



Efficacy of Integrating Indigenous Knowledge with Modern Conflict Resolution Mechanisms among Agro-Pastoral Communities Living Along Kerio Valley, Kenya

Charles Chelimo Suter, Mark Kiptui & Saina Christopher
School of Environmental Sciences and Natural Resource Management
University of Eldoret, Kenya
Email: chelimosuter@gmail.com

Abstract: Resource-based conflicts among agro-pastoral communities living along Kerio Valley, Kenya, continue to threaten livelihoods, social cohesion and sustainable peace despite the use of indigenous and formal conflict resolution mechanisms. This study assessed the efficacy of integrating indigenous knowledge with modern conflict resolution mechanisms in managing resource-based conflicts and sustaining peaceful coexistence. The study was guided by the hybrid governance theoretical perspective, which emphasizes complementarity between customary and formal institutions. A descriptive survey design using a mixed-methods approach was adopted. The target population comprised approximately 49,650 households across Elgeyo Marakwet, Baringo and West Pokot counties. A sample of 382 household heads was determined using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) table, alongside 30 purposively selected key informants and four focus group discussions. Data were collected using structured questionnaires, interview guides, focus group discussion guides and observation checklists. Content validity was established through expert review, while reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with coefficients above 0.70 considered acceptable. Findings revealed that 87.3% of respondents supported integration, 83.5% perceived it as improving conflict resolution effectiveness, and 77.5% considered hybrid systems more effective than single approaches. The study concluded that integrated approaches offered substantial potential for strengthening conflict management and peaceful coexistence. It recommended formal inclusion of elders in peace committees, clear institutional coordination and referral procedures, capacity building and adequate resourcing, alongside improved security interventions and sustainable management of water and pasture resources.

Keywords: Indigenous knowledge, modern conflict resolution, hybrid governance, agro-pastoral communities, Kerio Valley, resource-based conflicts

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1. Introduction

Conflict among pastoral and agro-pastoral populations is now widely treated as a development and security concern because it is bound up with competition over land, water, pasture and livelihoods. In this study, indigenous knowledge means the locally rooted norms, values, institutions and practices through which a community

interprets disputes and restores social order. It is usually transmitted orally and administered by elders. Modern conflict resolution mechanisms are the formal, state-recognised and externally supported approaches, such as courts, statutory mediation, security enforcement and peace committees. Integration is the deliberate blending of the two within one process. Efficacy is the extent to which that blend reduces violence, restores relationships and sustains peace.

Agro-pastoral communities combine livestock keeping with crop cultivation. Globally, the dominant peace architecture grew out of liberal, Western-derived institutions (Richmond, 2022). Yet research shows that the everyday practices of ordinary people often determine whether peace holds (Mac Ginty, 2021). In developed nations with Indigenous populations, this recognition has become institutional. Canada's adoption of the UN Declaration and its Truth and Reconciliation process have supported the revitalisation of Indigenous legal traditions alongside restorative justice in the criminal justice system, although the two are not treated as the same thing (Department of Justice Canada, 2022).

A similar hybrid logic runs through African scholarship. In West Nile, Uganda, indigenous authority held by clan leaders and women worked as both an alternative and a complement to the formal court system in de-escalating armed conflict. This led to the argument that embracing such authority offers a hybrid route to sustainable peace (Alidri, 2024). Kenya's 2010 Constitution gives legal recognition to traditional dispute resolution, which provides an enabling environment for integration. The Kerio Valley runs through Elgeyo Marakwet, Baringo and West Pokot counties. It is home to the Pokot, Marakwet, Tugen and Turkana, and its agro-pastoral livelihoods are highly exposed to drought and resource scarcity. Historically, communities such as the Pokot and Turkana relied on mediation by neutral elders, negotiation, restitution, oaths and rituals, which favoured reconciliation over punishment (Ogot et al., 2023). These mechanisms have since weakened. Drought, the commercialisation of livestock raiding and the proliferation of small arms have strained them, and fighting involving pastoralists, landowners, criminals and security forces in the Rift Valley has killed more than 200 people since May 2021 (International Crisis Group, 2023). State security operations and peace committees have been deployed in response, yet violence recurs. This suggests that formal measures alone are not securing lasting peace, and that indigenous institutions are struggling without institutional support. There is little systematic evidence on how effectively the two systems have been combined in Kerio Valley, or on which conditions make the combination work. This study addresses that gap.

1.1 Research Objective

To assess the efficacy of integrating indigenous knowledge with modern conflict resolution mechanisms among agro-pastoral communities living along the Kerio Valley, Kenya.

1.2 Research Question

How effective is the integration of indigenous knowledge with modern conflict resolution mechanisms in resolving

and sustaining peace among agro-pastoral communities living along the Kerio Valley, Kenya?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Empirical Review

The integration of indigenous knowledge with modern conflict resolution mechanisms is an important consideration in peacebuilding because communities experiencing recurrent conflict often require approaches that are culturally legitimate, institutionally supported, and responsive to changing security conditions (United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, 2025). Among agro-pastoral communities, conflicts frequently arise from competition over grazing land, water access, livestock, territorial boundaries, and the movement of herds, making locally accepted negotiation and reconciliation processes particularly relevant (Shiferaw & Debela, 2024). Indigenous institutions can contribute knowledge of customary obligations, intercommunity relationships, compensation practices, and reconciliation rituals, while modern mechanisms can provide administrative coordination, formal mediation, security enforcement, and legal accountability (Mengstie, 2022). Research on peacebuilding in Kenya's Kerio Valley indicates that combining customary practices with formal governance and community dialogue is important for understanding how peace agreements are negotiated and sustained (Yegon et al., 2025). Consequently, examining the efficacy of this integration requires assessing not only whether conflicts are settled, but also whether agreements are respected, violence declines, relationships improve, and peace endures over time (Shiferaw & Debela, 2024).

