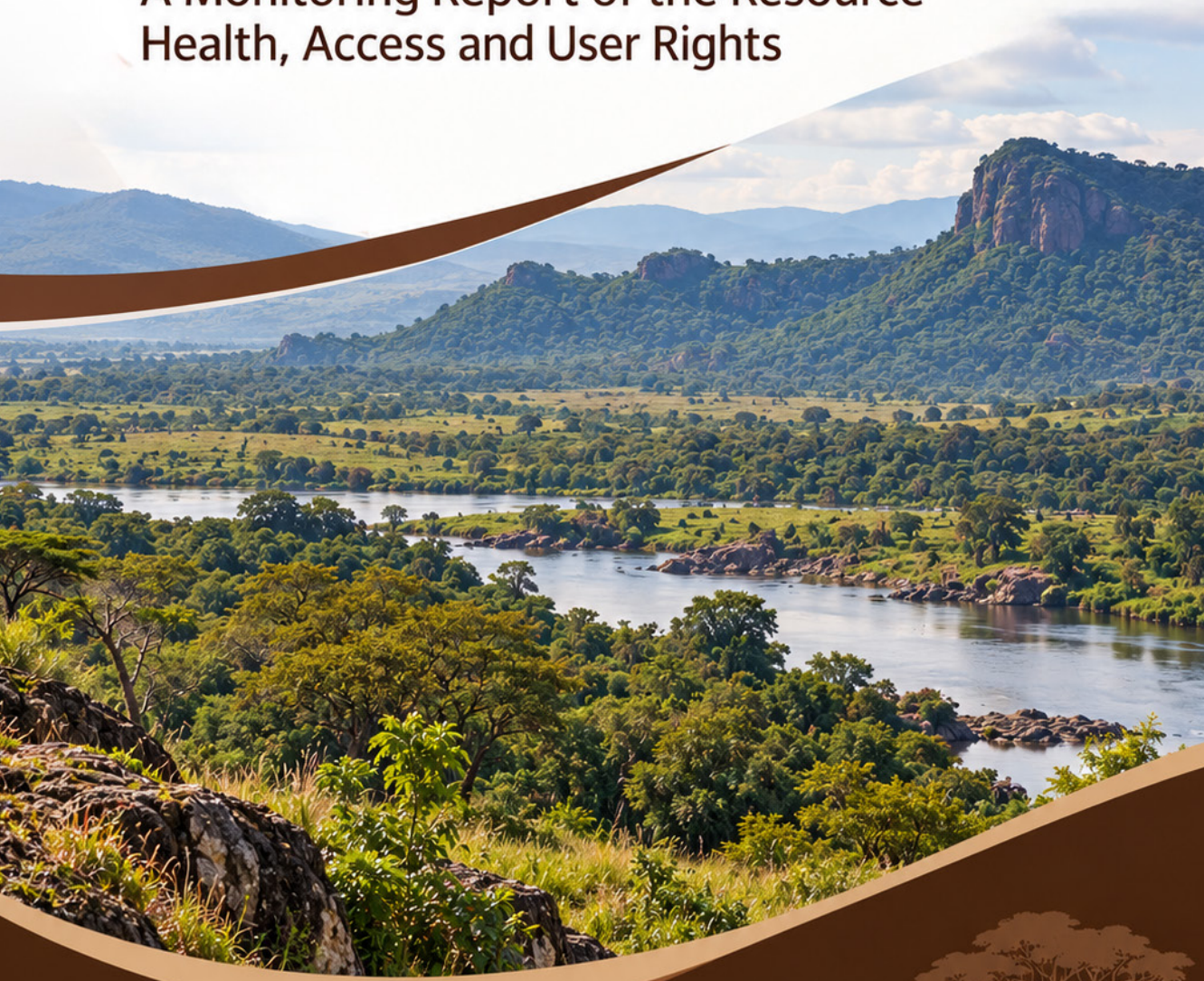
Natural Resources Management in West Nile

A Monitoring Report of the Resource Health, Access and User Rights



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ACRONYMS

ACODE	Advocates Coalition for Development and Environment
CFM	Collaborative Forest Management
CFMC	Community Forest Management Committee
CFR	Central Forest Reserve
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DLG	District Local Government
DRDIP	Development Response to Displacement Impacts Project
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FY	Financial Year
IFPA-CD	Investing in Forests and Protected Areas for Climate-Smart Development Project
JICA	Japan International Cooperation Agency
LC	Local Council
LG	Local Government
LLG	Lower Local Government
MAAIF	Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries
MEMD	Ministry of Energy and Mineral Development
MLHUD	Ministry of Lands, Housing and Urban Development
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
MWE	Ministry of Water and Environment
NEMA	National Environment Management Authority
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NSOER	National State of the Environment Report
NUSAF	Northern Uganda Social Action Fund
OPM	Office of the Prime Minister
PAMANA	Building Peace through Sustainable Access to and Management of Natural Resources
PPP	Public-Private Partnership
PWD	Person with Disability
REDD+	Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation, plus forest conservation, sustainable forest management and enhancement of forest carbon stocks

UNHCR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UWA	Uganda Wildlife Authority
WENDA	West Nile Development Association

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

West Nile's forests, wetlands, rivers, riverbanks, soils and protected areas are productive assets and essential safety nets. This flora and fauna support farming, livestock, fisheries, household energy, construction, cultural practices, tourism and local income; while regulating water, reducing erosion, storing carbon and buffering against floods and drought. These functions are under increasing pressure from agricultural expansion, settlements, wood-fuel and charcoal demand, logging, grazing, fire, sand mining, pollution, climate variability and weak enforcement. Protracted displacement increases demand for land, water, biomass and services; yet evidence shows that degradation predates refugee inflows and is driven by interacting pressures from host communities, markets, energy and governance. The policy challenge here is therefore to manage the shared landscapes for both refugee and host populations, rather than assigning environmental decline to a single group.

The joint monitoring exercise assessed resource condition, access and user rights, sustainable use and governance arrangements at 11 purposively selected natural-resource sites across 11 West Nile districts in August 2025. Multidisciplinary district teams that were deployed used a common monitoring tool, community engagement activities, and field observation and documentary information to examine forests, wetlands, rivers and riverbanks, water bodies and a wildlife-protected areas. The sites were selected because district officials considered them vulnerable to degradation, encroachment or mismanagement. The findings presented here are therefore a diagnosis of priority sites and recurring institutional problems. The findings are also by no means a statistically representative estimate for all natural resources in West Nile.

The assessment identified combined ecological rights and implementation deficits. Communities could physically reach the monitored resources, but physical entry was not consistently being converted into secure, equitable and sustainable use. In many sites, resource boundaries and bundles of rights were found to be unclear, management plans were absent or unfunded, community institutions lacked recognised authority, coordination was irregular and grievance handling mechanisms were weak or unknown. These conditions created two risks at the same time; (1) continued depletion through poorly controlled use and (2) unjust exclusion through discretionary restrictions or enforcement. The appropriate response

was noted not to be resource protection alone. It was recognized as an integrated package that clarifies rights and responsibilities, financing of public mandates, strengthening representative institutions, restoring degraded ecosystems, providing viable energy and livelihood alternatives, and ensuring accessible remedies.

Headline findings

The monitored portfolio came out as environmentally important. Forests accounted for 6 of the 11 sites, making forest governance prominent in the results. The remaining sites covered riverine, wetland, water and wildlife resources. Several records contained incomplete or inconsistent information on size, boundaries, location or classification. This weakened the ability of authorities to measure encroachment, issue defensible permits, plan restoration or demonstrate change. Shared resources, including Mt. Kei and the connected river and wetland systems, required common maps, indicators and inter-district management rather than isolated district actions.

Government ownership status does not eliminate community rights. Ten sites were reported as public or state-managed and one as customary, although some classifications were inconsistent. Ownership, public trusteeship, management authority and use rights appeared to be distinct. Communities could retain legitimate customary, subsistence, cultural and procedural interests in publicly managed resources. Governance arrangements therefore needed to specify the responsible authority, recognized users, permitted activities, benefit-sharing rules and appeal mechanisms, and ought never to treat lack of formal documentation as proof that legitimate rights did not exist.

Livelihood dependence was high and uses were cumulative. All monitoring teams reported physical community access. Farming occurred at seven sites, while grazing and fishing each occurred at five sites. Logging, charcoal production, sand mining, tourism, cultural use and harvesting of grass, papyrus and firewood were also recorded. The combined effect of multiple uses can exceed ecological limits even where each activity is considered separately. Management plans therefore should distinguish between essential subsistence and cultural use from high-volume commercial extraction, establish spatial and seasonal controls, and link restrictions to feasible energy, livelihood and production alternatives.

Rights were unevenly recognized and understood. Four districts reported recognized customary rights, three reported legal use rights and four reported no recognized rights. Awareness of applicable rights and rules was uneven, and the monitoring data did not consistently

distinguish access, withdrawal, management, exclusion and benefit rights. Women, youth, persons with disabilities, refugees, customary users and poorer households could have been physically present yet had limited influence over rules, permits, revenues and grievance processes. Participatory rights mapping and disaggregated monitoring were required before restrictions, licensing or introducing investments.

Resource conditions are deteriorating across most monitored sites. Nine of the 11 teams assessed current use as unsustainable, and visible environmental harm was reported at nine sites, including deforestation, water pollution and land degradation. Community-led restoration or conservation initiatives were identified in only five districts, while local rules were both present and reportedly observed in only two. Community monitoring occurred in seven districts, but reporting was constrained by political interference, weak awareness, poor coordination and absent or unsafe channels. These findings indicate that degradation cannot be addressed by community mobilization alone. Ecological baselines, long-term maintenance, credible enforcement and predictable public finance were also required.

Governance institutions exist, but functionality is weak. Seven of the ten responding districts, noted a known management arrangement, yet only Yumbe, Madi-Okollo and Terego reported some form of management plan. Community-led structures were present in five districts and coordination mechanisms in six. Recent resource conflicts were reported in at least five districts, but only Madi Okollo and Koboko reported conflict-resolution mechanisms considered both accessible and trusted. Weak remedy and unclear referral pathways seemed to allow disputes to persist, discourage reporting and creating opportunities for political influence, selective enforcement and retaliatory extraction.

What the findings imply. The binding constraint was found not to be the complete absence of policies, agencies, committees or projects. There too, was a weak connection between them. Mandates were not consistently matched with staff, transport, geospatial tools, operating finance or restoration budgets. Resource Management Plans were unknown to users or disconnected from tenure arrangements. Committees existed but without authority, finance or equitable benefits. Projects created parallel structures and short-lived assets without identifying the permanent institution and budget that would sustain them. Effective governance therefore requires minimum functionality standards that combine ecological condition, tenure and access,

institutional performance, benefit distribution and grievance handling outcomes.

Existing interventions provide a foundation, but require stronger institutional alignment. Government and partner programmes, including the Investing in Forests and Protected Areas for Climate-Smart Development Project, DRDIP, JICA-supported initiatives, PAMANA and district restoration activities, provide experience in forest management, agroforestry, assisted natural regeneration, livelihoods, energy efficiency, community monitoring and conflict management. Promising practices noted include customary mediation, collaborative forest management, local monitoring, joint district-community-CSO assessments, agroforestry, beekeeping and efficient cooking technologies. These practices should be scaled only where rights are documented, representation is credible, ecological results are measured, benefits are equitably distributed and recurrent responsibilities are embedded in district and national systems.

Priority Recommendations

a) ***Setting and enforcing minimum governance standards.*** MWE and NEMA should require verified boundaries, recognized rights and users, approved and costed management plans, representative institutions, permit and revenue records, ecological indicators and tiered grievance handling mechanisms for high-risk sites. UWA and other responsible agencies should apply the framework through annual joint reviews with districts.

b) ***Clarifying tenure and user rights before restriction or investment.*** MLHUD, district land boards, area land committees and sector agencies should undertake participatory rights mapping, document statutory and customary interests, resolve contradictory classifications and refer unresolved ownership questions to competent institutions. Restrictions and project decisions should include notice, reasons, consultation, safeguards and an accessible appeal route.

c) ***Financing decentralized environmental mandates.*** MoFPED, MWE and the Ministry of Local Government should establish a minimum operational package for district natural-resource management covering staffing, transport, field inspection, geospatial information, conflict management, restoration and public reporting. Financing should recognize the additional costs faced by high-pressure, cross-boundary and refugee-hosting districts.

d) ***Integrating ecosystems, energy, displacement and livelihoods.*** OPM, MWE, MEMD, MAAIF, UNHCR and local governments should implement shared landscape plans for refugee and host communities. Plans should combine biomass supply, clean cooking, land and water access, food security, restoration and livelihood support, while preventing conservation costs from falling disproportionately on vulnerable households.

e) ***Strengthening local institutions and remedies.*** Districts should recognize or rationalize community structures, clarify mandates, require representative leadership and transparent accounts, and connect them to parish, sub-county, district and national agencies. Conflict and complaint registers should record entry points, timelines, decisions, appeals and implementation, with confidentiality and protection against retaliation.

f) ***Institutionalization of evidence and public accountability.*** Districts should maintain geo-referenced resource and rights registers and revisit the same sites using ecological, extraction, permit, revenue, restoration, conflict, participation, benefit and grievance indicators. MWE and NEMA should standardize definitions and reporting, provide quality assurance and convene an annual West Nile review that publishes agreed actions and implementation progress.

g) ***Implementation and results focus.*** Immediate action should concentrate on high-risk sites and unresolved cross-boundary resources. Progress should be measured through financed management plans, reduced harmful extraction, ecosystem recovery, accountable permits and revenues, clarified rights, resolved grievances, and improved participation and benefits for marginalized users. This would convert joint monitoring into an ongoing accountability mechanism.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

West Nile's forests, woodlands, wetlands, rivers, riverbanks, soils and protected areas constitute natural capital that supports biodiversity, household energy, crop and livestock production, fisheries, construction, tourism, income generation and local economic activity. These resources also provide less visible public benefits, including water regulation, soil formation, erosion control, carbon storage, habitat protection and buffering against droughts and floods. Their degradation is therefore not only an environmental problem. It also reduces livelihood security, raises service-delivery demands and disaster-response costs, and weakens the productive base on which local governments and communities depend. National evidence supports this framing. The World Bank estimates that natural capital accounted for almost 40 percent of Uganda's wealth in 2014, while forest and wetland losses continue to erode ecosystem services and economic resilience (World Bank, 2020, 2021).

These pressures are particularly pronounced in West Nile because of rapid land-use change, energy poverty, climate variability and protracted displacement that interact within the same landscapes. A satellite-based study of refugee-hosting areas found expansion of settlements, built-up land and subsistence farming alongside losses in woodlands, wetlands and savannah grasslands (Barasa et al., 2020). The FAO and World Bank assessment similarly found that tree-cover loss and degradation accelerated around refugee settlements after the South Sudan refugee influx, but cautioned that degradation pre-dated displacement and also reflected host-community production, charcoal and fuelwood demand (FAO and World Bank, 2018). This distinction is important. Refugee presence intensifies pressure in some locations, but attributing degradation to refugees alone obscures the underlying drivers and could produce inequitable or ineffective policy responses.

