

# From Resource Scarcity to Political Triggers: Explaining Inter-Clan Conflict in Embu County, Kenya

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## ABSTRACT

Inter-clan conflict remains a persistent challenge in many parts of Kenya, yet existing studies often examine its drivers in isolation. This study investigates the interaction between structural conditions and political triggers in shaping inter-clan conflict between the Ndamata and Mururi clans in Embu County, Kenya. Drawing on Resource Scarcity Theory and Conflict Transformation Theory, the study adopts a mixed-methods approach combining survey data (N = 292) and qualitative interviews with key stakeholders. The findings reveal that resource scarcity and historical land grievances constitute the underlying structural conditions of conflict, while political competition—particularly during elections—acts as a critical trigger that activates these tensions. Descriptive results indicate that elections are perceived as the most significant driver of conflict, followed by competition over resources and land disputes. Qualitative evidence further demonstrates how political actors mobilize communities and intensify perceptions of exclusion during electoral periods. Importantly, the study finds no statistically significant differences between the Ndamata and Mururi clans in their perceptions of conflict triggers, suggesting that inter-clan conflict is shaped by shared structural conditions rather than divergent group-specific grievances. Contextual factors such as youth unemployment and social media are found to function as enabling conditions that amplify, rather than independently generate, conflict dynamics. The study contributes to the literature by demonstrating that inter-clan conflict is best understood as the product of interacting structural inequalities and situational triggers. It underscores the need for integrated policy responses that address both the underlying causes of conflict and the political processes that activate them.

**Keywords:** Inter-clan conflict; resource scarcity; political competition; electoral triggers; land disputes; Embu County, Kenya

## INTRODUCTION

Inter-clan conflict remains a persistent feature of local governance and social relations in many parts of Kenya, particularly in regions where historical grievances, resource competition, and political contestation intersect. While such conflicts are often framed as localized disputes rooted in cultural differences or ancestral rivalries, a growing body of scholarship demonstrates that they are embedded in broader structural and political processes (Kenya Human Rights Commission, 2022; World Resources Institute, 2020). In Embu County, tensions between the Ndamata and Mururi clans provide a useful case through which to examine how these dynamics unfold in practice.

Across Kenya, inter-group conflicts have frequently been linked to competition over land and other natural resources. Land occupies a central place in both economic livelihoods and social identity, making disputes over ownership and access highly emotive and difficult to resolve (World Resources Institute, 2020). Historical patterns of land allocation, many of which date back to colonial policies, have produced enduring inequalities and contested claims that continue to shape contemporary conflicts. These grievances often remain latent but can be reactivated during periods of political transition or uncertainty (Kenya Human Rights Commission, 2024).

At the same time, the decentralization of political power under Kenya's devolved governance system has reconfigured the stakes of local political competition. County-level elections have intensified contestation over access to public resources, leadership positions, and development opportunities. In this context, clan identity has become an increasingly salient basis for political mobilization. Political actors frequently invoke shared identity narratives to consolidate support, often framing elections as zero-sum contests between competing groups (Cheeseman, Lynch, & Willis, 2021). This dynamic heightens perceptions of exclusion and increases the likelihood that existing tensions will escalate into open conflict.

The interaction between resource-based grievances and political mobilization is particularly evident in localized contexts such as Embu County. The Ndamata and Mururi clans, while sharing geographical proximity and historical ties, have experienced recurrent tensions that are often amplified during electoral periods. These conflicts are not solely the result of immediate triggers but are shaped by long-standing structural inequalities, perceived injustices in resource distribution, and the strategic actions of political elites. Similar patterns have been observed in other parts of Kenya, where competition over scarce resources intersect with political mobilization to produce cyclical conflict dynamics (International Crisis Group, 2017; UNDP, 2022). In addition to land and political competition, socio-economic conditions—particularly youth unemployment—have emerged as important contextual drivers of conflict. High levels of unemployment create a pool of economically vulnerable individuals who may be more susceptible to mobilization during periods of tension. Empirical studies show that unemployed youth are often drawn into conflict dynamics through political patronage networks and informal mobilization structures (Mugisha et al., 2020; World Bank, 2018). This underscores the importance of situating inter-clan conflict within broader socio-economic conditions rather than treating it purely as an identity-based phenomenon.