Indigenous knowledge refers to locally developed and intergenerational understandings, values, customs, and practices through which communities interpret their environment, govern relationships, and address disputes, including the use of elders, customary councils, mediation, and restorative compensation (Genbezo, 2025). Modern conflict resolution mechanisms encompass formal and contemporary approaches such as government-led mediation, negotiated settlements, alternative dispute resolution, statutory justice, and coordinated security interventions (Yegon et al., 2025). Integration refers to the deliberate coordination of customary institutions and knowledge with formal mechanisms while maintaining appropriate roles for community representatives, public authorities, and legal institutions (Mengstie, 2022). Efficacy refers to the extent to which these combined approaches achieve practical outcomes, including timely dispute settlement, compliance with agreements, reduced recurrence of violence, accountability, and sustainable reconciliation (Enyew & Ayalew, 2023). Agro-pastoral communities are populations whose livelihoods combine livestock keeping with crop cultivation, often making access to pasture, water, farmland, and livestock routes central to

their social relations and potential disputes (Shiferaw & Debela, 2024).

Globally, contemporary peacebuilding studies recognise that indigenous peoples should participate meaningfully in decisions concerning mediation, conflict resolution, and peace processes that affect their communities (United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, 2025). International experience suggests that culturally grounded approaches may strengthen local ownership because community members can recognise their customs, values, and legitimate representatives within the resolution process (Bishop, 2025). However, integrating indigenous practices into formal systems requires attention to differences in authority, decision-making, cultural expectations, and the distribution of power among participating groups (Leckey, 2022). Evidence from Indigenous justice programmes in Canada illustrates how restorative processes, peacemaking circles, culturally specific interventions, and elder participation can complement conventional justice services (Department of Justice Canada, 2021). These experiences indicate that the effectiveness of integrated mechanisms should be assessed through their actual outcomes and inclusiveness rather than assuming that either customary or formal approaches are inherently superior (Beaucage et al., 2025).

In Australia, Bishop (2025) examined approaches to First Nations-led research on Indigenous peacebuilding, building on an earlier review of published material concerning First Nations conflict management practices. The research emphasised collaborative approaches in which Indigenous communities help design methods for collecting, interpreting, and sharing knowledge about conflict and its management (Bishop, 2025). Its findings highlight the importance of community leadership and culturally appropriate research processes when seeking to understand Indigenous approaches to peacebuilding (Bishop, 2025). However, the article primarily addresses research design and community participation rather than measuring whether a combined customary and formal mechanism reduces violent conflict or improves compliance with peace agreements (Bishop, 2025). For Kerio Valley, the study therefore provides a useful methodological lesson about community ownership, but further empirical investigation is necessary to establish the practical efficacy of integrating indigenous knowledge with modern conflict resolution mechanisms.

In Canada, the Department of Justice evaluated the Indigenous Justice Program, which supports community-based justice services reflecting Indigenous cultural traditions, including restorative justice, mediation, peacemaking circles, and elder participation (Department of Justice Canada, 2021). The evaluation reported that participating programmes offered a range of culturally grounded services, including criminal diversion, civil and family mediation, and reintegration support (Department of Justice Canada, 2021). Its findings demonstrate that Indigenous knowledge and community participation can be

incorporated into structured justice services rather than treated as alternatives that must remain separate from formal institutions (Department of Justice Canada, 2021). Nevertheless, the evaluation also identified challenges involving inconsistent programme data, making comparisons of outcomes across communities difficult (Department of Justice Canada, 2021). The Canadian experience suggests that a Kerio Valley integration framework should combine locally legitimate practices with clearly defined responsibilities, systematic monitoring, and reliable evidence on the recurrence and resolution of conflict.

In South Africa, Mboh (2022) investigated the role of traditional leaders in conflict resolution among communities in Mahikeng Local Municipality using a qualitative research approach. The findings indicated that traditional leaders relied on inherited moral values, mediation, and arbitration to address community disputes and maintain peace (Mboh, 2022). However, the study also reported that some community members disrespected traditional authorities, illustrating how declining legitimacy can weaken the implementation of customary decisions (Mboh, 2022). Research on traditional leadership in Bungeni, Limpopo Province, similarly highlighted how the dominance of formal courts can marginalise customary institutions despite their cultural relevance and accessibility (Baloyi et al., 2022). These findings suggest that integration in Kerio Valley should establish clear cooperation between elders and formal authorities while protecting fairness, community trust, and the legitimacy of customary institutions.

A more recent South African study examined indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms among the Vatsonga, focusing on mediation, reconciliation, and arbitration in disputes involving interpersonal relations, theft, and land allocation (Mboh, 2025). The findings showed that traditional leaders and elders played central roles in guiding dispute settlement, while community participation encouraged collective ownership of the outcomes (Mboh, 2025). The study further observed that restorative approaches could support social cohesion by emphasising reconciliation and the reintegration of offenders rather than punishment alone (Mboh, 2025). However, the qualitative design and purposive selection of 45 participants limit the extent to which the findings can establish measurable differences in conflict recurrence between integrated and exclusively formal mechanisms (Mboh, 2025). For the Kerio Valley study, this evidence underscores the need to assess whether incorporating indigenous knowledge into formal mediation produces sustained peace, particularly where disputes involve livestock theft, grazing rights, and intercommunity retaliation.

In Ethiopia, Mengstie (2022) investigated indigenous conflict resolution between the Awi and Gumuz communities in Zigem Woreda using a qualitative case-study approach. The study found that the elders' council, known as shimigilina, was widely recognised and respected by both communities as a mechanism for resolving ethnic-

based disputes (Mengstie, 2022). The process included stages of deliberation and customary commitments intended to prevent revenge and further harm, demonstrating how shared norms can support reconciliation between conflicting groups (Mengstie, 2022). However, the study recommended developing frameworks for integrating the elders' council with the formal justice system, indicating that recognition and coordination remain important institutional concerns (Mengstie, 2022). These findings are relevant to Kerio Valley because they suggest that agreements grounded in shared cultural values may complement formal institutions, although their effectiveness against recurrent resource-based violence requires further assessment.