The joint monitoring exercise examined how ecological conditions, access and user rights; resource use and governance arrangements interact at 11 purposively selected sites in 11 West Nile districts during August 2025. District officials selected sites considered vulnerable to degradation, encroachment or mismanagement. The results are therefore diagnostic evidence from priority locations, not a statistically representative estimate for the entire sub-region. They are most useful in identifying recurring institutional failures, differences between sites and practical issues requiring verification, planning or enforcement.

The report's central proposition is that deterioration cannot be explained by scarcity or illegal extraction alone. Resource outcomes reflect whether users understand and can exercise legitimate rights, whether ecological limits are translated into locally workable rules, whether institutions possess authority and resources to implement those rules, and whether affected people can participate, obtain benefits and seek remedies. This approach is consistent with FAO's tenure guidance, which treats secure and equitable rights to land, fisheries, forests and commons as a foundation for sustainable management and food security (FAO, 2012, 2016). The report consequently assesses resource health, access and rights, sustainability of use, management arrangements, coordination and conflict resolution, and converts the findings into actions for local governments, MWE, NEMA, UWA, MLHUD, OPM, civil-society organisations and development partners.

2.0 BACKGROUND

West Nile's natural-resource governance context is shaped by dependence, demographic change and environmental risk. Most rural households combine farming with livestock keeping, collection of fuelwood and other forest products, fishing, wetland use and small-scale extraction. Natural resources therefore function both as productive assets and as safety nets during crop failure, price shocks and displacement. When resource quality falls, poorer households are affected first because they have fewer alternatives and depend more directly on common or publicly managed resources. At the national level, the World Bank estimates that approximately 41 percent of Uganda's land is degraded and links land and forest degradation to lower agricultural productivity, poverty and greater vulnerability to climate shocks (World Bank, 2021).

The sub-region's role as a major refugee-hosting area adds sustained demand for land, wood fuel, poles, water and livelihood opportunities, while increasing the planning and service-delivery responsibilities of host districts. This is a structural development issue rather than a temporary emergency. FAO and World Bank analysis estimated annual cooking-fuel demand in 14 northern Uganda settlements at about 345,000 tonnes of dry wood, roughly four times estimated tree growth within the settlements and a five-kilometre buffer. The same assessment found that both refugee and host households were highly dependent on wood energy, with host-community consumption exceeding refugee consumption on a per-person basis (FAO and World Bank, 2018). The evidence calls for landscape-level energy and restoration strategies serving both populations, rather than measures that transfer costs or restrictions from one group to another.

Land-use change compounds these pressures. Barasa et al. (2020) identified deforestation, bush burning, expansion of cultivation and settlements, land conflict and wetland reclamation as connected drivers of vegetation loss in West Nile. NEMA's National State of the Environment Report similarly identifies population growth, agricultural expansion, urbanisation, extraction and climate change as major pressures on Uganda's forests, wetlands, soils and freshwater systems (NEMA, 2024). These drivers interact. Removal of vegetation exposes soils to erosion, sediment reduces water quality and channel capacity, wetland conversion weakens flood storage, and declining productivity can induce further cultivation or extraction. A site-by-site governance response is necessary, but insufficient where degradation processes

cross district, catchment, forest-reserve or settlement boundaries.

Climate variability increases the consequences of weak management. More frequent or severe dry periods raise demand for wetlands, riverbanks, grazing land and forest products, while intense rainfall increases erosion, flooding and infrastructural damage where vegetation and wetlands have been lost. Resource governance must therefore combine protection with adaptation. Catchment restoration, assisted natural regeneration, fire management, soil and water conservation, sustainable biomass supply and diversified energy access should be planned as mutually reinforcing measures, not isolated projects. The JICA assessment of West Nile likewise emphasises integrated forest and natural-resource management, livelihood support and institutional coordination in refugee-affected landscapes (JICA, 2021).

The legal framework distributes authority across several institutions. The Constitution and Land Act recognise customary tenure and public trusteeship obligations, while the Land Act provides for communal land associations and common land-management schemes and requires protection of the interests of women, children and persons with disabilities (Republic of Uganda, 1998). The National Forestry and Tree Planting Act provides for collaborative forest management and community participation, and the National Environment Act assigns environmental responsibilities to national agencies and local governments (Republic of Uganda, 2003, 2019). The Local Governments Act gives councils planning, regulatory and service-delivery functions, while UWA, NEMA, MWE and other sector institutions retain mandates over specified resources (Republic of Uganda, 1997).

This institutional plurality can improve stewardship when mandates, boundaries and referral pathways are clear. It can also fragment authority when statutory, customary, community and project-based arrangements overlap. Research on decentralised environmental governance in Uganda finds that formal transfer of responsibility does not guarantee effective local action where technical capacity, finance, information and downward accountability remain weak (Nakakaawa et al., 2010). The practical test is therefore not whether a committee or mandate exists, but whether it can convene, make legitimate decisions, finance implementation, monitor compliance, coordinate with other authorities and account to affected users.

Access must also be distinguished from physical entry. A person may reach a forest, wetland or river but lack recognised authority to collect products, graze animals, fish, cultivate, participate in decisions or share benefits. Conversely, restrictions may be legally justified for

restoration or conservation but become inequitable if rules are unclear, enforcement is selective, or livelihood alternatives and grievance routes are absent. FAO's Voluntary Guidelines call for recognition of legitimate tenure rights, transparency, participation, non-discrimination and access to justice, including for rights that are customary or not formally recorded (FAO, 2012). For this report, equitable governance means that rules are ecologically credible, publicly understood, consistently applied and open to review.

The policy environment contains significant investments on which districts can build. The World Bank-supported Investing in Forests and Protected Areas for Climate-Smart Development Project seeks to strengthen management and increase benefits for forest-dependent communities, including refugees and hosts (World Bank, 2020). DRDIP combines social services, livelihoods and environmental management in refugee-hosting districts (OPM, 2025); while government, JICA, civil-society and development-partner initiatives support restoration, collaborative management, energy efficiency and community livelihoods. However, short project cycles, parallel structures and weak operation and maintenance can limit lasting impact. The central challenge is therefore to embed project assets, community organisations, monitoring data and benefit-sharing arrangements within funded districts and sector systems.

Against this background, the report examines the relationship between resource condition, livelihood dependence, rights and institutional performance. It gives particular attention to women, youth, persons with disabilities, refugees, host communities and customary users because formally neutral rules can affect these groups differently. The analysis seeks to identify where governance arrangements are functional, where access or authority remains uncertain, and which national and local actions can improve ecological sustainability without undermining legitimate livelihoods and rights.

2.1. Objectives

The main objective of the study was to examine sustainable use and conservation of natural resources in West Nile sub-region with a particular focus on the health of the resources, access and use rights by communities in the region.

2.1.1 Specific Objectives

1. To document the current state of the natural resource health in west Nile

2. To ascertain the management, access and user rights across key natural resource sites in the region and document best practices and irregularities in natural resource use in the region
3. To examine the key projects/interventions in West Nile that address sustainable use and conservation of natural resources – operationalization of sustainable utilization/access and user rights
4. To generate recommendations for improving natural resource governance in the region.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The joint monitoring exercise used a participatory, multi-stakeholder approach, engaging district officials, civil society representatives, and community members across the 11 West Nile districts. Multi-disciplinary monitoring teams were formed, each comprising five members: i.e., two district technical officers (including the District Natural Resources Officer as team leader), one CSO representative trained by ACODE/WENDA, and one representative from a local natural resource user group. These teams mobilised communities at designated sites, collected data using a standardised tool with tailored indicators, documented case studies to capture experiences and governance challenges, and contributed to report drafting and validation workshops. Before fieldwork, the monitors held online meetings to agree on modalities for co-creating and standardising the monitoring tool. The tool was developed through co-creation sessions to build consensus on areas for natural resource monitoring.

Following the monitoring exercise, a second virtual meeting was held between ACODE and the district teams to review the submitted reports and provide feedback. The district-specific data, monitoring tools, and district-level reports were later consolidated into a regional synthesis report, which highlighted key issues, trends, and governance gaps. This report is intended to inform context-specific interventions, strengthen advocacy, and contribute to national policy and climate justice dialogues.

The joint monitoring exercise covered 11 natural resources in 11 districts, as shown in Table 1 below. District officials selected the natural resources in consultation with WENDA and ACODE, based on their vulnerability to degradation, previous reports of mismanagement, and encroachment.

Table 1: Natural Resource Types and Districts Covered

No.	District	Site	Type
1	Adjumani	Zoka Forest Central Reserve	Forest
2	Arua	Ezuku Central Forest Reserve	Forest
3	Koboko	Mt. Kei Central Forest Reserve	Forest
4	Madi Okollo	Ajai Wildlife Reserve	Wildlife Reserve
5	Maracha	River Olufe	Eco Tourism
6	Moyo	Gbalala Wetland Site	Wetland

No.	District	Site	Type
7	Nebbi	Agweci Community Forest Reserve	Forest
8	Obongi	Kochi Community Forest Reserve	Forest
9	Terego	River Enyau	River
10	Yumbe	Mt. Kei Central Forest Reserve	Forest
11	Zombo	Nyagak River Bank	River

4.0 PRESENTATION OF KEY FINDINGS

Across the monitored sites, four connected findings emerge. The sample is dominated by public or state-managed forests and protected resources, while livelihoods rely on multiple, sometimes incompatible, uses. Physical access is widespread, but legal and customary rights are unevenly recognized or understood. Unsustainable use and visible degradation are reported in most districts. Governance arrangements exist in many locations, yet management plans, coordination mechanisms and trusted grievance channels are inconsistent. Taken together, the findings indicate that the principal policy problem is not only scarcity or illegal use, but weak alignment between ecological limits, livelihood needs and institutional authority (NEMA, 2024; Republic of Uganda, 2019).

Resource health, however, remains under pressure. Evidence from the monitoring exercise indicates that wetlands, forests, soils and aquatic ecosystems continue to degrade, driven by agricultural expansion, settlement, fuelwood and charcoal demand, grazing, fires, pollution and other forms of resource extraction. This aligns with NEMA's 2024 State of the Environment assessment, which identifies population growth, economic activity and climate change as major drivers of environmental degradation and resource depletion. Wetlands are particularly important because they provide water regulation, flood buffering, biodiversity habitat, fisheries, dry-season grazing and other livelihood benefits, but agricultural encroachment, livestock grazing, vegetation harvesting and pollution are undermining these functions. Although recent restoration efforts have improved the national picture, the underlying pressure on wetlands remains substantial.

Access to natural resources remains central to livelihoods, yet it is increasingly contested. Communities depend on land, water, wetlands, forests, grazing areas and fisheries for food, energy, construction materials and income. Access is shaped by land tenure, customary institutions, location, wealth and gender, and growing resource scarcity can intensify competition among users. Uganda's Land Act recognizes customary tenure and communal land use and provides for common land management schemes covering activities such as grazing, watering livestock and gathering wood and other natural resources. It also requires customary land institutions to safeguard the interests of women, children and persons with disabilities. Thus, the issue in West

Nile is not simply whether resources exist, but who can access them, under what conditions, and who receives the resulting benefits.

Governance arrangements are based on a combination of statutory institutions, local government structures and customary/community systems. At the national level, responsibilities are shared among institutions including the Ministry of Water and Environment, NEMA and Uganda Wildlife Authority, working with district local governments and communities. The monitoring specifically engaged environmental and forestry officers from West Nile districts—including Adjumani, Moyo, Koboko, Arua, Yumbe, Terego, Nebbi, Pakwach and Madi-Okollo who are in charge of management of these resources. The governance framework also places environmentally sensitive resources such as wetlands, rivers, lakes, groundwater, forest reserves and national parks under public trusteeship for the common good, while allowing regulated licenses and permits for resource use.

Overall, the picture is mixed: natural resources remain an essential livelihood asset, and significant institutional efforts are underway for restoration, catchment management, and stronger environmental enforcement. However, resource degradation, unequal access and tenure/governance challenges continue to threaten long-term sustainability. The key management challenge for West Nile is therefore to move beyond resource protection alone towards inclusive governance that secures legitimate user rights, improves equitable access and benefit sharing, strengthens community participation, and provides incentives for local users to invest in resource restoration and sustainable use. This is increasingly reflected in Uganda's environmental policy direction, including NEMA's 2025/26–2029/30 strategic plan, which prioritizes ecological integrity, environmental governance, compliance and institutional capacity.

4.1 Description of the natural resources monitored

The outreach exercise covered forests, wetlands, rivers and riverbanks, a water body and a wildlife-protected area across 11 districts. Forest sites accounted for 6 of 11 observations (54.5 percent). This concentration is analytically important because forests carry overlapping mandates, high livelihood dependence and strong commercial pressure from charcoal, timber, cultivation and grazing. However, it also means that the regional synthesis is weighted towards forest governance and should not be interpreted as an ecosystem-wide inventory. The duplicated monitoring of Mt. Kei from Koboko

and Yumbe is useful because the reserve crosses administrative and community boundaries, but it requires joint planning rather than two isolated district responses.

Figure 1: Natural Resource Type Visited

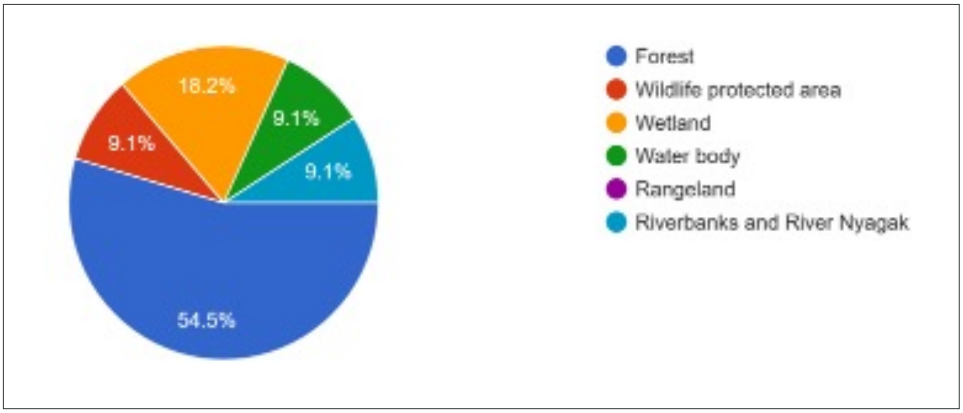


Figure 1 confirms the predominance of forest sites, followed by riverine, wetland and protected-area resources. For local governments, this distribution points to a landscape approach. Extraction in an upstream forest or riverbank can affect downstream water quality, erosion and wetland condition beyond the district where the activity occurs. District natural-resource plans should therefore identify shared ecosystems, agree joint indicators and undertake coordinated inspections through the relevant MWE water-management structures and sector agencies.

4.1.1 Details of the Resources Visited from the 11 West Nile Districts

Table 2 records substantial variation in ecosystem type, scale and administrative setting. Several entries also contain missing or inconsistent information on size, location and classification. These are not minor documentation gaps. Without verified boundaries and baseline condition data, authorities cannot measure encroachment, issue defensible permits, cost restoration or demonstrate change over time. Each district should validate the site register against cadastral records, gazettement instruments, MWE or UWA records and georeferenced field data, then maintain it as part of the district environment information system required for planning and compliance monitoring (Republic of Uganda, 2019).

