



Land Governance Reforms in Tanzania: *Unpacking Institutional Gaps, Persistent Tenure Insecurity, and Livelihood Outcomes for Agrarian Households*

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Abstract: *Despite three decades of policy and legal reforms aimed at strengthening land tenure security and improving household livelihoods, land governance outcomes in Tanzania remain inconclusive and highly contested. This study addresses a critical gap in understanding why well-intended reforms have failed to deliver consistent livelihood benefits, particularly for agrarian households. Guided by Property Rights Theory, this narrative literature review synthesizes peer-reviewed articles (Google Scholar) and official government documents (Ministry of Lands, 1995–2023) to examine four core reform pillars: power relations in land decision-making, village land surveying and use planning, institutional decentralisation, and individual land titling. The results reveal three major findings. First, while significant institutional achievements exist, such as Certificates of Village Land issued to approximately 95% of villages (11,744 villages by 2023) and 83% resolution of 211,030 land disputes by district tribunals, these gains are undermined by structural constraints. Second, weak decentralisation of financial resources and authority has rendered village councils and ward tribunals largely ineffective, perpetuating land conflicts, forced relocations, and tenure insecurity, particularly in hotspot regions (Kiteto, Ngorongoro, Morogoro). Third, land titling progress remains fragmented, with 75% of land unregistered and Certificates of Customary Rights of Occupancy largely unrecognized by formal financial institutions, contradicting Property Rights Theory predictions. This study contributes empirically by aggregating fragmented evidence to show that the presumed positive nexus between land governance reforms and household livelihoods is conditional on genuine power devolution and coordinated implementation. Policy contributions include demonstrating that decentralisation without fiscal and legal authority produces governance failure, not tenure security. Practically, the study recommends: (i) amending legal frameworks to balance presidential land powers with local governance authority; (ii) establishing a nationally coordinated, publicly financed land-use planning and titling programme; and (iii) mandating bank recognition of Certificates of Customary Rights of Occupancy as collateral. Concerted, multi-actor coordination, not further policy formulation, is the urgent priority.*

Keywords: *Land governance reforms, Tenure security, Household livelihoods, Institutional decentralisation, Property rights theory*

1.0 Background Information

Land is increasingly becoming a governance issue, fundamentally shaping household livelihoods in agrarian countries like Tanzania, where over 70% of the population depends on land-based activities for survival¹. Since the 1990s, Tanzania has embarked on comprehensive land governance reforms, aligning with neoliberal economic policies introduced in the 1980s, to enhance access to land, stimulate investment, secure land rights through tenure security, and ultimately improve household livelihoods. These reforms culminated in the National Land Policy of 1995 (revised in 2023) and the associated Land Act No. 4

and Village Land Act No. 5 of 1999, which collectively sought to transform land administration from a centralized, state-controlled system to a more participatory, market-oriented framework (URT, 1995). Despite these ambitious institutional changes, empirical evidence on the actual outcomes of land governance reforms in Tanzania remains fragmented and inconclusive. This study addresses this critical knowledge gap by systematically aggregating and analyzing evidence on four core policy and legal pillars: (i) power relations in land decision-making; (ii) village land survey, demarcation, and land-use planning; (iii) institutional decentralisation of land governance; and (iv) individual land titling through Certificates of Customary Rights of Occupancy (CCROs) and Certificates of Granted Rights of Occupancy (CGROs).

¹<https://povertyevidence.org/resources/institutional-challenges-to-poverty-alleviation-assessing-the-synergistic-impact-of-land-rights-extension-and-financial-services-in-tanzania/#main>



The discourse of land governance reforms in Tanzania is inseparable from the broader neoliberal policy agenda that swept across the Global South in the 1980s and 1990s. Unlike the state-controlled economy that prevailed during the *Ujamaa* period (1967–1985), which emphasized collective land management (Delehanty, 2020), the market-oriented economy liberalised land as a commodity to attract private investment (Cotula, Toulmin, & Quan, 2006; Amanor, 2012). The Government of Tanzania, responding to perceived government failures in land administration, formulated the National Land Policy in 1995 to improve land rights in terms of access, use, and ownership. In 1999, two critical land laws were passed: the Land Act No. 4 governing general and reserved lands, and the Village Land Act No. 5 governing village lands, which constitute approximately 70% of Tanzania’s total land area (URT, 1995). Furthermore, the government decentralised land administration to heighten community participation, with particular attention to land survey, demarcation, land-use planning, and land titling. However, the outcomes of these reforms have not been remarkable, constrained by structural challenges, including failure to decentralise power and financial resources, weak local governance, and overlapping institutional mandates at the local level (Pedersen, 2010; John & Kabote, 2017).

The recently revised National Land Policy (2023 edition) aims to address some of these persistent challenges. Launched in March 2025, the revised policy seeks to eliminate outdated traditions that exclude women from land ownership, enhance land registration through ICT systems, reform land conflict resolution bodies at village and ward levels, and attract foreign investment in the real estate subsector (URT, 1995 [2023 ed.]). President Samia Suluhu Hassan emphasized that land will remain public property entrusted to the President on behalf of citizens, while directing the Ministry of Lands to establish a Land Commission and a One-Stop Centre for surveying, registration, and title deed issuance². Nevertheless, critical limitations persist. The revised policy fails to recognise, clarify, and secure customary rights of rural residents, and compulsory taxation on all land places customary smallholders at risk³. Moreover, as of the end of 2024, an estimated 9,000 villages, more than three quarters of Tanzania’s villages, lacked formal land use plans⁴.

Land governance, as conceptualised in Tanzania’s policy framework, refers to “*the framework that facilitates land development using laws on land use, management, conservation, revenue collection and dispute resolution concerning land ownership, boundaries and usage*” (URT,

²<https://www.africa-press.net/tanzania/all-news/masterstroke-land-policy-launched>

³<https://www.landesa.org/new-national-land-policy-offers-promise-for-tanzanias-rural-residents/>

⁴<https://www.landesa.org/new-national-land-policy-offers-promise-for-tanzanias-rural-residents/>

1995, p. 12). This conceptualisation, adopted in this study, aligns with international definitions by the World Bank (2013) and FAO & UN-Habitat (2009), which emphasize rules, processes, institutions, and structures through which decisions about land access, use, and control are made and implemented. In African societies, land is not merely a natural resource but also an identity, culture, human rights, and a livelihood indicator for the majority (Cotula *et al.*, 2006; Tchatchoua-Djomo, 2018; Huntington & Lisher, 2025). Effective land governance, therefore, plays a critical role in shaping household livelihoods, particularly in agrarian communities in the Global South.