A study by Eneyew and Ayalew (2023) examined the role of aboled, an indigenous conflict resolution institution, in Borena Woreda, Ethiopia, using qualitative and survey data. The findings indicated that kin councils, spiritual authorities, and religious leaders contributed different functions, including managing proceedings, establishing facts, and supporting reconciliation (Eneyew & Ayalew, 2023). The study also found that the institution contributed to conflict prevention and the restoration of social harmony, suggesting that indigenous mechanisms can address relationships beyond the immediate dispute (Eneyew & Ayalew, 2023). Nevertheless, the findings do not by themselves establish that combining aboled with modern conflict resolution mechanisms is more effective than using either approach independently (Eneyew & Ayalew, 2023). This limitation establishes a relevant research gap for Kerio Valley, where the central question is not simply whether indigenous practices exist, but whether their deliberate integration with formal mechanisms improves the settlement, prevention, and long-term management of agro-pastoral conflicts.

2.2 Theoretical underpinning

This paper was anchored on Conflict Transformation Theory advanced by John Paul Lederach in 1997 and further elaborated in *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation* (Lederach, 2003). The theory postulates that sustainable peace requires more than ending an immediate dispute; it involves transforming relationships, attitudes, behaviours, social structures, and institutions that sustain conflict (Lederach, 2003). The theory is particularly relevant because the study examines whether customary practices and formal conflict resolution mechanisms can work together to address recurrent resource-based disputes, improve intercommunity relationships, and sustain peace. It recognises personal, relational, structural, and cultural dimensions of conflict, thereby emphasising dialogue, mutual understanding, justice, and constructive social change as foundations for lasting peace (Lederach, 2003). The theory is significant to this study because it provides a framework for examining how indigenous practices, such as elders' mediation, customary negotiations, compensation, and reconciliation ceremonies, can complement modern mechanisms, including government mediation, formal justice, and security interventions. It therefore guides the

assessment of whether integrating these approaches among agro-pastoral communities in Kerio Valley contributes to reduced violence, stronger compliance with agreements, improved intercommunity relationships, and sustainable peace (Lederach, 2003).

Other researchers have applied Conflict Transformation Theory to pastoralist and agro-pastoralist conflicts to explain how community participation, negotiation, and institutional collaboration can address the underlying causes of violence. Alemneh and Alemu (2023), for example, examined conflict transformation practices among the Nyangatom, Hamar, and Dassanech communities in Ethiopia using a qualitative case-study design involving interviews, focus group discussions, observation, and document analysis. Their study explored how different actors and conflict management practices responded to resource-based disputes and the challenges of maintaining peaceful relations among pastoralist and agro-pastoralist communities (Alemneh & Alemu, 2023). Similarly, a study of cross-border conflicts involving Turkana communities in Kenya and neighbouring Ethiopian communities used Lederach's grassroots peacebuilding perspective to examine the contribution of local peace actors and multiple peacebuilding mechanisms to conflict transformation (ACCORD, 2025). These applications demonstrate the relevance of the theory to this study because they connect local participation, multiple conflict resolution approaches, and sustainable peacebuilding, although their findings do not automatically establish that integration is more effective than individual mechanisms.

In this study, Conflict Transformation Theory will guide the examination of the efficacy of integrating indigenous knowledge with modern conflict resolution mechanisms through four interconnected dimensions: changes in individual attitudes towards violence, improvements in relationships between conflicting communities, coordination between customary and formal institutions, and the influence of cultural values on peacebuilding. The theory suggests that elders' knowledge of customary agreements, resource-sharing arrangements, compensation, and reconciliation can be combined with formal mechanisms to address both immediate disputes and the wider conditions that perpetuate conflict (Lederach, 2003). Empirical research on indigenous conflict resolution in Ethiopia has found that customary institutions can contribute to restoring peace and social harmony, although challenges relating to institutional effectiveness and changing attitudes may weaken their capacity to sustain peace (Eneyew & Ayalew, 2023). The theory will consequently help interpret whether the integration of customary and formal mechanisms improves dispute settlement, compliance with agreements, reduction of recurrent violence, and peaceful coexistence among the agro-pastoral communities living along Kerio Valley. However, because the theory emphasises transformation over time, the study should distinguish immediate dispute settlement from evidence of sustained peace and should

recognise that its explanatory value depends on the local conditions and empirical findings.

3. Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive survey design using a mixed-methods approach. The descriptive survey design enabled the researcher to document existing indigenous conflict resolution practices, the use of modern conflict resolution mechanisms, and community perceptions of their effectiveness. The mixed-methods approach enabled the collection and integration of quantitative and qualitative data to provide a broader understanding of conflict resolution practices, community experiences, and the sustainability of peacebuilding initiatives. The target population comprised approximately 49,650 households across the three counties. A sample of 382 household heads was determined using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sample size determination table. In addition, 30 key informants were purposively selected based on their knowledge, responsibilities, and involvement in indigenous and formal conflict resolution processes, while four focus group discussions were conducted with selected community members. The planned sample therefore comprised 382 household heads and 30 key informants, supplemented by participants in the four focus group discussions. Household heads were selected using an appropriate probability sampling technique to ensure representation across the three counties, while purposive sampling was used to identify key informants, including community elders, local administrators, peace committee members, security officers, and representatives of relevant government agencies. Focus group participants were selected from the agro-pastoral communities to capture diverse experiences and perceptions of customary and formal conflict resolution practices.

Data were collected using structured questionnaires, key informant interview guides, focus group discussion guides, and observation checklists. The questionnaires collected quantitative data on the indigenous conflict resolution practices used by communities, the application of modern conflict resolution mechanisms, the extent of integration between the two approaches, and perceived conflict resolution outcomes. The key informant interviews explored how elders, government officials, peace committees, and security agencies collaborated in managing conflicts, as well as the challenges encountered in implementing peace agreements. Focus group discussions gathered community perspectives on the acceptability of customary practices, the accessibility of formal conflict resolution mechanisms, the perceived effectiveness of their integration, and their contribution to reducing recurrent violence and promoting peaceful coexistence. Observation checklists were used to record relevant community practices, local peacebuilding activities, and other observable conditions associated with conflict management in the study areas.