Table 2: Details of the Natural Resources Monitored per Districts

District	Sub County	Natural Resource Type	Name of the Natural Resource	Ownership type	Size of the Natural Resource
Nebbi	Erusi	Forest	Agwechi Community Forest Reserve	Public	129 hectares
Maracha	Kijomoro	Water body	Miri adua falls on the Oluffe	Public	2 hectares
Obongi	Itula	Forest	The Waka Community-Led Forest Reserve	Public	1500 hectares
Moyo	Moyo	Forest	Eriya Central Forest Reserve	Public	7336 hectares
Arua	Vurra	Forest	Ezuku Forest Reserve	Public	22 Acres
Yumbe	Kerwa, Wandi, Midigo, Lobe and Kei Sub-Counties	Forest	Kei Central Forest Reserve	Public	40,689 hectares
Madi-Okollo	Inde Town Council	Wildlife protected area	Ajai Wildlife Reserve	Public	166 square kilometres
Terego	Odupi	Wetland	Yelulu Wetland	Public	55.2 hectares
Adjumani	Pakele	Wetland		Public	
Zombo	Jang Okoro, Aka, Athuma, Abanga, Nyapeya, Paidha town council, Paidha and Atyak sub counties	Riverbanks and River Nyagak	Nyagak River Bank	Customary	40km

District	Sub County	Natural Resource Type	Name of the Natural Resource	Ownership type	Size of the Natural Resource
Koboko	Ludara	Forest	Kei Central Forest Reserve	Public	10,000 hectares

4.1.2 Ownership Type

Table 3 indicates that ten sites were reported as public or state resources and one as customary, although some classifications conflict with descriptions elsewhere in the report. Public ownership does not eliminate community rights or local-government responsibilities. Rather, it heightens the need to specify the responsible authority, permitted uses, community roles and benefit-sharing arrangements. The classification of rivers, wetlands and riverbanks should be legally verified because public trusteeship, customary tenure and private interests may coexist. MLHUD, MWE and district land and environment offices should jointly resolve ambiguous status before enforcement or investment decisions are made (Republic of Uganda, 1998, 2019).

Table 3: Ownership Type for the Different Natural Resources per Districts

District	Natural Resource Type	Ownership type
Nebbi	Forest	Public/State
Maracha	Water body	Public/State
Obongi	Forest	
Moyo	Forest	Public/State
Arua	Forest	Public/State
Yumbe	Forest	Public/State
Madi Okollo	Wildlife protected area	Public/State
Terego	Wetland	Public/State
Adjumani	Wetland	Public/State
Zombo	Riverbanks and River Nyagak	Customary
Koboko	Forest	Public/State

4.1.3 Description of management of the resource

Management ranges from agency-led control by MWE or UWA to district management, collaborative arrangements, community committees and a public-private service contract. Diversity is appropriate where

it reflects resource type and law, but the findings reveal uneven accountability. Some arrangements lack clear structures, written mandates, plans or reporting lines. This creates risks of regulatory capture, informal payments, weak enforcement and conflict over benefits. Each site therefore needs a documented governance map specifying ownership, statutory mandate, authorised users, decision-making procedures, revenue flows, monitoring duties and escalation channels. Collaborative forest management should be assessed by the authority and benefits actually transferred to communities, not only by the existence of a committee (Republic of Uganda, 2003).

Table 4: Description of management of the resource

District	Natural Resource Type	Description of Management of the Resource	Management Type
Nebbi	Forest	Communal management without a clear management structure.	Community-led
Maracha	Water body	Public-private partnership where the Sub-County contracted service provider manages the resource.	Mixed / PPP
Obongi	Forest	Managed under a participatory governance framework where decision-making and stewardship are led by a Community Forest Management Committee (CFMC), with guidance from local government authorities and environmental partners.	Mixed (Community-Government)
Moyo	Forest	Forest reserve is managed by the community in collaboration with the MWE.	Mixed (Community-Government)
Arua	Forest	Government (Arua District Local Government)	Government Led
Yumbe	Forest	Public resource managed by MWE on behalf of the Government. Enforcement and restoration are challenged by illegal exploitation, corruption, refugee pressures, and unresolved land conflicts, despite existing laws, oversight, and CFM initiatives.	Government-led

District	Natural Resource Type	Description of Management of the Resource	Management Type
Madi Okollo	Wildlife protected area	Managed jointly by the Uganda Wildlife Authority and community members.	Mixed (Community-Government)
Terego	Wetland	It is managed by the respective Sub County and District Local government.	Community-Government
Adjumani	Wetland	It is managed by the respective Sub County and District Local government.	Community-Government
Zombo	Riverbanks and River Nyagak	Managed by Zombo District Local government.	Community-led
Koboko	Forest	MWE through a Collaborative Forest Management (CFM)	Mixed/ Community-Government

4.1.4 Communities, Groups, Depending on the Different Resources for their livelihoods

The monitored resources support diverse users, including farmers, fishers, grazers, sand miners, charcoal and timber actors, women, youth, refugees, cultural users and tourism groups. This diversity makes a single category of 'community' which is analytically inadequate. Users have different dependence levels, bargaining power and environmental impacts. District stakeholder registers and management plans should distinguish subsistence users from commercial extractors, rights-holders from occasional users, and host-community needs from refugee vulnerabilities. Representation should be assessed through participation in decisions and benefit sharing, not merely physical presence at a site.

Table 5: Communities, groups, depending on the different resources

District	Natural Resource Type	Communities/Groups Depending on the Resource
Nebbi	Forest	Kubi community, Agwechi community, Jupangira, Nziri West, Omonda
Maracha	Water body	Women groups, Tenderer, LC 1 System, Boda boda, NUSAF 3 beneficiaries, Washing bay boys

District	Natural Resource Type	Communities/Groups Depending on the Resource
Obongi	Forest	Communities: Ribu, Kwericha, Nogunu, Romogi, Ginyako, Ludara, Komiru, Lewa. The Waka Community-Led Forest Reserve is a model of grassroots-driven stewardship balancing conservation with sustainable use, though 300 hectares have already been degraded due to encroachment.
Moyo	Forest	Different community groups depend on forests and other natural resources
Arua	Forest	Orivu sand mining community; neighbouring communities, especially women, depend on firewood collection
Yumbe	Forest	Host communities and refugees; ethnic groups (Aringa, Kakwa); settlements near Mt. Kei (Munduale, Ayapili); livelihood and economic groups (charcoal producers, timber loggers, carpenters, honey producers, hunters); cultural/ traditional users; cross-border communities (Koku from South Sudan). Dependence includes firewood, charcoal, poles, timber, medicinal plants, bushmeat, and farmland.
Madi Okollo	Wildlife protected area	Ayavu Gazi Fishing Group, Ayavu Village
Terego	Wetland	The host community of Imvepi Parish and the refugee population rely on fishing, grazing, apiary, and farming around the wetlands
Adjumani	Wetland	- Olua I Settlement & Gonyila Village (Pakele Sub-county): sand mining in Adidi stretch (~2.5 km). Users: Pa'oja clan, local sand miners, women, youth, PWDs. - Leanguru Village (Pakele Sub-county): charcoal production from private natural forest. Users: charcoal burners, tree owners, local farmers.
Zombo	Riverbanks on River Nyagak	Communities in Nyagak Village

District	Natural Resource Type	Communities/Groups Depending on the Resource
Koboko	Forest	Belo, Titinga, Yuku community; St. Egito Eyerere CFM; Yuku women savings group. The community have physical access to the resource. The main resource use type is farming, grazing, logging, stone quarrying, and Cultural use like for herbal medicines.

Effective natural-resource governance in West Nile requires accurate inventories and verified boundaries, clear institutional mandates, recognition of legitimate customary and statutory user rights, functional management arrangements, inclusive participation and equitable benefit sharing. The concentration of forests and other publicly managed resources among the monitored sites also highlights the need to distinguish public trusteeship from unrestricted government control and to recognise the livelihood, cultural and procedural rights of resource-dependent communities.

These governance issues are particularly important in West Nile, where settlement expansion, cultivation, energy demand and competing land uses are contributing to the loss and degradation of woodlands, wetlands and other vegetation (Barasa et al., 2020). District local governments and responsible national agencies should therefore establish georeferenced resource inventories, clarify tenure and management responsibilities, assess the functionality of community and collaborative structures, and differentiate between subsistence users, customary rights-holders and commercial extractors. Such measures would strengthen accountability, support sustainable land management and protect the natural-resource base on which local livelihoods and climate resilience depend (World Bank, 2021).

4.2 Natural Resource Access and User Rights

Key Findings

- Physical access is generally open across all sites.
- Activities range from grazing and farming to logging, mining, and cultural uses, with some unregulated exploitation.
- Customary/legal rights are inconsistently recognized across districts; in some areas, they are absent or unclear.
- Awareness of rights varies – some communities are informed, others not.

- Women, youth, PWDs, and refugees largely have access, but exceptions noted (e.g., Moyo, Yumbe).
- Payments are not required for access, but disputes over ownership and benefits exist (e.g., Lowi clan in Adjumani).
- Traditional norms are respected in some districts but eroded in others.
- External interference (investors, refugees, govt. agencies) limited overall but reported in Moyo and Terego.
- Disputes are common in some districts (e.g., Nebbi, Maracha, Adjumani, Arua).
- Access restrictions exist in some areas (ordinances, MOUs, buffer zones), but many lack structured restrictions.

The analysis treats access as more than physical entry. It covers the practical ability to derive benefits, the legal or customary authority to use a resource, knowledge of applicable rules, participation in decisions, costs, cultural norms, external influence, dispute resolution and restrictions. This approach follows Ribot and Peluso's distinction between rights-based access and the wider powers and social relations that determine who actually benefits from resources (Ribot and Peluso, 2003). It also reflects the property-rights framework of Schlager and Ostrom (1992), which separates operational rights of access and withdrawal from collective-choice rights to manage, exclude others and transfer rights. Consequently, a community may enter a forest, wetland or riverbank but still lack secure withdrawal rights, decision-making authority, a fair share of benefits or an effective remedy.

This distinction is material under Uganda's legal framework. The Land Act recognises customary tenure and provides for communal land associations and common land management schemes, while the National Forestry and Tree Planting Act allows collaborative forest management and the National Environment Act regulates environmentally sensitive resources and activities (Republic of Uganda, 1998, 2003, 2019). The findings should therefore be interpreted as evidence about the quality and enforceability of access arrangements, not simply whether people can reach a site.

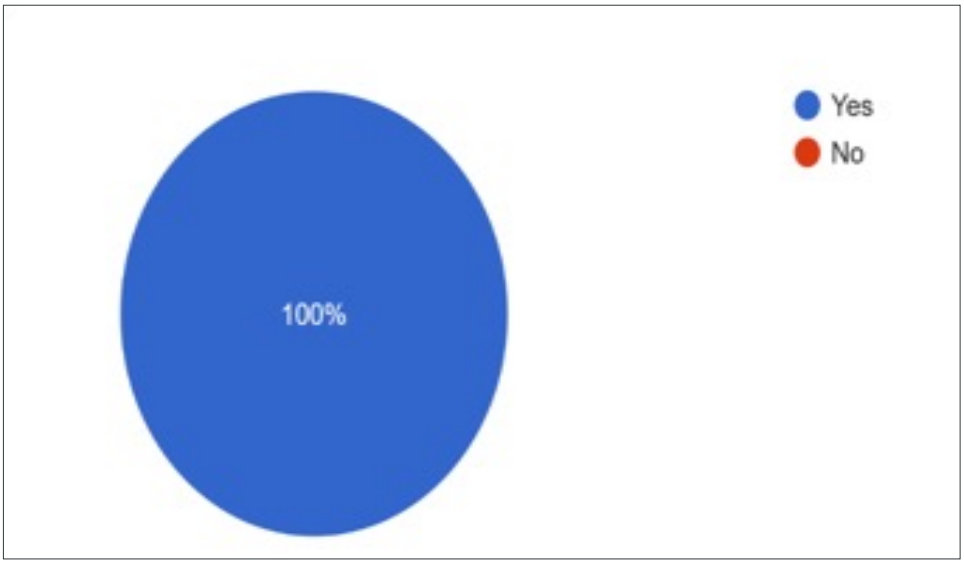
4.2.1 Physical access of community members to the resources

All 11 monitoring teams reported that community members could physically reach the monitored resources. This confirms proximity and continuing livelihood dependence, but does not establish that access

is lawful, secure, equitable or ecologically sustainable. Common-pool resource research shows that resources from which exclusion is difficult can be depleted where user boundaries, withdrawal rules and monitoring are unclear (Ostrom, 1990; Cox, Arnold and Villamayor Tomás, 2010). In the monitored sites, universal physical access coexists with uncertain rights, limited restrictions and reported degradation. The finding is therefore better interpreted as high exposure to, and dependence on, natural resources rather than as evidence of effective access governance.

Implications for natural resources, access and user rights. Unqualified entry can increase cumulative extraction and make it difficult to distinguish legitimate subsistence use from unauthorised commercial activity. Conversely, blanket closure can transfer conservation costs to households that depend on fuelwood, grazing, fishing or cultivation. Districts and responsible agencies ought to record users, purposes, seasons, quantities and legal authority, then establish differentiated rules for subsistence, cultural and commercial uses. Clear resource and user boundaries, locally legitimate rules, monitoring, graduated sanctions and low-cost dispute resolution are more likely to support durable collective management than undifferentiated enforcement (Ostrom, 1990).

Figure 2: Physical access of community members to the resources



The practical implication is that access controls must be differentiated. Subsistence collection, cultural use, grazing, commercial extraction and destructive activity should not be regulated identically. Site

rules should define permitted and prohibited activities, transparent permit conditions, seasonal limits and sanctions, while ensuring that restrictions do not impose disproportionate costs on poor households or excluded groups.

4.2.2 Activities taking place in the natural resources that were monitored

The monitored sites are multifunctional livelihood landscapes. Farming occurred at 7 of 11 sites (63.6 percent), while grazing and fishing each occurred at 5 sites (45.5 percent). Logging, charcoal production, mining, tourism, cultural use, and harvesting of grass, papyrus and firewood were also reported. These uses were not independent. Cultivation can reduce wetland retention and riparian cover, livestock can compact riverbanks, and wood fuel extraction can interact with settlement growth and agricultural expansion. The World Bank and FAO assessment of northern Uganda similarly found that forest and land degradation in refugee-affected areas was driven by interacting demand for energy, construction materials, farming land and livelihoods, rather than by a single user group (FAO and World Bank, 2018). Site-level planning should therefore assess cumulative pressure and trade-offs across uses.

Implications for natural resources, access and user rights. Multiple use raises a resource's economic value but also intensifies competition among users with unequal bargaining power. If permits are assessed activity by activity, the combined extraction load may exceed ecological limits. Management plans should define sustainable-use zones, seasonal rules and extraction ceilings, and should distinguish livelihood use from high-volume commercial extraction. Restrictions need to be paired with credible alternatives such as agroforestry, efficient cooking energy, sustainable fisheries, soil and water conservation, and low-impact enterprises. Evidence from collaborative management in Uganda shows that conservation gains do not automatically translate into equitable livelihood benefits, making transparent benefit-sharing and periodic distributional review essential (Turyahabwe et al., 2013; Egunyu et al., 2021).