This study is guided by the Property Rights (PRs) Theory, articulated by Demsetz (1967, 2002), which posits that secure and clearly defined property rights increase incentives for individuals to invest in land and improve productivity. The critical tenet of PRs theory is that amplified land rights increase the likelihood of land tenure security, thereby enhancing investment on land, which ultimately improves land productivity and livelihoods. Recent studies in Kenya (Mbudzya, Gido, & Owuor, 2022), Ethiopia (Iticha & Han, 2025), Rwanda (Abbot & Mugisha, 2015), and Burundi (Tchatchoua-Djomo, 2018) have applied PRs theory to understand the influence of land tenure security on household livelihoods, albeit with mixed results depending on the efficacy of land governance. In Tanzania, the theory is relevant to examining how land titling (CCROs and CGROs), land-use planning, land demarcation, and decentralised governance institutions influence tenure security and livelihoods.

The central argument of this study, informed by PRs theory, is that land governance reforms stimulate land tenure security, which consequently improves household livelihoods. However, this nexus is moderated by institutional and structural factors, including unequal power relations, weak local governance capacity, lack of financial decentralisation, institutional coordination problems, and weak policy implementation (Cotula *et al.*, 2006). Studies across the Global South show that unequal power relations and weak institutions often limit the capacity of local governance structures to enforce land rights and manage land conflicts effectively (Domeher & Abdulai, 2012). In Tanzania, the legal framework grants the President overarching authority over all land on behalf of citizens, a power that has been criticized for undermining genuine community participation and enabling household relocations without adequate compensation (Haulle, 2015; Mwamfupe, 2015). As Kinunda (2018) argues, the lawful procedure requiring village council and village assembly approval for land transfers often amounts to little more than rubber-stamping government decisions, espousing asymmetrical power relations between central and local governance structures.



This study focuses on institutional achievements and structural challenges of land governance reforms in Tanzania, contributing to the Sustainable Development Goal 15 (Life on Land) and to the international literature on land governance reforms in the Global South. The study addresses four research questions:

- i. How do power relations between national and local land actors affect land rights and tenure security?
- ii. To what extent has village land been demarcated, planned for use, and what are the challenges?
- iii. What local governance structures have been established in the process of decentralisation, and what challenges are associated with that process?
- iv. What are the achievements and challenges of land titling, and how does this influence household livelihoods?

Therefore, by answering these questions, this study provides critical evidence for improving policy and legal framework efficacy and administrative efficiency of land governance in Tanzania.

2.0 Empirical and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Historical and Policy Evolution of Land Governance Reforms in Tanzania

The question of land governance reforms in Tanzania is historically and politically embedded in the country's transition from colonial rule to post-independence state-building, and subsequently from state-controlled to market-oriented economies. Understanding this historical trajectory is essential for unpacking contemporary institutional gaps, persistent tenure insecurity, and livelihood outcomes for agrarian households.

During the German colonial administration (1895–1918), all territorial land in Tanganyika was converted into crown land, effectively alienating indigenous populations from legal land ownership (Nyamhanga, Malisa, & Kabote, 2025; Biddulph, 2018). The British colonial administration, through the Land Tenure Ordinance No. 3 of 1923, declared land as public property controlled by the British colonial governor, maintaining the structure of land alienation (Shivji, 1996; Mramba, 2018). However, the British also introduced legal pluralism in 1928, recognizing customary land rights alongside statutory laws, a dual system that persists in modified form today (Biddulph, 2018; Nyamhanga *et al.*, 2025). Despite this recognition, colonial land governance fundamentally served European settler interests, marginalizing African smallholder farmers and pastoralists (Haulle, 2015).

Post-independence Tanzania, under President Julius Nyerere's Ujamaa (1967–1985), pursued a socialist, state-controlled economy where land was conceptualized as a public resource held in trust by the state, with villagisation programs consolidating rural populations into planned

settlements (Delehanty, 2020). While *Ujamaa* aimed to modernize agriculture and provide social services, it also centralized land governance, weakened customary institutions, and facilitated state-led land appropriation without adequate compensation (Shivji, 1996; Locher, 2016). The collapse of *Ujamaa* in the mid-1980s, driven by economic inefficiencies and external pressure from the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, ushered in neoliberal economic reforms that prioritized market liberalization, privatization, and foreign investment (Cotula, Toulmin, & Quan, 2006; Amanor, 2012).

In response to these neoliberal pressures, the Government of Tanzania initiated comprehensive land governance reforms in the 1990s. A landmark report by the National Commission on Land (1992), chaired by Professor Issa Shivji, recommended a community-based land rights approach (Shivji, 1996; Biddulph, 2018). Subsequently, the government formulated the National Land Policy in 1995, which was revised in 2023, and passed two critical land laws in 1999: the Land Act No. 4 (governing general and reserved lands) and the Village Land Act No. 5 (governing village lands, which constitute approximately 70% of Tanzania's land area). These laws were complemented by guidelines and forms in 2001, the first Strategic Plan for Implementation of the Land Laws in 2005, the Land-Use Planning Act No. 6 of 2007, and the second Strategic Plan in 2013 (Biddulph, 2018; URT, 1995 [2023 ed.]). The overall objective was to improve land rights in terms of access, use, and ownership, decentralize land administration, and attract private investment, consistent with neoliberal policy prescriptions (Pedersen, 2010; John & Kabote, 2017).

2.2 Framing Land Governance: Institutional Perspectives and Policy Context

The concept of land governance is related to, but distinct from, land administration. Land administration refers to systems, processes, and structures used to manage land, including determination of land rights, land survey, land use regulation, and land valuation and taxation (Hull, Whittal, & Kingwill, 2024). Land governance, by contrast, is a broader concept that emerged in the 1990s following liberalization of the land sector (Borras & Franco, 2010). Fukuyama (2013) conceptualizes governance generally as “*government's ability to make and enforce rules, and to deliver services.*” Descending from this, international organizations define land governance in nuanced ways. The World Bank (2013) defines land governance as a set of “*rules, processes and institutions through which decisions are made about land and its resources on access, use and control, and how the decisions are implemented.*” FAO and UN-Habitat (2009) add that land governance includes “*rules, processes and structures through which decisions are made about access to land and its use, the manner in which the decisions are implemented and enforced, and the way that competing interests in land are managed.*” Chitonge (2021) further



emphasizes that land governance is about rules and policies that regulate power relations over land control between different land actors at different levels of governance.