Before the main data collection exercise, the research instruments were reviewed by experts to establish content validity and were pilot tested among respondents with characteristics similar to those of the target population but who were excluded from the main study. Reliability of the questionnaire constructs was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with coefficients above the recommended threshold of 0.70 indicating acceptable internal consistency. The data collection process involved obtaining the necessary research authorization and local administrative permissions before engaging the selected communities. The researcher explained the purpose of the study to prospective participants and obtained their informed consent before administering questionnaires, conducting interviews, and facilitating focus group discussions. Questionnaires were distributed to the selected household heads, while key informant interviews and focus group discussions were conducted using the respective guides. Relevant observations were recorded systematically using the observation checklists, and completed questionnaires were checked for completeness and consistency before coding and data entry.

Quantitative data were coded and entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 26, for analysis. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were used to summarize respondents' demographic characteristics, indigenous conflict resolution practices, modern conflict resolution mechanisms, and perceptions of their integration and effectiveness. Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient was used to examine the direction and strength of relationships between the integration of indigenous knowledge and modern conflict resolution mechanisms and the identified conflict resolution outcomes. Qualitative data from key informant interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed, coded, categorized, and analyzed thematically. The resulting themes were used to explain community experiences, institutional collaboration, implementation challenges, and the perceived contributions of indigenous and modern conflict resolution approaches. Quantitative and qualitative findings were compared and integrated during interpretation to establish areas of convergence, complementarity, and divergence.

Ethical approval was obtained from a recognized institutional review board, and the necessary research permits and administrative authorizations were secured before fieldwork commenced. Informed consent was obtained from all participants after they were informed about the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, and their right to decline participation or withdraw without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by protecting participants' identities and presenting findings in aggregate form or through non-identifying participant codes. Research data were securely stored and accessed only by authorized persons, and the information collected was used solely for the stated academic purposes. The researcher observed cultural

sensitivity when engaging community elders and other participants, respected local customs without assuming that all customary practices were universally accepted, and took measures to minimize potential harm, discomfort, and the risk of exposing participants to reprisals associated with discussing intercommunity conflicts. Voluntary participation, transparency, honesty, academic integrity, and the responsible reporting of findings were upheld throughout the research process, and the findings were intended to inform relevant communities, peace-building practitioners, and government stakeholders.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1 Integration of Indigenous and Formal Conflict Management Systems

The purpose of this study was to analyze the efficacy of integrating indigenous knowledge with modern conflict resolution mechanisms among communities living along Kerio Valley, Kenya. Respondents were requested to rate their level of agreement with various statements on a five-point Likert scale. The constructs measured included the desirability of integrating indigenous and formal systems, government support for indigenous mechanisms, inclusion of elders in formal peace structures, the effectiveness of integration, the consequences of poor collaboration, formal recognition of indigenous knowledge, the comparative effectiveness of hybrid systems and community support for integration. The findings were summarized in Table 1

Table 1: Integration of Indigenous and Formal Conflict Management Systems

Statement	SD		D		U		A		SA	
	f	%	f	%	F	%	f	%	F	%
Indigenous and formal systems should be integrated in managing resource-based conflicts.	11	3.0%	27	7.3%	9	2.4%	149	40.4%	173	46.9%
Government institutions support indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms.	57	15.4%	101	27.4%	33	8.9%	113	30.6%	65	17.6%
Elders are included in formal peace committees and decision-making structures.	39	10.6%	79	21.4%	17	4.6%	139	37.7%	95	25.7%
Integration of systems improves effectiveness of conflict resolution.	15	4.1%	35	9.5%	11	3.0%	163	44.2%	145	39.3%
Lack of collaboration between systems worsens resource-based conflicts.	13	3.5%	29	7.9%	15	4.1%	151	40.9%	161	43.6%
Formal institutions respect and recognize indigenous knowledge systems.	49	13.3%	93	25.2%	25	6.8%	127	34.4%	75	20.3%
Hybrid conflict management systems are more effective than single approaches.	21	5.7%	43	11.7%	19	5.1%	157	42.5%	129	35.0%
Community members support integration of indigenous and formal systems.	9	2.4%	23	6.2%	13	3.5%	145	39.3%	179	48.5%

The findings in Table 1 showed that a majority of the respondents, 173 (46.9%), strongly agreed that indigenous and formal systems should be integrated in managing resource-based conflicts, 149 (40.4%) agreed, 27 (7.3%) disagreed, 11 (3.0%) strongly disagreed while 9 (2.4%) were undecided and this implies that an overwhelming majority (87.3%) of respondents endorse system integration in principle reflecting strong grassroots appetite for hybrid conflict-management approaches. Over the years the lifestyles of these communities have become increasingly influenced by formal education, modern governance structures, statutory land-tenure systems, market-oriented livelihoods, improved communication and greater

interaction with government institutions and at the same time, traditional institutions such as elders, clan structures, customary agreements and indigenous resource-management practices continue to influence how communities understand and respond to conflicts and these parallel systems create an opportunity for complementarity rather than competition.

Formal institutions provide legal authority, security, enforcement mechanisms and access to statutory justice while indigenous institutions offer local legitimacy, cultural understanding, accessibility and relationship-based approaches to reconciliation. Integrating the two systems

can therefore provide a more comprehensive response to resource-based conflicts by combining the strengths of formal and customary mechanisms. Such integration would enable elders and community structures to participate in early warning, mediation, reconciliation and resource-sharing negotiations while ensuring that serious offences, constitutional rights, land disputes and enforceability of agreements remain appropriately addressed within the formal legal framework. The strong support for integration recorded in this study therefore reflects the communities' recognition that sustainable conflict management in Kerio Valley requires approaches that are both culturally grounded and institutionally supported and this finding is consistent with Ehrhardt et al. (2024) who observed that the effectiveness of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms increases when they collaborate with or are formally recognized by, state institutions, producing hybrid governance models that draw on both formal and customary traditions.