Figure 3: Activities taking place in the natural resources that were monitored

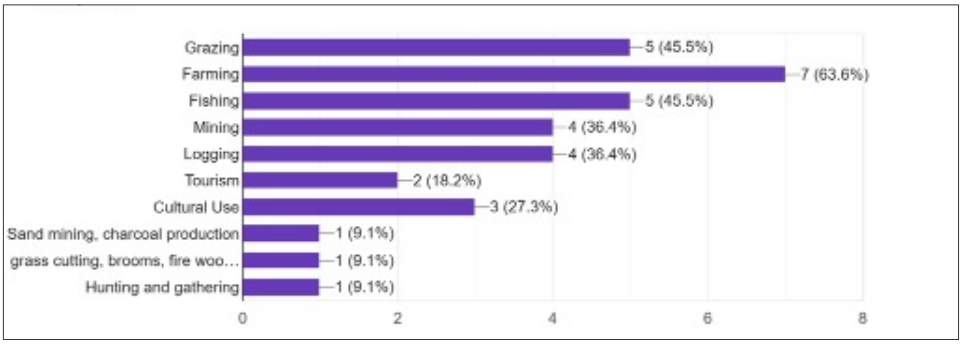
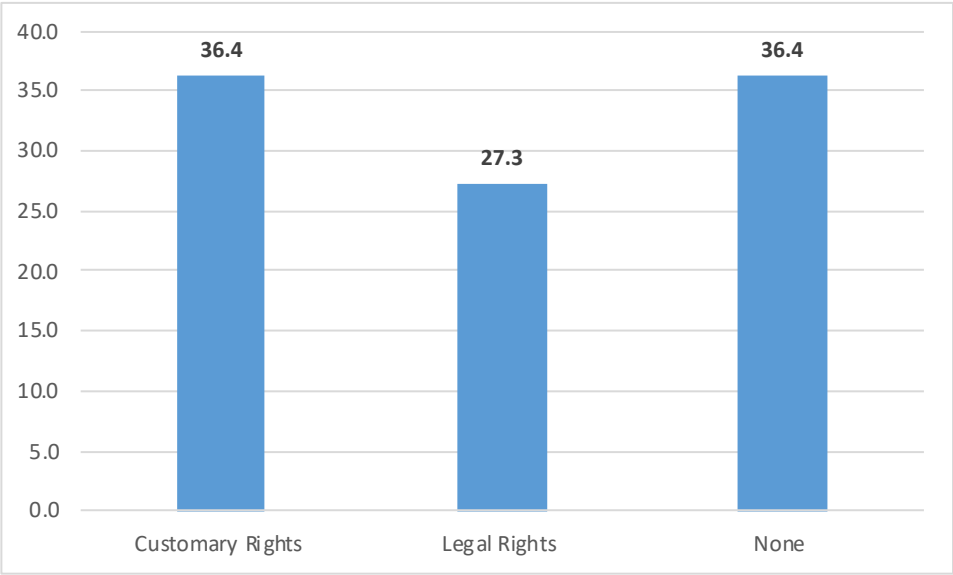


Figure 3 shows that agriculture and extractive uses dominate, while restoration and low-impact enterprises are less visible. This suggests that the opportunity cost of conservation is immediate for households, whereas ecological benefits are dispersed and long term. Enforcement alone is therefore unlikely to succeed. MAAIF, MWE, UWA, OPM and local governments should connect restrictions to agroforestry, efficient cooking energy, sustainable fisheries, soil and water conservation, beekeeping and other viable alternatives, with clear eligibility and benefit-sharing rules.

4.2.3 Customary or legal rights to use the resource

As indicated in figure 4, Only four districts (36.4%) out of 11 reported recognised customary use rights, three recognised legal use rights (22.7%) and four report no recognised rights (36.4%). This pattern may indicate actual insecurity, weak documentation, or confusion between ownership, permission to enter, withdrawal rights and authority to manage. The distinction is fundamental. Property rights can be disaggregated into access, withdrawal, management, exclusion and alienation, and different actors may hold different elements of this bundle (Schlager and Ostrom, 1992). Uganda's Land Act legally recognises customary tenure and permits communal land associations and common land management schemes, while sector laws may assign regulatory powers over forests, wetlands, wildlife, and water to public authorities (Republic of Uganda, 1998, 2003, 2019). Public ownership therefore does not mean the absence of legitimate community use interests.

Figure 4: District Recognition of Customary or legal rights to use the resource



Unclear or overlapping rights weaken incentives for stewardship, complicate enforcement and create opportunities for elite capture, arbitrary exclusion and conflict. Before imposing restrictions, issuing licences or approving investments, district land boards, area land committees, natural-resource departments and sector agencies should undertake participatory rights mapping. The process should identify rights-holders, permitted uses, seasonal and cultural claims, management authority, benefit entitlements and appeal routes. Agreements should be documented in accessible formats and local languages. Where customary rules are valid, formal institutions should recognise them while applying constitutional protections for women, children and persons with disabilities (Republic of Uganda, 1998).

4.2.4 Community awareness of customary or legal rights

Community awareness of customary or legal rights was reported in six (75%) of the eight districts that responded to this issue. The result cannot be treated as a reliable measure of legal literacy because the monitoring tool did not test what respondents actually knew. Awareness should include knowledge of the resource boundary, lawful and prohibited uses, permits and fees, decision-making bodies, benefit-sharing arrangements, sanctions and complaint channels. The missing responses also point to weak institutional records and inconsistent communication. Under the access framework, formal rights have limited practical value if users lack the information or capability needed

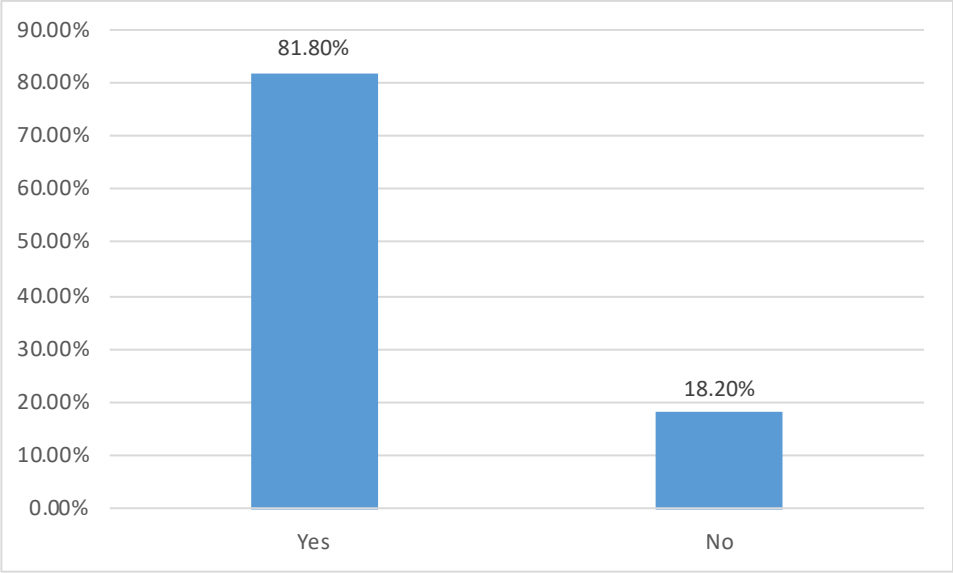
to claim them (Ribot and Peluso, 2003).

Implications for natural resources, access and user rights. Low or uneven awareness can produce accidental non-compliance, selective enforcement and dependence on intermediaries who may demand informal payments. It can also prevent communities from challenging unlawful exclusion or reporting harmful extraction. Districts should combine radio, community meetings, posted site rules, maps and user-group leaders, then verify comprehension through periodic surveys or community scorecards. Communication should be tailored for local languages, low literacy and disability access. Legal awareness should be linked to practical assistance for permits, complaints and mediation, rather than treated as a one-off sensitisation activity.

4.2.5 Natural resource access of women, youth, PWDs, indigenous people and refugees

The results, as illustrated in Figure 5, revealed that nine districts out of 11 reported access for women, youth, persons with disabilities, Indigenous or customary communities, and refugees. Moyo and Yumbe reported restrictions. Because the groups were combined into one response category, the result cannot establish equality. Physical entry may coexist with unequal withdrawal rights, exclusion from committees, unsafe travel, limited mobility, lack of tenure documents, unpaid labour burdens or weak control over income. Research on participatory natural-resource institutions shows that presence or nominal membership does not necessarily translate into effective voice, particularly where social norms and institutional rules disadvantage women and poorer users (Agarwal, 2001). Recent research near Bidibidi also identifies gendered barriers to women's leadership in community forestry (Turyamureba et al., 2026).

Figure 5: Natural resource access for women, youth, PWDs, indigenous people & refugees



These findings suggest that aggregated reporting risks masking who bears conservation costs and who receives benefits. Future monitoring should disaggregate each group by type of use, frequency, decision-making role, benefits received, exposure to sanctions and ability to complain. Site committees should adopt representative membership and accessible procedures, but representation should be assessed by influence and outcomes, not attendance alone. Restrictions should be screened for disproportionate effects and supported by targeted measures, including safe collection arrangements, accessible infrastructure, livelihood support, energy alternatives and protection of customary and subsistence interests. These measures are consistent with the Land Act's safeguards for vulnerable interests (Republic of Uganda, 1998).

4.2.6 Payment to access the natural resources

Out of the 11 districts covered, no district reported a general payment for physical access to natural resources. This may protect subsistence use, but it does not demonstrate that access is cost-free. Users may face licence fees, user-group contributions, transport costs, informal payments, revenue-sharing arrangements or obligations to provide labour. The finding also leaves open whether commercial users capture valuable resources without paying the full social and ecological costs. Ribot and Peluso (2003) show that access to benefits is shaped not only by legal rights but also by capital, technology, markets, authority and

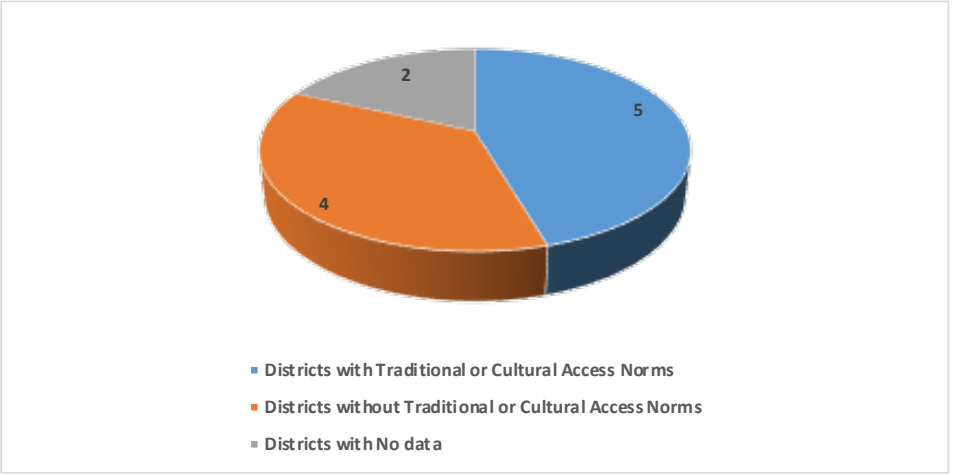
social identity. A zero entry fee can therefore coexist with significant economic exclusion.

Implications for natural resources, access and user rights. Undocumented charges invite rent seeking and undermine trust, while free commercial extraction can deprive local governments and communities of revenue for management and restoration. Districts and agencies should separate physical entry from legally prescribed permits, licences, royalties and community contributions. Any charge should have a clear legal basis, a published tariff, a receipt and audit trail, and transparent rules for revenue allocation and community benefit. Fee waivers or differentiated tariffs may be justified for essential subsistence use, but commercial charges should reflect monitoring, rehabilitation and ecological costs.

4.2.7 Traditional or cultural access norms

Traditional or cultural access norms were reportedly respected in five districts and not respected in four, as shown in Figure 6. Three districts provided no data. This mixed pattern matters because customary institutions often regulate seasons, sacred sites, harvesting methods, inheritance, grazing and dispute settlement where statutory enforcement is weak. However, customary rules are neither uniform nor automatically equitable. Hybrid governance research cautions against equating the physical resource with a single property regime, since statutory, customary and administrative rules commonly overlap (German and Keeler, 2010). The Terego boundary issue illustrates the need to distinguish customary claims from statutory buffer-zone requirements and to create a process through which both can be considered.

Figure 6: Traditional or cultural access norms

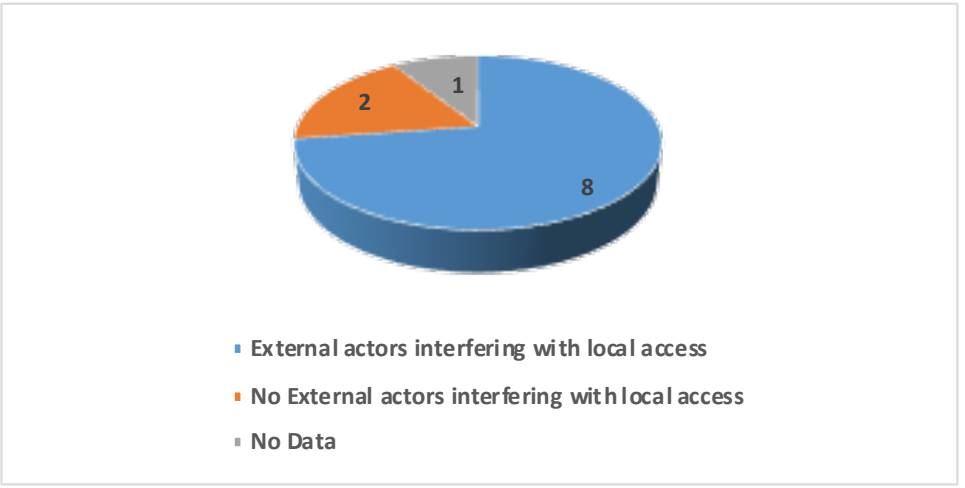


The findings imply that erosion of legitimate local norms can remove low-cost controls on extraction and weaken compliance, yet uncritical formalisation can entrench discrimination. Districts should document the relevant norm, rights-holders, ecological purpose, decision authority and sanctions, then test these against the Constitution and sector law. Customary leaders should have defined roles in management and mediation, with written decisions, inclusive participation and referral of matters beyond their jurisdiction. This approach can preserve locally legitimate conservation practices without allowing customary authority to override the rights of women, youth, persons with disabilities or minority groups.

4.2.8 External actors interfering with local access

Regarding external interference with local access to natural resources, eight districts reported no interference, as indicated in Figure 7. Two districts, Moyo and Terego, reported interference, while Adjumani had no data. A binary response is analytically weak because an external actor may lawfully regulate access, facilitate restoration, compete for resources, acquire exclusive rights or displace existing users. The relevant questions are who acted, under what authority, whose access changed, and whether due process, compensation, benefit sharing and grievance mechanisms were available. In refugee-hosting areas, the World Bank and FAO documented increased demand for woodfuel, poles and agricultural land, but framed the pressure as a landscape and energy challenge affecting both refugees and host communities rather than as a basis for attributing degradation to refugees alone (FAO and World Bank, 2018).

Figure 7: External actors interfering with local access



The implications for natural resources, access and user rights are that poorly coordinated interventions can create parallel rules, intensify host-refugee tensions, or enable investors and agencies to override local rights. OPM, UNHCR, sector agencies and districts should integrate settlement energy, land, water, livelihoods and restoration plans, and publish the authority and conditions attached to any access restriction or allocation. Social and environmental screening should identify existing statutory and customary users, distributional effects and remedies before decisions are implemented. Monitoring should distinguish lawful regulation from unlawful interference and track impacts on both host and refugee households.