In Tanzania, the National Land Policy of 1995 (revised 2023) conceptualizes land governance as “*the framework that facilitates land development using laws on land use, management, conservation, revenue collection and dispute resolution concerning land ownership, boundaries and usage*” (URT, 1995, p. 12). This study adopts this conceptualization because it is appropriate to the analysis of power relations, institutional decentralisation, land-use planning, and land titling under consideration. Critically, land governance involves both formal systems (written policies and laws) and informal systems (customary or traditional practices), which often overlap in their functions (Biddulph, 2018). In some African countries, like Nigeria, land governance also involves religious institutions (Afolabi, 2021). These systems are normally expected to operate transparently, accountably, and efficiently (Kironde, 2009).

The land governance reforms in Tanzania are fundamentally about transforming power relations. The policy emphasizes decentralisation to improve land productivity and conflict resolution (URT, 1995). However, empirical evidence demonstrates that decentralisation has been implemented selectively: responsibilities have been transferred to local governance structures (village councils, ward tribunals, district land and housing tribunals), but financial resources and legal authority remain largely centralized (Pedersen, 2010; John & Kabote, 2017; Nyamhanga *et al.*, 2025). This asymmetrical power relation between the national level (particularly the Presidential institution, which holds all land in trust for citizens) and local level governance structures undermines genuine community participation, reduces tenure security, and perpetuates land conflicts (Haulle, 2015; Mwamfupe, 2015; Kinunda, 2018).

2.3 Property Rights Theory and Land Governance Reforms: *Theoretical Framework*

This study is guided by the Property Rights (PRs) Theory, which emerged from institutional economics in the 1960s and 1970s. While Coase (1960) developed foundational ideas about property rights and transaction costs, Demsetz (1967, 2002) articulated the PRs theory by elucidating three critical issues relevant to the Global South: (i) how ownership rights influence economic efficiency; (ii) why societies develop formal systems of property rights; and (iii) how secure rights stimulate investment and resource productivity. The central tenet of PRs theory is that secure rights over land influence investment in it productively. Amplified land rights increase the likelihood of land tenure security, enhance investment, and ultimately improve land productivity and livelihoods (Demsetz, 1967; 2002).

The PRs theory has been extensively applied in recent empirical studies across sub-Saharan Africa to understand the nexus between land tenure security and household livelihoods. In Kenya, Mbudzya, Gido, and Owuor (2022) used econometric modeling to demonstrate that farmers with formally documented land rights were more likely to access credit and achieve higher agricultural productivity. In Ethiopia, Iticha and Han (2025) conducted a meta-analysis showing that secure land tenure is associated with higher crop yields, improved investment decisions, and better access to credit. In Rwanda, Abbot and Mugisha (2015) found that the Land Tenure Regularisation Programme substantially improved tenure security and reduced land-related conflicts. In Burundi, however, Tchatchoua-Djomo (2018) found that land governance reforms created confusion among state and non-state authorities regarding which rules should apply, such that the hypothesized positive outcomes were hardly realized. These mixed results suggest that the efficacy of PRs theory depends critically on the strength of land governance institutions and the degree of genuine decentralisation.

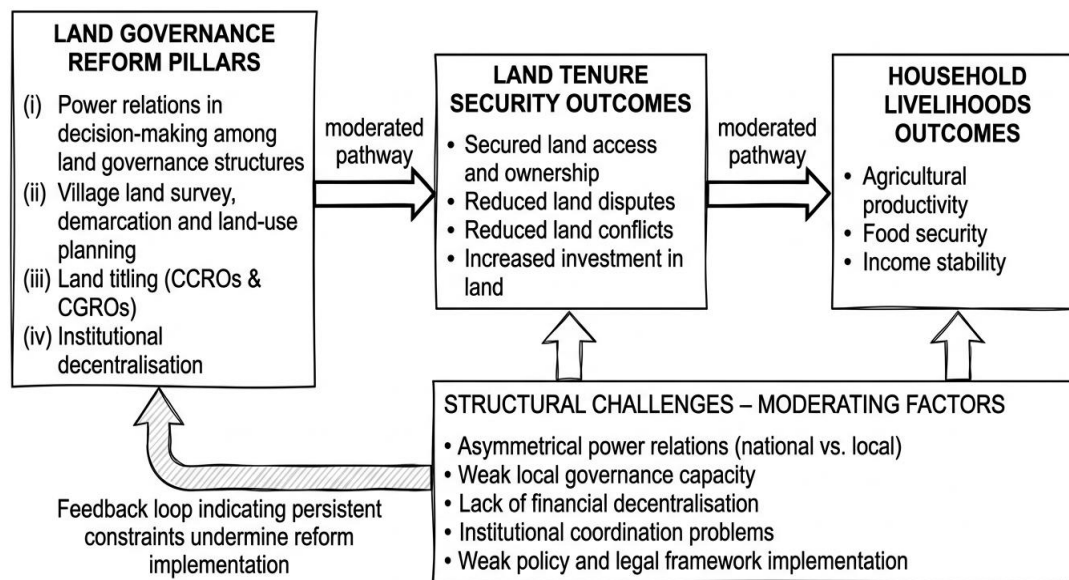
This theory is relevant to guide the analysis of this study in examining how and to what extent land governance reforms in Tanzania, including land titling (CCROs and CGROs), land-use planning, land demarcation, and decentralised governance institutions, influence land tenure security and livelihoods. In line with PRs theory, these reforms were meant to strengthen tenure security, stimulate investment on land, and improve household livelihoods. However, as illustrated in Figure 1, the outcomes of land governance reforms do not drift smoothly; they are moderated by institutional and structural factors that can weaken intended outcomes. These factors include asymmetrical power relations, weak local governance capacity, lack of financial decentralisation, institutional coordination problems, and weak policy and legal framework implementation (Cotula *et al.*, 2006; John & Kabote, 2017; Nyamhanga *et al.*, 2025). The figure consolidates theoretical propositions from Demsetz (1967; 2002) and empirical evidence from Cotula *et al.* (2006), Mbudzya *et al.* (2022), and Iticha and Han (2025), and visually represents the mediated relationship between land governance reforms, land tenure security, and household livelihoods in Tanzania.

