

“It feels like we are non-Ugandans...” – Conservation Conflict and Justice in Post- Conflict Acholi, Uganda

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Abstract

Conservation conflicts pose a multifaceted challenge in Uganda, frequently resulting in injustices for local people residing near protected areas. In the Acholi region particularly, marginalization and displacement due to conflict have significantly influenced local perceptions and interactions with conservation initiatives. Through a conservation justice lens, this thesis delves into these dynamics of conservation conflicts in the Acholi region where historical injustices intersect with contemporary conservation efforts. It explores the multifaceted factors influencing these conflicts, considering socio-economic, political, and cultural dimensions. Through eight semi-structured interviews and nine focus group discussions with people affected by these conservation conflicts, I examined the narratives and experiences of marginalized individuals, seeking to uncover how these conflicts relate to broader injustices stemming from the legacies of the LRA-war. The affected Acholi people recognize the benefits of conservation due to elephants' cultural significance and their economic contribution through tourism, despite concerns about the mismanagement of funds. However, the impacts of conservation conflicts severely exacerbate socio-economic vulnerabilities, deepening poverty among subsistence farmers and perpetuating inequalities rooted in the legacies of the LRA-war. Furthermore, the comparison drawn between the constant fear of elephant encounters and traumatic memories of the LRA-war illustrates the psychological toll inflicted upon people living amidst elephant conflict zones. The lack of meaningful government intervention in addressing these conservation conflicts, including the failure to address or even recognize the losses incurred by local people due to elephant raids, perpetuates feelings of neglect and marginalization among the population – the feeling of being "non-Ugandan". The results show that conservation conflicts in the Acholi region intertwine with historical marginalization entrenched by colonial legacies and perpetuated through political instability. The disparities in the Acholi region underscore persistent challenges, leaving it disadvantaged and socially fragmented. These conservation conflicts, reflective of broader injustices, emphasize the urgent need for their resolution. Addressing these conflicts and injustices is imperative, given their intertwining with historical injustices and disrupted livelihoods, necessitating simultaneous attention alongside social and economic recovery efforts to effectively tackle post-conflict injustices. Furthermore, resolving conservation conflicts could contribute significantly to fostering peace and stability in the region.

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1. Introduction

Meet Okello¹, a young farmer from a small village in east Acholi, Uganda. He spent his early years in an Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camp due to the presence of the Lord's Resistance Army in northern Uganda. Within the camp, stories of elephants roaming the distant plains were often shared among the displaced community by the elders. Okello shares these childhood memories with me, "when I was young, I used to like the elephants. We were eager to see it and very excited to see it," he recalled. He emphasized the cultural significance of elephants in Acholiland stating, "this totem, we don't kill it, we want that our children can see them." However, Okello's tone shifted as he discussed the challenges they now face, "we could plant crops and sell them for school fees, and medicine, and now it is not possible because of the elephants, who eat all the crops." Reflecting on the changing dynamics of their relationship with elephants, Okello expressed sadness, saying, "it makes us sad the way we interact with elephants now. We didn't expect it to destroy our crops. We sometimes went to the park, to see the elephant. Because it is our Acholi pride, so what happens now makes it sad." This shift in sentiment is compounded by the unexpected consequence of crop destruction by elephants, a direct threat to their livelihoods and well-being. Despite these challenges, Okello highlighted his village's resilience and determination to coexist with elephants. "with the elders, we concluded, that we need to find ways to live besides the elephants. Because the elephants will stay, this is now their home." However, Okello expressed frustration with the lack of government support, lamenting, "but we are not being heard about our problems by the government, so we are not on good terms with them." highlighting a disconnect between the experiences and needs of Okello's family and the responsiveness of the government to address them. He perceived a sense of neglect, comparing their treatment to that of others, "it feels like we are non-Ugandans because if we are real Ugandans, they would have taken care of us, like people from western Uganda." Okello's frustration with the government's lack of support is indicative of a larger issue of neglect and indifference towards the Acholi community. This points to ongoing disparities in development and political representation that have persisted over time. Additionally, historical conflicts and underdevelopment have further exacerbated socio-economic inequalities in the Acholi region. His perception of inferior treatment compared to other regions underscores systemic biases within Ugandan society (McMullen et al., 2012; Omach, 2021; Vandeputte, 2022). Okello's experience highlights the need to address conflicts like crop destruction by elephants by not only mitigating isolated incidents but also by understanding the deeper issues of inequity and marginalization. This understanding is crucial for fostering a coexistence that is just and sustainable for both humans and conservation.

1.1 Conservation conflicts in Uganda

Okello's story offers insight into the complex relationship between humans and wildlife, particularly elephants, in regions like northern Uganda. Such conflicts are common in Uganda, where the coexistence of humans and wildlife gives rise to what are known as human-wildlife conflicts (Brackowski et al., 2023). These conflicts encompass a spectrum of issues, including direct confrontations between humans and wildlife over resources such as land and crops. Initially, it appears that a considerable number of these conflicts are focused on the occurrences of e.g. elephants destroying crops and the resulting impact on affected individuals.

However, scholars are increasingly critiquing the usage of the term "human-wildlife conflict," given its tendency to overlap with human-human conflicts over resources and conservation efforts, thus masking the true nature of the root causes of the conflict (Madden, 2004; Peterson et al., 2010, 2013; Redpath et al., 2015; Woodroffe et al., 2005). While confrontations between humans and wildlife can spark conflicts, these disputes primarily originate from disagreements among humans regarding wildlife management, highlighting the significant role of human-human tensions in shaping these interactions (Dickman, 2010; Peterson et al., 2010). This highlights the crucial need to grasp the wider context of human-wildlife conflicts, as such conflicts stem not only from their immediate effects but are also deeply intertwined with complex power dynamics, changing attitudes, and values rooted in social and cultural history (Redpath et al., 2015). Consequently, conflicts typically arise from various origins, including varying stakeholder perspectives, exclusion from conservation planning, challenges in negotiations, or historical elements that can make conservation appear potentially threatening (Soliku & Schraml, 2018). Therefore, there is value in reframing adverse incidents of HWC as 'conservation conflicts' (Redpath et al., 2013) or 'human-human conflicts' (Pooley et al., 2017), as such conflicts seldom manifest solely between humans and wildlife but rather involve complex interactions among various human stakeholders. Reframing these incidents broadens the scope of analysis, moving beyond the simple perception of wildlife as the sole source of conflict and considering the complex interplay of social, economic, and ecological factors involved. Through this approach, it promotes the involvement of a variety of stakeholders, such as policymakers, conservationists, and local people, emphasizing their influential role rather than being viewed as mere external actors. This encourages the development of collaborative approaches to conflict resolution, fostering cooperation and shared efforts in resolving conflicts.

Conservation conflicts are widespread in Uganda, featuring increasing conflicts such as crop destruction by baboons and elephants, exacerbating food insecurity and poverty (Gemedda & Meles, 2018; UWA, 2018). However, these conflicts are complex and extend beyond isolated incidents like crop destruction by elephants. In Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, for instance, these conflicts manifest in various ways. They include the continual threat posed by wild animals, which not only endanger human lives but also disrupt local livelihoods and agricultural practices. Moreover, local people face imposed restrictions regarding their traditional use of natural resources for subsistence, further deepening their economic vulnerability. Additionally, the absence of sufficient compensation mechanisms for those adversely affected by conservation efforts compounds these injustices, leaving affected individuals without recourse or support (Baker et al., 2012; Madden, 2008; Tumusiime & Vedeld, 2015). These issues collectively contribute to a complex and challenging landscape where the needs of conservation and those of local people often clash, perpetuating significant inequities for local stakeholders. Studies suggest that the intensity of these conflicts can serve as a catalyst, prompting individuals to resort to illegal activities such as poaching (Moreto, 2019) or retaliate through violence, for instance, the poisoning of lions by pastoralists due to lions killing their livestock (Akampurira & Marijnen, 2024). Those most affected by these conflicts are indigenous and local people, who are frequently marginalized and unrecognized (Ampumuza et al., 2020). In Queen Elizabeth National Park, for instance, conservation conflicts encompass the dispossession of local people from their ancestral lands and livelihoods. There are cases where

wildlife has fatally harmed people, yet these victims often go unnamed and unacknowledged, creating an impression that their lives are deemed less valuable than those of animals (Akampurira & Marijnen, 2024). The lack of recognition not only deepens the wounds of loss and suffering within affected communities but also underscores broader systemic injustices, where the human toll of conservation efforts is systematically sidelined in favour of wildlife preservation goals. Such disregard compounds the trauma experienced by those directly affected and perpetuates a cycle of disempowerment and marginalization, where the voices and rights of local people are routinely ignored. This context sheds light on the complexities of conservation efforts in Uganda, often leading to injustices for indigenous and local populations and perpetuating a cycle of inequality and disempowerment.

These examples from Uganda display a need for more justice in conservation affairs and there is a growing expectation for actors to ethically justify their actions (Brittain et al., 2020). Incorporating principles of conservation justice into decision-making processes is crucial for resolving such conflicts fairly and effectively, and they are not only necessary but also highly desirable and ethical (Lischka et al., 2018; Rudd et al., 2021). In the absence of considerations of justice, conservation conflicts are more likely to persist and escalate, leading to negative outcomes for both biodiversity conservation and human well-being (Shoreman-Ouimet & Kopnina, 2015; Vucetich et al., 2018). By acknowledging the historical context, contemporary challenges, and cultural values, conservation justice ensures the participation of affected communities, recognizes their rights and identity, and promotes equitable distribution of benefits (Dietsch et al., 2021; Nyhus, 2016). This approach fosters trust and reduces tensions among stakeholders, enhancing the chances of reaching mutually acceptable solutions to conservation conflicts (Young et al., 2016). Ultimately, conservation justice is essential in achieving lasting conservation outcomes that are both effective and socially just (Martin et al., 2015; Saif et al., 2022).

1.2 Conservations conflicts in post-conflict Acholi, northern Uganda

The Acholi region, in northern Uganda, offers a distinctive backdrop for conservation conflicts as decades of instability and conflict shaped unique relations between humans and in this case, elephants. For many years, the Acholi region bore witness to armed conflicts, including the notorious Lord's Resistance Army insurgency, which not only disrupted the lives of its inhabitants but also left indelible scars on the landscape (Akello, 2019; Finnström, 2008; Van Acker, 2004). People were forced to abandon their homes, farms, and traditional ways of life, seeking refuge in safer regions. However, with the conflict subsiding the Acholi region has undergone a challenging resurgence. Once displaced and dispersed, these communities have embarked on the complex task of rebuilding, adjusting to new lifestyles, and working to revive their cultural heritage (Giblin, 2014; Kligerman, 2009). With the return of the Acholi people to their ancestral lands, a sense of hope and rebuilding has taken hold, although this has not come without a struggle, as the region continues to face several significant challenges. Land grabbing, for example, has escalated into a pressing concern, giving rise to conflicts and disputes between government institutions and the Acholi communities as they vie for control of valuable land resources (Sulayman, 2015). This situation adds to the pre-existing historical marginalization of the Acholi people, who have long been politically and economically disadvantaged (Mabikke, 2011). In addition, the long-lasting trauma resulting from years of

conflict and displacement remains embedded in the Acholi community's collective memory, which could influence long-term social and economic stability (McMullen et al., 2012). It is within this post-conflict backdrop of return to the ancestral lands that the interactions between humans and elephants have gained particular significance, as the resettlement of the Acholi people into these areas has led to increased encounters and conflicts with wildlife, particularly elephants. This situation underscores the challenges of rebuilding livelihoods and securing food sources in a landscape now shared with elephants, which further complicates the recovery and stability of the Acholi people.

Historically, the Acholi region was home to thriving elephant populations, and elephants hold a sacred status as ancestors or totems within the Acholi culture (Brooks & Buss, 1962; Okot, 2019). Upon arrival in Gulu, the administrative hub of Acholiland, visitors are welcomed by a prominent statue of an elephant, while the Acholi flag and the insignia of local football teams feature an elephant. For the Acholi people, it represents not only strength and supremacy but also embodies the essence of a peaceful nation, but also the pride of the culture. Therefore, cultural symbols like the elephant can aid in fostering reconciliation and social cohesion among the Acholi people, helping to redefine their identity in the aftermath of conflict (Catherine, 2019; Lapwoch & Amone-P'Olak, 2016). While cultural representations such as the elephant could contribute to fostering reconciliation and solidarity among the Acholi, they can also create support for conservation efforts by symbolizing the preservation of natural heritage. Although there is a desire to peacefully coexist with elephants, the enduring impacts of marginalization and conflict have led to significant shifts in the relations between the people and elephants in the region (Oniba & Robertson, 2019).