4.2.9 Disputes or complaints regarding access or user rights

Access or rights disputes were identified in at least five districts out 11 covered by the Monitoring exercise. These disputes concerned ownership, boundaries, benefit sharing, livestock damage, tree use, sand mining and cultivation. These disputes signal institutional ambiguity as well as interpersonal disagreement. Common-pool resource scholarship identifies rapid, low-cost conflict-resolution mechanisms as a hallmark of more durable resource institutions, because unclear boundaries and rules otherwise raise transaction costs and weaken compliance (Ostrom, 1990; Cox, Arnold and Villamayor Tomás, 2010). Contradictory reporting on Mt. Kei, where a district-level response indicated no dispute while narrative evidence recorded clan claims, further shows that current data systems may understate conflict.

The unresolved claims or disputes can delay restoration, undermine

enforcement, discourage investment and prompt parties to extract resources before losing access. Each district should maintain a verified conflict register recording parties, location, tenure basis, contested benefit or use, forum, status and outcome. Land-status questions should be referred to district land institutions and MLHUD, while negotiable use and benefit disputes may be handled through documented mediation by trusted local structures. Every pathway should protect due process, allow appeals and avoid using security enforcement as a substitute for determining civil rights.

4.2.10 Availability of access restrictions

Only four districts reported identifiable access restrictions, five reported none, and two lacked information. Given the reported degradation and unsustainable use, the absence of known rules suggests either a substantive regulatory gap or a failure in communication and enforcement. Effective common-pool resource institutions typically align withdrawal rules with local ecological conditions, identify authorised users, monitor compliance, and apply proportionate sanctions (Ostrom, 1990; Cox, Arnold and Villamayor Tomás, 2010). Uganda's environmental framework also provides regulatory controls for sensitive ecosystems and potentially harmful activities, including sand extraction and the management of wetlands, riverbanks and lakeshores (Republic of Uganda, 2019; NEMA, 2023).

Therefore, access and utilisation rules should be resource-specific, evidence-based and publicly known. They may include buffer zones, closed seasons, gear restrictions, extraction quotas, permit conditions and user-group rules. Restrictions must also meet standards of legality, necessity, proportionality and procedural fairness. Users should receive notice, reasons, an opportunity to be heard and an accessible appeal route. Where restrictions impose substantial livelihood losses on vulnerable households, responsible institutions should phase implementation and provide viable alternatives. The policy objective is controlled and equitable use within ecological limits, not blanket exclusion.

Overall, physical access is high, but the institutional quality of access is low and uneven. The evidence indicates unclear bundles of rights, incomplete awareness, limited distributional data, weak recognition of legitimate customary rules, under-recorded disputes and inconsistent restrictions. These weaknesses can simultaneously accelerate degradation and expose dependent households to arbitrary exclusion. The policy priority is therefore to convert open or contested access into transparent, differentiated and enforceable arrangements that define

users and boundaries, protect legitimate subsistence and customary interests, regulate commercial extraction, share benefits fairly, monitor ecological condition and provide trusted remedies.

4.3 Sustainable Resource Use

Key Findings

- Widespread unsustainable use reported in 9 of 11 districts (overexploitation, poor management).
- Visible environmental harm (deforestation, water pollution, land degradation) in most districts.
- Community-led restoration efforts present in a few areas (Yumbe – REDD project; Terego – agroforestry/bee-keeping; Koboko, Zombo), but absent in others.
- Community by-laws exist in some places but are often ignored or weakly enforced.
- Community monitoring/reporting is strong in districts like Obongi, Yumbe, Madi Okollo, Terego, Koboko, but weak in Nebbi, Maracha, Moyo, Adjumani due to political interference, poor coordination, and lack of awareness.

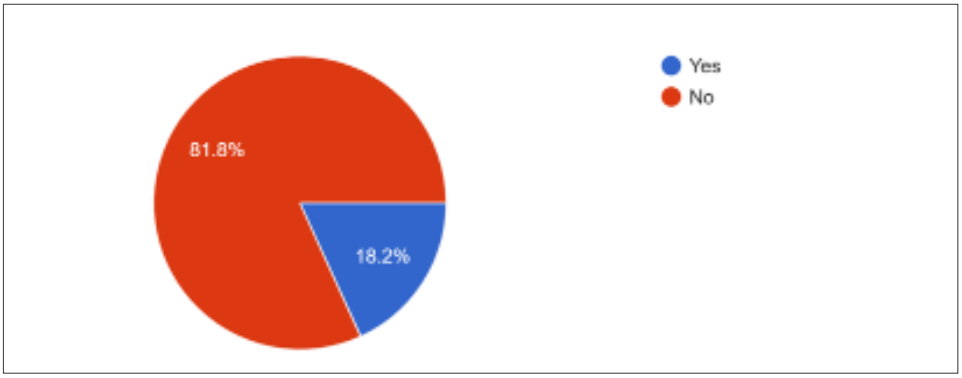
Sustainability was assessed through five linked indicators, perceived resource condition, visible environmental harm, restoration initiatives, local rules and community monitoring. Together, these provide a useful rapid governance and ecological diagnostic, but they do not constitute a direct measurement of sustainable yield or ecosystem recovery. A resource is sustainable only where the rate and type of use remain within its regenerative capacity while maintaining ecosystem functions and fair access over time. The assessment is also based mainly on observation and respondent judgement. Future rounds should triangulate these perceptions with repeat photography, georeferenced boundaries, land-cover and vegetation data, water-quality testing where relevant, extraction and permit records, restoration survival rates, enforcement data, and differentiated information on who bears the costs and receives the benefits of resource use (NEMA, 2024; MWE, 2025).

4.3.1 Sustainability of the resource

The results indicate that nine of the 11 district monitoring teams assessed current resource use as unsustainable. Although the sites were purposively selected and the results cannot be generalised statistically to all natural resources in West Nile, agreement across

nine districts indicates that degradation pressures are geographically widespread within the monitored sample. This finding is consistent with national evidence that Uganda's forests, wetlands, aquatic systems, and biodiversity remain under pressure from agricultural expansion, encroachment, woodfuel demand, pollution, settlement growth, and weak enforcement (NEMA, 2024). It also aligns with the FAO and World Bank assessment of refugee-affected northern Uganda, which identified interacting demand for farmland, fuelwood, construction materials and livelihoods, rather than a single cause of degradation (FAO and World Bank, 2018). The result therefore points to a landscape-level implementation problem involving incentives, livelihoods, staffing, finance and institutional coordination.

Figure 8: Sustainability of the resource



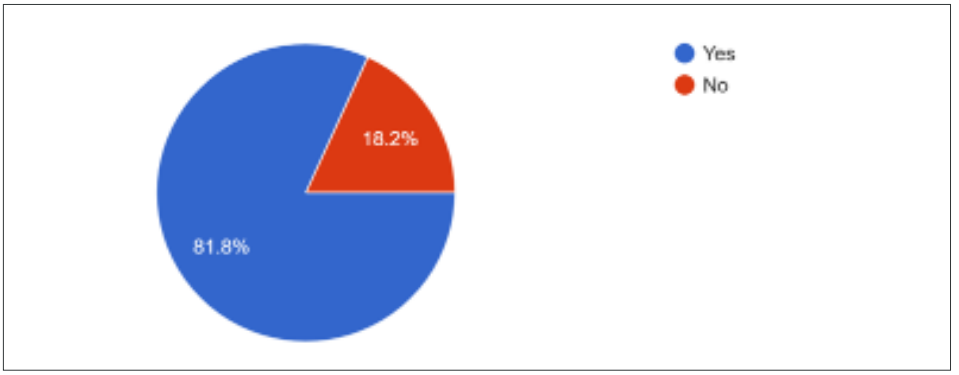
Therefore, continued extraction beyond ecological limits reduces the quantity, quality and reliability of resources available to legitimate users. Scarcity may then increase travel time, unpaid collection labour, prices and conflict, with disproportionate effects on women, poorer households, pastoralists, fishers, refugees and host communities. It can also prompt authorities to introduce abrupt restrictions that penalise subsistence users alongside commercial extractors. Districts should define site-specific ecological thresholds, separate subsistence and cultural use from high-volume extraction, and link controls to energy, livelihood and restoration support. MWE, NEMA, UWA and local governments should treat restoration and compliance as funded service-delivery functions, while monitoring whether restrictions and benefits are distributed equitably.

4.3.2 Visible signs of environmental harm

Visible environmental harm was reported at nine monitored sites, including deforestation, water pollution and land degradation. The close correspondence between perceived unsustainable use and

visible damage strengthens the internal consistency of the findings, but visual inspection alone may under-detect gradual, seasonal or less visible change. Water contamination, declining regeneration, soil compaction, biodiversity loss and altered wetland hydrology may occur before they become obvious during a short monitoring visit. Conversely, visible disturbance does not by itself establish the responsible actor or causal pathway. Uganda's National State of the Environment Report similarly describes continuing pressure on forest, wetland and aquatic ecosystems and emphasises the need for stronger monitoring and enforcement (NEMA, 2024). The absence of reported visible harm at the Arua and Madi Okollo sites should therefore be interpreted as no harm observed during the exercise, not proof of good ecological status.

Figure 9: Visible signs of environmental harm



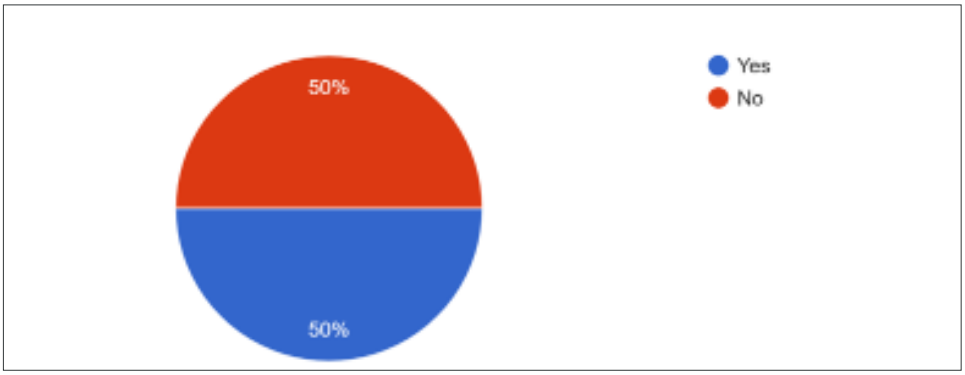
Environmental harm changes the substance of access, because a legal right to use polluted water, depleted fisheries, degraded grazing land or a forest without regenerating products yields progressively fewer benefits. Degradation can also trigger exclusionary conservation measures and intensify disputes over remaining resources. Each affected site should have a pressure-response-recovery plan that identifies the stressor, responsible institution, baseline condition, remedial action, timeframe and measurable recovery indicator. Compliance action should follow verified evidence and due process, while affected users should have access to information, complaint channels and remedy. Polluters and commercial extractors should bear rehabilitation costs in accordance with the National Environment Act, rather than transferring those costs to resource-dependent communities (Republic of Uganda, 2019).

4.3.3 Availability of community-led initiatives for restoration or conservation

Community-led restoration or conservation initiatives were identified in five districts, four districts reported none, and two had unclear responses. Existing activities, including agroforestry, beekeeping, tree planting and natural regeneration, demonstrate willingness to act where environmental objectives are linked to visible livelihood benefits. Their presence, however, should not be equated with ecological recovery. Restoration success depends on suitable species and sites, protection from fire and grazing, maintenance, survival, connectivity to remaining habitat, and the removal of ongoing degradation pressures. Ugandan research on assisted natural regeneration shows that biomass and functional diversity can improve over time, but recovery is uneven and may remain incomplete even after 16 to 22 years, which makes long-term monitoring essential (Ssekuubwa et al., 2023). FAO also identifies farmer-managed natural regeneration as a potentially low-cost restoration approach, provided that land users have incentives and authority to protect regrowth (FAO, 2020).

Restoration creates new assets and can change who may use land, trees, water or forest products. Projects that do not clarify tenure, tree ownership, harvesting rights and benefit sharing may exclude customary users or reduce community incentives to maintain restored areas. Districts should therefore verify rights before investment, obtain informed community agreement on permitted uses, and document how women, youth, refugees, host communities and customary rights-holders will participate and benefit. Performance should be measured through survival rates, hectares under effective management, vegetation or water recovery, reduced harmful extraction and distribution of benefits, not seedlings distributed or meetings held. Effective initiatives should be integrated into district plans and budgets so that maintenance continues after project funding ends.

Figure 10: Availability of community-led initiatives for restoration or conservation



4.3.4 Availability and adherence of by-laws or local rules initiated by the community to guide resource use

Local rules existed and were reportedly observed in only Madi Okollo and Terego. Several districts had rules with weak compliance, while others reported no community-initiated rules. This confirms that enactment does not equal implementation. Research across 273 Ugandan communities found that awareness and compliance were influenced by institutional presence, poverty and the level at which rules were made. Compliance was more likely for regulations enacted by village councils than for rules passed by higher legislative bodies, underscoring the importance of local ownership, while poverty reduced the capacity to comply (Nkonya, Pender and Kato, 2008). Participatory by-law reform in Uganda has likewise shown that rule-making can strengthen collective action when communities, local leaders and technical authorities jointly define the problem, responsibilities and enforcement arrangements (Sanginga et al., 2010).

Implications for natural resources, access and user rights. Weak or selectively enforced rules can create de facto open access for powerful actors while exposing poorer users to arbitrary sanctions. Councils should review whether each by-law or community rule has a lawful basis, clearly defined resource and users, locally understood obligations, proportionate sanctions, named enforcement responsibility and an accessible appeal mechanism. Rule development should include affected statutory and customary users, especially women and marginalised groups, and should distinguish subsistence use from commercial extraction. Where compliance costs exceed household capacity, enforcement should be accompanied by livelihood, energy, or technical support. MWE and NEMA should provide model provisions and procedural guidance, while districts publish rules, monitor their

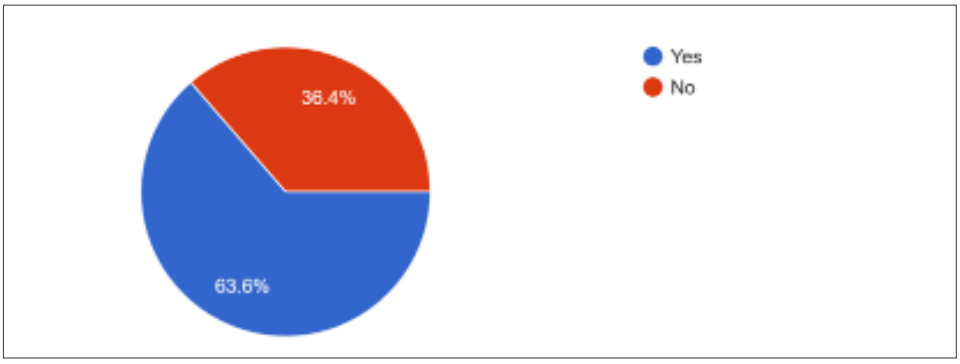
application and report sanctions and appeals by user category.

