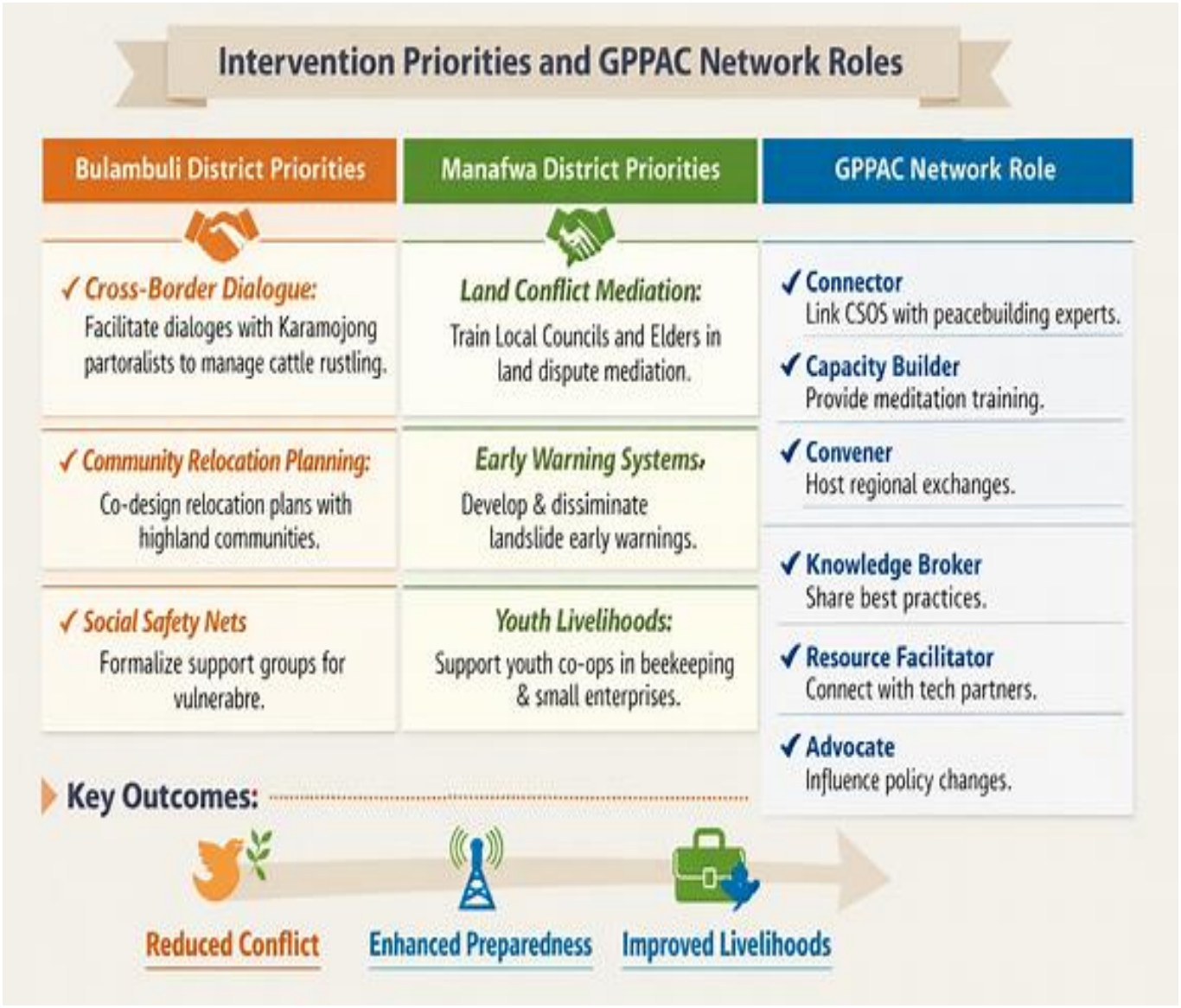
c) Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs): These existing community finance groups can be leveraged to provide micro-insurance or loans for climate-resilient livelihoods, reducing dependence on distress asset sales after a shock.

d) Local Conflict Mediation Forums: Strengthening the capacity of existing Elders' Councils to formally mediate land and water disputes provides a culturally legitimate, low-cost conflict resolution mechanism.

8.0 Conclusions and Strategic Recommendations

8.1 Synthesis of Findings

The climate crisis in Manafwa and Bulambuli is not a future threatens but a present, multi-dimensional emergency. Environmental shocks are driving large-scale internal displacement, deepening poverty, and acting as a catalyst for both localized resource competition and cross-border violence. While communities are actively adapting, their efforts are insufficient against the scale of the challenge. The institutional response, though framed by progressive policies, is hamstrung by critical gaps in data, financing, capacity, and most critically a lack of conflict-sensitive approaches.


Intervention Priorities and GPPAC Network Roles
Bulambuli District Priorities
Manafwa District Priorities
GPPAC Network Role
✓ Cross-Border Dialogue:
Facilitate dialoges with Karamojong partoralists to manage cattle rustling.
Land Conflict Mediation:
Train Local Councils and Elders in land dispute mediation.
✓ Community Relocation Planning:
Co-design relocation plans with highland communities.
Early Warning Systems,
Develop & dissiminate landslide early warnings.
✓ Social Safety Nets
Formalize support groups for vulnerabre.
Youth Livelihoods:
Support youth co-ops in beekeeping & small enterprises.
✓ Connector
Link CSOS with peacebuilding experts.
✓ Capacity Builder
Provide meditation training.
✓ Convener
Host regional exchanges.
✓ Knowledge Broker
Share best practices.
✓ Resource Facilitator
Connect with tech partners.
✓ Advocate
Influence policy changes.
Key Outcomes:
Reduced Conflict
Enhanced Preparedness
Improved Livelihoods

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