

Contested Conservation Frontiers: Resource Wars, Power Play, and Violence in Samburu and Isiolo Counties

Clifford Collins Omondi Okwany & Evelyne Atieno Owino

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of informal arrangements between the Northern Rangeland Trust (NRT), a non-governmental organization, pastoral communities, and state actors in northern Kenya, focusing on Isiolo and Samburu counties. The cases in these counties highlight the contrasting impacts of NRT-led conservation interventions on natural resource management (NRM). The work draws on 56 in-depth interviews, 41 focus group discussions, repeated field observation, and transect walks conducted between 2018 and 2024 with key informants, including NRT representatives, government officials, civil society actors, and pastoral community members, triangulating findings with conservation literature and government documents. The analysis reveals that public-private partnerships (PPPs) involving NRT and government actors are characterized by secrecy, and their influence is primarily evident through their impacts. Conservation efforts, often justified under the guise of environmental protection, have increasingly relied on the privatization and legitimization of coercive force. This militarized approach exacerbates resource conflicts and perpetuates cycles of violence. The study, thus, underscores the need for greater transparency and accountability in conservation initiatives to balance resource management and community livelihoods effectively.

Keywords

Organized Violence, Natural Resource Management, Northern Rangeland Trust,
Community Land Act, Pastoral Communities.

Credit authorship contribution statement

Clifford Collins Omondi Okwany: Conception or design of the work, data collection, data analysis and interpretation, critical revision of the article, and final approval of the version to be published.

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About the authors

Clifford Collins Omondi Okwany is a political scientist trained in Kenya and Norway. He is a resident at the Institute of Public Policy and International Affairs (IPPIA) and a senior fellow at the Raad Peace Research Institute. His research work is based in the Horn of Africa. (cliffmode2006@gmail.com)

Evelyne Atieno Owino is a PhD researcher at Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies and Center for Development Studies (Zentrum für Entwicklungsforschung), University of Bonn. Evelyne's Doctorate program is concentrated on investigating the interface of social-ecological transformations in Rural Africa. (evelyne.owino@bicc.de)

1. Introduction

Militarization and organized violence have become prominent features of African conservation practices, particularly in natural resource management (NRM). This study examines how militarization in conservation practices affects NRM and pastoral land tenure systems in Kenya, particularly under the Community Land Act (hereafter CLA 2016). Our paper complements the literature by Lunstrum, Bocarejo and Ojeda¹ and Duffy et al.,² which argues that the use of force by state and private entities to enforce conservation policies in Kenya often leads to significant tensions between conservationists and local pastoral communities. While ostensibly aimed at protecting and governing natural resources, this approach frequently exacerbates socio-political conflicts and marginalizes vulnerable communities. Weak land tenure systems, particularly under the CLA 2016, exacerbate these challenges by creating ambiguous legal frameworks that can be manipulated and exploited by private companies and organizations, undermining community rights and fueling disputes over NRM.

Under Kenya's 2010 Constitution, the CLA 2016 protects community land rights and promotes equitable, community-driven land management frameworks. However, delays in registering community lands and resolving boundary disputes have hampered its implementation. Such delays provide opportunities for private entities to manipulate land governance structures, often leading to land dispossession and "green grabbing," i.e. the appropriation of land under the pretext of environmental protection.³ In response, the Community Land (Amendment) Bill of 2023 seeks to address these issues, but the broader structural weaknesses in NRM governance remain unresolved. Public-private partnerships (PPPs) may be a mechanism to bridge the gap between conservation and community interests. These partnerships bring together public institutions such as the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS), devolved governments, and private organizations such as the Northern Rangelands Trust (NRT). However, as it shall be clear below, our findings suggest that such PPP initiatives have opaque processes and a tendency to privilege private and state actors over local communities.

The monopolization of decision-making, combined with organized violence as an enforcement tool, often undermines the potential of PPPs to achieve equitable and sustainable NRM outcomes. Thus, we aim to examine the intersection of militarization, land tenure, and PPPs in NRM in Kenya's northern counties, particularly Isiolo and Samburu, highlighting how weaknesses in statutory frameworks and conservation policies enable private entities to dominate resource governance, creating cycles of conflict over

1 Bocarejo and Ojeda (2016).

2 Duffy et al. (2019).

3 Fairhead et al. (2012).

critical resources such as land, water, and pasture. The writing is divided into different sections. First, we discuss the NRM framework with a focus on conservation in Kenya. Secondly, we show the powerplay that encompasses the management of natural resources. The analysis shows how private interests exploit loopholes in legal frameworks and conservation regulations and take advantage of weak community land systems. We also demonstrate how organized violence is used as a policing strategy for NRM in Northern Kenya.

2. Methodology

This study takes a qualitative approach, integrating primary data obtained through interviews with secondary analysis of the relevant literature and government documents. We conducted fieldwork in two critical counties (Samburu and Isiolo) between February 2018 and March 2024. Samburu County included conservancies such as *Namunyak*, *Kalepo*, *Westgate*, *Sera*, *Kalama*, and *Ngilai* central community, while Isiolo County included *Nakuprat-Gotu*, *Leparua*, *Buliqo Bulesa*, and *Nasulu* community conservancies. The study was conducted in three distinct phases: the initial phase (2018–2021), a follow-up phase (October 2022–March 2023), and the final phase (January–March 2024). Fifty-six semi-structured interviews were carried out primarily with key informants, including representatives from the Northern Rangelands Trust (NRT), local, county, and national government officials, community-based organizations, faith-based organizations, and civil society organizations working in the two counties.

In addition, interviews were held with community leaders, pastoralists, and conservation practitioners to capture diverse perspectives. The interviews were complemented by 41 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), which enabled us to gather opinions and insights from local communities with a common interest in NRM, taking place in selected pastoral communities with the objective of understanding grassroots experiences with conservation initiatives and the impact of militarized enforcement. These sessions provided insights into the communities' perceptions of land tenure, security, and resource access. Furthermore, we conducted a secondary data analysis that included a comprehensive review of conservation-related academic literature and provided the theoretical context for analyzing the implications of militarization on NRM. We analyzed key statutory documents, including the Community Land (Amendment) Bill of 2023 and relevant policy briefs, to gain insight into Kenya's legal and institutional frameworks governing land tenure and conservation.

Data from interviews, FGDs, and secondary sources were triangulated to ensure validity and reliability. We used thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and relationships among key variables, including organized violence's role, PPPs' effectiveness, and

community responses to conservation practices. We employed qualitative research as a methodological approach to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of NRM in northern Kenya, with particular attention paid to the intersection of militarization, land tenure, and public-private partnerships. The study provides actionable insights for policymakers, conservation practitioners, and community stakeholders seeking to address these complex challenges.