In general, informed by PRs theory and the empirical context of Tanzania, this study suggests that land governance reforms are expected to stimulate land tenure security, which consequently improves household livelihoods. However, this nexus is not automatic or linear. The institutional and structural challenges identified in Figure 1, particularly asymmetrical power relations between the Presidential institution and local governance structures, weak decentralisation of financial resources, and ineffective local governance capacity, act as moderators that can weaken or

entirely negate the intended outcomes of land governance reforms. Therefore, the overall relationship between land governance reforms and household livelihoods in Tanzania is likely to be inconclusive or mixed, depending on the efficacy of land governance institutions. This framework guides the empirical analysis in subsequent sections of this study.

documents based on inclusion criteria; (iv) data extraction and quality appraisal; and (v) narrative synthesis organized around four thematic pillars of land governance reforms. This structured approach, while not replicable in the statistical sense, ensures transparency and analytical coherence (Byrne, 2016; Snyder, 2019).

Figure 1: Nexus Between Land Governance Reforms, Land Tenure Security, and Household Livelihoods in Tanzania



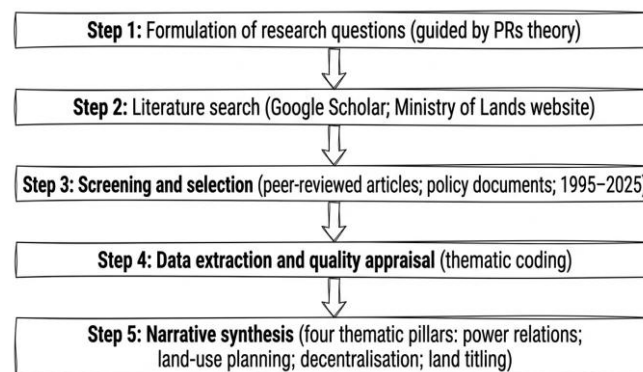
Source: Consolidated from theoretical and empirical literature including Demsetz (1967; 2002), Cotula et al. (2006), Mbudzya et al. (2022), Iticha and Han (2025), and author's synthesis.

3.0 Methodology

This study adopts a narrative literature review approach to systematically examine the nexus between land governance reforms, land tenure security, and household livelihoods in Tanzania. The narrative literature review is a traditional, qualitative synthesis method that focuses on summarizing, interpreting, and critically analyzing previous studies across a broad scope of inquiry (Byrne, 2016). Unlike systematic reviews, narrative reviews do not follow a rigid, reproducible protocol; however, they are particularly suited for examining complex, multi-dimensional topics such as land governance, where diverse methodological approaches (qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods) and heterogeneous outcomes need to be integrated to generate policy-relevant insights (Bryman, 2016). To enhance academic rigour, this study incorporates statistical evidence from official government sources and peer-reviewed empirical studies, interpreting quantitative findings alongside qualitative evidence.

Figure 2 illustrates the sequential methodological framework employed in this study, from literature search to synthesis and reporting. As shown in Figure 2, the review process followed five iterative steps: (i) identification of research questions derived from the theoretical framework (Property Rights Theory); (ii) systematic literature search using predefined keywords; (iii) screening and selection of relevant

Figure 2: Methodological Framework for Narrative Literature Review on Land Governance Reforms in Tanzania



Source: Adapted from Byrne (2016) and Snyder (2019).

Literature search strategy: The study used *Google Scholar* as the primary search engine for retrieving peer-reviewed scholarly articles. *Google Scholar* was selected because it provides broad, interdisciplinary coverage of land governance literature, including articles from developing country contexts that may not be indexed in subscription-based databases (Martin-Martin *et al.*, 2018). In addition, the official website of the Ministry of Lands, Housing and Human Settlements Development (www.ardhi.go.tz) was used to retrieve the National Land Policy document of 1995 (2023 edition), land laws (Land Act No. 4 of 1999 and Village Land Act No. 5 of 1999), strategic plans, and official



statistics on Certificates of Village Land, land-use planning coverage, and performance of District Land and Housing Tribunals.

Search keywords: The following keywords and their Boolean combinations were used in the literature search: “*land governance reforms in Tanzania*”; “*village land survey, demarcation and land-use planning*”; “*land tenure systems in Tanzania*”; “*land titling in Tanzania*”; “*Property Rights Theory*”; “*decentralisation of land governance in Tanzania*”; “*land governance and power relations*”; “*Certificates of Customary Rights of Occupancy (CCROs)*”; and “*land conflicts Tanzania*”. The search was limited to documents published between 1995 (the year of the National Land Policy) and 2025, ensuring coverage of the entire post-reform period.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria: Included documents were: (i) peer-reviewed journal articles published in English; (ii) official government policy documents, land acts, and strategic plans; (iii) working papers from recognized research institutions (e.g., DIIS, UNU-WIDER); and (iv) empirical studies from Tanzania and other sub-Saharan African countries applying Property Rights Theory.

Excluded were: (i) opinion pieces, editorials, and non-peer-reviewed blog posts; (ii) documents focused solely on urban land without linkages to agrarian livelihoods; and (iii) studies from non-African contexts without comparative relevance to Tanzania’s customary-statutory land tenure dualism.

Data extraction and synthesis: From the retrieved documents, data were extracted using a thematic coding framework structured around the four policy and legal pillars identified in the National Land Policy (URT, 1995): (i) power relations in decision-making among land governance structures; (ii) village land survey, demarcation and land-use planning; (iii) land titling (CCROs and CGROs); and (iv) institutional decentralisation of land governance. Within each theme, the study extracted information on: stated policy objectives; reported institutional achievements; documented structural challenges; and empirical evidence on household livelihood outcomes (agricultural productivity, food security, income stability). Table 1 summarizes the key data sources, their geographic focus, methodological approaches, and principal findings related to land governance reforms in Tanzania.