Similarly less than half of the respondents, 113 (30.6%) agreed that government institutions support indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms, followed by 65 (17.6%) who strongly agreed, 101 (27.4%) who disagreed, 57 (15.4%) who strongly disagreed and 33 (8.9%) who were undecided and this implies that only a slight majority (48.2%) of respondents perceive government institutions as actively supportive of indigenous mechanisms with this statement recording the highest combined disagreement (42.8%) in the entire construct indicating widespread scepticism about the depth of state backing for customary systems and this finding aligns with Dahlberg's (2024) study on the spheres of authority of chiefs which found that state officials' willingness to formally recognize and combine traditional and formal justice systems varies considerably across different governance levels and country contexts often falling short of consistent institutional support.

Additionally a majority of the respondents, 139 (37.7%) agreed that elders are included in formal peace committees and decision-making structures, 95 (25.7%) strongly agreed, 79 (21.4%) disagreed, 39 (10.6%) strongly disagreed while 17 (4.6%) were undecided and this implies that a majority (63.4%) of respondents perceive some degree of elder inclusion in formal structures though the relatively high disagreement (32.0% combined) suggests such inclusion remains inconsistent or symbolic in practice. Elders possess contextual knowledge of historical grievances, clan relationships, traditional resource-sharing arrangements, migration routes and previous peace agreements that can strengthen the ability of formal institutions to understand and address the underlying causes of resource-based conflicts.

Their participation can also improve community acceptance of peace initiatives because elders often enjoy considerable legitimacy and trust among local residents however the relatively high level of disagreement recorded in the study suggests that the participation of elders may not be

consistent across peace committees or administrative areas and may sometimes be limited to consultation rather than meaningful decision-making. For integration to be effective, elders should therefore be systematically represented in relevant peace structures and provided with opportunities to contribute to early warning, mediation, negotiation, monitoring and implementation of peace agreements. Such inclusion should also be balanced with representation of women, youth and other affected groups to ensure that hybrid conflict-management structures are inclusive and responsive to the wider community and this finding is corroborated by Duursma (2022) who found that traditional authorities are frequently invited into peacebuilding structures yet their substantive influence within those formal arrangements often remains constrained relative to state-appointed actors.

Furthermore, a majority of the respondents, 163 (44.2%) agreed that integration of systems improves effectiveness of conflict resolution, 145 (39.3%) strongly agreed, 35 (9.5%) disagreed, 15 (4.1%) strongly disagreed and 11 (3.0%) were undecided and this implies that an overwhelming majority (83.5%) of respondents affirm the effectiveness gains associated with system integration, reinforcing the case for hybrid conflict-management models. The integration of indigenous and formal conflict-management systems can improve the effectiveness of conflict resolution by combining the complementary strengths of both approaches. Indigenous mechanisms provide local knowledge, cultural legitimacy, accessibility and relationship-based reconciliation while formal institutions provide legal authority, professional expertise, security, enforcement and mechanisms for protecting rights and in the context of Kerio Valley, a coordinated approach can enable conflicts to be identified and addressed at an early stage through elders, community peace committees and local leaders while more complex or serious cases can be referred to relevant government agencies and formal justice institutions.

Such collaboration can also improve information sharing, strengthen monitoring of peace agreements and enhance community confidence in conflict-resolution processes. The high level of agreement recorded in the study therefore indicates that respondents recognize the practical benefits of combining customary and formal approaches rather than relying exclusively on either system. For integration to achieve sustained effectiveness however there is a need for clearly defined roles, regular coordination between customary and formal institutions, capacity building for community actors, adequate government support and mechanisms for ensuring that customary practices are consistent with constitutional rights and formal legal standards. This finding is consistent with the Zimbabwean case documented by Dahlberg (2024), in which government actors described the combination of traditional and formal justice systems as a more effective tool for natural resource conflict management at the local level than either system operating in isolation.

Moreover, a majority of the respondents, 161 (43.6%), strongly agreed that lack of collaboration between systems worsens resource-based conflicts, 151 (40.9%) agreed, 29 (7.9%) disagreed, 13 (3.5%) strongly disagreed while 15 (4.1%) were undecided and this implies that an overwhelming majority (84.5%) of respondents recognize institutional fragmentation as a driver of unresolved or worsening conflict, underscoring the perceived cost of poor coordination between customary and formal actors. Ideally, indigenous and formal conflict-management systems should operate in a complementary and coordinated manner with each system drawing on its respective strengths to address resource-based conflicts comprehensively however in practice, limited collaboration, unclear institutional roles, weak communication and differences in approaches to dispute resolution may create gaps through which conflicts remain unresolved or escalate.

Formal authorities may sometimes overlook customary structures despite their strong community legitimacy while customary actors may lack the legal authority and institutional resources required to enforce agreements or address serious offences and this fragmentation can result in duplication of efforts, conflicting decisions, delayed interventions and reduced community confidence in peacebuilding initiatives and in Kerio Valley where resource conflicts often involve complex social relationships and cross-community grievances, poor coordination may allow unresolved disputes to evolve into retaliation, cattle rustling or prolonged inter-community tensions and this finding is supported by the International Development Research Centre's research on hybrid security arrangements in Africa in line with Bagayoko & Hutchful (2016) which found that overlapping and poorly coordinated formal and informal institutions in security and justice governance frequently compound, rather than resolve, local resource-related disputes.