Furthermore, the rapid expansion of digital communication has introduced new dimensions to inter-clan relations. Social media platforms facilitate the rapid dissemination of information but also enable the spread of rumours, misinformation, and inflammatory narratives. In fragile contexts, such dynamics can intensify mistrust and accelerate the escalation of disputes (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Article 19, 2018). While the role of digital media in local conflict processes continues to evolve, its influence is increasingly recognized as a significant factor in shaping perceptions and behaviours.

Despite extensive research on inter-group conflict in Kenya, existing studies tend to examine individual drivers—such as resource scarcity, land grievances, or political competition—in isolation. This has limited the ability to understand how these factors interact to produce and sustain inter-clan conflict at the local level. In Embu County, there is a lack of integrated, empirical analysis that captures both the structural causes and immediate triggers of conflict between specific clans.

This study adopts an integrated perspective that moves from structural conditions—particularly resource scarcity and historical land grievances—to the political triggers that activate these tensions, especially during electoral periods.

This study addresses this gap by examining the underlying causes and triggers of inter-clan conflict between the Ndamata and Mururi clans. It adopts a mixed-methods approach to identify the relative importance of key factors, including land disputes, resource competition, political processes, cultural dynamics, youth involvement, and information flows. By combining statistical analysis with qualitative insights, the study provides a more nuanced and contextually grounded understanding of conflict dynamics.

The central argument advanced in this paper is that inter-clan conflict in Embu County is not driven by isolated or clan-specific grievances, but by structurally shared conditions that affect both communities in similar ways. Political competition—particularly during elections—acts as a catalyst that activates underlying tensions rooted in resource scarcity and historical inequalities. This convergence of structural and situational factors creates a recurring cycle in which conflict is periodically reignited.

Despite extensive research on inter-group conflict in Kenya, existing studies tend to examine individual drivers – such as resource scarcity, land grievances, or political competition – in isolation. This has limited the ability to understand how these factors interact to produce and sustain inter-clan conflict at the local level. In Embu

County, there is a lack of integrated, empirical analysis that captures both the structural causes and immediate triggers of conflict between specific clans.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Resource Scarcity and Material Drivers of Conflict

Extensive research shows that competition over scarce resources is a central driver of inter-group conflict, particularly in agrarian and semi-arid contexts. Resource Scarcity Theory explains how limited access to essential resources such as land, water, and pasture creates conditions under which groups mobilize to secure their livelihoods, often along ethnic or clan lines (Homer-Dixon, 1999; UNDP, 2022). In Kenya, where land remains both an economic asset and a symbol of identity, disputes over ownership and access have consistently been linked to localized conflict dynamics.

Empirical studies across northern and eastern Kenya demonstrate that competition over land and natural resources frequently escalates into inter-clan disputes, particularly in areas characterized by weak institutional regulation (International Crisis Group, 2017). These conflicts are often intensified by environmental stressors, including climate variability, which further constrain resource availability and increase competition. However, while resource scarcity provides a compelling structural explanation, it does not fully account for the timing and intensity of conflict outbreaks. In many cases, resource-related grievances persist without immediate escalation, suggesting that additional factors are required to trigger active conflict. These findings suggest that resource scarcity should not be viewed as an isolated driver, but as a structural condition that interacts with political processes, particularly during periods of heightened competition such as elections.

### Historical Land Grievances and Institutional Legacies

Closely linked to resource scarcity are historical patterns of land allocation and governance. Colonial and post-colonial land policies in Kenya produced uneven distribution of land and entrenched systems of inequality that continue to shape contemporary disputes (Veit, 2019). These structural imbalances have resulted in persistent contestation over land ownership, boundaries, and access, particularly in regions with overlapping claims.