As demonstrated in Table 1, the empirical evidence on land

Table 1: Key Empirical Studies on Land Governance Reforms in Tanzania

Author(s) (Year)	Geographic Focus	Methodology	Sample Size	Principal Findings Related to Land Governance Reforms
Biddulph (2018)	National (Tanzania)	Qualitative policy review	N/A (policy documents)	Land Acts of 1999 implemented as community lands approach but constrained by weak decentralisation of power and resources
John & Kabote (2017)	Morogoro Region	Mixed-methods	120 households	Weak local governance capacity (village councils and ward tribunals) limits land conflict arbitration
Nyamhanga <i>et al.</i> (2025)	Kilosa & Mvomero Districts	Mixed-methods	120 households	63.3% of households work on unplanned land; weak compliance with land-use planning increases conflict likelihood
Usika <i>et al.</i> (2024)	Iringa District	Mixed-methods	400 households	Households with CCROs more food secure than those without; CCROs used as collateral (informal credit)
Msangi <i>et al.</i> (2022)	Multiple regions (Tanzania)	Quantitative (multinomial regression)	Not specified	Formal land titles improve perceived tenure security but results vary by region; strength of land governance determines benefit magnitude
Hombrados <i>et al.</i> (2015)	National (Tanzania)	Quantitative	3,265 households	No significant impact of land titling on agricultural production or land investment
Aikaeli & Markussen (2022)	National (Tanzania)	Quantitative (econometric)	Not specified	Land titling increases market value of land and generates significant economic returns
Kinunda (2018)	National (Tanzania)	Legal-policy analysis	N/A	Village councils lack genuine autonomy; lawful procedures amount to rubber-stamping government decisions
Haulle (2015)	National (Tanzania)	Critical legal analysis	N/A	Concept of "rights to own land" is incorrectly applied; citizens have "rights to occupy land" under Presidential trusteeship
Mwamfupe (2015)	Multiple regions (Kiteto, Ngorongoro, Coastal, Mbeya, Morogoro)	Qualitative case study	N/A	Persistent farmer-herder conflicts due to policy deficiencies, corruption, and weak land-use planning

Source: Author’s compilation from the reviewed literature.



governance reforms in Tanzania is characterized by mixed and context-dependent outcomes. Studies such as Usika *et al.* (2024) and Aikaeli and Markussen (2022) support the Property Rights Theory hypothesis that land titling improves tenure security and livelihoods, while Hombrados *et al.* (2015) find no significant impact. Similarly, Biddulph (2018) and John and Kabote (2017) consistently identify weak decentralisation of financial resources and authority as a structural constraint undermining reform implementation. These mixed results justify the narrative review approach, which allows for synthesis of heterogeneous evidence to identify patterns, contradictions, and knowledge gaps (Snyder, 2019).

Limitations of the methodology: This study acknowledges several limitations. First, as a narrative literature review, it cannot be reproduced in the same manner as a systematic review or meta-analysis, and the selection and interpretation of studies may be subject to author bias (Byrne, 2016). Second, the reliance on Google Scholar, while broad, may exclude some grey literature and non-English publications. Third, the majority of empirical studies reviewed are cross-sectional, limiting causal inference about the impact of land governance reforms on household livelihoods. Fourth, there is a geographic bias: most studies focus on Morogoro, Iringa, and Northern Tanzania, with limited evidence from other regions (e.g., Lake Zone, Western Tanzania). Despite these limitations, the narrative review approach is appropriate for addressing the broad, policy-relevant research questions of this study and for generating hypotheses for future quantitative and mixed-methods research.

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and discusses the findings of the narrative literature review structured around the four policy and legal pillars of land governance reforms in Tanzania: (i) power relations in decision-making; (ii) village land survey, demarcation and land-use planning; (iii) individual land rights through titling (CCROs and CGROs); and (iv) institutional decentralisation of land governance and land disputes resolution. The section concludes with an analysis of the nexus between land titling, tenure security, and household livelihoods in light of Property Rights (PRs) Theory (Demsetz, 1967; 2002). Figure 3 provides a consolidated overview of the policy and legal framework governing land governance reforms in Tanzania since the colonial period, while Tables 2, 3, and 4 summarize key achievements, structural challenges, and empirical evidence on land titling outcomes.

4.1 Power Relations and Land Governance Reforms

As shown in Figure 3, Tanzania’s land governance framework has undergone multiple transformations, from colonial alienation (1895–1961) to post-independence state centralism (1961–1980s), and from neoliberal reforms (1990s) to the present revised policy (2023). Despite this evolving legal architecture, one fundamental continuity persists: the concentration of ultimate land authority in the executive branch. Under both the Land Act No. 4 of 1999 and the Village Land Act No. 5 of 1999, all land in Tanzania is declared public land held by the President as trustee on behalf of citizens (URT, 1995). The President has legal

Figure 3: Evolution of Policy and Legal Framework for Land Governance in Tanzania (1895–2023)

YEAR	ADMINISTRATION	LAND GOVERNANCE REFORM	SOURCE
1895	German Colonial Administration	• Converted all territorial land into crown land	Nyamhanga et al. (2025); Biddulph (2018); Haulle (2015)
1923	British Colonial Administration	• Issued Land Tenure Ordinance No. 3, declaring land as public property controlled by British colonial governor	Nyamhanga et al. (2025); Biddulph (2018); Mramba (2018); Shivji (1996)
1928	British Colonial Administration	• Recognized customary land rights; introduced legal pluralism (statutory and customary co-existence)	Nyamhanga et al. (2025); Biddulph (2018); Shivji (1996)
1992	Tanzania Government	• National Commission on Land report developed under Professor Issa Shivji	Biddulph (2018); Shivji (1996)
1995	Tanzania Government	• Formulated and issued the National Land Policy	Haulle (2015); Biddulph (2018)
1999	Tanzania Government	• Passed Land Act No. 4 (General and Reserved Land) and Village Land Act No. 5 (Village Land)	Nyamhanga et al. (2025); Biddulph (2018); Kironde (2009); Pedersen (2010)
2001	Tanzania Government	• Enacted guidelines and forms to complement 1999 Land Acts	Biddulph (2018); Shivji (1996)
2005	Tanzania Government	• Issued 1 st Strategic Plan for Implementation of Land Laws (1999)	Biddulph (2018)
2007	Tanzania Government	• Enacted Land-Use Planning Act No. 6	Biddulph (2018)
2013	Tanzania Government	• Issued 2 nd Strategic Plan for Implementation of Land Laws (1999)	Biddulph (2018)
2023	Tanzania Government	• Revised National Land Policy (1995) to 2023 edition	URT (1995 [2023 ed.])

Source: Author’s consolidation from the literature.



powers to transfer village land to general land or reserved land, or allocate it to investors in the name of “public interest” without compulsory compensation mechanisms that adequately reflect market values (Haulle, 2015; Locher, 2016).