Conservation conflicts are prevalent in northern Uganda, and hence the Acholi region, as marginalization and conflict-induced displacement have shaped how people view and interact with conservation efforts. In the post-conflict setting of northern Uganda, the dynamics of conservation conflicts remain relatively underexplored, and literature is scarce compared to the more extensively studied southern regions of the country, which could be linked to the decades of instability. The region, still grappling with the aftermath of decades-long conflict and displacement, presents a unique and complex backdrop for understanding conservation conflicts. One of the few studies involves the "Green Grabbing" Apaa case, which concerns a remote village in northern Uganda located within the East Madi Wildlife Reserve. This area has seen persistent violent evictions of residents, often carried out by the state, including the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) (Kobusingye, 2020; Serwajja, 2018). On one side, the UWA and the national army argue that the eviction of residents from Apaa is necessary to protect wildlife and maintain ecological integrity (Kobusingye et al., 2017). They emphasize the importance of the area as a wildlife corridor and aim to prevent poaching activities that threaten the animal populations moving between reserves. On the other side, residents of Apaa and their supporters assert that they have ancestral rights to the land and have been unfairly targeted for eviction. They argue that the government's actions result in loss of livelihoods and displacement of communities, leading to socio-economic hardship and human rights violations. The affected people face dispossession from their ancestral lands and livelihoods, exacerbating their already precarious post-conflict situation and undermining efforts for peacebuilding and reconciliation in the region (Lenhart, 2013). While the Apaa case offers a glimpse into the complexities of

conservation conflicts in the post-conflict setting of northern Uganda, it also underscores the pressing need for further research and analysis in this understudied area as it remains unclear how conservation conflicts can influence post-conflict contexts, and how conservation conflicts can evolve under these post-conflict circumstances.

The Acholi region, therefore, offers a distinctive backdrop for studying conservation conflicts in the aftermath of conflict. Despite the Acholi people's hopes of rebuilding their homes and their desire to coexist with elephants, the destruction of their crops by elephants leaves them feeling marginalized and frustrated (Sulayman, 2016). Hence, amidst the process of resettlement, the legacy of armed conflict and displacement, continuous marginalization, and trauma could be exacerbating the challenges posed by elephants and related conservation conflicts. Concerns arise among people about potential displacement once more and the revival of trauma in conflict with elephants which could have a serious impact on how people view and interact with elephants and conservation (Barua et al., 2013; Jadhav & Barua, 2012; Massé, 2016). Thus, when analysing conservation conflicts in the Acholi region, it's crucial to factor in the historical context, post-conflict challenges, and socio-economic and cultural values alongside conservation efforts, as these elements can profoundly impact both local people and conservation outcomes (Nyhus, 2016).

Considering the preceding discussion, conservation conflicts in Acholiland must be handled in a manner that can be considered just for the affected people. The importance of justice in conservation is amplified by the region's history of injustices. Acholi people have suffered horrendous injustices before, and the consequences of these injustices continue to impact daily life (see chapter 2.1). Conservation conflicts further complicate matters, affecting various aspects of life for the affected Acholi people. Consequently, people may feel marginalized, distrustful of authorities, or disengaged from decision-making processes, hindering efforts to mitigate conservation conflicts. Therefore, it is essential to prioritize justice in resolving conservation conflicts, particularly amid efforts for post-conflict recovery and reconciliation, especially when broader post-conflict justice frameworks are lacking. For that reason, I argue that solving these conservation conflicts and addressing conservation justice could contribute to post-conflict recovery, while simultaneously acknowledging that conservation justice may be unattainable without also addressing the underlying and broader post-conflict injustices. I hypothesize that the value of resolving conservation conflicts and advocating for conservation justice resides in their capacity to bolster post-conflict recovery and reconciliation efforts.

1.3 Research aim & research questions

Conservation conflicts in regions like the Acholi region in northern Uganda, present a complex challenge intersecting historical injustices, post-conflict dynamics, and contemporary conservation efforts. This study examines the complexities of these conflicts and considers historical contexts, cultural values, and the experiences of marginalized people, particularly those affected by displacement and years of armed conflict. With a conservation justice approach, I examine conservation conflicts in the Acholi region in Uganda, when elephants destroy livelihoods or kill people – and how such incidents can contribute to post-conflict injustices. The study will contribute to advancing understanding and discussion around issues of justice and reconciliation in the context of conservation. Furthermore, the study aims to examine how the narratives and experiences of the Acholi people affected by conservation injustices intersect with broader discussions of post-conflict justice. Examining these intersections contributes to the understanding of post-conflict justice processes. The Acholi people have endured decades of conflict and violence in northern Uganda, and their experiences of conservation injustices relate to broader efforts to achieve reconciliation and restitution in the aftermath of conflict. Through the identification of opportunities to resolve historical grievances and enhance sustainable peacebuilding, we can understand how conservation injustices fit within the context of post-conflict justice.

I aim to provide insights into the complexities of conservation justice to contribute to a deeper understanding of conservation conflicts in post-conflict regions and offer insights for more just, equitable, and sustainable conservation practices. Moreover, the study contributes to the literature on human-elephant relations and conservation conflicts in post-conflict contexts, as they are scarce, especially in northern Uganda. Ultimately, the findings of this research have the potential to inform more inclusive and participatory approaches to conservation that respect and improve the rights and interests of local people.

General research question:

How do conservation conflicts and injustices in post-conflict Acholi, Uganda, relate to broader injustices in the region linked to the legacies of the LRA-war?

Sub-research questions:

1. What are the underlying socio-economic, political, and cultural factors that influence conservation conflicts in the Acholi region?
2. Can conservation efforts in the Acholi region be considered just in terms of both recognition and distribution dimensions when addressing conservation conflicts?
3. How do the narratives and experiences of Acholi people affected by conservation injustices intersect with broader discussions of post-conflict justice?

2. Theoretical framework

To start the theoretical framework, I will give a brief overview of the historical context of conflict in Acholiland. Understanding this background is crucial as it sets the stage for why conservation issues in the region hold such significance. Next, I will give an overview of conservation in Uganda, providing a broader understanding of the landscape within which these issues operate. Then, I will explore the specifics of conservation conflicts and the concept of conservation justice, exploring the ethical and social complexities involved. Following that, I will discuss post-conflict justice, highlighting the importance of addressing the aftermath of conflict in Acholiland. Finally, I will explain how conservation justice intersects with the broader concept of post-conflict justice, discussing the connections between conservation and the recovery of areas affected by conflict.

2.1 Historical background of the conflict in the Acholi region

It is imperative to begin by discussing the historical context of marginalization, conflict, and post-conflict in the Acholi region to gain insight into the enduring socio-economic challenges faced by its population. The marginalization of Northern Uganda has deep historical roots, stretching back to the colonial era under British rule. Colonial policies systematically favoured and directed economic and social development toward southern and southeastern Uganda, leaving the north neglected and lagging in progress (Omach, 2021). During this time, the British administration implemented preferential policies that benefited southern Ugandans, particularly those from regions like Buganda, who were more receptive to Christianity and Westernization, thereby establishing them as the privileged bureaucratic elite (Savard et al., 2016). Conversely, northern Ugandans were marginalized and relegated to plantation and industrial labour roles (Kustenbauder, 2010). Moreover, the southern regions' development came at the expense of the north, further exacerbating economic disparities (Nannyonjo, 2005). Meanwhile, the Nilotic-speaking northern regions like Acholi remained largely underdeveloped, serving primarily as a reservoir of migrant labour and military recruits. This deliberate division along ethnic and socio-economic lines laid the foundation for sustained inequalities that continued to affect Northern Uganda even after Uganda gained independence.

Post-independence, political power in Uganda initially shifted to leaders from the south, further entrenching the marginalization of the north. Economic opportunities and development projects were primarily concentrated in southern regions, while the north lagged in infrastructure, education, and access to basic services (Laruni, 2015). The disparities between the north and south widened over time, exacerbating feelings of resentment and exclusion among northern Ugandans. The situation worsened significantly when Idi Amin's regime assumed power, marking an exceptionally bleak period in the history of northern Uganda. Amin's tenure was characterized by atrocious human rights violations, disproportionately affecting northern communities, especially the Acholi and Langi. Amin's rule had a devastating impact, resulting in an estimated 300,000 deaths primarily among northern Ugandans over his eight-year reign (Nannyonjo, 2005).

The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) adopted the narrative of Acholi marginalization, capitalizing on the marginalization experienced in northern Uganda, particularly among the Acholi, as a driver behind the decades-long conflict that ravaged the region (Hassan, 2022; Vorhölter, 2014).

The conflict resulted in widespread violence, displacement, and human rights abuses, with the Acholi forcibly relocated into internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, where they endured appalling living conditions and dependence on humanitarian aid. The displacement of millions of people from their homes had devastating consequences for Acholi society, uprooting families, disrupting traditional livelihoods, and eroding social cohesion (Vandeputte, 2022). Despite efforts to end the conflict and facilitate the return of displaced populations, the legacy of marginalization continues to shape the socio-economic landscape of northern Uganda. After more than twenty years of violent conflict and harsh counter-insurgency operations, northern Uganda emerged socially, economically, psychologically, and politically fractured, perpetuating the region's historical marginalization (McMullen et al., 2012; Omach, 2021).

Currently, Northern Uganda, including the Acholi region, continues to experience marginalization (Vandeputte, 2022). Acholiland continues to grapple with economic disadvantages, as evidenced by its consistently lower-than-average Human Development Index (Oxfam, 2017; UNDP, 2015). Access to education and livelihood opportunities remains limited, perpetuating cycles of poverty and marginalization (Hopwood, 2022; Kobusingye, 2020; Savard et al., 2016). The lack of investment in infrastructure and basic services further hinders the region's development potential (Denov, 2020). Furthermore, the displacement and resettlement into camps resulted in a deterioration of social values and order, leading to a decrease in social cohesion characterized by a neglect of responsibilities, escalating crime rates, and widespread substance abuse, eroding traditional norms. Moreover, family dynamics have been deeply affected by separation, orphanhood, and a surge in domestic violence (Nannyonjo, 2005).

In summary, the post-conflict era in Acholiland reveals a continuation of historical marginalization, entrenched by colonial legacies, and perpetuated through political instability. Despite efforts to address root causes, the Acholi region remains disadvantaged and socially fragmented, as the enduring disparities underscore persistent challenges. Addressing conservation conflicts and injustices is essential, as they are intertwined with historical injustices and disrupted livelihoods, requiring simultaneous attention alongside social and economic recovery efforts to tackle post-conflict injustices effectively. Moreover, resolving conservation conflicts contributes to fostering peace and stability in the region.

2.2 Conservation in Uganda

Before discussing conservation conflicts, I want to discuss the history of conservation and its approach in Uganda, as is vital for understanding the root causes and dynamics of conflicts, besides the broader post-conflict context. Uganda, renowned for its exceptional biodiversity, boasts ten national parks and numerous wildlife reserves (NEMA, 2016). These areas are valued for their rich ecosystems, stunning landscapes, and cultural significance, as mentioned in the Uganda Wildlife Act (UWA, 2019b). The primary aim of establishing these protected areas is to minimize human interference in wildlife habitats while also promoting tourism, which has emerged as Uganda's fastest-growing economic sector (UBOS & MTWA, 2023). Iconic species such as mountain gorillas, elephants, and lions attract tourists from around the world, generating revenue that is vital for conservation efforts. Nonetheless, there has been considerable debate over the nationwide traditional conservation approach, which emphasizes protected areas managed by government agencies (Lele et al., 2010). Critics argue that this

"fortress" model alienates local people, who are often blamed for unsustainable resource use leading to biodiversity loss (Igoe & Brockington, 2002). Conversely, when conservation efforts actively involve local people, leveraging successful methods that empower them, the outcomes tend to be more favourable (Dawson et al., 2021; Oldekop et al., 2016). Unlike these successful community-based approaches as seen in Namibia and Kenya, Uganda has adhered to a top-down conservation strategy, where wildlife ownership remains vested in the government (J. Brown & Bird, 2011; Glew et al., 2010; UWA, 2019b). Following this model, the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA), established in 1996, is assigned the responsibility of preserving wildlife populations within and outside protected areas. Trained and armed rangers are tasked with enforcing wildlife laws, and actively engaging in the prevention of poaching (Harrison et al., 2015).

This militarized approach traces its roots back to colonial-era conservation practices, where punitive measures were imposed on violators, including fines and imprisonment (Ashaba, 2021). Again, criticism is directed at this approach, as militarized conservation has the potential to replicate past injustices (Duffy et al., 2019). This approach raises concerns that it may inadvertently exclude the residents in and near conservation areas. The use of forceful tactics may not only fail to address the root causes of ecological degradation but could also lead to injustices like the displacement or marginalization of indigenous peoples and other inhabitants, as seen in the Apaa case in Northern Uganda (Kobusingye, 2020; Kobusingye et al., 2017). Addressing disparities and ensuring that conservation efforts do not worsen them are crucial in tackling the root causes, such as poaching, that necessitate militarized conservation measures in the first place.