Research indicates that unresolved land issues serve as latent sources of tension that can be reactivated during periods of political or social change (Kenya Human Rights Commission, 2024). In many instances, historical injustices are not merely background conditions but active elements in conflict narratives, reinforcing group identities and justifying claims to territory. Nevertheless, historical grievances alone do not explain why conflicts intensify at particular moments, pointing to the importance of examining the conditions under which such tensions are activated. In many contexts, land is not only an economic resource but also a marker of identity and belonging, which makes disputes over ownership particularly resistant to resolution and more likely to escalate when combined with political contestation.

### Political Competition and Electoral Dynamics

A growing body of scholarship highlights the role of political competition – particularly elections – in shaping conflict dynamics in Kenya. Electoral periods often transform underlying grievances into active conflict through processes of mobilization, polarization, and competition over state resources (Cheeseman, Lynch, & Willis, 2021). Under devolved governance, local elections have increased the stakes of political competition by linking electoral outcomes directly to access to resources, employment opportunities, and development projects.

Political elites frequently exploit existing social divisions, including clan identities, to consolidate support. This process involves framing political contests as struggles between competing groups, thereby intensifying perceptions of threat and exclusion. Empirical evidence shows that electoral periods are associated with heightened levels of violence and inter-group tension, even in areas that remain relatively stable outside election cycles (Kenya Human Rights Commission, 2024).

However, the literature often treats elections primarily as triggering events without sufficiently examining how they interact with structural conditions such as resource scarcity and historical grievances. This limitation underscores the need to analyse political competition not in isolation, but as part of a broader system of interacting conflict drivers. These findings highlight the role of political competition as a key trigger that activates underlying structural tensions, particularly during electoral periods.

### **Socio-Economic Conditions and Youth Involvement**

Socio-economic factors, particularly youth unemployment, have been identified as important contributors to conflict dynamics. High levels of unemployment create economic vulnerability, making young people more susceptible to mobilization by political actors or local elites (World Bank, 2018). In such contexts, participation in conflict may be driven less by ideological commitment and more by economic incentives or social pressure.

Studies in East Africa demonstrate that unemployed youth are often recruited into conflict activities during periods of political contestation, where they serve as instruments of mobilization and enforcement (African Development Bank [AfDB], 2016). However, the role of youth unemployment is not uniform across contexts. Some studies find strong associations between unemployment and violence, while others report more limited or indirect effects, suggesting that socio-economic conditions interact with other factors rather than acting as independent causes. This suggests that youth unemployment operates as an enabling condition that facilitates mobilization, particularly during electoral periods when political actors seek to leverage existing socio-economic vulnerabilities.

### **Information Flows, Social Media, and Conflict Escalation**

The expansion of digital communication has introduced new dimensions to conflict processes. Social media platforms and informal communication networks enable the rapid dissemination of information, but they also facilitate the spread of rumours, misinformation, and inflammatory narratives (Khaemba, 2018). In fragile contexts, such dynamics can amplify mistrust and accelerate the escalation of disputes.

Research shows that misinformation is particularly influential during politically sensitive periods, where unverified claims can reinforce existing grievances and provoke reactive behaviour (Mohamed & Hussein, 2021). While the impact of social media varies across contexts, its role as an amplifier of conflict dynamics is increasingly recognized. However, the literature remains divided on the extent to which digital communication acts as a primary driver of conflict or merely intensifies pre-existing tensions. This indicates that social media functions as an accelerant of conflict, amplifying existing grievances and facilitating rapid mobilization, particularly in politically charged environments.

### **Comparative and Global Perspectives on Conflict Drivers**

Beyond the Kenyan context, studies from other regions reinforce the argument that inter-group conflict is shaped by the interaction of structural inequalities and proximate triggers. Resource scarcity has been widely identified as a driver of conflict in both developing and developed contexts, particularly where access to land and natural resources is unevenly distributed (Homer-Dixon, 1999). Similar dynamics have been observed in parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, where competition over pasture, water, and arable land contributes to recurring communal conflicts (World Bank, 2018).