This asymmetrical power relation between the Presidential institution and local governance structures has generated widespread public concern and, in some cases, open turbulence. Documented hotspots of land-related unrest include the Coastal Region, Southern Tanzania (Mtwara), Southern Highlands (Mbeya), Central Tanzania (Dodoma), and Northern Regions (Arusha, Manyara, Kilimanjaro) (Mwamfupe, 2015; Massawe & Urassa, 2016). The legal requirement that government proposals for land transfer be discussed by village councils and approved by village assemblies, ostensibly a participatory safeguard, has been characterized by Kinunda (2018) as nothing more than “rubber stamping” government decisions. This finding aligns with the concept of centric governance (power centralized in a single authority) rather than polycentric governance (power distributed across multiple decision-making centers), which Thiel (2023), Baldwin *et al.* (2024), and Goetz *et al.* (2024) argue is essential for genuine local participation and tenure security. Table 2 summarizes the key power asymmetries identified in the literature.

enhances tenure security and investment (Demsetz, 1967; 2002).

4.2 Land Survey, Demarcation and Land-Use Planning

The land governance reforms provide that village land, which constitutes approximately 70% of Tanzania’s total land area and is critical for agrarian household livelihoods, should be surveyed, demarcated, and issued a Certificate of Village Land (CVL). Land-use planning, mandated by the Land-Use Planning Act No. 6 of 2007, requires that village land be mapped and boundaries determined for different uses including residential, agriculture, grazing, industries, and social services (Nyamhanga, Malisa, & Kabote, 2025). According to PRs theory, such demarcation and planning should enhance tenure security, reduce land disputes, stimulate investment, and increase land market value (Demsetz, 2002; Aikaeli & Markussen, 2022).

Achievements. The issuance of CVLs has been one of the most remarkable institutional achievements of land governance reforms in Tanzania. Biddulph (2018) documented an increase from 36 villages with CVLs in 2005 to 9,460 villages in 2012. According to the revised National Land Policy of 1995 (2023 edition), CVL issuance covered 11,744 villages by 2023, representing approximately 95% of all villages in the country (URT, 1995 [2023 ed.]). This

Table 2: Power Asymmetries in Land Governance Decision-Making in Tanzania

Dimension	National Level (Presidential Institution)	Local Level (Village Councils & Assemblies)	Consequence for Tenure Security
Legal authority	Holds all land in trust; can transfer village land to general/reserved land	Can discuss and approve/reject proposals (legally) but decisions often overridden	Weak tenure security; household relocations common
Compensation power	Determines “public interest” and compensation amounts	Limited negotiation power	Inadequate compensation; impoverishment risk
Information access	Controls land registration and survey data	Limited access to official land records	Increased land disputes and double allocation
Dispute resolution	Final appellate authority through courts	Village councils and ward tribunals lack financial resources and enforcement power	Persistent land conflicts; escalation to violence

Source: Compiled from Haulle (2015), Kinunda (2018), Mwamfupe (2015), and John & Kabote (2017).

Haulle (2015) provocatively questions whether Tanzanians have a genuine “right to own land” or merely a “right to occupy land” until the government decides otherwise. This distinction is not merely semantic: under the current legal framework, the concept of “rights to own land” as applied in Tanzania’s land policy is arguably incorrect. The correct concept, based on the legal reality of Presidential trusteeship, would be “rights to occupy land” for a specified period (typically 33 to 99 years for CGROs, or indefinitely under customary use but revocable by the state). This finding suggests that both colonial land governance (1895–1961) and the post-reform land governance framework (1995–present) converge on a fundamental feature: overwhelming executive power over land, which undermines the PRs theory hypothesis that formalization of property rights automatically

implies that the vast majority of village land boundaries have been legally established, a necessary condition for resolving inter-village land conflicts.

Structural challenges. Despite impressive CVL coverage, land-use planning has progressed at a much slower pace. As shown in Table 3, the proportion of villages with land-use plans increased from 10% in the previous decade to only 23.8% by 2023 (URT, 1995 [2023 ed.]). At the district level, only 35% of 139 districts have completed land-use plans (Moshia, 2012; Naiposha, Nzunda, & Kashaigili, 2021). Nyamhanga *et al.* (2025) found that, in a sample of 120 households in Kilosa and Mvomero Districts (Morogoro Region), 63.3% worked on unplanned pieces of land,



significantly increasing the likelihood of land conflicts between farmers and pastoralists.

issued 63,000 CCROs in 36 villages in Iringa District (Usika, Kabote, & Urassa, 2024).

Table 3: Progress and Challenges in Village Land-Use Planning in Tanzania

Indicator	Achievement	Challenge	Source
Villages with CVL	11,744 (95% of 12,318 villages)	Boundary establishment does not equate to land-use planning	URT (1995 [2023 ed.])
Villages with land-use plans	23.8% (approx. 2,930 villages)	Slow progress from 10% in previous decade	URT (1995 [2023 ed.]); Biddulph (2018)
Districts with land-use plans	35% (49 out of 139 districts)	Uneven geographic coverage; fragmented efforts	Mosha (2012); Naiposha <i>et al.</i> (2021)
Households working on unplanned land	63.3% (Kilosa & Mvomero)	Increased conflict likelihood; weak tenure security	Nyamhanga <i>et al.</i> (2025)

The slow pace of land-use planning is explained by multiple factors. First, *limited financial and human resources*: the government has not allocated sufficient domestic funding for land-use planning, which instead depends on fragmented, project-based support from development partners (Biddulph, 2018). Second, *lack of coordination*: there is no national coordination framework or engagement mechanism to mobilize land actors (URT, 1995 [2023 ed.]). Third, *weak enforcement*: village councils and ward tribunals lack the technical capacity and legal authority to enforce land-use plans once developed (John & Kabote, 2017; Nyamhanga *et al.*, 2025). The persistence of unplanned land directly contributes to the escalation of farmer-herder conflicts documented by Mwamfupe (2015) and Massawe and Urassa (2016) in hotspot regions including Kiteto, Ngorongoro, Morogoro, Mbeya, and Mtwara.

4.3 Land Rights and Land Titling

The legal framework established under the land governance reforms recognizes individual rights over land access, use, ownership, and control through two types of titles: Certificates of Customary Rights of Occupancy (CCROs) and Certificates of Granted Rights of Occupancy (CGROs). While both have equal legal status, they differ fundamentally in origin and recognition. CCROs are rooted in customary laws of a particular community or ethnic group and are intended for smallholder farmers and pastoralists. CGROs are formal rights granted by the President, through the Commissioner for Lands, for a specified period (typically 33 to 99 years), and require surveyed and registered land (Pedersen, 2010; Nuhu, 2019a).