In addition a majority of the respondents, 127 (34.4%) agreed that formal institutions respect and recognize indigenous knowledge systems, 75 (20.3%) strongly agreed, 93 (25.2%) disagreed, 49 (13.3%) strongly disagreed while 25 (6.8%) were undecided and this finding implies that while a slight majority (54.7%) of respondents perceive some formal recognition of indigenous knowledge this statement recorded the second-highest disagreement in the construct (38.5% combined), pointing to persistent gaps in institutional legitimization of customary systems and this is a very critical indicator of the extent to which integration between indigenous and formal conflict-management systems has been institutionalized in Kerio Valley. Formal recognition of indigenous knowledge is important because it determines whether customary institutions are treated as legitimate partners in peacebuilding or merely as informal actors operating outside official structures.

Although the findings indicate that 54.7% of respondents perceive some level of recognition, the relatively high disagreement of 38.5% suggests that recognition remains

inadequate, inconsistent or largely dependent on individual institutions and local circumstances. Formal authorities may acknowledge the role of elders during community dialogues and peace initiatives while failing to provide clear institutional frameworks through which customary knowledge can systematically inform policy, conflict prevention, mediation and resource management and this finding aligns with the account of hybrid governance in Cameroon's Kom fondom by Dahlberg, S. (2024) which found that the co-optation of customary institutions by political elites can undermine rather than reinforce indigenous conflict management, eroding the very legitimacy that formal recognition is meant to strengthen.

Further a majority of the respondents, 157 (42.5%) agreed that hybrid conflict management systems are more effective than single approaches, 129 (35.0%) strongly agreed, 43 (11.7%) disagreed, 21 (5.7%) strongly disagreed while 19 (5.1%) were undecided and this implies that an overwhelming majority (77.5%) of respondents favour hybrid over single-track conflict management approaches reflecting confidence in combined systems as the most effective path forward. Based on the history and recurring nature of resource-based conflicts in Kerio Valley, reliance on a single conflict-management approach may be insufficient to address the complex social, economic, cultural and institutional factors underlying disputes. Resource conflicts in the area often involve overlapping issues of land, pasture, water, livestock, community boundaries, historical grievances and retaliatory violence requiring interventions that address both immediate disputes and their underlying causes.

Indigenous systems offer culturally grounded mechanisms such as elder-led mediation, customary negotiation, reconciliation, compensation and community dialogue while formal institutions provide statutory authority, security, legal enforcement, administrative coordination and access to judicial remedies. A hybrid system can therefore combine the accessibility and legitimacy of customary mechanisms with the authority and safeguards of formal institutions and in Kerio Valley such an approach could facilitate early identification of emerging disputes through community structures, mediation by elders and peace committees and referral of unresolved or serious cases to formal authorities.

The high level of support for hybrid systems reported in the study consequently suggests that communities recognize the need for a coordinated model that draws on both indigenous knowledge and modern conflict-resolution mechanisms to achieve more sustainable peace and resource-sharing arrangements and this finding is consistent with Sylvester and Sikhwar's (2024) theoretical framework on hybridity governance in Africa which found that the amalgamation of traditional and modern governance structures as exemplified by South Africa's integration of Ubuntu principles into restorative justice processes, represents an

effective and transformative advancement over governance systems relying on a single approach.

Furthermore a majority of the respondents, 179 (48.5%), strongly agreed that community members support integration of indigenous and formal systems, 145 (39.3%) agreed, 23 (6.2%) disagreed, 9 (2.4%) strongly disagreed while 13 (3.5%) were undecided and this implies that an overwhelming majority (87.8%) of respondents affirm strong community-level support for integrating the two systems, representing the strongest area of consensus within this construct and reinforcing the earlier finding on the general desirability of integration. Community support for integrating indigenous and formal conflict-management systems is essential for ensuring that hybrid approaches are accepted, implemented and sustained at the local level and communities living along Kerio Valley interact with both customary and formal institutions in managing disputes and their support provides an important foundation for strengthening cooperation between elders, peace committees, local administrators, security agencies and other formal actors.

The strong level of support reported in the findings suggests that community members recognize the complementary strengths of the two systems particularly the accessibility, cultural legitimacy and reconciliation orientation of indigenous mechanisms alongside the legal authority, enforcement capacity and institutional structures of formal systems. Community participation in designing and implementing integrated mechanisms can also enhance ownership, trust, accountability and compliance with negotiated agreements.

However successful integration requires more than community approval; it requires clear institutional roles, sustained government support, meaningful inclusion of elders and other community representatives and safeguards to ensure that customary practices respect constitutional rights and principles of equality and justice and this finding is corroborated by the Ghana Customary Land Secretariat case study by Biitir & Nara (2016) which found that integrating customary institutions into formal governance frameworks significantly enhances community participation and tenure security, empowering communities to engage more actively in resource management processes.

Respondents were further asked on how indigenous and formal conflict management systems be effectively integrated in your community and what challenges hinder collaboration between elders and formal institutions in conflict management. Respondents described specific mechanisms through which indigenous knowledge has translated into practical improvements in peace and equitable resource sharing. One respondent highlighted the preventive, early-warning function of elder oversight:

"The elders from both warring communities prevented conflicts through warning they

identified signs of tension and intervened before violence occurred. By the time we hear drums at night, it is often too late; the elders' work is to notice the tension long before that point and call a meeting."

Another respondent pointed to the symbolic power of sacred sites in reinforcing agreements:

"Sacred sites and oaths act as a deterrent for example trees, hills or water points are considered sacred and swearing under them makes people take agreements seriously. Nobody wants to be the one who broke a promise made under the big fig tree."

A further respondent described the restorative compensation process directly:

"Through organized reconciliation meetings where offenders compensate victims and communities agree to stop retaliation. Once the cattle or the equivalent value has been paid both families shake hands and that chapter is considered closed."

Another respondent summarized the broader outcome succinctly:

"Through indigenous knowledge, elders are respected as problem-solvers and resources are shared in a fair manner. It promotes everlasting peace in resource sharing."

This pattern of sacred-site enforcement and elder-led early warning as tools for sustaining peaceful resource-sharing arrangements is consistent with cross-border peacebuilding evidence from the Sahel where an early-warning system built around community consultation frameworks and village-level conflict committees was able to resolve the large majority of flagged tensions before they escalated into violence, underscoring the practical value of locally embedded, anticipatory conflict-management structures of the kind described by respondents in this study (Sahel agro-pastoral communities peacebuilding initiative, Mali–Mauritania border, UN, 2023).