The militarized and state-controlled approach in Uganda is justified by the considerable challenges confronting its conservation efforts, worsened by periods of political instability and conflict. The country witnessed a drastic decline in biodiversity, including elephants, between 1975 and 1995, with rampant poaching and encroachment on protected areas (Pomeroy et al., 2017). The war to overthrow Idi Amin and the collapse of the economy post-war exacerbated conservation challenges, leading to neglected infrastructure, decreased enforcement capacity, and increased poaching activities, ultimately contributing to the disappearance of iconic species like the white rhinoceros (Ashaba, 2021). The two-decade conflict between the Lord's Resistance Army and the government further hampered conservation efforts. The instability and insecurity caused by the conflict made it difficult for conservation organizations to operate effectively in the affected regions. As a result, the protection of wildlife, including elephants, became increasingly challenging during this period.

However, in recent years, there has been a notable resurgence in wildlife populations, which is attributed to improved conservation measures and sustained peace. Despite these positive trends, illegal activities such as encroachment and poaching continue to undermine conservation efforts (UWA, 2017). Furthermore, about fifty percent of Uganda's wildlife population inhabits areas not officially designated as protected, emphasizing the importance of the management of privately and communally owned lands (NEMA, 2016). Finding a balance between conservation and the socio-economic interests of local people remains a pressing concern for Uganda's authorities, as they strive to safeguard the country's natural heritage

while supporting the well-being of local people, and not perpetuate historic and contemporary injustices.

2.3 Conservation conflicts

Human-wildlife conflict (HWC) has emerged as the central concept for referring to situations where there is an overlap between human activities and wildlife habitats, leading to negative interactions or outcomes for either humans, wildlife, or both (Nyhus, 2016). It represents the challenge of managing interactions between humans and wildlife, striving to reconcile competing needs and interests. Human-wildlife conflict is more prevalent in the global south, and in this case Uganda because a substantial portion of the population, approximately 80%, relies on agriculture as their primary livelihood, leading to increased interactions and conflicts between humans and wildlife due to resource competition (Brackowski et al., 2023; Mukeka et al., 2019; UBOS, 2022). This strong dependence on agriculture for livelihood and a lack of resources to deter wildlife makes them economically, socially, and psychologically vulnerable to the impact of HWC which could aggravate existing historical difficulties by intensifying conflicts over land and resources (Gemedu & Meles, 2018; Jadhav & Barua, 2012; Mukeka et al., 2019). Therefore, in the context of addressing HWC, it is essential to take a multifaceted approach that extends beyond the ecological perspective, as this holistic approach helps identify root causes (Massé, 2016; White & Ward, 2010). When adopting a holistic perspective on HWC however, it becomes evident that these conflicts are not solely tied to ecological factors but are also a clash between conservation interests and various other concerns (Nyhus, 2016).

Consequently, there is a growing discussion by scholars around the concept of HWC which is frequently compounded by the tensions of human disputes over natural resources and conservation efforts (Madden, 2004; Redpath et al., 2015; Woodroffe et al., 2005). In their literature review, Peterson et al., (2010) noted that instances of direct conflict within what is termed HWC were rare. When such conflicts did arise, they predominantly stemmed from disagreements among humans regarding the management of wildlife. Thus, this study underscored the prevalent role of human-human conflict within the broader context of human-wildlife conflict. Furthermore, the issue with the human-wildlife conflict lies in its portrayal of wildlife as deliberate antagonists of humans. Embracing a concept that accurately depicts the nature of the conflict or interaction at hand will enable stakeholders to pursue coexistence with wildlife, rather than assuming inherent hostility between humans and wildlife (Peterson et al., 2013).

The need for different conceptualizations has resulted in various framings of conflicts, including biodiversity conflicts (Young et al., 2010), human-human conflicts (Pooley et al., 2017), and conservation conflicts (Redpath et al., 2013), while conflicts near protected areas have also been framed as protected area conflicts (Soliku & Schraml, 2018) and parks-people conflict (Mombeshora & Le Bel, 2009). While these concepts may have distinct definitions, they all recognize that people play a central role in these conflicts, rather than wildlife. Additionally, they acknowledge that conflicts are not solely a consequence of their impact; instead, they are intricately linked with complex issues concerning power dynamics, evolving attitudes, and deeply ingrained social and cultural values (Redpath et al., 2015). Hence, conflicts typically emerge from diverse sources and origins, encompassing human-wildlife interactions, varying stakeholder perspectives, exclusion from conservation planning, negotiation challenges,

distribution of park revenue, and legal or historical factors that may portray conservation efforts as potentially threatening.

In East Africa, violence, disempowerment, and marginalization drive these conflicts, as conservation efforts fail to integrate and compensate affected people or even deny access to land and resources (Di Marzo & Espinosa, 2023; Fairhead et al., 2012). Accordingly, I prefer to utilize the concept of conservation conflicts, and not HWC because it provides a more encompassing understanding of the complex interactions between humans and wildlife. Moreover, the term emphasizes conflicts among humans themselves, instead of wildlife as the main antagonist, reflecting differing interests and priorities related to conservation efforts. Furthermore, unlike biodiversity conflicts, which primarily focus on the impact on species diversity, and human-human conflicts, which may overlook the environmental aspects, conservation conflicts offer a holistic perspective that considers the intricate relationship between humans and their environment. Besides, choosing the concept of protected area conflict or park-people conflict might be appropriate when the primary focus is on conflicts occurring within or immediately adjacent to protected areas. However, it may limit the analysis to conflicts within the boundaries of these areas, overlooking broader societal factors that contribute to conflicts over conservation. Additionally, this concept may not fully capture the complexity of conflicts that extend beyond the physical boundaries of protected areas. In contrast, the concept of conservation conflict offers a more comprehensive framework that considers the various dimensions of conflicts related to conservation efforts. It acknowledges the central role of people in these conflicts and recognizes the complex interplay of social, cultural, economic, historical, and environmental factors.

By adopting the concept of conservation conflicts, I can explore a wider range of issues and dynamics that contribute to conflicts surrounding conservation initiatives, leading to a more holistic understanding of the challenges and opportunities in conservation. Also, I acknowledge the broader range of factors at play beyond direct ecological interactions as conservation conflicts encompass not only ecological, but also social, economic, cultural, and political dimensions. By recognizing the complexities embedded within these conflicts, I aim to address not only the immediate impacts of wildlife on humans but also the deeper socio-economic, political, and cultural factors at play, as it's crucial to recognize that conservation conflicts often mask deeper human-human conflicts, reflecting tensions between authorities and local peoples (Dickman, 2010). Hence, the formulation of successful conflict resolution starts with a thorough understanding of conservation-related conflicts in a broader sense, their fundamental triggers, and the potential challenges that can obstruct effective conflict management. Consequently, the failure to acknowledge and address underlying conflicts among stakeholders can impede conservation strategies as well as conservation justice.

By acknowledging the complexities of conservation conflicts, we can better understand the justice dilemmas inherent in these conflicts (Bontempi et al., 2023). Justice dilemmas are crucial in solving conservation conflicts because they highlight the inherent tensions between competing interests and values (Martin et al., 2016). The different values underlying wildlife conservation and human interests give rise to questions of fairness and equity in decision-making processes (Lenhart, 2023). Who gets to decide how resources are allocated? Whose interests are prioritized in conservation policies? These questions highlight the need for a justice-oriented approach to conservation that considers the diverse perspectives and needs of

all stakeholders. By promoting fairness, equity, and inclusivity in decision-making processes, conservation initiatives can better align with the needs and perspectives of local and indigenous peoples, essential in solving conservation conflicts.

2.4 Conservation justice

The importance of ensuring justice for local people in conservation efforts is gaining widespread recognition and support (Friedman et al., 2018; Martin et al., 2013, 2016). This reflects a growing understanding of the vital role these people play in preserving natural habitats and biodiversity (Dawson et al., 2021). There have been several concepts to include justice in conservation, such as social justice (Adams & Hutton, 2007; Martin, 2017), environmental justice (Bontempi et al., 2023; Martin et al., 2013) and conservation justice (Martin et al., 2015; Vucetich et al., 2018). Since these concepts largely intersect within the domain of justice in biodiversity conservation and share similar core principles, I have opted to focus on conservation justice in this case. The concept of conservation justice, derived from the more extensive concept of environmental justice, addresses concerns about equity and justice in the context of biodiversity conservation (Friedman et al., 2018; Martin et al., 2015). Questions of conservation justice revolve around how the distribution of costs, benefits, rights, and responsibilities is managed, emphasizing the inclusion of diverse classes, cultures, and beliefs. It also examines the intricate balance between considerations like current and future generations, as well as individual rights versus collective welfare (Martin et al., 2016). Conservation justice holds immense ecological, social, and moral significance in the pursuit of sustainable and effective conservation practices (Ruano-Chamorro et al., 2022). From an ecological standpoint, it is instrumental in ensuring the inclusion of diverse local knowledge, fostering collaboration with stakeholders, and promoting legitimacy in environmental decision-making. This, in turn, contributes to positive ecological outcomes by encouraging responsible resource management and conservation practices (Andrade & Rhodes, 2012; Oldekop et al., 2016). Socially, conservation justice plays a pivotal role in upholding fundamental human rights by advocating for the participation of those most affected by conservation decisions (Brockington et al., 2006; Miller-Rushing et al., 2022). By prioritizing equity, trust, and empowerment in decision-making processes, conservation justice fosters a sense of community ownership and support for conservation initiatives (Saif et al., 2022). Moreover, from a moral perspective, the emphasis on procedural justice reflects a commitment to fair and transparent governance, aligning with international declarations that underscore the importance of ethical decision-making in conservation efforts (Convention on Biological Diversity, 2010; Sikor et al., 2014). Ultimately, conservation justice stands as a holistic approach that integrates ecological, social, and moral considerations, ensuring that conservation practices are not only effective in preserving biodiversity but also just and equitable for the people involved.

2.4.1 What is just conservation?

The question arises: What is just in conservation? And what actions can be deemed morally and ethically right in the context of conservation efforts? These questions urge us to reconsider our practices, policies, and decision-making processes concerning the conservation of natural resources. It challenges us to consider whether our conservation efforts are ethically sound and aligned with the principles of justice. The just conservation philosophy's guiding principles assume a crucial role in evaluating the ethical and moral facets of our conservation actions,

establishing a framework grounded in three fundamental principles (Friedman et al., 2018; Guy & McCandless, 2012; Tan, 2021; Vucetich et al., 2018).

Firstly, it promotes the idea that individuals should possess equal access to fundamental liberties, advocating for the belief that everyone is entitled to rights and liberties equal to those of others, without generating inequality (Rawls, 2017). For example, in the context of conservation, a crucial basic liberty is the freedom from disproportionate environmental burdens. This implies that no particular group or individual should bear an unfair share of the negative consequences of conservation efforts. Secondly, just conservation advocates for equalizing opportunities, ensuring that all individuals have a fair chance at a healthy, meaningful life, and, in this case, especially the opportunity to overcome poverty (Armstrong, 2023). Applied to conservation contexts, this involves providing equitable access to decision-making processes related to conservation, preventing the disproportionate impact of policies and decisions on certain people (K. Brown, 2003; G. Holmes & Cavanagh, 2016). Finally, just conservation is guided by the principle of benefiting the least advantaged, with a focus on prioritizing the well-being of marginalized groups, such as the Acholi, in conservation efforts.

By grounding the philosophy of just conservation in these principles, not only the immediate concerns related to environmental well-being are addressed but also recognize the broader implications for social equity. This approach acknowledges that achieving justice in conservation requires a comprehensive understanding of the ethical dimensions involved, as well as a commitment to incorporating fairness and equity into our conservation practices. The principles of just conservation contribute to a growing incorporation of justice considerations spanning distribution, procedure, and recognition dimensions (Dawson et al., 2018; Martin et al., 2015). By considering these justice dimensions, the holistic impact of conservation efforts can be assessed. However, I will not focus on the procedure dimension in my analysis. This is because the outcomes related to distribution and recognition are intricately linked to the procedural methods, and I did not specifically investigate the top-down decision-making process.

In my approach to conservation justice, I prioritize fairness, inclusivity, and respect for diverse perspectives. I believe that conservation efforts should not only aim to protect the environment but also uphold social justice principles and address systemic and historical inequalities. I contend just conservation means ensuring that everyone has equal access to the benefits of conservation initiatives while bearing a fair share of the associated costs. This involves actively involving marginalized communities in decision-making processes and resource allocation, acknowledging historical injustices, and striving for equitable outcomes. Additionally, I emphasize the importance of recognizing and valuing the knowledge, rights, and cultural practices of local people.