3. Natural resource management: A conservation framework in Kenya

Natural resource management is an interdisciplinary field of study that encompasses the sustainable utilization of available resources, such as water, land, air, minerals, forests, wild flora, and fauna. These resources provide biodiversity through a multitude of ecosystems that support the life of other species of variant genes, enabling them to adapt to different environments and climates through an interactive process.⁴ In this discussion, it is crucial to acknowledge that natural resource systems are inherently complex and interlinked with social, economic, and political systems. NRM adopts an integrated methodological approach acknowledging the interconnectedness of social and natural systems. It addresses the socioeconomic and political pressures on institutions and fosters human-nature relationships, as the public good necessitates collective management of shared resources.⁵

Muralikrishna and Manickam⁶ highlight the role of NRM in supporting human livelihoods in terms of consumption and public good services. Riddiford⁷ underscores the necessity for an integrated catchment management approach to NRM that incorporates the interests of the affected communities and employs flexible strategies for integrated policy programs based on appropriate planning processes. Such an approach considers the powers involved in NRM and the interests of the affected communities. To ensure this, it is essential to consider the following key interests: First, the enhancement, maintenance, and sustainability of the resources; second, the protection, recovery, and conservation of planning and effective action; and third, to enhance the capacities, skills, and engagement of the communities affected.⁸ While community-based NRM models focus on local-scale management, such as group ranches and village-level initiatives,⁹ the complexity of resource use in northern Kenya requires a broader approach. Pastoral communities depend on vast rangelands for water and grazing, requiring mobility during seasonal changes.

4 Jhariya et al. (2022); Muralikrishna & Manickam (2017).

5 Hughes et al. (2021).

6 Muralikrishna and Manickam (2017).

7 Riddiford (2021).

8 For further public participation processes, see also Webler (1999).

9 Moiko (2015).

Collaborative initiatives involving government, private entities, and communities are essential to effectively manage these expansive and dynamic landscapes. This is why a public-private partnership (PPP) model is often selected. In this framework, the government establishes laws and policies, private entities contribute resources and expertise, and communities provide indigenous knowledge. However, northern Kenya's NRM framework is constrained by gaps in legislation, weak land tenure systems, and competing interests among stakeholders. Despite the existence of statutory laws such as the Wildlife Conservation and Management Act (2013), the CLA (2016), the Forest Conservation and Management Act (2022), and the Climate Change Act (2016), the absence of unified national land policy has impeded the integration of these frameworks. This has resulted in fragmented governance, whereby private entities and political actors have exploited the ambiguities inherent in the statutory laws. The interplay between conservation and economic interests introduces further complexity to the situation.

The concept of sustainable development, as postulated by ecological economics, strives to achieve a balance between the pursuit of business profits and the preservation of ecosystems.¹⁰ While there is a growing recognition of the link between corporate performance and environmental responsibility,¹¹ many private entities prioritize economic returns over environmental sustainability.¹² This tension is evident in the NRT operations, which demonstrate a profit-driven approach in their partnerships with county and national governments, with a tendency to disregard community needs.

Conservation is frequently portrayed as a means of resolving conflicts and fostering cooperation regarding shared resources.¹³ However, conservation initiatives can also be drivers of conflict.¹⁴ As Greiner¹⁵ observes that conservancies' dual nature serves as an instrument for land-use transformation and resource formalization. The intention to add value to natural resources, the lack of clarity surrounding land rights and the intersection of ethnic territorial disputes with conservation policies frequently results in violence. In Kenya, conservation practices are often associated with state enforcement, which can result in human rights violations when security agencies use force.

Northern Kenya's NRM challenges underscore the importance of hybrid governance models that blend top-down and bottom-up approaches. Hardin's¹⁶ "*Tragedy of the Commons*" proposes the establishment of rational institutions to govern shared resources,

10 Daly & Growth (1996); Müller et al. (2022).

11 Whiteman et al., (2013); Winn & Pogutz (2013).

12 Browning et al. (2020); Figge & Hahn (2021).

13 Ali, (2005), (2007).

14 Duffy, (2014); Duffy et al. (2019).

15 Greiner (2012).

16 Hardin (1968).

whereas Ostrom¹⁷ and Olson¹⁸ advocate for a balance between institutional and community-led management. Article 63 of Kenya's Constitution and CLA, 2016, provides a framework for the community to manage their resources, while Article 67 emphasizes the importance of top-down institutional oversight. Combining these approaches could create a governance structure integrating conservation expertise, traditional pastoralist knowledge, and policy-driven county government leadership. However, governance in northern Kenya often fails to reflect this balance. Private entities and political actors exploit the weakness of institutions and limited government presence, imposing a top-down approach and using organized violence to enforce conservation agendas. These practices prioritize economic profits over the equitable distribution of resources, exacerbating tensions in communities that rely on natural resources for survival.

4. Powerplay and the development of natural resource management in northern Kenya

The rise of private interests can be analyzed in the context of global changes, particularly the liberalization of the world economy that established institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. This, in turn, contributed to the privatization of properties and land,¹⁹ commonly referred to as neoliberal conservational strategies,²⁰ which have resulted in “the privatization and commodification of natural resources”.²¹ Hann²² gives an account of the Chinese economy's transformation in the absence of liberalization and property privatization. Our analysis focuses on how the interplay between privatization and communally registered land transforms pastoral land. This analysis shows how the status of pastoral land is changing from community land, group, and trust lands to a more liberal form of domination through private corporate ownership or individuals. This shift encourages the privatization of land and promotes conservation efforts in northern Kenya. This is despite the fact that most African land is communally owned.²³ As a result, the drive for development is accelerating the privatization of land, increasing corruption over land, and land-grabbing.²⁴

In 1995, NRT established *Namunyak* and *Il Ngwesi* conservancies in Samburu and Laikipia counties. Lekurruki, which is also situated in the Laikipia district, was established

17 Ostrom (1990).

18 Olson (2007).

19 Havnevik et al. (2007).

20 Pitas & Mowen, (2023).

21 Müller et al. (2022, p. 307).

22 Hann (1998).

23 Alden Wily, (2018); Wily & Wily (2015).

24 Wolford et al. (2012).

in 1999, expanded, and by 2015, NRT was assisting pastoral communities in the management of 33 community conservancies in 10 counties, most of which are located in northern Kenya.²⁵ In 2021, five conservancies in Samburu West and four in Isiolo were added.²⁶ As a result, the number of conservancies is increasing, which aligns with the idea of natural resource management (NRM), a sustainable utilization of wildlife and indigenous trees. However, this has led to contestations between the indigenous pastoralist livelihood, the conservationists, and development agents representing local and external interests. These ideas of NRM are implemented through the use of organized violence, the legitimization and monopolization of the use of force, which results in the compulsory acquisition of land, the eviction of local populations, and the enforcement of property rights.²⁷ Such cases are common in pastoral areas in Kenya and elsewhere in the Global South.²⁸

From 2000 to 2015, the NRT conservation agenda impacted 480,000 people, transformed approximately 43,900 km² of land in Kenya's arid and semi-arid regions, and resulted in the training of about 708 conservancy rangers, 37 of whom were part of mobile security teams.²⁹ The organization is engaged in land deals that affect the natural resources, including land, pasture, and water, which are essential for pastoralists' livelihoods.³⁰ Nevertheless, conservation efforts have also proved beneficial to pastoral communities supported by NRT activities, which have transformed Samburu and Isiolo's pastoral land by promoting community conservancies and improving security and the livelihoods of the pastoral communities. However, some scholars, such as Bersaglio,³¹ contend that such advancement is achieved through domination, as powers from the county and NRT engage through hybrid institutions – a collaboration between the government and the private sector aiming to manage pastoral natural resources. This has resulted in unintended and undesired outcomes of NRM. Therefore, opinions differ on whether conservation has positively or negatively impacted pastoralist livelihoods.