In West Africa, for example, farmer–herder conflicts in countries such as Nigeria and Mali illustrate how environmental stress, population pressure, and weak governance structures interact to produce violent outcomes (Benjaminsen & Ba, 2009). Similarly, studies in Sudan and South Sudan demonstrate how historical grievances and political manipulation intersect with resource scarcity to sustain cycles of communal violence (De Waal, 2015).

Political competition as a trigger of conflict is also well documented beyond Kenya. In many transitional democracies, elections create periods of heightened tension by intensifying competition for state resources and political power (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004). Electoral processes often provide opportunities for elites to mobilize

group identities and exploit existing divisions, thereby transforming latent grievances into active conflict. This pattern has been observed in countries such as Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire, and Ethiopia (Straus & Taylor, 2012).

At the same time, the role of socio-economic conditions—particularly youth unemployment—has been highlighted in global conflict literature (Urdal, 2006). The growing influence of digital communication further demonstrates how information flows can amplify grievances and accelerate conflict escalation across different contexts (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Taken together, these studies reinforce the argument that conflict emerges from the interaction between structural conditions and triggering mechanisms.

## **Synthesis and Research Gap**

Taken together, the literature demonstrates that inter-clan conflict is shaped by the interaction of structural conditions and proximate triggers rather than single-factor explanations. Resource scarcity and historical land grievances provide the underlying conditions for conflict, while political competition, socio-economic pressures, and information flows contribute to its escalation.

Despite this, existing studies tend to examine these factors in isolation, limiting the ability to understand how they interact within specific local contexts. Furthermore, much of the literature focuses on broader regional or national patterns, with limited attention to localized dynamics at the county or community level.

In the case of Embu County, there is a lack of empirical studies that integrate multiple drivers of conflict using both quantitative and qualitative evidence. This study addresses this gap by examining how structural conditions and political triggers interact to shape inter-clan conflict between the Ndamata and Mururi clans, providing a more comprehensive and contextually grounded understanding of conflict dynamics.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored in resource scarcity theory and conflict transformation theory, which together provide a complementary lens for understanding the structural causes and proximate triggers of inter-clan conflict. These perspectives are particularly relevant in explaining how material inequalities, historical grievances, and political processes interact to produce recurring patterns of conflict.

### **Resource Scarcity Theory**

Resource scarcity theory posits that conflict arises when groups compete over limited and unevenly distributed resources, particularly in contexts where livelihoods depend directly on access to land, water, and economic opportunities (Homer-Dixon, 1999). In such settings, scarcity not only creates competition but also reinforces group-based mobilization, as communities organize collectively to secure access to essential resources.

In the Kenyan context, land remains a critical economic and social resource, making disputes over ownership and access highly contentious (Veit, 2019). The theory is therefore particularly useful in explaining why competition over land and natural resources emerges as a central driver of inter-clan conflict. It highlights how structural inequalities in resource distribution create persistent tensions that can escalate into open conflict when opportunities for contestation arise.

However, resource scarcity theory alone does not fully explain why conflicts intensify at specific moments, such as during elections. While it accounts for the underlying conditions of conflict, it requires complementary perspectives to explain the timing and escalation of disputes.

### **Conflict Transformation Theory**

Conflict Transformation Theory provides a broader framework for understanding conflict as a dynamic process rooted in structural and relational inequalities rather than isolated events (Lederach, 1997). The theory emphasizes that conflicts are embedded in social, economic, and political systems, and therefore require long-term transformation rather than short-term resolution.

This perspective is particularly relevant in explaining the persistence of inter-clan conflict in Embu County. Historical land grievances, perceived inequalities in resource allocation, and recurring political tensions suggest that conflict is sustained by deeper structural conditions rather than singular causes. The theory highlights the need to move beyond immediate triggers and examine how systemic factors—such as governance practices and institutional weaknesses—contribute to the reproduction of conflict over time.

Furthermore, Conflict Transformation Theory helps explain why interventions that focus solely on resolving individual disputes often fail to produce lasting peace. Without addressing the underlying structural drivers, tensions are likely to re-emerge, particularly during periods of political competition.