4.3.5 Involvement of the community in monitoring and reporting illegal or unsustainable resource use

Communities participated in monitoring in seven districts and had limited or no involvement in four. Political interference, poor coordination, weak rights awareness and absent reporting mechanisms were cited as barriers. Participation is valuable because local users observe resource change frequently and can identify extraction, pollution and encroachment earlier than understaffed agencies. It is not, however, sufficient on its own. A randomized study covering 110 Ugandan villages found that community monitoring increased information and discussion but did not reduce overall forest use, and may have shifted extraction into unmonitored areas (Eisenbarth, Graham and Rigterink, 2021). This evidence cautions against measuring success by reports submitted or patrols conducted without examining institutional response, ecological outcomes and displacement to neighboring sites.

Therefore, community monitors need a clear mandate, safe and confidential reporting channels, feedback, technical support, and protection against retaliation. Reports should trigger a documented sequence of verification, referral, enforcement, and communication back to the complainant. Monitoring should cover the wider landscape to detect displacement and should combine community observations with agency inspections, geospatial evidence, and permit records. Participation must not transfer statutory enforcement risks and costs to volunteers without authority or protection. Monitors should represent different user groups, and data should distinguish harmful commercial activity from legitimate subsistence and customary use. Aggregated information on reports, response times, inspections, sanctions, and restoration outcomes should be publicly disclosed.

Figure 11: Involvement of the community in monitoring and reporting illegal or unsustainable resource use



The results in section 4.3 show that degradation is not explained solely by insufficient community effort. Unsustainable use persists where ecological limits are not measured, restoration is project-dependent, local rules lack legitimacy or enforceability, and community reports are not linked to credible institutional action. A stronger response must combine ecological baselines, secure and equitable rights, viable livelihood alternatives, locally legitimate rules, landscape-wide monitoring, predictable public finance and accountable enforcement.

4.4 Resource Governance

Key Findings

- Management arrangements exist in most districts, but gaps remain (particularly in Arua, Moyo).
- Formal management plans are absent in several districts (Nebbi, Maracha, Moyo, Arua).
- Community-led structures exist in some areas (Moyo, Yumbe, Madi Okollo, Terego, Koboko) but are absent in others; effectiveness is often limited.
- Coordination mechanisms with government are established in some districts (Obongi, Moyo, Yumbe, Madi Okollo, Terego, Koboko), but are lacking in others (Nebbi, Maracha, Arua, Adjumani, Zombo).
- Awareness of coordination mechanisms is inconsistent; low in Nebbi, Maracha, Arua, Adjumani, and Zombo.
- Resource-based conflicts reported in Nebbi (benefit sharing), Yumbe (land access), Terego (fishing grounds), Adjumani (land dispute with Lowi clan), Arua (access issues). Other districts more stable.
- Local structures (elders/committees) involved in conflict resolution in some areas (Moyo, Madi Okollo, Koboko), but weak/absent in others.
- Conflict resolution mechanisms trusted only in a few districts (Madi Okollo, Koboko); largely absent elsewhere.
- Community awareness of external reporting channels exists in Obongi, Moyo, Madi Okollo, Zombo, Koboko but absent in Nebbi, Maracha, Arua, Yumbe; unclear in Terego and Adjumani.

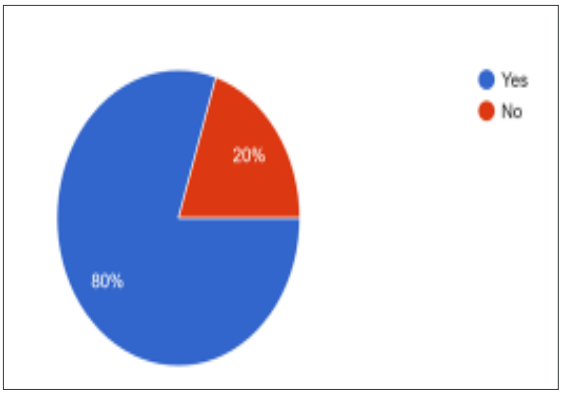
Resource governance was assessed through management arrangements and plans, community structures, coordination, conflict-management systems and external reporting channels. The results

reveal an implementation gap rather than a complete absence of institutions. Some sites have committees without plans, plans without finance, government oversight without effective community linkage, or customary authority without clear statutory recognition. Research on decentralised environmental governance in Uganda similarly cautions that transferring responsibility does not produce effective management unless local institutions have authority, finance, technical capacity and working links to higher levels of government (Nakakaawa et al., 2010). The analytical test is therefore whether institutions jointly define rights and responsibilities, make enforceable decisions, account for revenues and benefits, resolve disputes and maintain the resource, not simply whether a committee or plan exists.

4.4.1 Availability of known management arrangement for the resource

Seven of the ten districts that reported on this indicator revealed that they had a known management arrangement. This suggests that a basic institutional platform exists at most monitored sites, but the monitoring tool did not establish whether these arrangements were legally recognised, active or accountable. Durable common-pool resource institutions generally require clearly defined users and resource boundaries, rules suited to local conditions, participation in rule-making, monitoring, proportionate sanctions and accessible dispute resolution (Ostrom, 1990; Cox, Arnold and Villamayor Tomás, 2010). A known arrangement that lacks these functions may provide nominal coverage while leaving extraction, revenue and benefit decisions open to discretion.

Figure 12: Availability of known management arrangements for the resource



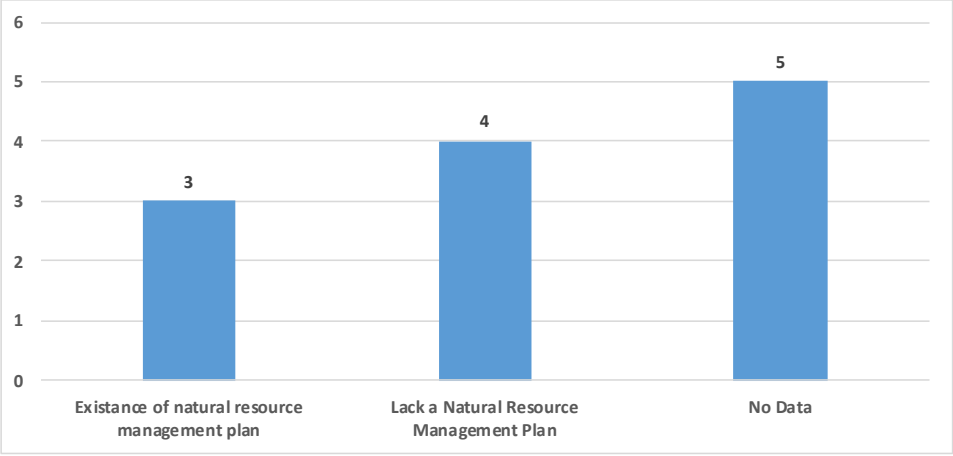
The weak arrangements create uncertainty over who may use the resource, who can exclude harmful users, who receives revenue and

who must restore damage. This can lead to de facto open access for influential actors, while legitimate customary and subsistence users remain insecure. Districts and responsible agencies should annually assess each arrangement against its legal mandate, representation, meeting records, approved plan, budget, monitoring activity, public accounts, decisions implemented and grievances resolved. Results should be published and linked to technical support and corrective action, rather than treated as a compliance checklist.

4.4.2 Availability of the resource management plan

The results show that the districts of Yumbe, Madi-Okollo and Terego have some natural resource management plan; four districts reported a lack of such plans, namely Nebbi, Maracha, Moyo and Arua. Information from the remaining districts was incomplete or lacked such data. This finding is significant because a plan translates general legal duties into spatially and temporally specific rules. Without a current, approved and costed plan, enforcement tends to be reactive, restoration projects may be scattered, and budget requests lack measurable outputs. Good forest and commons governance requires plans that reflect existing statutory and customary tenure, resource condition, differentiated uses and the participation of affected users (FAO, 2012, 2016). A document unknown to users, unsupported by finance or inconsistent with actual tenure is unlikely to guide behaviour.

Figure 13: Availability of the resource management plan



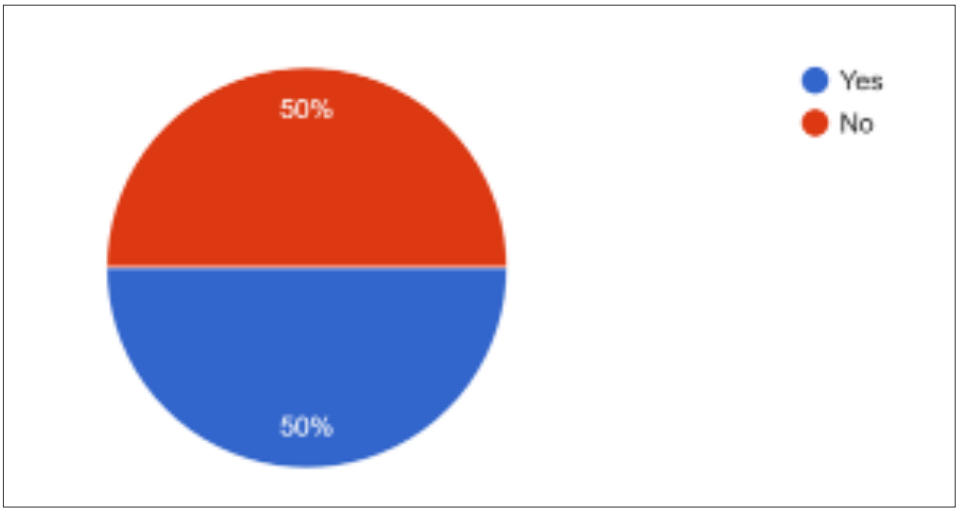
The absence of resource management plans leaves users uncertain about permitted areas, seasons, quantities, fees and appeal rights, while officials may apply restrictions inconsistently. MWE, UWA and district governments should support participatory plans that verify boundaries and tenure, zone uses, distinguish subsistence from

commercial extraction, set restoration and biodiversity targets, specify benefit sharing, identify safeguards for vulnerable users and provide grievance routes. Every plan should include an implementation budget, an annual work programme, a publicly available summary, and periodic reviews based on ecological and social indicators.

4.4.3 Availability of community-led structure for managing this resource

The monitoring results revealed that community-led structures were reported in five districts, but their authority, representativeness and functionality varied. These community-led structures existed in Moyo, Yumbe, Madi Okollo, Terego, and Koboko districts but were absent in others. However, their effectiveness was often limited. Their absence in five other districts creates gaps in local surveillance, knowledge, and collective action. However, forming committees is not sufficient. Collaborative management in Uganda has produced mixed livelihood outcomes where groups have limited bargaining power, benefits are uncertain, or participation is not connected to substantive decisions (Turyahabwe et al., 2013; Egunyu, Reed and Sinclair, 2021). Structures created for short-term projects may also duplicate statutory bodies and become inactive once facilitation ends.

Figure 14: Availability of community-led structure for managing this resource



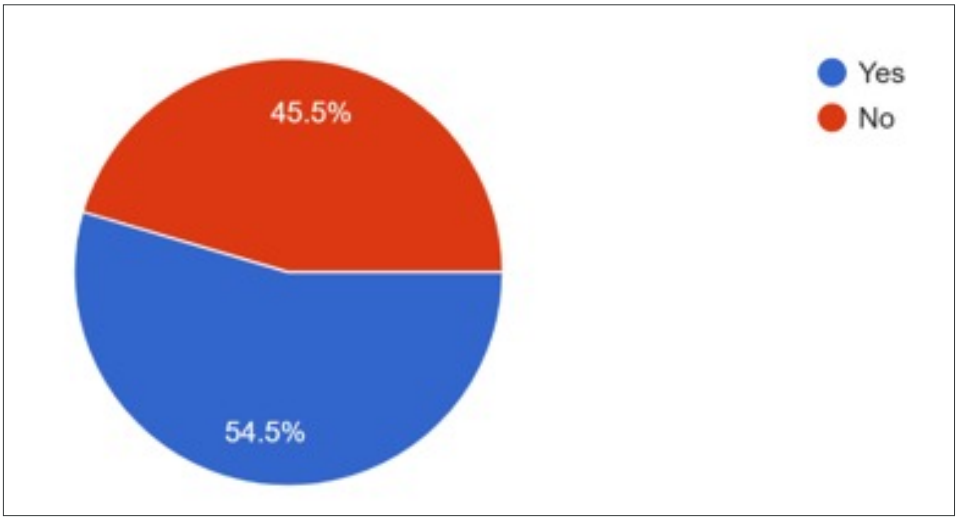
Community institutions can improve stewardship only when members have recognised authority to participate in rule-making, monitor use, receive information and benefits, and seek remedies. Councils and agencies should verify legal status, mandate, selection procedures,

term limits, financial controls and links to parish, sub-county and district structures. Membership and leadership should include affected women, youth, persons with disabilities, customary rights-holders, and refugee and host representatives where relevant. Performance should be judged by decisions influenced, obligations fulfilled, benefits distributed and ecological outcomes, not membership numbers alone.

4.4.4 Coordination mechanism between the group and the local or central government

Formal coordination mechanisms were reported in six districts and absent in five. Coordination mechanisms with government were established in the districts of Obongi, Moyo, Yumbe, Madi Okollo, Terego, Koboko) while Nebbi, Maracha, Arua, Adjumani, and Zombo districts lacked such coordination mechanisms. The pattern broadly follows the presence of organised community or collaborative structures, confirming that recognised user groups often serve as the interface between communities and government. Yet coordination can remain procedural if meetings do not resolve mandate overlaps, mobilise resources or track action. Uganda's decentralised framework distributes environmental responsibilities across local governments and sector agencies, making vertical and horizontal coordination essential (Republic of Uganda, 1997, 2019; Nakakaawa et al., 2010). Shared forests, wetlands, catchments and river systems also exceed single administrative boundaries.

Figure 15: Coordination mechanism between the group and the local or central government



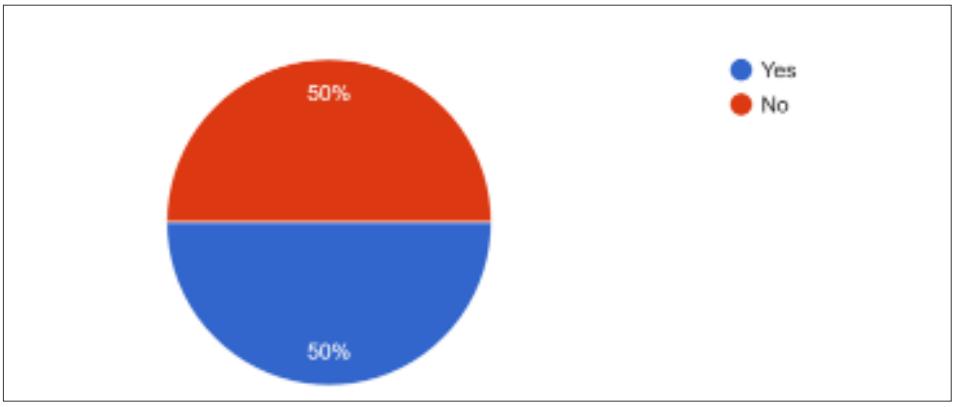
The findings imply that coordination failures allow users to receive

conflicting instructions, cause cases to move between agencies without resolution, and enable commercial actors to exploit jurisdictional gaps. Districts should establish quarterly site- or landscape-level forums linked to District Environment Committees, with agreed membership, decision-making authority, and an action tracker covering resource condition, permits, revenue, enforcement, restoration, disputes, and safeguards. Mt. Kei and shared river systems require inter-district arrangements with common maps, rules, data, and escalation routes. National agencies should respond within defined timelines when issues exceed district competence.