Most of the existing literature addresses the question of how to achieve a balance between the economic survival of communities affected and the conservation of wildlife.³² For example, some of the earlier academic works on NRT stipulate the neoliberal aspect of a market-based approach.³³ Bersaglio³⁴ also points to the power dynamics at play in the conservation agenda, providing examples of NRT's focus on conservation and its impact on

25 NRT (2015).

26 NRT (2021).

27 Büscher & Ramutsindela (2016); Duffy (2014); Witter & Satterfield, (2019).

28 Mavunjina, (2017); Mittal & Fraser (2018).

29 NRT (2015).

30 Enns (2019).

31 Bersaglio (2018).

32 Wolmer & Ashley (2003).

33 See, for example, Dressler & Büscher (2008); and Fletcher, (2010).

34 Bersaglio (2018).

the pastoral communities in Laikipia, with a particular focus on *Il Ngwesi*, *Lekurruki*, and *Naibunga* conservancies. Bersaglio and Cleaver posit that “[g]reen grabs occur through the process of bricolage”.³⁵ This market-based approach illustrates the inherent tension between the conservancy idea and community livelihoods.³⁶ However, such ideas promote green grabbing – i.e. strategically exploiting conservancy ideas to grab land and benefit private individuals and not the communities.³⁷

The economic aspects mentioned above fail to consider the power dynamic within society. Furthermore, they do not adequately address the environmental risks associated with the NRT’s wildlife protection strategy, which aims to attract tourists for the economic benefit of external actors. This strategy significantly threatens pastoral communal land rights, cultural heritage, and access to and control over natural resources. The pastoralist livelihood and land have been undergoing dramatic political and economic changes,³⁸ encompassing shifts in the land tenure system,³⁹ the construction of large-scale infrastructures,⁴⁰ the expansion of conservation areas and shifting pastoral land from communal to private land and changing to agricultural use,⁴¹ in the context of mining,⁴² interethnic conflict and violence.⁴³ The weak land tenure system facilitates the changes, which we will analyze below. Our research shows how PPP initiatives in Kenya exploit and take advantage of the weakness inherent in the system of communally owned land for private gain.

5. Results: Natural resource management complexities in the pastoral rangeland

Northern Kenya has historically been a region of relative neglect, both during the colonial era and since Kenya’s independence. This neglect has manifested in various forms, including implementing isolation policies that have affected the region’s economic transformation. The neglect has fostered a culture of skepticism and distrust from pastoral communities in Northern Kenya regarding the government’s development initiatives. The northern region also experiences conflicts historically rooted in competition over scarce natural resources and the cultural practice of cattle rustling, driven by the accumulation of wealth and the restocking of herds.

35 Bersaglio and Cleaver (2018) p. 477.

36 Roth & Dressler (2012).

37 Green & Adams (2015).

38 Korf et al. (2015).

39 Greiner (2017).

40 Okwany (2020); Okwany et al. (2024); Owino & Okwany (2025).

41 Greiner et al. (2013); Greiner & Mwaka (2018); Greiner et al. (2021).

42 Abuya (2018).

43 Greiner (2013); Okwany et al. (2023).

The prolonged drought between 2018 and 2023 exacerbated the resource conflicts in the region. The lack of effective NRM institutions and increased population and permanent settlements have contributed to the degradation of pastoral rangelands. Higher levels of poverty resulting from economic marginalization have also contributed to a high number of uneducated, unemployed, and disenfranchised population who, when exploited by external actors seeking to commercialize or politicize inter-ethnic boundary conflicts and livestock raiding, are prone to resorting to violence.⁴⁴

Cattle raiding has become more destructive and lethal due to the ready availability and proliferation of illicit firearms. However, global changes are attracting movements and projects into pastoral areas, and Isiolo and Samburu, because of their vast territory, have attracted most of these developments that threaten pastoralist livelihoods.⁴⁵ These pastoral communities feel marginalized even with the emergence of projects brought by Vision 2030 – a 22-year development project that started in 2008 and resulted in rapid development, yet Isiolo land is unregistered⁴⁶ – land with no record for community ownership but is under County leadership. On the other hand, Samburu has been going through land registration since the enactment of the CLA 2016.⁴⁷ However, such registrations were stopped because of unclear registration framework and manipulation, leading to corruption and double registration of individuals within the same communal land.⁴⁸ As such, the Community Land (Amendment) Bill of 2023 is currently in parliament. The amendment process tries to fix the confusion and corruption issues surrounding communal land. As we shall show below, Isiolo and Samburu land have different and weak land systems. Without title deeds, unregistered land leads to manipulation and land grabbing.⁴⁹

Northern Kenya has a lower level of development than the other regions in the country, and at the time of writing, the evolving nature of development is attracting experts and foreign investment to the region. Current policies continue to marginalize the pastoral communities and diminish their grazing lands. The NRT has emerged as a prominent actor in natural resource management. However, its interventions have generated both praise and criticism. This analysis assesses the duality of NRT's contributions, focusing on its impact on conservation and pastoral livelihoods in Samburu and Isiolo counties, using evidence drawn from both primary and secondary data.

44 FGDs with pastoral communities in Namunyak, Kalepo, Westgate, Sera, Kalama, and Ngilai central community conservancies in Samburu, and Nakuprat-Gotu, Leparua, Buliqo Bulesa and Nasulu in Isiolo between October 2022 to March 2023, with a follow up in January to May 2024. See, NRT, 2021.

45 FGD with Borana Council of Elders, October 19, 2018.

46 FGD with Borana Council of Elders, October 19, 2018.

47 Interviews with Samburu Land Office, November 2022, with follow-ups in February 2024.

48 Our FGDs from October 2022 to March 2023 in Wamba, Archers Post, Maralal, Marti, Baragoi, Parkati, and Nachola, with a follow-up in January to May 2024, demonstrate double registration of Land and powerful individuals who are not part of the Samburu community acquiring land through corrupt deals.

49 Interview with a key informant with information on NRT in Namunyak Conservancy, March 13, 2020.

5.1 ‘Green Grabbing’, legal loopholes, land contestation, and wildlife enterprise

The conservancy trend developed in response to the explosion of interest in experiencing wildlife in Africa’s vast, unspoiled areas. The extensive land occupied by colonial settlers was transformed into conservancies to generate funds for the settlers and local elites – influential community leaders who worked with the settlers. Consequently, a formalized bureaucratic system has been developed to target trust land (Isiolo) and group ranches (Samburu), which are communally owned, have a weak tenure system, and are easy to manipulate, leading to corrupt land deals.⁵⁰ Furthermore, the incursion of pastoral communities into private farms and ranches owned by colonial settlers, driven by the need for pastureland in the face of climate change and evolving environmental policies, has led to these settlers’ establishment of private and fenced wildlife conservancies. This has, in turn, attracted an influx of conservancy businesses, followed by the formation of NRT and the continuous policing of the conservancies since the 1990s.⁵¹

Pastoral land is communally owned under the Group Representative Act of 1968 and the Trust Land Act of 1968. The first Act was applied in districts cooperating with the national government and were more organized as groups. The later Act was applied to districts that were in opposition to the post-colonial government, which came into power in 1963. With the exception of a few educated leaders, group ranch members were largely unaware of the intricacies of legal land issues and the limitations of communal land ownership. The situation of trust land was even worse due to the trusteeship invested in the district leadership. One of the key distinctions between the group ranch and the trust land established under the Group Representative Land Act of 1968 and the Trust Land Act of 1968 is that the former emphasized the strength of community ownership of land, whereas the land under the latter was subject to the authority of the district leadership.