2.4.2 Distributional justice

The concept of distributional justice in conservation revolves around the fair distribution of costs, benefits, rights, and risks associated with the preservation of natural resources (Law et al., 2018). For example, in this case study, the costs stem from elephants raiding crops or harming people, while the benefits are potentially derived from tourism revenue and the risk involves the potential harm caused by deterring elephants. However, benefits and burdens are not solely economical, as the burden of elephant conflict encompasses both physical and mental health stressors (Barua et al., 2013; Jadhav & Barua, 2012). Physically, individuals and families face

diminished well-being due to injuries, poor nutrition, and loss of sleep. Mentally, there is heightened stress, social disruptions, and economic insecurity. Benefits could be cultural and spiritual significance, as the presence of elephants can contribute to cultural identity and traditional practices, while ecosystem services such as shaping vegetation structure and creating microhabitats for other species can support the functioning of entire ecosystems (Chardonnet et al., 2002). In my approach, I will conceptualize "burden" as any factor contributing to increased costs or risks, while "benefit" will encompass anything advantageous or beneficial. I opt for the term "burden" to encompass not only explicit costs but also profound negative effects that may extend to a deeper level or dimension. In agreement with Armstrong's (2019) viewpoint, I assert that the distribution of these factors should strive to mitigate, rather than worsen, inequalities.

Hence, central to this framework is the principle that individuals who bear a proportionately larger share of the associated burden should, in turn, receive corresponding benefits from conservation initiatives. Ongoing concerns highlight the disproportionate impact on impoverished people, where the poor often shoulder higher burdens while affluent individuals secure the majority of benefits, thereby exacerbating existing global disparities (Martin et al., 2013). The uneven and changing distribution of populations in proximity to conservation areas further contributes to these inequalities. In this context, the lack of resources among the poor and powerless hampers their ability to engage in conflict prevention or mitigation when interacting with wildlife (Harris et al., 2023). Distributional injustices manifest in the high opportunity costs faced by people coexisting with wildlife, as well as in the unequal distribution of benefits from wildlife tourism within communities (Saif et al., 2022). The proposed strategy of targeting benefits to the poor and affected, and burdens to the comparatively wealthy is argued as a means to achieve greater economic equality, emphasizing that benefits do not cause poverty, nor do costs cause wealth. The suggested approach of directing benefits towards the impoverished and affected while imposing burdens on the relatively wealthy is advocated as a strategy to foster increased economic and social equality. In northern Uganda, implementing this strategy would involve directing wildlife tourism revenues towards impoverished and affected people, while ensuring that the comparatively wealthy contribute more towards conservation costs. Local government authorities and or NGO's for example, would need to collaborate with representatives from the affected communities to ensure equitable distribution and monitor the initiative so that local needs are met. While I admit that this strategy is challenging, this approach aims to balance conservation with socio-economic development, it could foster greater economic and social equality.

2.4.3 Recognitional justice

Central to distributional justice is the principle of recognitional justice, which advocates for a nuanced understanding of the societal consequences tied to conservation efforts (Martin et al., 2016). This requires acknowledging and respecting diverse values, knowledges, ethnicities, classes, and abilities. Recognizing these elements within societal structures is vital for unravelling the perpetuation of injustices. Importantly, the recognition perspective is instrumental in establishing the foundational social conditions that contribute to well-being, while addressing power imbalances and avoiding cultural domination (Martin et al., 2015). Recognition justice, in this context, deepens understanding of subjective perceptions, experiences, and evaluations of conservation interventions, shedding light on whether these perspectives are acknowledged by powerful actors and included in or excluded from

conservation discourses (Massarella et al., 2020). This interpretation of recognition emphasizes the importance of considering how people are actually experiencing their lives within the context of conservation practices. In my approach, if I describe recognition justice, it is about ensuring that everyone has the right to be treated equally, with equal opportunities to participate, benefit, avoid harm, and acknowledgment of historical and contemporary injustices. Hence, calls for inclusivity in conservation must incorporate recognition and equity dimensions to prevent the construction of an ethically non-inclusive conservation agenda, suppressing marginal views (Cortés-Capano et al., 2022). Ethical foundations are rooted in recognizing the rights of local people to their resources, means of subsistence, and compensation for losses, guided by social justice values and human rights frameworks (Springer, 2009).

2.5 Post-conflict justice

In addressing conservation conflicts and injustices, it is imperative to consider the context of the Acholi people. Recognizing the historical injustices and conflicts that have impacted their land, livelihoods, and resources, we can better understand the importance of incorporating broader post-conflict justice measures. Conservation justice thus becomes integral to achieving post-conflict justice for the Acholi and similar communities, as it addresses the underlying grievances related to natural resources and rights. This can help prevent the recurrence of violence and contribute to the long-term stability of post-conflict societies. Post-conflict justice refers to the legal and societal processes undertaken in the aftermath of a conflict or war to address human rights violations, ensure accountability for crimes committed, promote reconciliation, and "the basic sanctity and inherent value of human life" (IHRLI, 2007; United Nations, 2006). It is a concept widely used in areas heavily affected by war, incursions, instability, and other forms of violence, including northern Uganda (Binningsbø et al., 2012; Macdonald, 2017). Post-conflict justice is vital for fostering sustainable peace, economic development, democratization, and human rights protection by addressing grievances and promoting accountability as evidenced by its positive impacts on peacebuilding, economic growth, democratic governance, and human rights promotion (Cox, 2020; Lie et al., 2007; Smeulers & Grünfeld, 2011). Besides, it is important as post-conflict recovery processes can reproduce historical forms of marginalization, and the failure to address reconstruction in a just matter can perpetuate cycles of conflict and injustice. This is particularly significant for the Acholi people in this case who have endured prolonged conflict and marginalization in Uganda (Balint et al., 2017).

Various academic disciplines engage with the study of post-conflict justice, each offering unique perspectives and using the terminology in different manners. However, the extent of this diversity and the nuanced differences in terminological usage, analysis, and critique across disciplines exceed the scope of this thesis. Therefore, only the most prominent disciplinary approaches will be briefly discussed here. The concept of "post-conflict justice" encompasses a range of related concepts, including predominantly used "transitional justice", "post-conflict reconstruction" and "peacebuilding". These terms and their definitions are imprecise and often overlap and differ, as they are defined by their context.

Transitional justice has become a foundational element for societies navigating the aftermath of conflict. The UN Secretary-General defined transitional justice as "the full range of processes and mechanisms associated with a society's attempt to come to terms with a legacy of large-

scale past abuses, to ensure accountability, serve justice and achieve reconciliation”(United Nations, 2004). Transitional justice primarily focuses on accountability and reconciliation for human rights violations, aiming to rebuild trust in institutions and promote long-term peace and stability. This concept encompasses strategies for societies transitioning from oppressive regimes or periods of armed conflict, involving addressing past atrocities, bridging social divides, fostering reconciliation, and establishing effective justice systems to prevent future human rights violations (Call, 2004; Mani, 2011).

Post-conflict reconstruction “supports the transition from conflict to peace in an affected country through the rebuilding of the socioeconomic framework of the society” (Holtzman et al., 1998). The goal of post-conflict reconstruction is to facilitate the shift from conflict to peace by reconstructing the socioeconomic foundations of affected communities, emphasizing the creation of conditions conducive to lasting stability, including economic revitalization, social cohesion, and effective governance (Hamre & Sullivan, 2002). However, critiques of transitional justice and post-conflict reconstruction often highlight their failure to address the everyday needs of a population in affected areas, prioritizing technical objectives set largely by external actors (Macdonald, 2017; Özerdem, 2015). This approach can result in a disconnect between international priorities and local realities, hindering the effectiveness of interventions.

Nevertheless, the peacebuilding approach to post-conflict justice may incorporate these local dynamics to a greater extent as Lambourne (2003) defines post-conflict peacebuilding as “strategies designed to promote a secure and stable lasting peace in which the basic human needs of the population are met and violent conflicts do not recur” while Evans (1994) argues that “at the heart of the notion of peacebuilding is the idea of meeting needs: for security and order, for a reasonable standard of living, and recognition of identity and worth”. In essence, peacebuilding endeavours revolve around creating an environment where the fundamental needs of individuals and communities are adequately met. This involves not only addressing immediate security concerns but also addressing underlying grievances, inequalities, and injustices that fuel conflicts.

While transitional justice and post-conflict reconstruction are vital approaches to addressing the aftermath of conflict, including the Acholi region, opting for a concept that resembles peacebuilding over these frameworks for post-conflict justice arises from various considerations. Transitional justice, while crucial for addressing past atrocities and ensuring accountability, often focuses on legal and punitive measures, which may not fully address the underlying socioeconomic factors contributing to conflict or facilitate long-term reconciliation. Similarly, post-conflict reconstruction primarily centers on rebuilding physical infrastructure and institutions, potentially overlooking the need for societal and political transformation and addressing grievances that fuelled the conflict. Therefore, I will use a definition that is more tangible for local people involved, similar to peacebuilding to approach post-conflict justice, I define post-conflict justice as “an approach aimed at fostering a secure and enduring peace by addressing the basic human needs of the population, including security, order, a reasonable standard of living and recognition of historical and contemporary injustices”. By defining post-conflict justice as an approach that addresses basic human needs and historical injustices, particularly relevant to the Acholi people of Uganda who have endured prolonged conflict and

marginalization. This definition resonates with the local context, thereby providing a practical concept to address the specific needs and challenges faced by the Acholi people in their pursuit of justice and reconciliation.

2.6 Linking conservation justice and post-conflict justice

Post-conflict justice and conservation justice share commonalities in their pursuit of equity and fairness, albeit in different contexts and scope. Both concepts emphasize the right to basic needs and managing the distribution of costs, benefits, rights, and responsibilities in a manner that is inclusive and just. Conservation justice seeks to ensure that conservation efforts consider diverse perspectives and promote equitable outcomes for all stakeholders involved, including marginalized people. Similarly, post-conflict justice efforts to address historical grievances, promote reconciliation, and establish a foundation for sustainable peace by acknowledging and rectifying past injustices. However, important differences exist in their scopes and objectives. While conservation justice primarily focuses on the equitable management of biodiversity conservation, post-conflict justice extends beyond conservation concerns to encompass broader societal issues, including human rights violations, accountability for crimes committed during conflicts, and socioeconomic reconstruction.

Nonetheless, I argue that this conservation justice and post-conflict justice interact closely, especially in the Acholi region where conservation conflicts intersect with broader social tensions. Conservation justice plays a crucial role in the broader framework of post-conflict justice by addressing underlying grievances related to natural resources management. In regions emerging from conflict, disputes over access to and control, and decision-making of natural resources often persist as sources of tension and potential triggers for renewed violence (Folami, 2017). Therefore, conservation justice contributes to post-conflict justice by addressing these underlying grievances thereby fostering peace and stability in affected regions. Subsequently, conservation conflicts can contribute to or aggravate post-conflict tensions and justice if they are also not managed in a way that can be considered just (Martin et al., 2016). Conversely, post-conflict justice frameworks provide an opportunity to integrate conservation justice principles into broader transitional justice efforts, promoting reconciliation and resilience by addressing conservation injustices alongside broader societal inequities. In essence, both conservation justice and post-conflict justice converge in their goal of fostering inclusive, sustainable societies that respect both human rights.

2.7 Epistemological considerations

Within my theoretical framework, it is important to elaborate on certain epistemological considerations, particularly in confronting and dismantling enduring colonial legacies that have historically marginalized indigenous and local knowledge systems. The dominance of Western science, capitalism, and social sciences has not only subjugated the African continent but also hindered its full participation in the global knowledge community, perpetuating what is termed "epistemic neocolonialism" (Mlambo, 2006). This form of neocolonialism manifests in various ways, including the privileging of Western scientific knowledge over indigenous and local knowledge systems, the marginalization of non-Western philosophies and perspectives in academia, and the imposition of particular narratives on historical events and cultural practices. This perpetuates the misrepresentation of marginalized groups, who often lack awareness of

their rights to representation and access to higher education (Chowdhury, 2023).

Acknowledging that my approach is rooted in a Western academic viewpoint, and could be considered neo-colonial, reflects on its implications for my theoretical framework. I recognize that my epistemic approach towards conflict and justice may differ significantly from that of the Acholi people. Therefore, incorporating these considerations into my research is crucial for amplifying marginalized voices and perspectives, contributing to a more inclusive and equitable knowledge ecosystem.