4.4.4 Awareness of coordination mechanisms

The awareness of coordination arrangements was reported in five districts but absent in Nebbi, Maracha, Arua, Adjumani, Zombo. Terego district had no data or provided no response to this indicator. This gap reduces the practical value of existing institutions. From an access perspective, rules and remedies are usable only if affected people know the responsible body, the meeting process, and the escalation route. FAO's tenure guidance emphasises accessible information, participation and access to justice as foundations of responsible governance (FAO, 2012). General sensitisation is insufficient if users cannot identify where to obtain permission, challenge a decision or report harm.

Figure 16: Awareness of coordination mechanisms



These results suggest that the low awareness can produce accidental non-compliance, reliance on brokers, informal payments and under-reporting of abuse. Districts and agencies should publish local-language contact points, mandates, meeting schedules, permit requirements, fees and escalation routes through radio, noticeboards, user groups and accessible formats. Awareness should be tested through periodic

user surveys and community scorecards. Communication should also explain the difference between customary, local-government and national-agency authority so that users can navigate overlapping institutions without forfeiting legitimate rights.

4.4.6 Resource-based conflict in the area of recent

The results revealed recent resource-based conflicts in Nebbi, Arua, Yumbe, Terego and Adjumani, involving benefits, payments, access, cultivation, boundaries, fishing grounds and land claims. These conflicts were reported in Nebbi (benefit sharing), Yumbe (land access), Terego (fishing grounds), Adjumani (land dispute with the Lowi clan) and Arua (access issues). These cases show that conflict arises not only from physical scarcity but also from unclear tenure, competing rules, unequal benefit distribution and weak institutional legitimacy. In West Nile, statutory and customary authorities coexist in land allocation and mediation, while displacement and cross-border social relations add further layers of complexity (Laine, 2026). FAO guidance similarly notes that structural tenure disputes may require legal recognition, governance reform or authoritative adjudication rather than short-term mediation alone (FAO, 2005).

These results suggest that unresolved disputes can accelerate extraction, obstruct restoration and investment, and turn enforcement into a source of grievance. Each district should maintain a georeferenced conflict register and conduct conflict analysis before imposing restrictions or approving projects. The referral pathway should distinguish negotiable use and benefit issues from questions requiring land adjudication, administrative review or court determination. District security committees should not substitute for civil dispute resolution. Settlements should be documented, rights-compatible, and monitored, with protections for women, minority claimants, refugees, and poorer users who may have less bargaining power.

4.4.7 Involvement of local structures in resolving the conflict

Local structures, including elders and committees, were actively involved in conflict resolution in three of the 11 districts covered. In some areas of Moyo, Madi-Okollo, and Koboko districts, these structures were involved in conflict resolution, but in others they were weak, absent, inactive, or undocumented. This weak coverage reduces access to early, low-cost settlement. Elders and community committees can contribute local knowledge, legitimacy, and culturally intelligible processes, particularly where formal institutions are distant. Yet customary institutions may also reproduce unequal power relations, lack written records, or decide matters beyond their jurisdiction.

Evidence from Uganda indicates that customary institutions remain important where formal systems are weak, especially for poorer communities, but should be connected to lawful referral and oversight (Nkonya, Pender and Kato, 2008; Laine, 2026).

These results suggest that local mechanisms should be recognised as part of a tiered system rather than used as substitutes for statutory institutions. Districts should define which matters elders or committees may mediate, require voluntary participation and written outcomes, and establish referral for ownership, criminal, administrative or rights violations. Training should cover mediation, evidence, gender and disability inclusion, conflicts of interest, record keeping and appeal. Performance should be assessed through accessibility, timeliness, settlement implementation and user perceptions of fairness.

4.4.8 Availability of Conflict Resolution Mechanisms

The results revealed that, of the 11 districts covered, only Madi Okollo and Koboko reported conflict-resolution mechanisms that were both accessible and trusted. This is among the report's most consequential findings because rights are insecure when users cannot obtain timely and impartial remedy. Effective natural-resource grievance systems require clear entry points, predictable timelines, transparency, protection against retaliation, appeal and referral, while unresolved structural claims must remain open to competent land or judicial institutions (FAO, 2005; World Bank, 2024). Trust should not be inferred from the existence of a committee. It must be demonstrated through use, fairness, timeliness and the implementation of outcomes.

It's important to note that weak remedy systems may cause parties to resort to political influence, security actors, retaliatory extraction or violence. Every monitored site should display a tiered grievance pathway from community and sub-county entry points to district, sector-agency and judicial review. Case registers should protect privacy while recording issue type, affected groups, response time, decision, appeal and implementation. Independent review should be available for complaints against the managing authority itself. User-satisfaction and outcome data should be disaggregated by sex, disability, age, refugee or host status and user category.

4.4.9 Community Awareness of external reporting channels

Communities in five districts out of 11 covered were aware of external reporting channels, four were unaware, and two had no clear data. Uneven awareness constrains accountability where local structures are inactive, captured or implicated in abuse. External channels are

especially important for reporting illegal commercial extraction, corruption, pollution, rights violations and unresolved complaints. However, multiple uncoordinated hotlines or offices can produce referral loops without remedy. Effective reporting requires a visible institutional owner, case tracking, confidentiality, feedback and publication of aggregate performance.

The users who lack safe external channels may remain silent, allowing harm to continue and weakening confidence in lawful management. Districts should publish a referral directory covering local councils, district technical officers, MWE, UWA, NEMA, police for alleged crimes, land institutions, ombuds or oversight bodies, and qualified civil-society support. A common case-management protocol should prevent duplication and specify response and escalation times. Whistle-blower safeguards and confidential options are necessary where political protection or retaliation is feared.

Thus, section 4.4 shows that governance is very weak at the interfaces between rights, institutions and implementation. The priority is not to create more committees in isolation, but to connect verified tenure and user rights, representative structures, financed plans, coordinated enforcement, transparent benefits and trusted remedies. These findings also have a public-finance implication. Environmental mandates that are not translated into staffing, transport, geospatial equipment, operating funds and restoration budgets remain nominal. National agencies should establish minimum functionality standards and technical oversight, while district program budgets identify site-specific outputs. Outcome indicators should include resources under approved and financed plans, permit compliance, restoration survival, disputes resolved, grievances closed, user satisfaction and the distribution of decision-making and benefits across user groups.

5.0 KEY INTERVENTIONS, GOOD PRACTICES AND CHALLENGES

5.1 Key Interventions in West Nile

Government, development-partner and civil-society interventions in West Nile increasingly combine conservation, livelihoods, climate resilience, displacement response and peacebuilding. This integrated direction is consistent with the monitoring evidence, which links degradation to insecure access, energy demand, poverty, contested tenure and institutional weakness. The relevant policy test is not the number or value of projects. It is whether interventions reduce harmful extraction, restore ecosystem functions, secure legitimate rights, distribute benefits fairly and strengthen institutions that will remain after external financing ends. Projects should therefore be assessed against a shared landscape baseline and district plan rather than through stand-alone output indicators.

Investing in Forest and Protected Areas for Climate Smart Development (IFPA-CD).

The Investing in Forests and Protected Areas for Climate-Smart Development project links protected-area and forest management to jobs, tourism, restoration and community benefits in refugee-hosting landscapes. Its stated objective is to improve sustainable management and increase benefits to communities, making tenure, access agreements, benefit distribution and safeguards central to performance (MWE, 2025; World Bank, 2024). Districts should use the project to establish joint ecological and social baselines, formalise collaborative agreements, disclose benefit flows and integrate recurrent functions into agency and district budgets. Mid-term and completion assessments should test whether resource condition and household benefits improve together, including for people whose access is restricted.

JICA Green Growth, Agroforestry and Sustainable Natural Resource Management Project.

The Uganda-Japan initiative builds on JICA's West Nile assessment, which identified the need for sustainable forest and natural-resource management in a landscape shaped by high woodfuel demand, agricultural pressure and displacement (JICA, 2021). Agroforestry and green-growth activities can provide fuelwood, fodder, soil protection

and income, but adoption and ecological additionality should be demonstrated beyond demonstration plots. Monitoring should cover tree survival, farmer retention, rights to planted trees, women's access to inputs, reduced extraction from natural forests and integration with district extension services.

Building Peace Through Sustainable Access to and Management of Natural Resources in West Nile and Central Equatoria (PAMANA) – Sustainable Access to and Management of Natural Resources

PAMANA framed natural-resource access as a peace, livelihood and gender-equity issue in Koboko and Yumbe and across the border in Central Equatoria. Its design sought to reduce resource conflict and pressure by building local capacities and supporting vulnerable host, refugee and displaced populations (Austrian Development Agency, 2024). This is relevant where statutory, customary and cross-border institutions overlap. Successor programmes should retain documented agreements, functional mediation and referral pathways, and evidence on disputes resolved, rights clarified, pressure reduced and benefits received by women and vulnerable groups.

Ecosystem restoration and sustainable livelihoods interventions.

Restoration initiatives in Terego and other refugee-hosting landscapes combine wetland and woodland restoration, agroforestry, natural regeneration and livelihood support. Such packages can reduce pressure only if the livelihood component is economically viable and the degradation driver is actually displaced or removed. Reported hectares, seedlings and participants should be complemented by independently verified survival, vegetation or hydrological recovery, maintenance, tenure and user-right safeguards, and avoided extraction over several seasons (Ssekuubwa et al., 2023).

Refugee-hosting area environmental and energy interventions

Energy and environmental interventions around refugee settlements address a major driver of woody-biomass demand. FAO and World Bank analysis of northern Uganda recommends combining restoration, sustainable wood supply, energy access and district planning for both refugees and host communities (FAO and World Bank, 2018). OPM, MWE, MEMD, UNHCR and host districts should therefore plan household energy, woodlots, food security, land access and ecosystem restoration as one package. Restrictions imposed without affordable alternatives may shift extraction or transfer disproportionate costs to women and vulnerable households.

Development Response to Displacement Impacts Project (DRDIP)

DRDIP demonstrates the value of combining environmental management, livelihoods, infrastructure and local-government capacity in refugee-hosting districts. Phase II continues this integrated natural-resource-management approach across host districts and settlements (OPM, 2025; World Bank, 2025). The main governance risk is that infrastructure and livelihood investments may create cumulative environmental pressure unless screened against district landscape plans. Common safeguards, georeferenced investments, shared indicators, benefit tracking and accessible grievance mechanisms should therefore apply across components.

Across the portfolio, five implementation lessons emerge. First, livelihood and energy alternatives must be economically viable, accessible to high-pressure users and demonstrably reduce harmful extraction. Second, participation must include authority, transparent benefit sharing and remedy, especially for women, youth, persons with disabilities, customary users, refugees and host communities. Third, projects should strengthen statutory and customary institutions through documented mandates and shared reporting rather than parallel committees. Fourth, ecological and rights outcomes should be monitored together. Fifth, every project should have an exit plan identifying the permanent institution, budget, data system and accountability arrangement that will continue each function.

The portfolio provides an opportunity to move from scattered projects to a regional natural-resource compact. MWE could convene NEMA, UWA, OPM, MLHUD, MAAIF, development partners and West Nile local governments around shared priority landscapes, minimum governance standards, a consolidated investment map and annual results review.

The remaining gap is institutionalisation. Projects may finance restoration and committees without settling control, use, benefit and grievance questions. District councils and national agencies should therefore require exit and sustainability plans that identify the institution, budget line, data system and accountability arrangement that will continue each function.

5.2 Summary of good practices

The practices below are promising because they address more than one dimension of the problem, but they should be treated as candidates for replication rather than proven models. Scale-up should depend on documented rights, local legitimacy, ecological effectiveness, equitable benefits, affordability and institutional continuity.

Customary institutions provide locally legitimate rules and mediation,

as illustrated by clan involvement in sand-resource management and disputes. Their strength lies in local knowledge, accessibility and social legitimacy. Their replication should require documented and publicly known rules, non-discrimination, transparent fees, records of decisions and referral to competent statutory institutions where ownership, criminal conduct or administrative authority is contested. This reflects FAO guidance that customary tenure should be recognised while protecting legitimate rights and access to justice (FAO, 2012, 2016).

Community organisations and local environmental structures have mobilised users for monitoring, wetland protection and restoration. This is good practice where participation is connected to a defined mandate, decision authority and government response. Inclusion claims should be verified through leadership, attendance, influence, benefits and grievance use, disaggregated by sex, age, disability, customary status and refugee or host status. Project-created structures should be integrated into lawful local-government arrangements before external support ends.

Farmer-managed natural regeneration, agroforestry, riverbank planting, wetland-buffer marking and restrictions on destructive fishing gear provide practical models for combining production and restoration. Assisted natural regeneration can improve biomass and ecological function, but recovery is slow and uneven and therefore requires long-term monitoring (Ssekuubwa et al., 2023). Scale-up should be conditional on secure rights to land and trees, suitable species and sites, survival and maintenance plans, protection from fire and grazing, and measured reduction in pressure on natural ecosystems.

Volunteer monitoring and local enforcement extend the reach of understaffed authorities, but monitoring alone may shift harmful activity to unmonitored areas if it is not linked to broader rules, incentives and enforcement (Eisenbarth, Graham and Rigterink, 2021). Districts should formalise monitor mandates, confidentiality, reporting and feedback, protect monitors from retaliation and retain statutory responsibility for investigation. Coverage should extend across connected landscapes and combine local observation with agency inspection and geospatial evidence.

Joint monitoring by district officers, community representatives and civil society connects citizen observation with official responsibility and creates a shared evidence base. Its replicable value lies in combining perspectives and generating agreed actions. Future rounds should use georeferenced baselines, consistent definitions, documentary verification, action trackers and public follow-up. Community evidence

should inform budgets, enforcement and restoration decisions, not remain a stand-alone report.

Beekeeping, horticulture, agroforestry and efficient cooking technologies may reduce pressure while diversifying income and energy sources. They should not automatically be labelled alternatives unless users can access inputs, land, markets and extension and the activity replaces harmful extraction. Targeting should prioritise resource-dependent households and women, refugees, youth and poorer users who may face entry barriers. Monitoring should compare income, adoption, woodfuel or extraction reduction and distribution of benefits.

Collaborative forest management in Yumbe and Koboko offers a legal and institutional platform for joint stewardship, negotiated access and livelihoods. Uganda's evidence shows that CFM can improve forest condition but may deliver limited or uneven livelihood gains unless rights, obligations and benefit sharing are explicit (Turyahabwe et al., 2013; Egunyu, Reed and Sinclair, 2021). MWE and districts should publish agreements, verify representative membership, track obligations and benefits on both sides, and provide accessible grievance and review procedures.

Sensitisation and locally agreed rules are useful when tied to visible boundaries, feasible alternatives, accessible permits, consistent sanctions and trusted remedies. Awareness without enforcement or benefits rarely changes incentives. The Mt. Kei management plan provides a potential coordination framework, but its value depends on legal and customary boundary clarification, inter-district ownership, adequate finance, user awareness and routine performance review.