During the administration of Jomo Kenyatta, the first president of Kenya, from 1963 to 1978, the Borana in Isiolo supported the Shifta Wars – separatist wars between the Kenyan government and Somali militias backed by the Said Barre administration in Somalia. These Shifta Wars compelled the Kenyatta regime to subject the Isiolo leadership to the district command. Accordingly, the Trust Land Act of 1968 was enacted to enforce land leadership under the purview of the national government in northeastern Kenya, including Isiolo and Marsabit, under the district trusteeship.⁵² This meant that the land was under the purview of the district leadership, representing the national government. In contrast, land under the governance of a group representative (a Samburu district case) was registered under and entrusted to the community’s traditional leadership.⁵³ Both land tenures were

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid.

52 FGD with Borana Council of Elders, October 19, 2018.

53 Interview with land experts in Samburu County office, February 15, 2023.

susceptible to corruption because the district leadership changed with each new president's administration, while the group ranches were subject to manipulation by elders and clan leadership. Consequently, private entities exploited the land tenure system, manipulating the national administration and the community leadership to acquire land in northern Kenya.

Isiolo and Samburu districts (now counties) were neglected until the 1990s, when the area experienced a surge in interest in prospective energy development, such as oil, wind, and geothermal potential, which led to a surge in interest. However, these areas are governed by a communally owned land tenure system. Isiolo was adjudicated under the trusteeship of the former district leadership, while Samburu was under the community group ranches – community leadership and families registered their names as owners of pastoral rangeland. Such trusteeship and group ranch leadership were transferred to the county governments pending the CLA 2016, which stipulates the registration of communal lands to empower pastoral/indigenous communities with authority over land adjudication. As early as 1995, the NRT's conservation agenda began exploiting the weaknesses of the communal land tenure system by establishing a conservancy when the community land in question was supposed to be under the trusteeship of the district leadership and group ranches. As a consequence of the postponement of land registration in Isiolo and Samburu, NRT continues to benefit from a weak land tenure system.⁵⁴ Such a system subjects pastoral communities to vulnerabilities over land use change due to marginalization and insecurity.⁵⁵ The changes can also potentially result in the scandalous acquisition of pastoral land.⁵⁶

Different acts constitute the new land tenure system. For instance, community land is registered under the CLA 2016, conferring rights over the land to the community. Furthermore, the Wildlife Conservation and Management Act (WCMA) of 2013 offers interested parties, individuals, communities, government, or private entities to participate in NRM. Also, forest and wetland lands are safeguarded under the Climate Change Act of 2016 and the Forest Conservation and Management Act of 2022; these forest lands are part of the community resources but are protected areas. Nevertheless, these Acts of parliament often overlap, resulting in gaps and inconsistencies due to the absence of an integrated land policy.

Section 29 of the CLA 2016 designates the land rights to the community, while Section 28(1) protects pastoral customs and practices provided the land is registered under the community. Section 28(2) permits communal grazing but restricts these rights to registered

54 NRT (2020a).

55 FGDs with community members in Wamba, Nasulu, Sera, Kalama and Ngilai, Samburu, February 2024; FGDs in Nakuprat-Gotu in Isiolo, March 2024.

56 Krätli, S. & Swift, J. (2003); Gabbert et al. (2021); Lind et al. (2020).

communities to follow a grazing plan. However, implementation has been delayed due to ongoing amendments to the CLA 2016 in parliament since February 2023. In addition, legal loopholes, double registration, and the manipulation of old registers in group ranches have contributed to the continued exploitation of community lands.⁵⁷ These deficiencies permit entities like the NRT to partner with county governments in PPPs for conservation initiatives, which often result in forced evictions and organized violence. The extant national land policy enacted in 2009 and integrated into the 2010 Constitution requires updating to reflect new land regulations and address these overlaps.⁵⁸

For instance, while the WCMA of 2013 emphasizes NRM, the slow registration of community land under CLA 2016 has hampered community decision-making processes and has left pastoral communities vulnerable.⁵⁹ Statutory laws such as the Forest Conservation and Management Act 2022 and the Government Lands Act (Chapter 280 of 2010) further complicate matters, with the latter giving the executive authority to declare land as state property. This fragmentation allows private entities to take advantage of these ambiguities. NRT, in particular, has faced legal challenges to its conservation activities, with petitioners arguing that its actions violate Section 117 of the 2013 WCMA, which recognizes traditional mechanisms for resolving land disputes, and Sections 28 and 29 of the CLA 2016, which safeguard pastoralist rights.

In Isiolo, for instance, seven years after the CLA 2016 was enacted, the land registration process has not commenced, resulting in legal disputes over NRT's management of community land under communal tenure systems.⁶⁰ However, disparate interests advocate for NRT's involvement in NRM. With the advent of the CLA (Amendment) Bill of 2023, pastoral communities engage in public-private partnership initiatives on conservation and NRM through political patronage but are limited in legal procedures.

Community-based conservancies are seen as a strategy for NRM and are proving to be better initiatives for including community leadership in the stewardship of trust lands or group ranches and safeguarding community land. Such is the case because these community-based conservancies entail traditional mechanisms, indigenous knowledge and community responsibility. Management which is community initiated, supported by policies/laws, and expertise and resources from private organizations, safeguards communally owned pastoral land. However, the weak tenure system leaves pastoral

57 Interviews with land experts in Samburu County office, February 15, 2023.

58 Discussions with land tenure experts at the land conference organized by the Kenyan Ministry of Land and Physical Planning (MoLPP, Food Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)), and French Institute For Research In Africa (IFRA), June 13th to 14th, 2022.

59 Interview with the land registrar of Laikipia and Samburu, June 14, 2022.

60 The Elephant (2022).

61 Environmental Land Court decision on petition no. 7 of 2020, John Ngimor & 554 others versus Northern Rangeland Trust & 3 others; decided against NRT at the Environmental and Land Court, Kitale, 2021.

lands vulnerable to large-scale land use changes through contentious conservation and infrastructure development projects.

Consequently, NRT's restrictive grazing policies have resulted in the dispossession of pastoralists from their land, while the militarized policing strategy used to control wildlife and pasture has contributed to shrinking pastoral land and intensified resource wars in a region prone to prolonged droughts.⁶² NRT has also been seen as a contentious security provider in northern Kenya, effectively functioning as a state within a state. This is due to their initiative to mediate pastoral conflicts by employing rangers who oversee conservancies and the communities around them. NRT has been accused of involvement in inter-communal violence, as its security personnel have become a pivotal force fueling inter-communal conflicts involving cattle rustling. This raises the question of whether the NGO is an agent of peace, as it claims, or an agent of violence.⁶³

The NGO, NRT was founded by Ian Craig, a British national whose ancestors were among the colonial settlers. Craig's family owned a 62,000-acre ranch that is now *Lewa Conservancy* in Laikipia County and is the headquarters of NRT.⁶⁴ Its conservation strategy is to help community leaders, mostly elites, manage the conservancies as tourist attractions and invest in expensive lodges.⁶⁵ Conservancies embrace the concept of eco-tourism – attracting tourists while also conserving wildlife and enhancing pastoralist livelihoods, with the additional objective of fostering peace.⁶⁶ Such investments are also designed to transform the lives of local communities by providing bursaries and employing community members as scouts/rangers who manage the conservancies.⁶⁷

NRT's efforts have protected elephants and rhinos by bringing ivory poaching down to zero, rehabilitating rangelands, supporting forest conservation, protecting native trees such as acacias and mangroves in coastal Kenya, supporting community enterprises – buying and selling livestock and collecting about 20 tons of plastic waste from the beaches.⁶⁸ The challenge lies in achieving a balance between conservation and the protection of pastoralist livelihoods. There is evidence that NRT has incrementally created such difficulties,

62 FGDs with pastoral communities in Namunyak, Kalepo, Westgate, Sera, Kalama, and Ngilai central community conservancies in Samburu, and Nakuprat-Gotu, Leparua, Buliqo Bulesa and Nasulu in Isiolo between October 2022 to March 2023, with a follow up in January to May 2024. Also see, Mkutu, 2020.