3. Methods

3.1 Research design

The existing body of research on conservation conflicts in post-conflict environments is limited, especially in Uganda. Hence, this study embraced an exploratory approach. The study aimed to generate new information through research questions designed to elucidate information and obtain insights, rather than to assess predefined hypotheses (Swedberg, 2020). Given its focus on the Acholi region of Uganda and its holistic approach, this research proposal is best categorized as a typical case study (de Vaus, 2014). Case studies are an effective way to gather in-depth and detailed information from a specific local setting, such as the Acholi region. Data collection methods that I used were semi-structured interviews and focus groups, as they enable to collection of in-depth qualitative data, which explores the complexity of the topic and encourages participant interaction and engagement (Gill et al., 2008; Kallio et al., 2016; Wilkinson, 1998). Secondary data sources that were used are documents from governmental organizations, NGOs, and academic publications.

3.2 Study area

The Acholi region is situated in northern Uganda next to the South-Sudanese border with an estimated 2.4 million inhabitants (figure 1). It encompasses a range of landscapes, including savannahs, forests, and wetlands, and has two main seasons: rainy and dry. A large portion of land is occupied by subsistence farmers. Farming is a long-standing lifestyle, with crops like millet, sesame, and sorghum grown alongside hunting and herding. People in Acholi use a rotating system to make sure everyone gets a fair share of land and crops, which helps reduce inequalities and promote self-sufficiency (Akena, 2018). Acholi is home to one national park within its boundaries, Murchison Falls National Park, and is also near Kidepo Valley National Park in the neighbouring Karamoja region, both home to considerable elephant populations. In addition, over 50% of Uganda's wildlife resides outside protected areas (NEMA, 2016). The precise size of the elephant population in the Acholi region remains unknown. Nevertheless, elephants occasionally stray from Kidepo Valley National Park and Murchison Falls National Park, encroaching upon inhabited areas. This issue becomes especially critical when elephants venture into these populated areas, leading to property damage, crop destruction, and safety hazards.

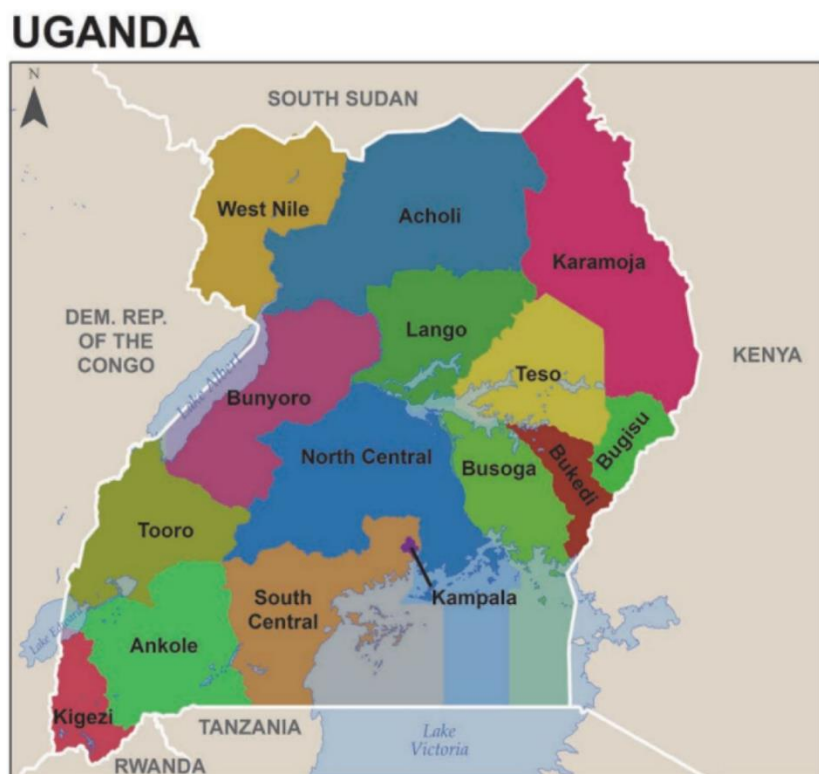


Figure 1: the Acholi region's position in Uganda alongside other regions (Ochen & Chi, 2022)

3.3 Methods of data collection

During visits to the locations, both semi-structured interviews and focus group sessions were conducted. I gathered data from November 2023 to December 2023, conducting semi-structured interviews and focus groups at nine different locations (figure 2). Five locations were in the southwest of Acholi, in the proximity of Murchison Falls National Park, and the other four locations were near Kidepo Valley National Park, in eastern Acholi. By focusing on people living near these parks, I investigated the direct impact of conservation efforts on local people. Areas surrounding protected wildlife areas often experience significant challenges, particularly in regions where human populations and wildlife habitats intersect. In the case of Acholi, people residing near Murchison Falls National Park and Kidepo Valley National Park face encounters with marauding elephants venturing out from the parks. This circumstance made these areas prime candidates for study, with a particular emphasis on villages near Kidepo, where there is a lack of published literature on conservation conflicts.

The chosen respondents met specific criteria; the individuals who participated in the interviews and focus groups are long-term Acholi residents with a deep-rooted history in the region. This choice of criteria was significant because it ensures that the participants have an understanding of the historical and cultural context of Acholi. By being long-standing residents, they had firsthand experience and knowledge of the region's history, including its conflicts and post-conflict context. This depth of understanding enabled me not only to explore historical events but also how these events continue to influence contemporary conservation conflicts. Additionally, by including individuals with a deep-rooted history in Acholi, the study captured a diverse range of perspectives and experiences, providing a richer understanding of the complexities surrounding conflict in the region. Furthermore, the majority of the participants involved were subsistence farmers, as they often experience the most significant impacts from conservation conflicts, experiencing direct and far-reaching consequences on their livelihoods.

Additionally, I must mention that my approach differed in the beginning stages of conducting interviews from the theoretical framework initially outlined. Initially, my interviews primarily delved into the evolution of human-elephant relationships over time rather than focusing on conservation conflicts and their effects on post-conflict situations. However, as the interviews progressed, I noted that conservation conflicts significantly intersected with the political and post-conflict dynamics of the Acholi region. These conflicts were not merely confined to elephants and crop raiding but intertwined with broader societal issues. Consequently, in subsequent interviews, I adjusted my approach to concentrate more explicitly on conservation conflicts and their implications within the post-conflict context of the region. This shift in focus potentially impacted the outcomes of the initial interviews and may have led to the omission of certain data.

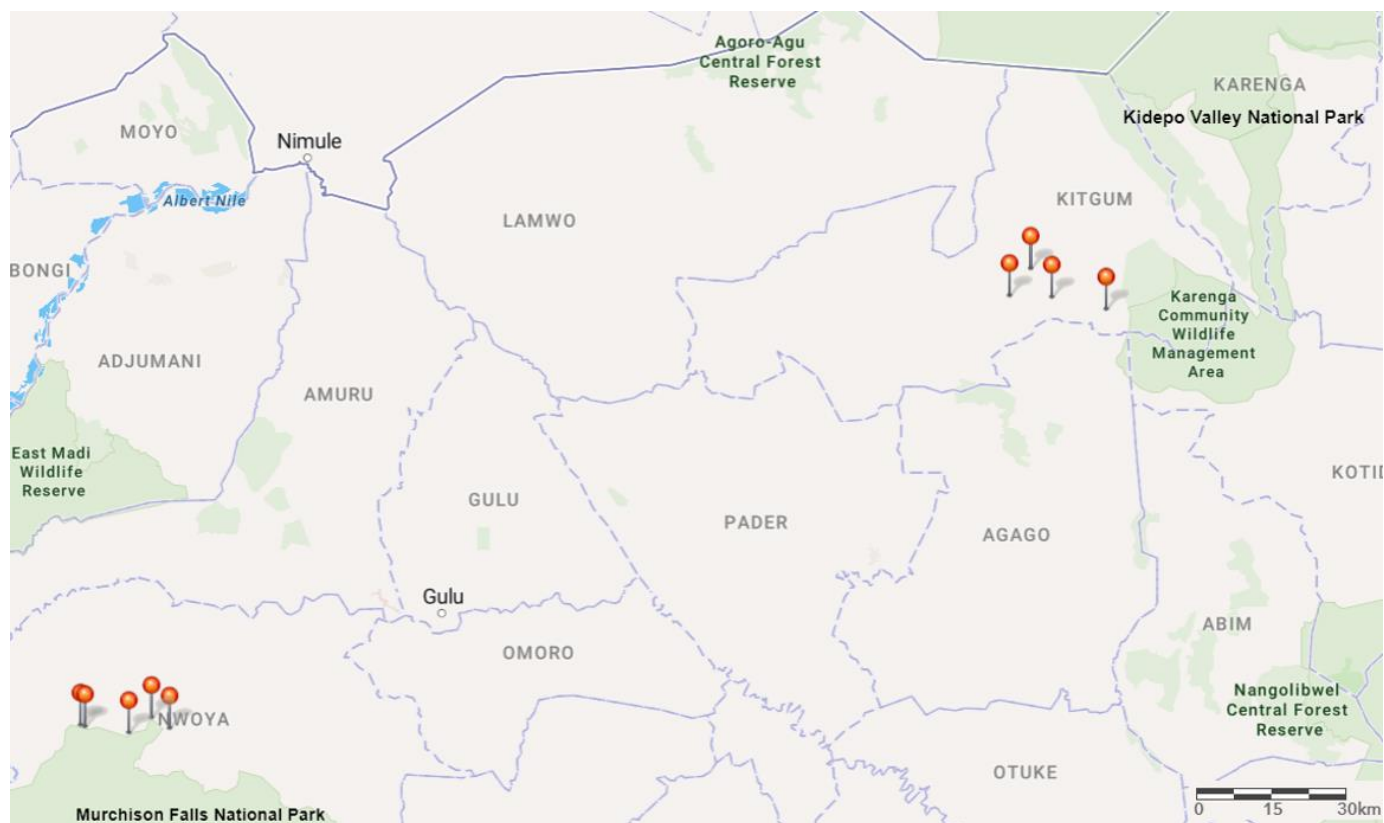


Figure 2: Locations of focus groups and interviews in the Acholi region.

In the area around Murchison Falls National Park, a local translator assisted with translating from Acholi to English. Similarly, near Kidepo Valley National Park, staff from Umoja Conservancies provided translation support. Moreover, I conducted several interviews directly in English at both sites. I favoured English for its fluency and its ability to facilitate a more thorough exploration of participants' answers. However, being unable to communicate in Acholi sometimes hindered my ability to accurately interpret participants' responses, potentially leading to misunderstandings or overlooking important cultural insights. Before every meeting, I explained the objectives and goals of this research. Additionally, I explained how the collected data will be used. This approach ensured transparency and fostered understanding among all parties involved in the research process. With verbal consent, participants were ensured to fully understand the research's purpose, procedures, and potential risks. These meetings were recorded in combination with written notes. Furthermore, voluntary participation and the participant's right to withdraw their consent at any point were emphasized (Fouka & Mantzorou, 2011).

3.3.1 Semi-structured walking interviews

Semi-structured walking interviews were conducted as they offered a defined structure while also allowing for adaptability through open-ended questioning, which was ideal for an exploratory approach (Kallio et al., 2016). Conducting walking interviews improved the fluidity of conversation, creating a comfortable atmosphere for both the interviewer and the participant. However, this approach wasn't feasible for every participant, particularly those with limited mobility. Furthermore, they facilitated a guided exploration of the living space, which served as a prompt for uncovering additional narratives and insights and enabling active interaction with

the environment, such as destroyed houses or crops, during the discussions (Kinney, 2017). Elders were the preferred interviewees, as they have observed changes over time and experienced conflicts. I often found that elders had a good overview and knowledge about the evolving dynamics between humans and elephants, shedding light on the intricacies of conservation challenges and their impact on livelihoods. Therefore, it is essential to recognize that these interviews leaned towards oral histories. They emphasize the collection of personal experiences, exploration of historical context, and a dynamic approach to addressing emerging factors, all to deliver a context-rich perspective on conservation conflicts and related topics (Sommer & Quinlan, 2018).

3.3.2 Focus groups

Following the semi-structured interviews, focus groups were conducted so that insights from interviews could be discussed in groups. The focus groups helped to understand underlying factors and it allowed participants to build on each other's input and experiences, or challenge these experiences (Nyumba et al., 2018; Wilkinson, 1998). While ideally, focus groups comprise around 8 participants, including individuals of various genders and ages, in practice, the composition often exceeded this number. Despite the larger size, these focus groups still proved effective and clear in generating valuable discussions and insights. Furthermore, the choice was made with the understanding that age and gender can significantly influence how individuals relate to and experience conflicts. However, I did not observe any noticeable differences based on age or gender during my research. The same topics were discussed as in the semi-structured walking interviews, but also new topics that derived from the interview prior were discussed to further gain an understanding along with additional subjects arising from prior interviews.