5.3 Challenges

The challenges form a reinforcing system rather than a collection of isolated problems. Weak staffing, finance, transport, data and coordination reduce planning and enforcement. This enables encroachment and commercial extraction, which degrade resources and intensify disputes. Unclear tenure, political interference and opaque benefits then weaken trust and reporting. Climate shocks, displacement pressures and limited livelihood alternatives increase dependence on the same declining resources. Research on decentralised environmental governance in Uganda supports this diagnosis, showing that institutional and systemic capacity, not individual training alone, determines whether local mandates are implemented (Nakakaawa et al., 2010). The appropriate response is an

integrated governance, rights and financing package.

Governance, policy and institutional capacity

Where authority, finance and accountability are misaligned, management becomes selective and reactive. Natural resources deteriorate while customary, subsistence and marginalised users face insecure access. The binding response is to clarify mandates and tenure, finance minimum operational functions, publish decisions and revenues, and connect community structures to statutory institutions.

a) Political interference, alleged corruption, unclear tenure, weak by-laws, understaffing and poor coordination reduce the credibility of enforcement and create opportunities for selective compliance.

b) District natural-resource units lack sufficient operational finance, field staff, transport and equipment to discharge planning, inspection and restoration responsibilities.

c) Management arrangements often lack written mandates, approved plans, documented decisions and transparent revenue or benefit-sharing systems.

d) Community institutions are absent or weak in several sites, while project-created bodies are not consistently integrated into statutory local-government structures.

e) Unresolved ownership and boundary claims, including clan disputes, make enforcement and investment vulnerable to contestation.

f) Information does not move reliably among communities, district departments and national agencies, reducing early warning and coordinated response.

g) Together, these gaps show that implementation capacity, accountability and legal clarity are the binding constraints.

Encroachment and unsustainable extraction

Treating all users alike obscures the difference between livelihood dependence and high-volume commercial extraction. Controls should target ecological harm and commercial pressure while protecting legitimate customary and subsistence rights, providing transition support and applying restoration liability to responsible actors.

a) Logging, charcoal production, cultivation, sand mining, pole cutting, destructive fishing, fire and overgrazing occur in or near vulnerable sites.

b) Open access and poorly differentiated rules allow subsistence needs and commercial extraction to be treated alike, weakening both protection and fairness.

c) Pressure is intensified by population growth, displacement, fuel and food insecurity, and inadequate alternative livelihoods.

d) Weak boundary demarcation and incomplete resource inventories limit detection, prosecution and restoration planning.

e) The result is declining ecological function and rising livelihood risk, consistent with national evidence on ecosystem degradation (NEMA, 2024).

Rights, participation and social accountability

Physical entry does not amount to meaningful access if users cannot influence rules, share benefits or obtain remedy. District and project systems should measure voice, benefit distribution, complaint resolution and exposure to sanctions across user groups, with particular attention to women, youth, persons with disabilities, customary users, refugees and poorer households.

a) Awareness of lawful use, permits, restrictions and complaint channels is uneven, and participation is not consistently linked to decision-making or benefits.

b) Women, youth, persons with disabilities, refugees and poorer users may have limited physical access and remain underrepresented in governance and benefit sharing.

c) Informants are unwilling to report illegal activity when political protection, retaliation or lack of institutional response is expected.

d) Customary norms are weakening in some sites, while their relationship with statutory rules is often undocumented.

e) These conditions reduce community incentives to invest in stewardship and can turn conservation measures into sources of grievance.

Planning, infrastructure and climate resilience

Uncoordinated projects can shift pressure between sites and create stranded restoration investments. Districts require spatially integrated plans linking resource protection, energy, livelihoods, disaster risk, infrastructure and climate adaptation, supported by maintenance finance and safeguards for affected users.

a) Several sites lack current, costed management or restoration plans, making budget allocation and performance measurement difficult.

b) Livelihood, tourism and value-chain infrastructure is limited, and poorly timed inputs, such as seedlings delivered outside suitable planting periods, reduce value for money.

c) Climate variability increases drought, flood, erosion and ecosystem stress, but local plans do not consistently link resource management, disaster risk and adaptation.

d) Externally funded initiatives are not always mapped against district priorities, creating duplication, geographic gaps and sustainability risks.

e) A consolidated district and regional investment framework is required to sequence protection, restoration, livelihoods and institutional strengthening.

Monitoring and evidence

Missing baselines and inconsistent case records make it impossible to determine whether ecological condition, rights security or institutional performance is improving. A minimum regional dataset should combine ecological, extraction, permit, revenue, conflict, participation, benefit and grievance indicators and should be subject to verification and public review.

a) Monitoring relies heavily on qualitative observation, while many sites lack verified boundaries, ecological baselines, extraction records and consistent case data.

b) Missing and contradictory responses weaken comparison across districts and can mask disputes or institutional failure.

c) Districts need a minimum dataset covering resource condition, authorised and unauthorised use, permits and revenue, restoration, enforcement, conflicts, participation and benefit distribution.

d) MWE and NEMA should standardise indicators and reporting templates, while national agencies provide quality assurance and feedback.

e) Without stronger data, decision-makers cannot target scarce resources or demonstrate whether interventions are improving ecological and governance outcomes.

6.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The monitoring exercise identified a consistent pattern across the purposively selected sites. Livelihood dependence was high, ecological pressure was widespread and governance arrangements were incomplete or weakly connected. The cardinal conclusion was that physical access has not been converted into secure, equitable and sustainable use. In many sites, boundaries and bundles of rights were unclear, plans were absent or unfunded, community structures lacked recognised authority, coordination was uneven and grievance mechanisms were not trusted. These conditions could produce two harmful outcomes at once, resource depletion through poorly controlled use and unjust exclusion through discretionary enforcement. National evidence and research on Uganda's decentralised environmental governance reinforce the need to address institutional capacity, tenure, finance and accountability together (NEMA, 2024; Nakakaawa et al., 2010). The response should therefore combine rights clarification, representative institutions, predictable financing, ecological restoration, viable energy and livelihood alternatives, landscape monitoring and accessible remedy.

6.1 Priority recommendations for national institutions

a) Establishing minimum governance standards. MWE and NEMA should issue a common framework requiring verified boundaries, recognized rights and users, approved and costed management plans, representative structures, permit and revenue records, ecological indicators and tiered grievance mechanisms. MWE, UWA and other agencies should apply the framework through annual joint performance reviews with districts.

b) Clarifying tenure and resolving overlapping claims before restriction or investment. MLHUD should support district land boards and area land committees to undertake participatory rights mapping, document statutory and customary interests, and refer unresolved ownership questions for competent determination. This is consistent with responsible-tenure principles that protect legitimate rights and access to justice (FAO, 2012, 2016).

c) Finance decentralized mandates. MoFPED, MWE and the Ministry of Local Government should review staffing norms and intergovernmental financing for district natural-resource functions. A minimum operational package should cover technical staff, transport, geospatial tools, inspections, conflict management, restoration and public reporting, with additional weighting for high-pressure, cross-boundary and refugee-hosting districts.

d) Integrating displacement, energy, land and ecosystems. OPM, UNHCR, MEMD, MAAIF, MWE and host local governments should implement joint landscape plans that combine household energy, food security, land access, livelihoods and restoration for refugee and host communities. The framework should prevent restrictions from transferring disproportionate costs to vulnerable households and should track benefits and grievances (FAO and World Bank, 2018; World Bank, 2025).

e) Aligning projects with permanent institutions. National programs and development partners should use district-approved landscape plans, shared safeguards, common indicators and government reporting systems. Approval should require an exit plan identifying the institution, recurrent budget, asset ownership, data custody and accountability mechanism that will continue each function.

f) Create a regional evidence and accountability platform. MWE and NEMA should standardize a minimum dataset for resource condition, use, permits, revenue, restoration, conflicts, participation, benefits and grievances. Annual West Nile reviews should compare progress, identify cross-district risks and publish corrective actions.

6.2 Priority recommendations for local governments

a. Validating a geo-referenced natural-resource and rights register. Each district should identify resource boundaries, condition, responsible authority, statutory and customary users, permitted activities, disputes and high-pressure zones. The register should be updated through participatory verification and used in development plans and program budgets.

b. Prepare and finance site management plans. High-risk sites should have approved plans defining zones, ecological limits, seasonal and user-specific rules, restoration targets, responsibilities,

safeguards, benefit sharing, finance and monitoring. Public summaries should be available in local languages.

c. Strengthen representative site institutions. Councils should recognize or rationalize community structures, clarify mandates, ensure inclusive leadership, require transparent accounts and connect them to parish, sub-county and district bodies. Functionality should be reviewed annually against decisions, compliance, benefits and ecological outcomes.

d. Differentiate regulation and support. Ordinances, by-laws, permits and enforcement should distinguish subsistence and cultural use from commercial extraction and destructive practices. Restrictions should follow due process, include appeal and be paired with targeted energy and livelihood alternatives where vulnerable users bear material costs.

e. Establish coordinated grievance and conflict systems. Districts should maintain conflict and complaint registers, publish entry points and timelines, recognize lawful local mediation, refer ownership and rights questions to competent institutions, and protect complainants from retaliation. Outcomes and appeals should be tracked and reported.

f. Coordinate shared ecosystems and investments. Neighboring districts should jointly plan and monitor Mt. Kei, catchments, wetlands and river systems using common maps, rules and indicators. All external projects should be mapped against district priorities and screened for cumulative environmental and social effects.

g. Institutionalize monitoring and public accountability. The Local Governments should undertake coordinated joint natural resource monitoring to ensure joint problem solving and interventions. The district councils should review findings, assign actions, provide budgets and publish implementation progress, including outcomes for women, youth, persons with disabilities, refugees, host communities and customary users.

District	Key Issues Identified	Improved Recommendations
Adjumani	Sand mining disputes (Lowi clan claims), charcoal production, weak by-laws, and unclear rights.	• DLG and MWE should mediate and legally resolve the Lowi clan dispute over sand mines. • DLG should formulate by-laws for sand mining and charcoal burning, ensuring inclusivity of women and youth. • DLG and CSOs should strengthen community sensitization on sustainable use.
Arua	Sand mining, weak/ absent management arrangements, lack of a management plan, and resource-based disputes.	• DLG and MWE should develop a resource management plan for Ezuku Forest. • MWE should strengthen collaboration with Orivu sand mining groups for restoration. • MWE and DLG should establish clear community-led structures for sustainable governance.
Koboko	Forest pressures, some restrictions in place, community structures exist but weak.	• DLG and MWE should register and formalize CFM Institutions around Mt. Kei • MWE should strengthen Collaborative Forest Management (CFM) institutions around Mt. Kei. • MWE and CSOs should provide financial/ logistical support for monitoring. • CSOs and LGs should support alternative livelihoods like beekeeping.
Madi-Okollo	Wildlife resources under UWA, strong community structure, but conflicts over fishing grounds.	• UWA should strengthen UWA–community co-management agreements. • UWA should provide alternative livelihoods (fish farming, tourism ventures). • MWE, UWA, and DLG should train the community on the sustainable use of wildlife and riverbank resources.
Maracha	Limited conservation initiatives, community disputes, absence of by-laws, no management plan.	• DLG and LLGs should develop and implement a restoration action plan for riverbanks along River Oluffe • DLGs should enact bylaws on resource use. • DLGs and CSOs should promote community-led restoration (tree planting, catchment protection). • CSOs strengthen local structures for conflict resolution.
Moyo	Forest under MWE, limited awareness of rights, external interference, and stray animal damage.	• MWE, DLGs and CSOs should conduct awareness campaigns on rights and sustainable use of wetlands in the districts. • MWE, and DLG should demarcate boundaries for Gbalala Wetland to control unsustainable exploitation • DLG should engage MWE on the need for boundary demarcation. • MWE should promote controlled grazing practices. • MWE should establish and promote community-led monitoring.

District	Key Issues Identified	Improved Recommendations
Nebbi	Forest disputes over benefit sharing, visible environmental harm, weak management, poor community monitoring.	• MWE, DLGs and CSOs should resolve benefit-sharing disputes through structured agreements. • MWE should introduce community patrols and reporting systems. • MWE should promote agroforestry and sustainable harvesting practices.
Obongi	Strong community management (Waka CFM), but encroachment of 300 ha, and a need for stronger by-laws.	• DLGs and MWE should support Waka CFM with legal recognition and resources. • MWE should reforest degraded 300 ha through community–NGO partnerships. • DLGs and CSOs should strengthen enforcement of bylaws with local leaders.
Terego	Wetland pressure from refugees and hosts, weak community structures, and localised conflicts over fishing.	• DLHs, OPM and UNHCR and CSOs should strengthen community wetland committees and enforce buffer zones. • MWE should Plan and Budget for demarcating wetlands and popularize guidelines for wetland use • MWE and DLGs should promote alternative livelihoods (bee-keeping, horticulture) to reduce pressure on natural resources • DLG, OPM and CSOs should mediate host–refugee conflicts over fishing grounds.
Yumbe	Mt. Kei forest under MWE, high exploitation (charcoal, timber), limited rights awareness, disputes over cultivation. In Bidibidi, people who came with their animals settled in the central forest reserve especially in Kilaji area. The entire region has only 3 environment protection police.	• MWE, OPM and CSOs should expand CFM coverage for Mt. Kei with inclusive membership. • OPM, UNHCR and CSOs should promote energy-saving stoves and briquettes to reduce tree cutting. • OPM, UNHCR and CSOs should train youth/women in alternative enterprises. • OPM, UNHCR, DLG and CSOs should strengthen conflict mediation over farmland access. • MWE should liaise with NEMA and Uganda police to ensure that every district has their respective enforcement force. • Kei CFR is a boundary resource and hence DLGs should to promote transboundary collaboration between the two countries (Uganda and South Sudan).

District	Key Issues Identified	Improved Recommendations
Zombo	Nyagak riverbanks under customary control, erosion of traditional norms, lack of management plan, environmental harm. Nyagak river and wetland is publically owned and managed, benefits the whole region with Hydro Electric Power. There are no restrictions on activities implemented along the river bank. For example, no restrictions on papyrus harvesting but rather on wetland encroachment. The river bank has a number of villages, Sub counties adjacent to river banks Jang Okoro, Aka, Athuma, Abanga, Nyapeya, Paidha town council, Paidha Sub county, Atyak sub county.	• MWE should support customary leaders in enforcing access norms. • MWE and DLG should develop a resource management plan. • MWE and DLG should promote agroforestry and riverbank stabilization. • DLG and CSOs Strengthen awareness on rights and sustainable practices.

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ABOUT ACODE

The Advocates Coalition for Development and Environment (ACODE) is an independent public policy research and advocacy think tank based in Uganda. ACODE's work focuses on four programme areas: Economic Governance; Environment and Natural Resources Governance; Democracy, Peace and Security; Science, Technology and Innovation. For the last eight consecutive years, ACODE has been ranked as the best think tank in Uganda and one of the top 100 think tanks in Sub-Saharan Africa and globally in the Global Think Tanks Index Report published by the University of Pennsylvania Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program (TTCSP).

ABOUT WENDA

The West Nile Development Association (WENDA) is a regional association of local governments in Uganda, established in 1993 to foster sustainable peace, inclusive governance, and socio-economic development across the West Nile sub-region. WENDA's vision is "a prosperous and peaceful West Nile with thriving communities". WENDA coordinates 12 local governments, two municipalities, and Arua City to address regional challenges collectively. WENDA plays a critical role in managing the region's refugee and host community response through its Regional Engagement Forum (WN-REF). It champions agro-industrialisation and advocates greater financial autonomy for local governments and infrastructure development to build prosperous, self-reliant communities.

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