63 FGDs with Borana council leaders October 19, 2018, Also see, Schetter et al., (2022).

64 Mittal & Mooloo (2021).

65 Most of our interviews with Key Informants, FGDs with Rangers, and communities, including NRT officials, pointed to specific elites having privileges over community conservatism.

66 NRT (2022).

67 Most of our interviews from Nakuprat-Gotu, Leparua, Biliqo-Bulesa in Isiolo, October 2019, and Westgate, Meibae, Namunyak, Sera, Kalepo in Samburu and Lewa in Laikipia November 2022, proved benefits from NRT, however, they also pointed a positive skewed benefit towards the dominating clans, and the beneficiaries are majority relatives of the leaders, and not reflecting the entire pastoral communities as hyped in NRT reports, and our interviews in NRT offices in Lewa conservancy and Wamba, November 2022.

68 NRT (2020b).

resulting in the forceful eviction of pastoralists from their land, including human rights violations in Isiolo.⁶⁹

In addition to such forceful evictions, NRT engages in corrupt land negotiations, incentivizing those who agree with its agenda and subjugating those who reject such deals.⁷⁰ For example, establishing the *Ltungai* Community Conservancy in Samburu West was an agreement between Samburu politicians, leaders, community gatekeepers, and NRT. The objective was twofold: to attract eco-tourism, conserve the area's rich wildlife, and serve as a buffer zone between the Pokot and Samburu communities to prevent inter-ethnic conflicts between them. The neighboring Pokot community was not consulted on the matter even though Pokots depended on the traditional grazing lands within the conservancy, which they had shared for generations, particularly during prolonged drought.⁷¹

Following its establishment in 2002 and implementation in 2005, Samburu politicians began disseminating leaflets urging the Pokot to return to Baringo County, claiming that Pokot in Samburu County are occupiers who migrate from West Pokot and Baringo Counties to invade Samburu communities. This marginalization of the Pokot ethnic group resulted in a "full-scale guerrilla-type war."⁷² Most Samburu villagers were forcibly displaced, numerous women and children were killed, and victims mutilated. The government ended the conflict by declaring a ceasefire in 2009.⁷³ In response, the conflict resulted in an unknown number of casualties,⁷⁴ with estimates ranging between 62 and 500 deaths, as reported by the Kenyan government,⁷⁵ *Ltungai* Community Conservancy thus illustrates how creating a conservancy can, in fact, fuel rather than prevent conflict.

Conservancies privately supported, promoted, and supervised by NRT encompass an area of 6.3 million hectares, about 11 percent of the land area of Kenya.⁷⁶ These conservancies have surpassed the total area managed by the national parks service, Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS), and are designated as community-based conservancies. NRT advocates for assisting the pastoral communities in managing the conservancies to transition their management to community members. In 2014, NRT initiated a peace program to resolve conflicts and follow up livestock raids. Peacebuilding activities predominantly involve the collaboration between local government officials, such as chiefs, national government peace cops, and the Council of Elders, which is made up of different ethnic groups. However, controversies surround the follow-up of livestock raids by the Joint Operations

69 Letiwa (2020).

70 FGD with Pokot Elders in Amaiya center, February 5, 2023; follow-up FGDs with Police and Rangers in Losuuk, March 2024.

71 Okumu, W. (2014).

72 See, for example, Greiner, 2017 referring to the Nation Media report 2006.

73 FGD with Pokot Elders in Amaiya center, February 5, 2023.

74 Ibid.

75 Greiner (2012).

76 See Corry (2021).

and Command Center (JOCC), a coordination center for NRT elite trained rangers. Within the JOCC, there is a special team named “nines,” given the name depending on their training, and they are teamed in numbers, ranging from ‘nine-ones or 9-1s,’ ‘nine-twos/9-2s,’ to nine-nines/9-9s. The JOCC coordinates the activities of KWS and the Kenya police, as they were accused of extrajudicial killings of communities who were underrepresented in the 9-1s to 9-9 teams.⁷⁷

There are reports of another conflict between the NRT leadership and *Namunyak* Conservancy in Samburu East, the first conservancy managed by NRT since 1995. The *Namunyak* leadership claimed they had severed ties with NRT, citing a lack of trust and transparency regarding financial matters, persistent attempts to sabotage operations, growth, and development, and an unfulfilled pursuit of sustainability. Consequently, they sought to become independent.⁷⁸ In contrast, NRT accused the leadership of *Namunyak* Conservancy of corruption and mismanagement of the conservancy funds designated for development.⁷⁹ A respondent corroborated this antagonistic relationship to us, stating:

“...There is a lot of NGO dominance in the conservancy business...NRT preaches to the community that this is their thing...however, they are using the community for fundraising and to further their interests...as in terms of actual benefits, things have stagnated since 1995...”⁸⁰

The focal point of the Memorandum of Understandings (MoU) between NRT and most community conservancies has been obtaining support from the NGO, which is advantageous in securing donor funding. Consequently, the group ranch leadership in Samburu and the trustees of the lands in Isiolo entered into an agreement with NRT that aims to secure funding and manage their land through conservancies. These MoUs stipulate that NRT will support the conservancy until the local leadership can resume responsibility for their management. The leadership of *Namunyak* Conservancy questioned the rationale behind NRT’s continued involvement in the management of their conservancy, given their demonstrated capacity to manage it independently. The local leadership highlighted that they were the first conservancy since 1995, and it was time to assume responsibility for the management themselves, secure funding from the donors directly, and seek investment opportunities independently. These assertions substantiated the concerns our key informant raised.