3.4 Methods for data analysis

Interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed to ensure accuracy in capturing participants' responses and insights. Each transcription was carefully reviewed for clarity and completeness. Content analysis was conducted to systematically analyse the data. By systematically analysing the content, the approach enabled the uncovering of the underlying themes and patterns within the data. The themes that emerged from the data, provided a holistic comprehension of the narratives, experiences, and perspectives of the participants. This method supports the exploration of the contextual details and the connections between the identified themes (Vaismoradi et al., 2013).

3.5 Positionality author

In this study, my positionality as a researcher exerted an impact, potentially shaping the outcomes. Positionality encompasses an individual's multifaceted identity, including social, political, cultural, and historical backgrounds, which in turn shapes their viewpoints, convictions, and life experiences (A. Holmes, 2020). It is crucial to account for positionality within my research, recognizing that as a researcher, I am not a neutral or impartial observer, but rather positioned within a specific social and cultural context that unavoidably influenced my understanding and analysis of the results. For instance, in my case, being male, white, and European might convey a sense of privilege or authority, potentially affecting how participants responded to my questions during interviews. White individuals from Western countries are often associated with wealth, education, and power due to historical colonial legacies and

contemporary global power structures. As a result, participants may have perceived me as having a higher social status compared to themselves. This perception of privilege can influence their responses during interviews, as they may feel compelled to defer to my authority or challenge my questions or perspectives (Mullings, 1999). Participants' responses might have been shaped by their perception of me within the context of colonial history, potentially evoking feelings of resentment or suspicion. During most interviews, however, these perceptions helped me gather more data. My position as a Western white researcher seemed to give participants the impression that I had the power, wealth, and influence to bring about change and provide solutions to their problems. As a result, participants were more willing to share detailed information and insights, believing that their contributions might lead to tangible improvements in their situation.

Hence, differences in race, class, gender, age, and political affiliation between myself and the participants can introduce both threatening and non-threatening dynamics to our interactions. These dynamics could have influenced the participant's willingness to share their perspectives openly, as well as how they interpreted my questions and the overall research process. Being a student from a different country offered a potential advantage in this scenario, as it is possible that participants perceived me as a more neutral or more approachable figure. This was particularly advantageous, especially considering that some interviewees expressed criticism toward the government. In this context, my positionality worked to my advantage, as participants would not have felt as comfortable sharing such views if I were a Ugandan citizen.

Furthermore, Umoja Conservancies, an organization committed to enhancing local people's capacity to conserve, manage, and benefit from wildlife on their land, supported and helped to facilitate the data collection. The involvement of Umoja Conservancies provided valuable local expertise and facilitated interviews with diverse participants. However, it's crucial to acknowledge that a member of Umoja has a previous role as an ex-UWA warden. This could have stirred distrust among the interviewed communities, as it may have raised concerns about biases or conflicts of interest, impacting the level of trust and openness during the interviews. Nonetheless, since the initial interviews were conducted by a local translator instead of a member of Umoja, this factor did not influence the first interviews and during the second round of interviews where Umoja was present, I did not notice any suspicion or animosity which could have influenced the data collection.

4. Analysis

4.1 The causes of increased human-elephant interactions

Near Murchison Falls National Park, simultaneously, as the Acholi people began the process of resettlement, another phenomenon unfolded - the habitation of elephants to their homelands. However, this homecoming of wildlife brought with it unforeseen challenges. Locals observed a marked increase in elephant-related destruction compared to pre-war times. According to one resident, "so, now there is a lot more destruction by elephants than before the war. Before the war, there were few".² The escalating encounters with elephants, "being with elephants here, made the resettlement very bad"³ - complicated the difficulties of post-conflict resettlement. As another resident noted, "because of the war, elephant numbers decreased just like the people. But now after the war, the amount of animals is too high".⁴ Consequently, the presence of elephants close to resettled communities significantly affected their adjustment and livelihood recovery efforts. The increase in elephant numbers and conflict with elephants can be explained by different factors: Before the LRA-war, the elephant population had already faced a sharp decline due to widespread poaching across the nation and continued to decline when the LRA-war started (UWA, 2014b, 2016). However, as the war went on, with a substantial portion of the population confined to IDP camps, human settlement in and near elephant habitats diminished significantly. Although there was a lot of poaching by rebels and government soldiers, the numbers slowly increased, due to the regeneration of biodiversity and very limited human settlement (WCS, 2010). Hence, after the war ended and people returned to their villages, elephants also inhabited the land, leading to increased conflict with elephants. Due to increased law enforcement and conservation efforts, the elephant population in Murchison Falls National Park has been increasing over the past decade, leading to the "massive destruction" of crops (African Wildlife Foundation, 2022). Secondly, oil exploration, of which the construction started in 2008 is believed to be a major driver of elephants moving into people's land (Fuda et al., 2018), as multiple participants stated, "the oil discovery and the heavy machinery is making elephants cross from the park to the community".⁵ The discovery of oil within the park led to extensive exploration efforts involving heavy machinery. The heightened human presence, along with the noise and light pollution generated during oil drilling, likely disrupts the behavioural patterns of wildlife, as levels of disturbance can prompt animals to abandon their traditional home ranges (Rabanal et al., 2010). Consequently, the traditional elephant habitat and migratory routes are disrupted by the presence of oil exploration, forcing them to navigate alternative paths, often through human-inhabited areas, leading to increased conflict (Galanti et al., 2006; MacKenzie et al., 2017; Prinsloo et al., 2011). This observation might explain the increase in incidents of elephants raiding crops and their migration beyond the boundaries of Murchison Falls National Park (Dowhaniuk et al., 2018).

In the eastern part of Acholi, bordering the Karamoja region and close to Kidepo Valley National Park, there has also been a notable surge in human-elephant interactions, marking the participants' initial encounter with such phenomena. As one elder expressed, "before I have not seen this animal. So, before 2019, they were not seen here. I was born in 1960 and have never seen them here".⁶ This statement highlights elephant sightings as a new phenomenon in this particular area, with participants recounting their first encounters with elephants as occurring from 2019 onwards, with some extending into 2020. However, an outlier emerged in a village

situated further southeast, where issues began to manifest around 2016. The pattern of initial interaction seems to correlate with proximity to the Kidepo Valley National Park, with participants further west experiencing these encounters later than those closer to the park's boundary.

Initially, sightings were sporadic, and conflicts were minimal. Yet, over time, people reported both elephant sightings and conflict instances increased in frequency. As one participant lamented, "now they come daily, in bigger numbers",⁷ noticing a substantial increase in elephant presence. Moreover, the situation has escalated to the extent that elephants "are now even giving birth around our water points",⁷ intensifying the number of interactions and conflicts. Participants in the eastern part of Acholi state one primary cause for the increased interactions, as "the elephant population is not in the park, they all moved out".⁸ This can be explained by the fact that elephant numbers are increasing, as well as the fact that over half of the elephants inhabit areas beyond the park's boundaries (UWA, 2014a, 2019a). The similarity in elephant population figures between today and the 1960s within Kidepo Valley National Park implies that the region may be nearing its carrying capacity for elephants, potentially driving elephants to migrate into surrounding community lands. Additionally, climate change could cause a migration because of drought in Kidepo Valley National Park, with elephants seeking further and wider water sources, which can extend well beyond the park borders (Auma & Badr, 2022; Egeru et al., 2020; Grogan et al., 2020).

4.2 Benefit of conservation

4.2.1 Cultural importance

The cultural significance of elephants among the Acholi people is profound and rooted in historical narratives and symbolic representations. Elephants have played an important role in shaping the identity of the Acholi community, serving as more than mere animals but as emblems of strength, wisdom, and shared heritage. The Acholi identifying themselves with the elephant started centuries ago, according to one elder,

"A long time ago [around 1400 AD], still in Sudan before we moved to where we are now, we were following the footsteps of the elephant. Because there was no human construction, there were elephant paths, which served as roads. We started following these paths to Acholiland, and that is why we call ourselves the elephant. Back then, we were friendly with them because they led us the way here".⁹

For the Acholi people, these routes held significance beyond sole pathways, as they ventured towards Acholiland in Northern Uganda from Sudan, they established a connection with elephants. This historical connection has not only influenced their migration but is reflected in Acholi's self-identification as the "elephant" people, as one Acholi elder mentions,

"The elephant is the symbol of the Acholi, that's why when you reach Gulu, you see them at the entrance. The elephant is there because it is a big animal and very strong, the king of the animal kingdom. That is why it is the symbol of Acholi. God created Acholi to match the strength of the elephant. Also, the elephant is very intelligent, matching the Acholi".³

The elephant holds a significant symbolic role within the Acholi community, representing attributes such as strength, resilience, and intelligence that are highly valued among the people, reflecting a conviction in the community's capacity for strength and endurance. The symbolism

of the elephant carries spiritual and cultural significance, extending beyond its physical attributes, with some believing that the "Acholi were created by God"³ to possess qualities akin to those of the elephant. Consequently, the elephant serves as a powerful emblem of identity, unity, and the enduring bond between the Acholi people and their land. One participant mentioned,

"I am proud of the elephant, the elephant should be there, Acholi people are good, but just like elephants, they are not to be provoked. They fight strong like an elephant".¹⁰

– which is a reference to LRA-war times when people had to be strong and resilient - underscores the notion that despite enduring hardships, the Acholi people remained steadfast and resilient, drawing upon their strength to overcome challenges and protect their land and people. Due to their cultural and spiritual significance, there is a widespread sentiment advocating for the presence of elephants. An interviewee emphasizes the importance of elephant conservation, stating, "elephants should be there, and also conserved for future generations; it should be there".¹¹ Echoing this sentiment, an elder articulated, "for us as elders, who are grown, we are not supposed to kill elephants, culturally because it is our totem. It is protected because it is our symbol".¹² The cultural emphasis on protecting elephants reflects the Acholi people's commitment to preserving their heritage and the significance of elephants in their society.

However, when talking with participants, a recurring motif emerged - a pervasive sense of sadness concerning current interactions with elephants, "it is our Acholi pride, so what happens now makes us sad"⁷ – referring to the current conflict, the crop-raiding, and fatal incidents with elephants. This remark reveals a significant shift in perspective among the people in post-war Acholi. As they navigate the aftermath of the LRA-war, symbols once revered by their elders now carry different meanings. The participant points out,

"After the war, the young people don't see the elephant as a symbol, because the only thing the youth sees is destruction. When they see the elephant statues at the Gulu market, they see it as a joke, and they think it doesn't belong here."¹²

This sentiment highlights a generational gap, wherein the older generation may have associated elephants with cultural significance and appreciation, while the youth, having only experienced destruction and struggle by elephants, view them with detachment. The presence of elephant statues, a symbol of heritage, now serves as a reminder of the damaged relationship between the Acholi and their cultural identity. People desire to coexist with elephants and support conservation initiatives for elephants due to their cultural significance. However, as previously mentioned, the younger generation predominantly witnesses the destructive impacts of human-elephant conflict, leading to a lack of support and appreciation for elephants. With each passing day of continued conflict, the backing for conservation efforts diminishes, as individuals gradually lose their cultural connection with elephants. Losing this connection would be unfortunate, as it represents one of the few positive aspects that can garner support for conservation efforts among people, as conservation interventions could benefit greatly from a supportive cultural context (Waylen et al., 2010)

Still, despite the complexities and signs of diminishing support, there is an overarching plea for coexistence, "we should find a way to find and harmonize this problem. How we can live together"?¹³ One participant added, "if the elephants don't disturb us, we are very proud of having them, because of their size and beauty".² Despite the persistent conflicts and challenges that arise from coexisting with elephants, it reveals a shared aspiration among the Acholi people to seek peaceful resolutions rather than resorting to violence or retaliatory measures against the elephants.

4.2.2 Economical benefit

Many participants appreciate the economic advantages brought by elephants, "I like the elephant very much because it brings foreign income into Uganda"¹⁰ - acknowledging their role in attracting tourists and generating foreign income for Uganda. The role of tourism in Uganda's economy is becoming increasingly significant. With 1.5 million international arrivals and a rising number of domestic tourists, the sector contributed 7.75% to the GDP and accounted for 6.7% of total national employment in 2018, and 14.7% of all employed Ugandans are involved in tourism-related employment (CBI, 2020; UBOS & MTWA, 2023). The tourism industry generated by conservation wildlife contributes significantly to the Ugandan economy, with tourists spending money on park entry fees, accommodations, and various services. These funds earned by the state, in turn, have the potential to support projects and developmental initiatives. A participant emphasizes this positive aspect, noting, "when tourists come to visit, they bring and spend a lot of money. This money is invested by the central government for developmental programs like building schools for the community".¹¹ Apart from the funds directed to the central government, villages situated adjacent to a park are entitled to a 20% revenue sharing from that park, according to UWA. This allocation is justified by UWA's acknowledgment that these villages "bear more of the costs of conservation than other villages further away". Hence, these funds are allocated not simply as benefits, but rather as tools to mitigate the burden of conflict and enhance livelihoods. They are directed toward initiatives aimed at managing the challenges posed by human-wildlife interactions, particularly in agricultural and livestock projects.