Achievements: Project-based interventions have demonstrated that land titling is feasible when adequately resourced. The Tanzania Land Tenure Improvement Project (2022–2027), a partnership between the Government of Tanzania and the World Bank, is being implemented in 14 regions covering approximately 40 districts, with a target of demarcating and registering 2.5 million land parcels and issuing CCROs to half a million citizens (URT, 2023). Another project implemented by the Government of Tanzania and USAID (2016–2021) successfully

Structural challenges: Despite these project-level successes, national-scale land registration remains extremely low. According to the revised National Land Policy (URT, 1995 [2023 ed.]), approximately 75% of land in Tanzania is not registered, creating significant difficulties for land occupation, transaction, and credit access. The major contributing factor is lack of financial resources: there is no nationally coordinated, government-financed land titling programme. Instead, efforts remain fragmented, donor-dependent, and geographically concentrated. Msangi *et al.* (2022) further note that CCROs are generally not accepted as collateral by formal financial institutions (banks), in contrast to CGROs, which are bankable. This finding contradicts the PRs theory assumption that formal land titles automatically unlock credit access (Demsetz, 1967; Mbudzya *et al.*, 2022). In Iringa District, where CCROs reportedly facilitated credit access, the mechanism was likely through informal financial arrangements (e.g., village savings and loan associations, informal lenders) rather than formal banking (Usika *et al.*, 2024).

4.4 Institutional Decentralisation of Land Governance and Land Disputes Resolution

Responding to land governance reforms, Tanzania established a multi-tiered institutional framework for land dispute resolution: Village Councils (arbitration at village level), Ward Tribunals (arbitration at ward level), District Land and Housing Tribunals (hearing and decision-making at district level), the High Court - Land Division (appeals), and the Court of Appeal (final appeals). According to the Ministry of Lands website and Biddulph (2018), Tanzania established 39 tribunals in 129 districts by 2013. The Land Policy of 1995 (2023 edition) reports that the country has 139 District Land and Housing Tribunals, of which 67% are operational, and these had successfully resolved 83% of 211,030 land disputes by 2023 (URT, 1995 [2023 ed.]).

Achievements. The operational tribunals have demonstrated efficacy in dispute resolution, particularly at the district level. The 83% resolution rate for over 200,000 disputes is a notable institutional achievement. Furthermore, the legal requirement that three members of each tribunal be women



(under the Land Disputes Courts No. 2 of 2003 and the Ward Tribunals Act No. 7 of 1985) represents progress in gender-inclusive land governance, addressing concerns raised by Dancer (2017) and Massay (2020) about women’s marginalization in land rights.

Structural challenges: Despite this legal architecture, empirical studies consistently demonstrate weak local governance at the village and ward levels (John & Kabote, 2017; Biddulph, 2018; Nyamhanga *et al.*, 2025). The central problem, as articulated by Pedersen (2010) and confirmed by later studies, is that decentralisation of land governance has been implemented selectively: responsibilities have been transferred to village councils and ward tribunals, but power (authority) and financial resources remain centralized. Village councils lack budgets for dispute arbitration, transportation to conflict sites, and training in land law. As a result, land disputes and conflicts have been lingering and escalating in both rural and urban areas, leading to loss of life and property (Alananga, 2019a; Alananga, Moyo, & Mwasumbi, 2023). Table 4 summarizes the key institutional achievements and structural challenges in decentralised land dispute resolution.

communities, notably in the Ngorongoro Conservation Area (Mollel & Porokwa, 2014; Locher, 2016; Weldemichel, 2022).

4.5 Land Titling, Tenure Security, and Livelihood: *Understanding the Nexus*

The PRs theory postulates a positive nexus between land titling, tenure security, and household livelihoods (Demsetz, 1967; 2002). However, the empirical evidence from Tanzania, summarized in Table 5, reveals mixed and inconclusive results that depend critically on the strength of land governance institutions, the presence of donor-funded projects, and the type of land title (CCRO vs. CGRO).

As shown in Table 5, the positive findings (Usika *et al.*, 2024; Aikaeli & Markussen, 2022) are largely from project-supported contexts where land registration and titling were implemented with adequate financial resources, technical support, and community engagement. The Iringa District case, where USAID supported issuance of 63,000 CCROs, demonstrates that land titling can improve food security and facilitate credit access (through informal mechanisms). However, these results are not generalizable to the 75% of Tanzanian land that remains unregistered (URT, 1995 [2023

Table 4: Institutional Decentralisation of Land Dispute Resolution in Tanzania: Achievements and Challenges

Institution	Legal Mandate	Achievement	Structural Challenge	Source
Village Council	Arbitration of land disputes at village level	Legally recognized; gender representation (3 women required)	No budget; no training; no enforcement power	John & Kabote (2017); Nyamhanga <i>et al.</i> (2025)
Ward Tribunal	Arbitration at ward level; receive matters from village councils	Established by Ward Tribunals Act No. 7 of 1985	Limited financial resources; weak coordination with district tribunals	Biddulph (2018); Kinunda (2018)
District Land & Housing Tribunal	Receive, hear, make decisions on disputes	139 established; 67% operational; 83% of 211,030 disputes resolved	Understaffed; backlog of cases; limited geographic coverage	URT (1995 [2023 ed.]); Biddulph (2018)
High Court - Land Division	Hear appeals from tribunals; review lower decisions	Functional appellate mechanism	Expensive for poor households; delays; centralized in major cities	Alananga <i>et al.</i> (2023)

The weak performance of village councils and ward tribunals has direct consequences for household livelihoods. Land resource conflicts, particularly between farmers and pastoralists, have escalated since the liberalisation epoch, leading to loss of life, destruction of property, and displacement of households (Mwamfupe, 2015; Massawe & Urassa, 2016; Alananga *et al.*, 2023). In urban Tanzania, double and multiple allocation of land, aggravated by poor land administration and weak governance, has resulted in widespread relocation of communities in Dar es Salaam and Mwanza cities, with compensation accounting for only 19% of all land conflicts (Uisso & Tanrivermiş, 2025). Approximately 40% of Tanzania’s land area is under some form of protection (including community-based conservation), and conservation policies have further exacerbated land conflicts by displacing pastoralist

ed.]).

The negative or null findings (Hombrados *et al.*, 2015; Kassa, 2018) are associated with weak land governance contexts: limited land-use planning, weak local enforcement, and absence of coordinated national programmes. These findings align with Chitonge (2021) and Chitonge and Harvey (2021), who argue that weak land governance across the Global South undermines the expected benefits of formalization. Similarly, in Burundi, Tchatchoua-Djomo (2018) found that land governance reforms created confusion among state and non-state authorities regarding which rules should apply, such that the hypothesized positive outcomes were hardly realized.