“...how come NRT has not allowed all these babies to grow in all these years of partnership...NRT conservation model lacks seriousness as they do not have community interests at heart because the peace NRT created is unsustainable. They want to take advantage of the uninformed community and the weak leadership of the communities...That is where corruption comes in...”⁸¹

77 FGDs with Borana council of elders, October 2018.

78 Interview with *Namunyak* leadership in Wamba, November 13, 2022.

79 Interview with NRT office at the sub-county office in Wamba, November 15, 2022.

80 Interview with a key informant about NRT in *Namunyak* Conservancy March 13, 2020.

81 Ibid.

The Isiolo community leadership, which had previously resisted NRT's initiatives on NRM, began cooperating with NRT leadership after the introduction of bursaries and development funds from the carbon credit projects introduced in 2021.⁸² The concept of carbon credits, a transferable financial instrument used as compensation for carbon offset or reduction in carbon emissions, has emerged as a topic of great interest in Kenya, particularly in the context of conservancies. NRT has been providing and administering carbon credit funds to conservancies, with 14 conservancies, most of which are in Samburu county, receiving 36 million Kenyan shillings each in carbon credit funding.⁸³ These figures fluctuate depending on how soil carbon is measured, and given the lack of information from the pastoral communities carbon funds are likely to exacerbate resource conflicts among different entities and interests.⁸⁴ It has already attracted government attention, leading to introducing the transferable financial instrument in parliament, the Carbon Credit and Benefit Sharing Bill 2023. The bill estimates that Kenya will receive US \$709 million or 100 billion Kenyan shillings annually from the carbon credit funds. The managing authorities will receive approximately five percent, while the communities living within a community forest will receive 55 percent.⁸⁵

Even though information about these carbon credit funds had not reached most conservancies in Isiolo and Samburu, they received them without questioning where they came from and why. A point of contention among the local communities interviewed was that they could not afford to live in the lodges at some conservancies on their land. For instance, the average salary for a Kenyan working in a conservancy is about US \$416 per month.⁸⁶ Staying at the lodges in conservancies that are overseen by the NRT is very expensive as prices are geared towards foreign tourists, mainly from the Global North. This renders it unaffordable for local pastoralists or Kenyan workers at the conservancies. For example, Sasab Lodge in Westgate Conservancy costs between US \$700 and US \$800 per night, Lewa Safari camp in Laikipia costs US \$1,546 per night, and Borana Lodge in Laikipia costs between US \$700 and US \$1,000 per night. This is considerably higher than the rates charged by the neighboring conservancies managed by the county government of Samburu. For instance, Samburu Sopa Lodge and Samburu Elephant Lodge, both under the purview of the county government, charge about US \$230 and US

82 Interviews with the Borana council leaders, January–February 2024.

83 Interviews with Westgate, Meibae, *Namunyak*, Sera, and Kalepo in Samburu in November 2022; interview at the NTR office in Lewa Conservancy in February 2024.

84 Interview with *Namunyak* community leadership questioned why everyone received this amount while other conservancies are larger in terms of natural resources such as forests and mountains, and in terms of economic needs, November 2022; A discussion with of the carbon credit expert pointed that there are private interests in the carbon credit business, leading to contestation and different entities politicising the carbon credit funds, February 2024.

85 Mutai (2023).

86 Corry (2021).

\$250 per night respectively. A key informant and a community leader confirmed these social disparities:

“...as a local community member, I cannot afford to go and stay in Lewa... why would I care about wildlife? \$700 is a lot of money per night for locals... So what happens to the community...do they have community interest at heart...?”⁸⁷

There have also been allegations and protests from local communities alleging human rights violations, including enforced disappearances, corruption, fueling of ethnic conflict, and extrajudicial killings perpetrated by NRT.⁸⁸ However, a nature conservancy report funded by NRT dismisses such claims.⁸⁹ These mixed reactions illustrate a different perception of NRT among ethnic communities. While the NGO has supported some communities of the Borana, it has violated the rights of other communities who do not agree with the NRT’s actions. It has offered incentives to communities that support its operations, while those in opposition have been denied the incentives and are subjected to the strong use of force through organized violence,⁹⁰ which shall be explained further below. This creates a conflict of interest between ethnic communities in Samburu and Isiolo counties. Such claims indicate that the NRT’s strategy of ‘divide-and-rule’ contributes to the exacerbation of ethnic conflict between different ethnic communities, including instances of intra-ethnic violence.⁹¹ Ethnic communities that previously resisted NRT operations, such as the Borana in Isiolo, are now embracing other initiatives, particularly those focusing on carbon funds from bursaries and other financial incentives.⁹² These actions illustrate the power play within the NRM agenda; they show blurred lines between community benefits in conservation work and manipulation through incentives while promoting nature-based solutions.

5.2 Organized violence: A policing strategy within the conservancies

In Kenya, policing is characterized by ‘policing the community’ rather than policing ‘with’ the community – a ‘community-oriented policing’ strategy. The former strategy has been applied despite the progressive police reforms since 2010.⁹³ However, it could

87 Interview with a key informant about NRT in *Namunyak* Conservancy March 13, 2020.

88 Mittal & Moolo (2021).

89 Sena, K. (2022).

90 Most of our interviews and observations confirmed the community division regarding conservancies. Some support the privatization of conservancies, while others want the county government to own them.

91 FGD with Borana Council of Elders, October 19, 2018.

92 Interviews with the Borana council leaders, and NRT headquarters, January–February, 2024.

93 Evidence from our fieldwork research under the ICT4COP 2015–2020, an EU Horizon 2020 project on community policing, demonstrates that policing in Kenya is still characterized by hard power or the police use of force rather than actively involving the community in policing work. Available at <https://www.communitypolicing.eu/handbook/country-specific-information/africa/kenya/>

be argued that community policing has progressed in Kenya since the colonial and post-colonial policing of 1963 to the 1990s. Kenyan community-policing strategies started in 2003 with the business communities in Nairobi engaging with the police to stop crime in the Central Business District (CBD).⁹⁴ Still, community involvement in policing is based on intelligence gathering and not actively involving the community through building trust and identifying and stopping crime. Policing in rural Kenya, particularly northern Kenya, where this study was conducted, is characterized by organized violence, that is, the legitimization and monopolization of the use of force by police institutions. This is despite Article 244 of the Kenyan constitution and Articles 41 and 96 of the 2011 National Police Act stipulating ‘policing with the community’.

Policing with the community represents a philosophy of building trust and a strategy of reassuring, responsive, proactive, problem-oriented, problem-solving, and partnering with the community as key stakeholders in policing work.⁹⁵ Even though NRM theory calls for community involvement as a key stakeholder in policing the conservancies, conservation in Kenya is deeply rooted in the strategy of policing the community.⁹⁶ Pastoral communities coexisted openly with wildlife before the international liberalization and privatization of property and land in the 1990s. However, private entities such as companies and NGOs understood the conservation agenda as a business venture. This resulted in drawing boundaries between wildlife and communities through the fencing and policing conservancies and reducing pastoral land and grazing activities.⁹⁷ Nevertheless, this objective is underpinned by a robust business rationale. The Samburu and Isiolo County case illustrates the negative impact of economic factors on the community’s social, cultural, and economic well-being, as our findings demonstrate. The current 39 conservancies funded by NRT have been militarized: There are cars and rangers with guns who claim to protect the conservancies but who are also engaged in illegal activities, preventing some communities from accessing the conservancy while allowing others to graze and live with the wildlife, according to a respondent.⁹⁸

NRT is responsible for the security in the conservancies, providing rangers with equipment, patrol vehicles, and communication, and pays their salaries in collaboration

94 Ruteere, M. & Pommerolle, M. E. (2003).

95 This definition was developed under the community-oriented policing projects, ICT4COP, an EU-Horizon 2020 research and innovation project, available at <https://www.communitypolicing.eu/about-the-project/>, also see, Lid & Okwany, (2019) and (2020).

96 Most of our interviews with the rangers and police in Isiolo and Samburu, including observation, robustly proved organized violence with the conservancies between October 2022 and February, 2023.