However, during different focus groups participants mentioned, "when tourists come, they bring revenue, which is invested back into the community".⁴ These comments caused a lot of discussions because not everybody agrees that they see that revenue invested back in the community. Concerns emerge regarding the transparency and fairness of revenue-sharing mechanisms. One interviewee expressed doubt, stating, "UWA is talking about revenue sharing, but the park is giving the money to the sub-county, but it should reach the community, otherwise they are not benefiting",¹⁰ another participant added, "as the government supposedly supports the community through the benefits of the park, but we never see the benefits".¹⁴ This sentiment reflects a discrepancy between the intended purpose of revenue sharing – to benefit people living close to the protected areas – and the actual impact felt on the ground. According to participants embezzlement and corruption complicate the distribution of these funds, as told by one participant, "the revenue goes through the top ranking 'levels', and the bottom, like these villagers, get nothing. Nobody can follow the money – which is a big problem".³ Participants mention instances where the promised benefits of tourism fail to materialize due to mismanagement at higher levels of governance. A participant expresses this frustration by saying,

"The government has a revenue policy for the community, but the higher-ranking officials take a lot. That is why there is almost no construction or projects because of embezzlement".¹⁵

This perceived misallocation of funds raises questions about the effectiveness of the revenue-sharing model and its ability to truly benefit the people living in proximity to protected areas. Therefore, there is a call for more transparent revenue-sharing mechanisms to ensure equitable distribution of benefits within the community, if distribution occurs at all.

However, misallocation or leakage of funds is not solely confined to northern Uganda; it is pervasive throughout the country. Critics contend that despite the industry's considerable revenue generation, a sizable portion fails to benefit local economies (Sandbrook, 2010). This problem is caused by several factors, including inadequate communication with local people, challenges in fair distribution of benefits both locally and nationally, corruption allegations, and the influence of powerful local elites (Ahebwa et al., 2012). Consequently, the people living close to protected areas often do not see significant improvements in their economic conditions, despite the influx of tourists and revenue, leading to a cycle of underdevelopment and frustration among local populations. Effective benefit-sharing must encompass principles of good governance, accountability, equity, transparency, and broad stakeholder engagement. This means that the distribution of benefits should be fair and transparent, with mechanisms in place to ensure that funds are utilized properly and that all stakeholders have a voice in decision-making processes (Snyman & Bricker, 2021).

Hence, the participants appreciate elephants for their cultural significance and contributions to revenue generation. Despite concerns about the mismanagement of funds, there is support to conserve elephants due to their economic and cultural importance potentially benefiting the people's well-being. However, this support comes with conditions – elephants must not cause harm or destroy crops.

4.3 The burdens of conservation

The people who participated in the interviews were mostly subsistence farmers, which is the backbone of the economic activities in these areas (Twecan et al., 2022). Nearly all participants living next to the affected areas near Murchison Falls National Park or Kidepo Valley National Park reported that elephants destroyed their crops. Crops that are often planted, like cassava, sorghum, rice, pumpkin, potatoes, and millet, seem to be a target for elephants, sometimes even including granaries in which people store food. Because people are predominantly focused on agriculture, the consequences of elephant raids are severe and direct, with one participant expressing the frustration and desperation of seeing their hard work in the fields being destroyed by elephants,

"Elephants come and clear your garden like they are a customer. The crops are destroyed, and you have to wait 3 or 4 months for other crops to grow. What will you be eating in the meantime"?¹³

Crucially, these affected people are already among the poorest in Uganda, amplifying the severity of the economic impact, as a participant mentioned, "we feel that we are the most affected by this elephant problem because we are the poorest".¹⁵ The affected people in Acholi are already amongst the poorest people in Uganda, making them vulnerable to various threats (UBOS, 2018, 2020). The lack of a financial safety net further exacerbates their vulnerability and

underscores the immediate threat to food security, making it challenging for farmers to recover from the losses incurred due to elephant raids. As participants try to cope with the economic aftermath of the raids, they resort to alternative means of income,

"Sometimes we cut down trees and sell charcoal. This is mainly done by men. Women go and sell grass bundles. With this, we can go and buy food. This is nothing in comparison with what the garden gives, so it is not enough. But at least it is something".⁸

However, these solutions are far from sufficient to sustain their livelihoods, especially when compared to the productivity of their gardens. Thus, while these alternative income-generating activities offer temporary relief, they do little to address the underlying issues of food insecurity and economic instability. Therefore, rebuilding livelihoods after such raids is difficult due to resource and livelihood constraints, as well as the time it takes for agricultural activities to resume since crops like millet and maize take months to regrow.

The sentiments of focus group participants reveal a perception of the disproportionate impact of the elephant problem, linked to their prevailing economic hardships, as emphasized by one participant who stated, "because elephants are very destructive and we are poor, it is going to bring hunger to our people".¹⁷ Participants recognize the severity of the situation and worry, "there are also questions and worries about what the future will bring, because if even more elephants come, what do we plant and eat?".¹⁶ When questioned about the severity of the elephant problem compared to other challenges in their livelihoods, participants of a focus group near Kidepo Valley National Park highlighted the impact,

"The Karamojong only took the cows and left the crops, and their visits were less frequent. The government stepped in to defend us from the Karamojong and provide support. Besides, dealing with drought is manageable, as one can plan for planting crops either early or late, and it doesn't persist throughout the entire year. However, the elephants pose the greatest challenge because they leave nothing to eat and visit frequently the whole year".^{8,16}

Coming from the bordering Karamoja region, the Karamojong cattle raiders were known for their frequent raids, marked by violent theft and pillaging of villages (Stites & Howe, 2019). Cattle raids had far-reaching consequences for the livelihoods of the affected people, impacting their economic stability and increasing feelings of insecurity. Additionally, drought induced by climate change in northern Uganda results in poor harvests and in certain instances, triggers famine (Branch, 2018; Njuguna et al., 2023). With these comparisons, the participants highlighted the persistent and devastating nature of elephant raiding. While they can somewhat mitigate the effects of drought by adjusting planting times, and despite the support from the government to cope with challenges like cattle raids, the threat posed by elephants is unparalleled.

Furthermore, consequences extend beyond immediate livelihood concerns to education. As agricultural yields diminish and incomes decline, parents face challenges in covering school fees, increasing the dropout rate among children. A father explained,

"We are educating our children from the money we sell from crops. The level of education has been falling since last year, the same year the conflict with elephants started because elephants basically destroy the school fees".²

A woman further elaborated,

"My daughter went to nurse training school, which I paid with money from my rice garden down in the valley. But last year, the elephant destroyed the rice so there was no way for her to go back to nursing school. And this year the destruction is even worse, so there is no chance for her to go to school. Now she is just at home doing nothing".²

Subsequently, this not only perpetuates the poverty cycle but also poses a threat to the people's long-term prospects by depriving them of an educated workforce (Muyinda & Whyte, 2011). The inability to access education traps individuals in a cycle and burden of poverty. Furthermore, without proper education and skills development, people increasingly face limited opportunities for better employment and economic advancement (Jadhav & Barua, 2012). As Savard et al., (2016) explain, the denial of access to education and livelihood opportunities has been utilized as a tool to perpetuate the economic marginalization of people in northern Uganda, as postwar reconstruction and poverty reduction initiatives by the government have been deemed insufficient, persisting in their inadequacy. As a consequence of the limited opportunities, certain individuals turned to illicit activities, with participants expressing that some "become a thief" or, as mentioned by those in proximity to Murchison Falls National Park, "end up crossing to the park, as we have poachers among us".⁴ The latter situation can lead to severe outcomes, including the possibility of a life sentence in prison or, in some instances, individuals suffering lethal consequences in the park by the UWA, according to multiple participants.⁵

Moreover, the concern over livelihood intertwines with the broader issue of safety in the community. The financial instability caused by the potential loss of crops not only poses a tangible threat to the livelihoods of the participants but also generates significant psychological strain. As expressed by one participant, "the first thought that comes to mind when an elephant comes is the crops",¹⁶ highlighting the impact of financial uncertainty on daily life, and the second thought is safety, with the explicit fear expressed as "it is going to kill me" and "I am scared that it will hurt one of the children".¹⁶ The loss of lives due to fatal encounters with elephants adds a heightened layer of emotional intensity to the people's struggles. Recalling a significant incident, a participant shares,

"Sometime back it [an elephant] killed a person who was working in the garden. Now we feel so uncomfortable while working there".¹¹

Routine activities like working in the garden become potentially dangerous, and the fear of fatal attacks casts a pervasive shadow. In discussions near Murchison Falls National Park, multiple focus groups revealed that, over the past few years multiple people have lost their lives due to encounters with elephants.⁵ This alarming statistic further amplifies the emotional toll, making the fear of fatal encounters a grim reality for the participants. The resulting trauma, stemming from both financial insecurity and the loss of lives, leaves an enduring psychological impact on the people. The fear of elephants draws parallels to wartime experiences, creating a pervasive sense of vulnerability among community members. Expressing this sentiment, a participant shares, "we get so scared of the elephants that it feels like going back to the LRA-wartime when we lived in fear".² The psychological burden disrupts daily activities, manifesting apprehension, and a reluctance to engage in certain areas associated with potential elephant encounters. One woman emotionally said, "I get so scared when walking in a bushy area, sometimes the feeling

covers me like a spirit. Then I fall and get myself back together and go home”.² This pervasive fear leads to reluctance to send children to schools or, avoiding specific locations such as waterpoints or roads to trading centers. Thus, the intertwining concerns of livelihood and safety underscore the serious challenges faced by participants with the emotional toll extending far beyond mere financial instability, severely affecting their well-being. The bleakness of the situation leaves some individuals feeling hopeless,

“Some people are so hopeless, they say: what can I do in this world? There is nothing left. Let me die”.¹⁶

Faced with formidable challenges, many people find their hope gradually fading as they are running out of options to mitigate the problem. The constant presence of uncertainty infiltrates every aspect of their lives, leaving them feeling helpless and powerless. This diminishing hope is not merely about coming to terms with their circumstances; it also represents a significant doubt regarding the possibility of any meaningful change or progress, especially as their problems and hardships go unrecognized.

4.4 Recognition of local people

4.4.1 Compensation

The frustration and hardships faced by the people due to elephant-induced damages are exacerbated by the absence of a functional compensation system. Despite the announcement of the Uganda Wildlife Act in 2019, which was intended “for financing compensation claims for human death, injuries or damage to property caused by a wild animal outside a protected area”, its implementation has been notably lacking (UWA, 2019b). Many participants state that there is no compensation, “when an elephant does something, like destroying crops or killing a person; there is no compensation”.¹¹ Another participant states, “when an animal comes and destroys your crops, there is a need for the compensation but the government is not giving it. So the law is there, but it is not being implemented”.⁹ Participants further elaborate on the consequences of this absence of compensation, particularly concerning the destruction of crops, questioning, “what will you be eating in the meantime?”⁹ which underscores the immediate impact on participants’ livelihoods. Furthermore, the discussions delve into graver scenarios, such as people being killed by an elephant, “if an elephant kills a responsible parent, who pays and works so that children can eat and go to school”?⁹ This important question highlights the wider societal consequences, illustrating the significant socio-economic impact experienced by the affected people.

However, some mention that there is compensation, although state that the guidelines for compensation, essential for ensuring fairness, are frequently criticized for being overly complex and challenging,

“To get compensation, it is a long process. Officials have to come and photograph your garden. You need to pay for transport to go to the offices of the police and UWA, which can take 3 days. But we are poor. How are we going to pay for all this? And in the meantime, we can’t work on our land, so there is no way to get it”.¹²

The bureaucratic delays are further compounded by the financial burden placed on the affected individuals. The compensation process is not only time-consuming but also costly, “the process of compensation is too long, and costs money we don’t have”,³ posing barriers for those

already struggling financially. When compensation is eventually provided, it is criticized for being inadequate and disproportionate to the extent of the damage inflicted by the elephants, particularly by the fortunate few who receive it,

“Recently they sent some compensation, 2 cups of beans and 2kg of posho. People were not happy with this. The elephant destroys the whole garden, and then you get only 2 cups. This is not equivalent”.¹⁷

The minimal compensation provided is seen as inadequate, given the significant damage inflicted by elephants in the gardens, which fails to adequately address the immediate needs of the participants and reflects the disparity between the compensation received and the actual losses incurred. This disparity between the compensation offered and the magnitude of the damage is perceived as insulting, deepening the sense of injustice felt by the affected families, as one participant emphasized, “if the compensation is not the equivalent of what was destroyed, it is like an insult”.² This situation not only leaves the community struggling to make ends meet but also highlights the urgent need for a more efficient, equitable, and compassionate compensation system that adequately addresses the challenges faced by those impacted by incidents involving elephants.