Despite this generally positive assessment, respondents identified clear and recurring limitations to indigenous systems particularly regarding enforcement power and impartiality. One respondent explained the core enforcement gap:

"Availability of modern weapons this limits the methods' lack of enforcement power, whereby elders can mediate and fine, but they can't jail. A young man with a gun does not fear a fine the way his grandfather feared the elders."

Another respondent raised concerns about partiality in cross-community disputes: "At some points, elders from respective communities may defend their own people, hence breaking the rule of fairness. It is difficult for an elder to rule fully against his own son or nephew, even when the evidence is clear." A further respondent linked ineffectiveness directly to the absence of legal backing: "Indigenous conflict management systems are not recognized by the law of Kenya. The decisions made by the council of elders are not enforceable when one party refuses to comply or obey."

One respondent also noted the direct threat posed by armed actors who disregard customary authority altogether: "Armed parties may sometimes disrespect the management teams when someone already has a gun and is determined to raid, the presence of unarmed elders does not stop him."

These enforcement and legitimacy challenges are consistent with broader regional analysis of cross-border pastoral conflict dynamics which found that the proliferation of small arms and the involvement of armed actors operating outside customary social structures have progressively undermined the capacity of traditional elder-led institutions to prevent or de-escalate violent confrontations particularly in borderland areas where state security presence is thin and weapons circulate with relative ease (Cross-border pastoral mobility and conflict in Africa, 2023).

On how indigenous and formal systems could be more effectively integrated, respondents offered concrete, practical proposals centered on formal documentation and joint institutional structures. One respondent described a specific model:

"This can be done by recognizing the council of elders as the official community peace committee. After elders mediate and agree on compensation or peace treaties, the agreement is written down, signed and stamped by the chief or sub-county commissioner. That way if someone breaks the agreement later there is a paper that the police and the courts can also act on."

Another respondent proposed a multi-stakeholder committee structure:

"Joint peace committees at the village level, whereby elders, chiefs, police and women and youth representatives sit together. When everyone has a seat at the table, no single group feels that the decision was forced on them."

A further respondent pointed to religious institutions as an additional integration channel:

"Through religious organizations, peace committees and security agencies working together."

On the challenges hindering this collaboration, respondents were candid about persistent mistrust and resource constraints. One respondent explained:

"Mistrust between elders and government where elders think that the government will ignore their agreements. We have seen cases before where the elders solved a problem and then the government came in and changed everything as if our work meant nothing."

Another respondent pointed to practical resourcing gaps:

"We have limited resources for peace committees and differences between customary and formal laws."

A further respondent reiterated the underlying legal barrier already raised earlier:

"Lack of recognition by the law of Kenya. Decisions made by the council of elders are not enforceable when a defendant does not comply with the agreement made by the council. Elders' decisions should be documented."

The respondents' emphasis on formal documentation, signing and stamping of elder-brokered agreements as a solution to the enforceability gap reflects an emerging and evidence-supported approach to hybrid governance across pastoralist Africa. Cross-border pastoral conflict research has similarly found that formalizing the outputs of customary mediation through written agreements co-signed by both traditional and state authorities has proven effective in bridging the legitimacy gap between the two systems, giving communities a locally trusted process while providing security and judicial actors with an enforceable record that can be acted upon when agreements are violated (Cross-border pastoral mobility and conflict in Africa, 2023).

On interview, participants were asked on how indigenous practices are currently integrated with formal government structures, respondents described an emerging if still uneven, division of labour between customary and state institutions. One informant explained the referral logic that governs this division:

"Minor conflicts are referred to elders to handle while serious criminal cases are handled by magistrates and judges in the court of law. Both counties have peace secretaries who bring together chiefs and the council of elders. It is not that one system has replaced the other they work side by side, each one handling what it is best suited for."

Another respondent highlighted the tangible security gains associated with government-elder collaboration:

"Through collaboration, government security interventions including disarmament exercises and deployment of security personnel, have helped create a safer environment for dialogue. Local peace committees and Nyumba Kumi work with chiefs and police. It has promoted trust because members of the community now respect the decisions made by either elders or government officials."

Despite these gains, informants were clear-eyed about the friction points between the two systems. One elder described the core procedural mismatch:

"Most elders' decisions are verbal, witnessed by the community. Traditional practices and the constitution of Kenya conflict some decisions made by elders are not legally enforceable."

Another respondent linked this legal ambiguity to broader institutional mistrust:

"There is mistrust between communities and security agencies. Also there are differences between customary approaches and formal legal procedures and the community wants reconciliation, but the police want arrests."

Looking ahead, informants offered a range of recommendations for deepening this collaboration. One elder called for a broader coalition of stakeholders:

"Elders, county and national government officials, civil society groups and religious leaders all of them should be brought together, not just the elders alone."

Another respondent connected the sustainability of peace to addressing structural drivers that lie beyond elders' traditional mandate:

"Deal with the drivers that elders can't touch. Empower elders because they understand the community relationships, but government should combine security agencies with development programmes addressing water shortages and pasture management."

A further suggestion focused on sustaining social cohesion through shared cultural and recreational activity:

"Regular peace barazas and sports tournaments between Pokot, Marakwet and Tugen these bring the young people together in a way that talking alone cannot."

The tension respondents described between the informal, verbally-sealed authority of elders' rulings and the documentation-driven requirements of formal legal enforcement is consistent with recent comparative analysis of customary courts operating alongside formal justice systems in East Africa which found that while several countries have moved toward recognizing traditional justice mechanisms, the practical relationship between customary and formal courts remains complex and heavily dependent on the specific legal mandate granted to customary authorities in each jurisdiction with enforceability and caseload impact varying considerably even where recognition exists on paper (Customary courts in East Africa, ISS Africa, 2024) and this underscores the relevance of the informants' recommendation that indigenous mechanisms be formally empowered and legally clarified rather than merely tolerated alongside the formal system, a recommendation that directly supports the study's fourth objective on integrating indigenous knowledge with modern conflict-resolution mechanisms.