97 Interview with Borana Council of Elders, October 19, 2018.

98 Interview with an official of an NGO and county official in Maralal, Samburu central, and police in Loosuk, January 5, 2023.

with the National Police Service (NPS). The rangers⁹⁹ are armed and have undergone training, enabling them to implement traditional policing strategies effectively. This approach has proven to be effective in the management of the conservancies; however, it also poses a risk to the already militarized pastoral region, which is characterized by the presence of illegal arms and light weapons due to the ongoing conflicts in South Sudan, Sudan, Ethiopia, and Somalia.¹⁰⁰

In Samburu and Isiolo counties, the Kenyan Wildlife Service (KWS) polices a conservation zone¹⁰¹ managed through the Kenya Wildlife Service Command, which was established in 1989¹⁰² and enforced through the Wildlife Conservation and Management Act 2013 – an NRM legislation that outlines the policing of conservancies.¹⁰³ Furthermore, the Kenya Forest Service command, subject to the Forest Conservation and Management Act 2005 (amended in 2016, 2019, and 2022), also employs forest rangers. The devolution of power has enabled the county leadership to manage their conservancies and create a scouts/ranger unit, which is managed under the county security governance structure.¹⁰⁴ While these policing organizations are presumed to coordinate with the National Police Service command, they illustrate the phenomenon of green militarization/organized violence in Samburu and Isiolo. Nevertheless, such coordination remains purely theoretical.¹⁰⁵ It is important to note that the Samburu County government has shown greater support for the conservancies than the Isiolo County government of 2013–2022. The deployment of rangers in Isiolo resulted in conflict with local communities and conservancies. The former Isiolo County government did not have such a program for recruiting rangers as the Samburu County government did through the County Ministry of Tourism. This resulted in widespread protests from Isiolo, alleging that NRT was using a militarization

99 NRT and the County governments use the concept ‘rangers,’ to mean the police protecting the conservancies. The rangers are under the National Police Service Program as the National Police Reservists (NPRs). Such a program is coordinated through the National Police Service Act 2011, and these rangers coordinate and work through the national police structures.

100 Consultation from three NGOs working on peace initiatives in Samburu and Isiolo in October and November, 2022.

101 Interview with KWS in Kom, and Wamba, Samburu East, November 2022.

102 KWS (2021).

103 Follow-up interview with KWS in Wamba, Samburu East, February 2024; also see Wildlife (Conservation and management Act 2012) available at http://kenyalaw.org/kl/fileadmin/pdfdownloads/Acts/WildlifeConservationandManagementActCap376_2_.pdf

104 Interview with Samburu Peace and Security Office, February 5, 2023.

105 Interviews with Rangers in Tuum, Nachola, Bendera in Baragoi, Samburu north, October–November 2022; and an experience from our abrupt interview that ended when the rangers in Ltungai conservancy, Samburu central were informed about the stolen Samburu goats by the Pokot in Manyattas – pastoral traditional huts, proves lack of coordination between the rangers and the National Police Service, February 6, 2023. The Rangers were informed through a phone call by some community members who also rushed to the conservancy and followed the rangers in chasing the stolen goats, without informing the police’s Anti-Stock Theft Unit, and police posts in Longewan and Loosuk areas neighbouring Baringo county from Samburu East.

strategy that entailed the use of force, beatings, and torture as a strategy to enforce the law and maintain order, targeting the minority ethnic groups such as the Borana of Isiolo.¹⁰⁶ However, the current county government of Isiolo, elected in 2022, has adopted a policy of recruiting rangers and coordinating with NRT on conservation matters.¹⁰⁷

The county scouts and NRT rangers are trained at the KWS training college in Manyani, Voi, Taita Taveta County, assisted by the National Police Service, which trains the rangers and provides them with weapons.¹⁰⁸ NRT rangers receive hybrid security training, including private technical training from 51 Degree, a security consulting organization run by Batian Craig, the son of NRT director Ian Craig.¹⁰⁹ The partnership with wildlife security and the police is due to the limited government presence in northern Kenya. As a result, some argue that NRT uses its donor funding support to its JOCC and strengthens organized violence within the conservancies.¹¹⁰ The JOCC works with advanced, sophisticated, and intensive military technology, and their training is more rigorous than that of the average rangers whom the KWS trains. They have been responsible for the recovery of livestock from raiders and anti-poaching activities¹¹¹ but have also been accused of human rights violations and forced disappearance, which has reduced livestock recovery activities. Nevertheless, they continue to engage in anti-poaching activities and protect the conservancies.¹¹²

In addition to its role in anti-poaching and community conservancy, the Kenya Wildlife Services (KWS) have delegated their responsibility for the securitization program in northern Kenya to NRT due to a lack of resources. This shift reflects a historical pattern of neglect by colonial and post-colonial governments in this region. The NGO employs rangers who are responsible for highway security and responding to livestock theft. However, there have been cases where the rights of indigenous communities have been violated, as well as abductions and enforced disappearances.¹¹³ These violations are attributed to the NRT's

106 Okwany & Owino (2022).

107 Interviews with Isiolo County offices and the Borana Council of Elders from January to March 2024, demonstrate a shift. Both County leadership and communities started embracing NRT conservation agendas, as opposed to the previous Isiolo County government, and communities who were hostile against the national government and NRT, now praise NRT work but with reservations. As such, the political shift demonstrates what some of our interviews confirm as economic incentives, the community leaders have received some funding and focus on the carbon credit funding that already is popular in Samburu conservancies, and with the popularity of carbon credit bill 2023 in Parliament, the political elites shift to embrace conservation agenda.

108 Interviews at the County Police headquarters in Maralal, Samburu Central, October 2022, and KWS in Wamba and Kom, Samburu East, November 2022.

109 Mittal & Mooloo (2021).

110 Mbaria & Ogada (2017).

111 Mittal & Mooloo (2021).

112 Interview by a former Nine One ranger, November 2022.

113 The Elephant (2022).

securitization claims, which the NGO justifies by providing conservancy security and maintaining law and order in the conservancies within the pastoral rangelands.¹¹⁴

By 2018, NRT had about 748 rangers, an increase of 435 from 2012. These rangers are well-armed and trained in accordance with NPS and KWS standard operating procedures.¹¹⁵ In 2023, NRT employed more than 870 fully armed rangers, earning between US \$100 and US \$200 monthly. The exact amount depended on the conservancy's income.¹¹⁶ Consequently, some of these rangers earn more than rangers paid by the county government, who earn between US \$34 and US \$48, or a police constable who earns a net salary of between US \$83 and US \$180 per month.¹¹⁷

As early as 1998, a few security personnel in Kenya's arid and semi-arid regions led the British colonial government to form the Kenya Police Reservists (KPRs, now National Police Reservists). The colonial government started the KPR program as home guards who provided security for the white settlers. Following independence, the initiative evolved into a voluntary police force whose members were community-based scouts who volunteered to help with security within their community and were commanded by the police officers in charge of the station. In the case of northern Kenya, they worked in anti-stock theft and anti-poaching operations due to the inherent challenges posed by pastoral communities' coexistence with wildlife. The voluntary nature of these KPRs meant they earned little money and sometimes even went without payment. They were poorly trained and had poor policing equipment. There was an ineffective oversight strategy and inadequate monitoring of the arms given to them.¹¹⁸ Following accounts of cattle raiding, poaching, and organized violence for commercial purposes, the government rescinded the policy of recruiting KPRs.¹¹⁹

Some of these KPRs were then recruited by local raiders and militiamen and involved in ethnic and political rivalries, while politicians hired some to burn houses and attack their rivals.¹²⁰ Members of parliament used their constituency funds to buy guns for the KPRs, which resulted in some KPRs disobeying commands from the police officers in charge of the station.¹²¹ The government banned the KPR program after the 2007–2008 electoral violence because of the escalation of ethnic conflict and the use of illegal arms

114 NRT (2013).

115 NRT (2018).

116 Interviews with NRT rangers in 5 conservancies in Isiolo and 6 conservancies in Samburu in November 2022, and a follow-up in February 2023.