Table 5: Empirical Evidence on Land Titling, Tenure Security, and Livelihood Outcomes in Tanzania

Author(s)	Location	Methodology	Key Finding	Support for PRs Theory?
Usika <i>et al.</i> (2024)	Iringa District	Mixed-methods (N=400)	Households with CCROs more food secure than those without; CCROs used as collateral (informal credit)	Yes (with donor project)
Aikaeli & Markussen (2022)	National	Econometric	Land titling increases land market value and generates economic returns	Yes
Msangi <i>et al.</i> (2022)	Multiple regions	Multinomial regression	Formal titles improve perceived tenure security; results vary by region	Conditional (depends on governance strength)
Hombrados <i>et al.</i> (2015)	National	Quantitative (N=3,265)	No significant impact of land titling on agricultural production or investment	No
Kassa (2018)	Tanzania	Empirical investigation	No significant positive relationship between titling and long-term investment where local governance is weak	No

Resolving the apparent contradiction: The mixed results can be resolved by recognizing that land titling is a necessary but not sufficient condition for improved household livelihoods. The PRs theory hypothesis holds only when four enabling conditions are met: (i) the titling process is accompanied by land-use planning; (ii) local governance institutions (village councils, ward tribunals) have adequate financial resources, authority, and capacity to enforce land rights; (iii) credit markets recognize land titles (including CCROs) as collateral; and (iv) there is a coordinated, adequately funded national programme rather than fragmented donor projects. In Tanzania, none of these enabling conditions are fully satisfied at the national scale.

Livelihood implications of weak tenure security: The persistence of land disputes, conflicts, and household relocations has devastating effects on agrarian livelihoods. Relocation disrupts access to farmland, grazing areas, and water sources, leading to food insecurity, income instability, and impoverishment (Mwamfupe, 2015; Nkansah-Dwamena, 2021). Davis, D’Odorico, and Rulli (2014) assessed the impact of population relocation in 28 developing countries and concluded that the phenomenon has the potential to adversely affect incomes across the developing world. In Tanzania, the ease with which communities are relocated, facilitated by Presidential powers over land, suggests that land governance reforms have not fundamentally altered the structural vulnerability of agrarian households. This finding contradicts the central hypothesis of PRs theory and underscores the need for genuine decentralisation of power and resources.

5.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

This study, guided by the Property Rights Theory and based on a narrative literature review of peer-reviewed articles and official government documents, set out to unpack the institutional gaps, persistent tenure insecurity, and livelihood

outcomes of land governance reforms in Tanzania. The results demonstrate that while Tanzania has achieved notable institutional milestones, including the establishment of a comprehensive policy and legal framework, issuance of Certificates of Village Land to 95% of villages, and resolution of 83% of land disputes through district tribunals, these achievements have not translated into the anticipated improvements in land tenure security and household livelihoods for the majority of agrarian households. The central tenet of Property Rights Theory, that formalising land rights through titling, decentralisation, and land-use planning automatically stimulates investment and enhances livelihoods, is not supported by the aggregated evidence from Tanzania. Instead, the outcomes of land governance reforms remain inconclusive and highly conditional on the strength of governance institutions, the degree of genuine power and financial decentralisation, and the presence of well-resourced, coordinated implementation programmes rather than fragmented donor-dependent projects.

The empirical implications of this study are threefold. First, asymmetrical power relations between the Presidential institution, which holds all land in trust for citizens, and local governance structures (village councils and ward tribunals) fundamentally undermine community participation and tenure security. The legal requirement for village assemblies to approve land transfers has become procedural rubber-stamping rather than genuine decision-making, as evidenced by widespread household relocations without adequate compensation in hotspot regions including Kiteto, Ngorongoro, Morogoro, Mbeya, and Mtwara. Second, selective decentralisation, where responsibilities have been transferred to local levels without corresponding financial resources and legal authority, has paralysed the dispute resolution capacity of village councils and ward tribunals, allowing land conflicts to escalate and causing loss of life, property, and livelihood disruption. Third, land titling remains fragmented and donor-dependent, with 75% of



Tanzanian land unregistered and Certificates of Customary Rights of Occupancy largely unrecognised by formal financial institutions, meaning that even where titles exist, the anticipated credit access and investment effects are realised only through informal mechanisms or in project-supported areas like Iringa District.

From a policy perspective, the findings suggest that further policy formulation without addressing structural implementation constraints will not resolve Tanzania's land governance challenges. Concerted efforts are required in four priority areas. First, legal amendments should balance the overwhelming powers of the Presidential institution with genuine authority for village councils and village assemblies, including binding decision-making power over land transfers that affect community livelihoods. Second, decentralisation must be completed by transferring not only responsibilities but also financial resources (through ring-fenced budgets for land governance at village and ward levels) and legal authority (including enforcement powers for land dispute decisions). Third, a nationally coordinated, publicly financed land-use planning and titling programme should replace the current fragmented, donor-dependent approach, with specific targets for increasing the proportion of villages with land-use plans from the current 23.8% to at least 50% by 2030. Fourth, the government should mandate formal financial institutions to recognise Certificates of Customary Rights of Occupancy as collateral, potentially through a guaranteed mechanism that de-risks lending to smallholder farmers and pastoralists.

This study has several limitations that point to future research priorities. The narrative review approach, while appropriate for synthesising heterogeneous evidence, cannot provide causal estimates of the impact of specific reform components on household livelihoods. Therefore, coordinated, large-scale, longitudinal empirical studies using mixed methods are urgently needed to quantify the key factors that explain the inconclusive relationship between land governance, tenure security, and household livelihoods in Tanzania. Specifically, future research should investigate: (i) the causal effects of land-use planning on conflict reduction and agricultural productivity using quasi-experimental designs; (ii) the mechanisms through which Certificates of Customary Rights of Occupancy influence credit access and investment in different regional contexts; and (iii) the comparative effectiveness of polycentric versus centric governance arrangements in resolving land disputes. In conclusion, land governance reforms in Tanzania have laid a strong institutional foundation, but without genuine power and financial decentralisation, coordinated national programmes, and enforceable legal protections for agrarian households, the promise of tenure security and improved livelihoods will remain unrealised for the majority of Tanzanians who depend on land for their survival.

Declaration of Conflict of Interest

I hereby declare that there are no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the research and findings presented in this paper.

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