Respondents in focus group discussion also deliberated on how indigenous systems currently interact with government institutions, participants described a working but imperfect relationship built around county-level peace structures. A participant from the Endo FGD explained:

"There is a peace committee that brings together our elders, the chief and sometimes officers from the county peace office. When something happens along this stretch of the Kerio, the chief will usually call the elders before calling in security, because everyone knows the elders will get to the truth faster and in a way that keeps the peace afterward."

On challenges arising when the two systems are combined, a participant from the Kollowa FGD raised the recurring tension between customary informality and formal procedure:

"The elders' decisions are spoken and witnessed by the community, but they are not written down in the way the government wants. So when a case later goes to the chief's office or to court there is nothing on paper and the government side does not always take our agreement seriously."

A further participant from the Chesongoch FGD identified a specific disagreement pattern between elders and government authorities:

"The elders want to focus on reconciliation and compensation. The government side, especially the police, wants to arrest someone and take them to court and these two goals do not always fit together and sometimes this causes friction between our elders and the local administration."

On what could be done to strengthen collaboration, participants offered specific, locally grounded suggestions. A participant from the Sigor FGD proposed:

"Let the county government formally recognize our peace committee here at Sigor, the same way they recognize the chief's office and let our agreements be written and stamped, so that both sides elders and government are bound by the same paper."

Another participant, from the Tot FGD, emphasized resourcing:

"Give the peace committees here along the escarpment some small budget, even just for transport and for calling meetings quickly when tension starts, instead of waiting until after something has already happened."

The participants' call for formal recognition of local peace committees alongside adequate resourcing reflects recommendations emerging from recent regional analysis of peacebuilding structures across the wider Horn of Africa. A review of peacebuilding actors across the IGAD region found that community-level peace committees function most effectively where they are formally linked to county or national peace architecture and provided with dedicated resources for rapid response, rather than being left to operate informally and reactively, a structural gap that closely mirrors the concerns raised by participants regarding the Kerio Valley's own peace committee arrangements (IGAD, 2026).

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusions

The study concluded that integrating indigenous knowledge with modern conflict resolution mechanisms was widely perceived by agro-pastoral communities living along Kerio Valley as an effective approach to managing resource-based conflicts. The findings showed that 87.3% of respondents supported the integration of indigenous and formal systems, while 83.5% agreed that integration improved conflict resolution effectiveness and 77.5% considered hybrid mechanisms more effective than relying on a single approach. Furthermore, 87.8% of respondents expressed community support for integration, demonstrating strong acceptance of a collaborative approach that combines the cultural legitimacy, accessibility, and reconciliation practices of indigenous institutions with the legal authority, security capacity, and enforcement mechanisms of formal institutions. Qualitative findings further established that elders contributed to early warning, mediation, compensation, reconciliation, and the negotiation of resource-sharing agreements, while collaboration with government officials and peace committees helped connect community-based processes with formal security and

administrative structures. These findings indicated that the perceived efficacy of integrated conflict resolution depended on the complementary contributions of indigenous and formal institutions rather than the exclusive reliance on either system.

However, the study also concluded that the integration of indigenous and formal conflict resolution mechanisms remained constrained by inconsistent government support, limited formal recognition of indigenous knowledge, inadequate resources, mistrust between elders and government institutions, and differences between customary reconciliation practices and formal legal procedures. Although 63.4% of respondents agreed that elders were included in formal peace committees and decision-making structures, 32.0% disagreed, suggesting that their participation was not consistent across the study areas. Similarly, only 48.2% perceived government institutions as supportive of indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms, while 54.7% agreed that formal institutions recognized indigenous knowledge, indicating persistent institutional and implementation gaps. Qualitative findings further revealed that the limited enforceability of verbal customary agreements, the partiality of some elders, the proliferation of modern weapons, and disagreements over reconciliation and prosecution weakened the capacity of indigenous mechanisms to manage serious and recurring conflicts. Overall, the study established that integrating indigenous knowledge with modern conflict resolution mechanisms held substantial perceived potential for strengthening conflict management and peaceful coexistence along Kerio Valley, although the sustainability of these outcomes remained dependent on effective institutional collaboration, community trust, and the ability to address the limitations identified by respondents.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings, this paper made the following recommendations for policy action.

1. The county governments of Elgeyo Marakwet, Baringo and West Pokot should strengthen the integration of indigenous and formal conflict resolution mechanisms by formally incorporating councils of elders into county peace committees and other relevant peacebuilding structures, through establishing clear coordination procedures, defining the responsibilities of elders and government officials, and documenting agreements reached during mediation to improve collaboration and follow-up.
2. The national government, through the relevant peacebuilding and security agencies, should enhance institutional recognition of indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms by developing

clear operational guidelines for collaboration between elders, chiefs, peace committees, police and the formal justice system, through establishing referral procedures that allow customary mediation of appropriate disputes while ensuring that serious criminal offences and matters requiring formal legal intervention are handled in accordance with Kenyan law.

3. County governments and relevant peacebuilding organizations should strengthen the capacity and inclusiveness of community peace committees by providing training, logistical support and adequate resources to elders and other peace actors, through equipping them with skills in impartial mediation, early warning, negotiation, conflict de-escalation and monitoring of peace agreements, while ensuring meaningful participation of women, youth and representatives of affected communities.
4. The national and county governments, working with community elders, security agencies and development partners, should address the underlying drivers of recurrent agro-pastoral conflicts by linking community-based peacebuilding with coordinated security interventions and sustainable natural-resource management, through improving access to water and pasture, facilitating equitable resource-sharing agreements, strengthening responses to illegal firearms and livestock raiding, and organizing regular intercommunity dialogues to build trust and reduce retaliatory violence.

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