117 Interviews with police officers in Samburu County, October and November 2022.

118 Interviews with police and county and NRT rangers, October and November 2022

119 Most interviews with the police, NRT, and county ranger proved that KPRs were involved in illegal businesses such as poaching and ethnic conflict engineered by politicians. October and November 2022.

120 Interviews with the assistant commissioner, October 16, 2022.

121 Most interviews with police, NRT, and county rangers affirmed that the KPRs were effective in stopping the cattle raids but were funded by politicians to fuel ethnic conflict, especially during electioneering years, October and November 2022.

in northern Kenya. However, the program was reinstated under the 2011 National Police Act with a different name: National Police Reservists (NPRs). These NPRs train with NRT and County Rangers to stop cattle theft and poaching, and they receive training through a hybrid security or joint effort of the National Police Service, Kenya Wildlife Service,¹²² and the private security consultant 51 Degrees.¹²³ Thus, the continuation of legitimizing and monopolizing the use of force – organized violence in northern Kenya.

It has been established that organized violence occurred in Isiolo.¹²⁴ There are claims that about 76 Borana ethnic communities have been victims of killings that NRT supported during the inter-ethnic conflict in *Biliqo Bulesa* Conservancy.¹²⁵ In Samburu, too, there have been accounts of injuries from attacks by NRT security operations and conservation management,¹²⁶ with the NRT special forces having been accused of these attacks.¹²⁷ Moreover, NRT has promised many benefits to the communities that have yet to materialize.¹²⁸ The NGO acquired land in Isiolo and undermined the Borana Dedha grazing system – a traditional grazing system that ensures all communities have access to pasture throughout the year. The system embraces the equitable use of natural resources, and the elders are always available to mediate disputes over the competition. It also upholds traditional conservation ethics that respect wildlife. Those who undermine the grazing system or poach wildlife face grave consequences.

The withdrawal of the partnership between the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ) and the NRT peace MoU is a consequence of this. GIZ withdrew from their 2014–2015 peace partnership component due to concerns regarding the NRT leadership's lack of merit and choice of nepotism in recruiting peace leaders with no qualifications.¹²⁹ Therefore, it can be argued that conservation in northern Kenya is not solely characterized by NRM and the development aspect projected by NRT but also elements of forceful eviction of the pastoral communities in their grazing land, denying them their livelihood but projecting a modern way of community conservation and grazing. The NGO also exploits the PPP initiative, a partnership with county and national governments, through organized violence with the objective of NRM besides promoting conservation and improving the local livelihoods of pastoral communities.

122 Interviews with rangers in Ltungai Conservancy and police from Loosuk police station in Samburu Central, February 5, 2023.

123 Duffy (2022).

124 See, for example, Mittal & Mooloo (2021).

125 Four FGDs in Merti in Isiolo in November 2022 with a follow-up in February 2024.

126 Kariuki, P. (2022).

127 Most of our interviews confirms such community grievances towards NRT violation of human rights and forceful disappearance in Isiolo and Samburu.

128 FGD with Borana council of elders, October 19, 2018.

129 Interview with a key informant with information on NRT in Namunyak Conservancy March 13, 2020.

6. Conclusion

Effective conservation activities in northern Kenya require a **public-private partnership** (PPP), in which private entities contribute expertise and funding, communities provide indigenous knowledge, and governments establish regulatory frameworks. However, the existing partnerships often marginalize pastoral communities they claim to benefit from. Initiatives such as the Northern Rangelands Trust (NRT) have prioritized economic goals over genuine community involvement, resulting in the widespread privatization of land, the construction of fences, and the establishment of private parks that exclude the communities from decision-making and the usage of their ancestral lands. This exclusion is particularly evident in Isiolo and Samburu, where communities are priced out of conserved spaces, leading to ‘**green grabbing**’ – the appropriation of land for environmental conservation under questionable practices.

A weak land tenure system exacerbates these challenges, enabling NRT to exploit communal land through negotiations with community leaders incentivized by minimal benefits. For example, in Isiolo County, the absence of land registration under CLA 2016 facilitates corruption and land acquisitions. Although Samburu County has registered group ranches, concerns persist regarding the potential for manipulation and exclusion in conservancy management. This inequity is further illustrated by the marginalization of the Pokot community in the establishment of *Ltungai* Conservancy, a process that exacerbated ethnic conflict between the Pokot and Samburu communities. Similarly, the dispute between NRT and *Namunyak* Conservancy illustrates how NRT’s dominance over conservancy operations can have a detrimental effect on community relations. The *Namunyak* leaders’ demand for independence from NRT, alongside examples of corruption in other conservancies such as *Il Ngwesi* and *Lekurruki*, serves to highlight the necessity for community-driven, rather than externally imposed, conservation management.

In addition, Conservation efforts in northern Kenya are becoming increasingly characterized by **hybrid securitization** involving private rangers, government forces, community security personnel, and police resources. While this may be intended to safeguard wildlife, it has led to **organized violence**, including forcible evictions, extrajudicial killings, and ethnic conflicts. The paper demonstrates how the NRT, with the support of the Kenyan government, legitimizes the use of force, which leads to human rights violations perpetrated under the guise of conservation. The proliferation of security agencies, such as the Anti-Stock Theft Unit, National Police Reservists, and NRT rangers, has resulted in a lack of unified oversight, enabling some personnel to engage in illicit activities such as poaching and cattle rustling. This flawed securitization strategy prioritizes areas rich in wildlife while neglecting regions with fewer resources, deepening inequities and further marginalizing pastoral communities.

The NRT initiative exemplifies the potential and pitfalls of PPPs in natural resource management. While it has elevated conservation standards, its economic focus, weak governance structures, and reliance on force have perpetuated conflict and exclusion in northern Kenya. Conservation must adopt more inclusive, transparent, and rights-based approaches to achieve its dual goals of environmental sustainability and community empowerment. By addressing the structural weaknesses and prioritizing community agencies, conservation can transform from a source of conflict to an equitable development model. This paper identifies a significant discrepancy between the stated objectives of conservation initiatives and their actual ground implementation on the ground, particularly in northern Kenya. The findings challenge the prevailing narrative that PPPs are community-centered frameworks for managing natural resources. Instead, they reveal how weak governance, economic prioritization, and organized violence undermine conservation efforts and community well-being. This paper contributes to our understanding of how conservation initiatives in northern Kenya, exemplified by the NRT, highlight the tension between economic priorities, weak governance, and the marginalization of pastoral communities, thereby challenging the efficacy of current public-private partnership models.

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Conflict of Interest declaration

The authors reported no potential conflict of interest.

Ethical Compliance

The primary data collected in this study involving the participants were in accordance with the ethical requirements of the National Commission for Science, Technology, and Innovation (NACOSTI) license permit in Kenya and DFG guidelines and standards for ethical clearance issued in both phases.

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