### **Linking Structure and Triggers: A Combined Perspective**

Taken together, Resource Scarcity Theory and Conflict Transformation Theory provide a coherent framework for analysing both the underlying causes and immediate triggers of inter-clan conflict. Resource scarcity explains the structural conditions that generate competition and tension, while conflict transformation highlights how these conditions are embedded within broader systems that sustain conflict over time.

Within this framework, political competition—particularly during elections—can be understood as a triggering mechanism that activates underlying grievances. Electoral periods create opportunities for contestation over resources and power, thereby intensifying existing tensions. Rather than acting as independent causes, such triggers interact with structural conditions to produce conflict.

This integrated perspective allows for a more comprehensive understanding of inter-clan conflict in Embu County. It moves beyond single-factor explanations and instead emphasizes the interaction between structural inequalities and situational triggers, which together shape the dynamics of conflict between the Ndamata and Mururi clans.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

This study adopted a cross-sectional survey design integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches. The design was appropriate for examining the causes and triggers of inter-clan conflict at a single point in time. It enabled the analysis of measurable patterns of conflict drivers alongside in-depth insights into how these factors are experienced and interpreted within affected communities.

### **Study Area and Population**

The study was conducted in Embu County, located in eastern Kenya. The county is characterized by a predominantly agrarian economy, with the majority of households relying on land-based activities such as crop farming and livestock keeping for their livelihoods (County Government of Embu, 2023; Farm Africa, 2021). As a result, access to land and natural resources plays a central role in both economic survival and social organization, making the region particularly relevant for examining resource-based dimensions of conflict.

The focus on the Ndamata and Mururi clans is informed by recurrent tensions observed between the two groups, particularly during periods of political competition. These tensions are commonly associated with disputes over land boundaries, access to resources, and competition for local political positions (Kenya Human Rights Commission, 2024). Such dynamics make the case suitable for analysing how structural conditions—especially resource scarcity and historical land inequalities—interact with political triggers to shape inter-clan conflict.

The target population comprised key stakeholder groups involved in or affected by inter-clan conflict, including community members, local leaders, government administrators, security personnel, and representatives from non-governmental organizations. This diverse composition enabled the study to capture both grassroots experiences and institutional perspectives, providing a comprehensive understanding of the causes and dynamics of conflict within the study area.

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## Sampling Strategy

The study employed a combination of stratified and purposive sampling techniques to ensure representation across key stakeholder groups involved in or affected by inter-clan conflict in Embu County. The target population was organized into relevant strata, including community members, local leaders, political actors, National Government Administrative Officers (NGAO), security personnel, and representatives of civil society and business sectors.

The sample size was determined using a standard confidence interval approach at a 95% confidence level and a margin of error of  $\pm 5\%$ , yielding a minimum sample size of 384 respondents. This sample was distributed across the identified strata, with the majority drawn from community members to capture grassroots perspectives from both the Ndamata and Mururi clans.

Within the community stratum, respondents were selected using simple random sampling to ensure broad representation of lived experiences. For smaller and specialized groups, purposive sampling was employed. These groups included political leaders, NGAO officials, police officers, and representatives of non-governmental organizations. Participants were selected based on their relevant knowledge and direct involvement in conflict dynamics.

This combination of sampling techniques enabled the study to integrate both generalizable quantitative data and in-depth qualitative insights, thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of the causes and triggers of inter-clan conflict.

## Data Collection Methods

Data were collected using two primary instruments: a structured questionnaire and a semi-structured interview guide.

The questionnaire was administered to a broad sample of respondents and consisted of closed-ended items measured on a Likert scale. It captured perceptions of key conflict drivers, including land disputes, resource competition, political processes, youth involvement, and information flows.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with purposively selected participants in leadership and administrative roles. The interviews were carried out using a flexible format that allowed for probing and clarification of emerging issues. They provided in-depth insights into the underlying causes of conflict, political dynamics, and community-level experiences.

## Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were used to assess the relative importance of different conflict triggers. A composite index (Triggers\_Score) was constructed by aggregating relevant variables to provide an overall measure of perceived conflict drivers.

Given the non-normal distribution of the data, the Mann–Whitney U test – a non-parametric alternative – was employed to examine differences in perceptions between the Ndamata and Mururi clans.

Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2019) framework. This involved systematic coding of interview transcripts and identification of recurring themes related to conflict causes and triggers.

Findings from the quantitative and qualitative strands were integrated during interpretation to provide a more comprehensive and contextually grounded understanding of conflict dynamics.

## Validity and Reliability

Data collection instruments were developed in alignment with the study objectives and informed by relevant literature. A pilot study was conducted with a subset of respondents drawn from the Ndamata and Mururi clans to refine questionnaire items, improve clarity, and ensure contextual appropriateness.

Content validity was enhanced through expert review by scholars in peace studies, political sociology, and community development, who assessed the relevance and clarity of the instruments. Construct validity was ensured by aligning the questionnaire and interview items with the study's conceptual and theoretical framework.

The reliability of the quantitative instrument was assessed using Cronbach's alpha to evaluate internal consistency. For qualitative data, reliability was supported through the use of standardized interview procedures and systematic coding of responses to ensure consistency in data collection and interpretation.

## Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study and provided voluntary consent before participation. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained, and all data were handled securely.

The study was conducted with due sensitivity to the social and cultural context of inter-clan relations, particularly given the potential sensitivities associated with conflict-related research.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Key Drivers of Inter-Clan Conflict

The findings indicate that inter-clan conflict in Embu County is driven by a combination of structural and proximate factors, with political competition, resource scarcity, and historical grievances emerging as the most salient drivers. Respondents generally agreed that multiple interacting factors contribute to conflict (overall mean = 3.68), suggesting that inter-clan tensions are not attributable to a single cause but to a convergence of conditions.

Descriptive statistics for key conflict drivers are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Conflict Triggers

Variable	N	Mean	SD
Local elections raise tensions	292	4.51	0.71
Competition over resources	292	3.87	1.01
Historical land disputes	292	3.63	1.13
Cultural beliefs	292	3.58	1.21
Social media and rumours	292	3.28	1.54
Youth unemployment	292	3.19	1.46

Descriptive results indicate that local elections are perceived as the most significant trigger of inter-clan conflict ( $M = 4.51$ ,  $SD = 0.71$ ), followed by competition over resources ( $M = 3.87$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ) and historical land disputes ( $M = 3.63$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ).

The results reveal a clear hierarchy of conflict drivers, with elections emerging as the dominant trigger. The relatively high mean score and low variation indicate strong consensus among respondents regarding the role of political competition in intensifying tensions.

Political mobilization during elections reinforces the quantitative finding that elections are the most significant trigger of inter-clan conflict ( $M = 4.51$ ,  $SD = 0.71$ ). Qualitative evidence shows that electoral periods are associated with increased identity-based mobilization and inter-group suspicion.

This pattern is reflected in respondents' accounts, which highlight how political actors invoke group differences during elections:

During elections, leaders remind us of our differences... (ELD 03)

This indicates that political competition functions as a catalytic mechanism that activates underlying grievances rather than acting as an independent cause of conflict.

While elections emerge as the most immediate trigger, the findings also point to deeper structural conditions that sustain inter-clan conflict.

### **Structural Foundations of Conflict: Land and Resource Competition**

Competition over resources and land disputes represent the structural foundations of inter-clan conflict. These factors reflect long-standing inequalities and contested access to key economic assets. Descriptive results (Table 1) show that competition over resources ( $M = 3.87$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ) and land disputes ( $M = 3.63$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ) are among the most significant drivers of conflict. The relatively high mean scores indicate broad agreement that these factors form the underlying basis of inter-clan tensions.

Persistent land-related grievances further support the quantitative finding that resource competition and land disputes are central drivers of conflict. Respondents consistently described land disputes as deeply rooted in historical tensions:

Land cases are very common... there has been animosity over land boundaries. (ELD 05)

This theme supports the quantitative evidence by showing that land-related conflicts are not isolated incidents but manifestations of long-standing structural grievances.

Beyond these structural drivers, the findings also highlight a set of contextual factors that shape how conflict is mobilized and escalated.

### **Contextual and Enabling Factors**

While structural and political drivers dominate, other factors play important but secondary roles in shaping conflict dynamics. These factors include cultural beliefs, youth unemployment, and social media—

As shown in Table 1, these factors recorded comparatively lower mean scores—cultural beliefs ( $M = 3.58$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ), social media ( $M = 3.28$ ,  $SD = 1.54$ ), and youth unemployment ( $M = 3.19$ ,  $SD = 1.46$ ). This indicates more varied perceptions among respondents.

The relatively lower mean scores for social media and youth unemployment suggest that these factors are secondary but important in shaping conflict dynamics. Respondents' accounts illustrate how these factors facilitate mobilization and escalation, particularly during politically sensitive periods:

Violence often starts during elections... (NGO 01)

In addition, participants highlighted the role of digital communication in amplifying tensions:

Social media posts sometimes go viral... full of rumours. (NGAO 02)

These themes align with the quantitative findings by showing that these factors amplify tensions rather than independently generating conflict.

Importantly, these patterns are not confined to one group but are shared across both clans, as demonstrated by the comparative analysis.

### **Integrated Perceptions of Conflict Drivers**

To examine whether perceptions differed between the Ndamata and Mururi clans, a Mann–Whitney U test was conducted.

The results of this analysis are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Mann–Whitney U Test for Triggers\_Score by Clan

<b>Statistic</b>	<b>Value</b>
Mann–Whitney U	9419.50
Z	–0.064
p-value	0.949
Effect size (r)	0.004

The results indicate no statistically significant difference between the two clans ( $U = 9419.50$ ,  $p = 0.949$ ), suggesting that both groups share similar perceptions of conflict drivers. The composite index ( $M = 4.09$ ,  $SD = 0.47$ ) further indicates a high level of agreement across respondents, reinforcing the view that conflict is systemic rather than group-specific.

The absence of statistically significant differences between the two clans ( $U = 9419.50$ ,  $p = 0.949$ ) is reinforced by qualitative evidence showing that respondents across both groups describe similar experiences of conflict drivers. Participants from both clans emphasized shared challenges related to land disputes, resource competition, and political exclusion, indicating that conflict is shaped by common structural conditions rather than divergent group-specific grievances.

Taken together, these findings point to an interaction between shared structural conditions and situational triggers.

### **Synthesis: Interaction of Structure and Triggers**

The findings demonstrate that inter-clan conflict in Embu County emerges from the interaction between structural conditions and situational triggers. Resource scarcity and historical land grievances create underlying tensions, while political competition – particularly during elections – acts as a catalyst that activates these tensions.

Contextual factors such as youth unemployment and social media further shape how conflict unfolds by facilitating mobilization and intensifying escalation.

This pattern reflects a combined theoretical perspective. Resource scarcity generates underlying tensions, while conflict transformation explains how these tensions are sustained and periodically activated through political competition. Together, these findings highlight that inter-clan conflict is not episodic but embedded in systemic inequalities that are repeatedly intensified during electoral periods.

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that inter-clan conflict in Embu County is driven by interconnected structural and political factors rather than isolated causes. Political competition plays a central role in activating underlying tensions rooted in resource scarcity and historical land grievances.

The findings show that perceptions of conflict drivers are shared across clans, indicating that conflict is shaped by common structural conditions rather than divergent group interests. This highlights the need for interventions that address systemic inequalities rather than focusing solely on inter-group relations.

Effective conflict management requires action on multiple fronts. These include equitable land governance and transparent resource allocation. They also require inclusive political processes and stronger mechanisms for managing electoral competition.

Taken together, these findings suggest that sustainable peace depends not only on addressing immediate triggers but also on transforming the structural conditions that sustain inter-clan conflict over time.

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