4.4.2 Government neglect

As the participants grapple with the inadequacies of response mechanisms, a disconnect emerges between their experiences and the actions taken by authorities, particularly the UWA and the government. Despite reporting incidents of elephants causing havoc on community land, the UWA's interventions are viewed as insufficient. Initially, when participants seek assistance from the UWA, the UWA does respond to distress calls, rangers arrive, and employ deterrent measures such as shooting bullets in the air. This immediate action succeeds in scaring away the elephants temporarily. But often, the participants are confronted with reappearing elephants the very next day, yet the UWA either fails to respond to calls again or does so infrequently. However, participants most of the time report the absence of UWA when calling for assistance. In the ongoing struggle to address elephant invasions, community initiatives like recruiting scout rangers have emerged, although the effectiveness of these scouts is surrounded by scepticism,

“Scout rangers are there to escort wild animals, but they don't have guns. They only have vuvuzelas [a type of horn] and a small container [for drumming], an elephant won't run away from that. So, they need to be properly equipped, or the rangers from UWA themselves should come”.¹⁸

The scouts, tasked with escorting the elephants away from human settlements and farms, are found to be inadequately equipped for the task at hand. Instead of firearms or other effective deterrents, they are armed only with vuvuzelas and a small container, which are insufficient to deter elephants effectively. As the inadequacy of these tools is evident, there is a renewed call for better equipment or support from organizations like the UWA. Nevertheless, people are left on their own to defend themselves from the elephants and instead of proactive measures to address the issue, the UWA's purported guidance is simply to “get used to it”¹⁶, as the UWA claims to lack sufficient manpower to respond to all the incidents. During a focus group discussion, participants also cited another reason for the UWA's negligence,

“UWA has these rangers, they are completely to guide the animal from hurting. So, their intention in the park, they even don't want the rangers to mix with the local people. Because if that relationship gets too

good, there might be a tendency to sell animals for money. So UWA doesn't want any good relationship between the rangers and communities. Rangers are not allowed to go to communities".¹²

Participants state that UWA appears to deliberately prevent its rangers from establishing close ties with local people. The rationale behind this approach is to mitigate the risk of locals exploiting such relationships for personal gain, such as selling wildlife for profit. Conversely, it acknowledges the possibility of corruption among rangers, where individuals tasked with protecting wildlife may succumb to bribery or engage in illegal activities themselves, a practice not uncommon near protected areas in Uganda (Moreto et al., 2015). While this policy aims to safeguard against illegal activities like poaching and wildlife trade, it could also hinder UWA's ability to effectively address issues and solve with people living close to protected areas.

Regardless of the reasons behind UWA's neglect to marauding elephants on community land, the frustrations grow as this is contrasting to rapid response to wildlife-related or park-related issues, "the moment the elephants come here it causes havoc, nobody comes. But if we go in the park, the UWA reacts very fast by capturing you".³ This highlights a clear disparity in the UWA's priorities, where the welfare and safety of local people appear to be overlooked in favour of strict enforcement of protected areas. The frustration deepens when considering the disparity in treatment between human and animal casualties. Other participants lamented,

"When an elephant killed a child here, the UWA didn't compensate, and they even haven't said sorry. But when something happens to an animal, they react very quickly. While the elephant mortality is seen by them as a minor accident".¹⁴

While people from a different village also grieved,

"We are very angry, and there is even starvation within the community. There is not even enough food anymore. We are dying, but yet if you kill an elephant, you'll be in prison tomorrow".¹⁶

The lack of compensation or acknowledgment for human casualties, coupled with the perception of minimizing the severity of such incidents, further deepens the resentment among affected people. Also, the contrast drawn between the immediate consequences of harming wildlife, such as imprisonment, and the lack of support for human victims further exacerbates the sense of injustice. This underscores a sense of neglect and marginalization felt by the participants, where their grievances and losses are overshadowed by the swift action taken in response to incidents involving wildlife.

Moreover, the community's attempts to seek redress through formal channels, such as reporting incidents to the local government and UWA, result in a lack of meaningful response. The town council reports incidents to the district, which, in turn, forwards the concerns to the UWA. The bureaucratic procedures in place appear to be ineffective, failing to produce any concrete outcomes, as "we never had a positive response from them".² Despite the people's persistent efforts to raise concerns with the UWA's headquarters, it appears to yield no outcomes, as "we always report to the UWA head office, but we never get any feedback".⁷ Even when engaging directly with UWA officials in meetings, the absence of constructive feedback or visible progress only exacerbates the people's scepticism and frustration towards the UWA's ability to address their concerns. The sentiment is that, despite their efforts to communicate the challenges faced by the participants, there is a perceived lack of concern and a failure to

adequately respond to the immediate issues. The people's frustration and desperation reach a point where some members express a desire to resort to violence, threatening to kill elephants, further exacerbating the conflict between the people and the UWA,

"Killing is not the best option; we need to say it so UWA will act. Of course, we do not want to kill elephants, but we need to do something. If we kill them [elephants], what will we be proud of? We want to provoke the UWA into action".²

This conveys the dilemma faced by participants struggling with the consequences of human-elephant conflict. Amid intense frustration and despair, some members express an urge to resort to violence, including the option of killing elephants as a plea for a solution as participants feel that they have run out of options. Similar findings emerged in Tanzania (Mariki et al., 2015), where the act of killing elephants has been viewed as a means of protest and a message to the government. In those conversations, individuals cited a range of similar grievances. These encompassed issues such as the absence of benefits from conservation, frustration with land allocation, the neglect in installing rangers to deter crop-raiding elephants, and the failure to receive compensation for losses resulting from elephant raids.

However, a voice advocating reason emerges, urging against such drastic measures, as it calls for dialogue and active engagement with the UWA to instigate change. Because allegedly the UWA can't handle the problem, participants try to address the government to seek resolution and assistance in mitigating the issues they face,

"Our local council sends it to the district, and then sends it to the Ministry of Wildlife, and even in the parliament. So that people can live in peace. But no serious step has been taken. The Ministry of Wildlife and Tourism doesn't take it seriously".¹⁷

Despite these concerted efforts, people express disappointment with the lack of serious steps taken to address their concerns. People highlight that the Ministry of Tourism, Wildlife, and Antiquities, ultimately responsible for conservation matters, is not treating the matter with the seriousness it deserves. Desperate for a resolution, the participants extend their reach to organizations such as the members of parliament, and even the Minister of Defense, all to no avail. The frustration extends to the Ugandan government, which, despite their complaints, seemingly offers no meaningful assistance. The frustration intensifies as the government's response suggests a dismissive attitude, advising the Acholi community to "learn to live with the elephants like the Kenyans do",⁸ without providing any further guidance or support. Even high-profile visits from government officials, such as the Minister of Tourism, fail to yield tangible results. While promises may be made during such visits, the lack of follow-through underscores a broader pattern of governmental neglect and indifference toward the people's concerns.

4.4.3 Humans are less important than elephants

The lack of action and mitigation of the conflict with elephants has led to the widespread perception that the government places greater value on the lives of elephants than on the lives of its people,

"According to the policy of the government, the animal is more important than a human being",⁹

And another participant reinforcing this statement,

"I feel that the government thinks that our lives are not as important as the elephant".²

Many people recognize this perception with some of them stating "animals shouldn't be put above human lives".⁴ Many individuals are frustrated, emphasizing the belief that prioritizing animals over human lives is unjustifiable. They assert that such a hierarchy of values should not exist, highlighting a fundamental concern for human well-being and safety that they feel is being overlooked or neglected. By underscoring the perception of their lives as less valuable than those of the area's elephants, the villages surrounding the parks can be framed as less-than-human geographies (Margulies, 2019), underscoring the structural conditions where people grapple with dehumanizing circumstances. The failure to address and mitigate the conflict involving elephants has fostered a widespread perception within affected communities that the government values the lives of elephants more than those of its citizens, a perception common in areas facing conservation conflicts close to or in protected areas (Akampurira & Marijnen, 2024). This sentiment underscores a broader sense of neglect and marginalization among the participants, who adamantly reject the notion that animals should be placed above human lives. Consequently, this perceived hierarchy of values increases the sense of exclusion among affected communities, further solidifying their view of being consigned to less-than-human geographies.

Furthermore, the impact of this perceived neglect is evident in the sentiment that it feels as if they are treated as "non-Ugandans", strengthening a deep sense of marginalization (Babiha, 2018; Human Rights Watch, 2005). The marginalization of the Acholi people in Uganda has its roots in historical decisions made by colonizers, which established and perpetuated a societal hierarchy while disregarding certain groups. Despite the end of the LRA-war, which left the Acholi with deep scars, and the gradual return of many Acholi to their homelands, the region continues to lag in terms of development compared to other parts of Uganda, as it still has one of the highest poverty rates in Uganda (UBOS, 2018). Despite postwar efforts at reconstruction and poverty reduction, government support has been inadequate, and manifests in various forms, including limited access to education and livelihood opportunities, exacerbating marginalization. Savard et al., (2016) argue that this type of marginalization might be characterized as "violence of neglect" signifying the government's failure to offer adequate support to a segment of the population. "Violence of neglect" describes a type of harm suffered by individuals or groups due to systemic neglect or apathy from authorities or institutions, sometimes with the purpose of provoking instability (Chabal, 2009). Unlike explicit violence, like physical or verbal abuse, the violence of neglect manifests when essential support, resources, or attention are purposefully denied or insufficiently given, resulting in exclusion and marginalization. This neglect leads participants to question their identity as Ugandans, expressing a belief that if they were considered genuine citizens, the government would have taken more proactive measures to address their concerns,

"It feels like we are non-Ugandans because if we are real Ugandans, the government would have taken care of us, like people from western Uganda".¹⁹

Participants feel overlooked, believing that if they were truly recognized as integral members of Ugandan society, their voices would be heard, and their issues prioritized by the government. Despite being citizens of Uganda, they feel neglected and treated as "non-Ugandans" by the

government. This sentiment is amplified by the disparities in development and the inadequate support from the government, especially when contrasted with the more developed western and southern Uganda. The disparities between the Acholi region and western and southern Uganda are stark, manifesting across various socio-economic indicators (UBOS, 2018). Although south-west Uganda benefits from strong infrastructural development, economic prosperity driven by agriculture, and comparatively improved access to essential services like healthcare and education, the Acholi region struggles with limited infrastructure, economic opportunities, and access to basic services (Dowhaniuk, 2021; Kan & Klasen, 2021; NPA, 2020). Consequently, there is disappointment with the government's failure to address their needs and concerns, leading to questions about their identity as Ugandans. Moreover, a participant mentions,

"And we don't have our safety. The constitution of Uganda says that they are responsible for us, and to protect us. The government should be reminded of this responsibility. They failed their obligation".¹⁶

Emphasizing the expectation for the government to uphold its constitutional obligation to ensure the safety and protection of all citizens, individuals are demanding accountability and reasserting the obligation to prioritize the well-being of the people, especially the well-being of the Acholi people.

5. Discussion

This thesis examined conservation conflicts and injustices within post-conflict Acholi, Uganda, shedding light on their role in perpetuating broader injustices stemming from the legacies of the LRA-war. Through a conservation justice lens, the thesis explored the complex interactions between conservation efforts and the socio-political landscape, highlighting their profound implications for the region's ongoing struggles with historical injustices and socio-economic inequalities. It also addressed questions such as the underlying socio-economic, political, and cultural factors influencing conservation conflicts in the Acholi region, whether conservation efforts can be considered just, and how narratives of Acholi people affected by conservation conflicts intersect with broader post-conflict justice.

The conservation conflicts in Acholi, Uganda, serve as a reflection of the broader post-conflict injustices prevalent in the region. These conflicts epitomize historical and contemporary patterns of marginalization and neglect experienced by the Acholi community, exacerbating existing socio-economic vulnerabilities, and rekindling traumatic memories of conflict and insecurity. The disparities in resource allocation and governance challenges highlighted by these conflicts underscore the enduring struggles faced by communities in the aftermath of conflict, as inadequate government intervention perpetuates feelings of injustice and erodes trust in state institutions. This perception of injustice is amplified by the belief that the government places greater importance on the conservation of elephants than on the welfare of its citizens. This perception contributes to a prevailing sentiment of being treated as secondary to wildlife interests, causing many to feel alienated and neglected by governmental priorities. Consequently, there is a pervasive sense of being labelled as "non-Ugandan," where individuals feel overlooked and undervalued by the very institutions meant to protect and support them. Furthermore, the conservation conflicts jeopardize both the cultural identity and heritage of elephants, thereby endangering the limited support base conservation efforts still maintain. These conflicts encompass complex layers of historical grievances, socio-economic vulnerabilities, and cultural identity preservation. While the immediate impact may manifest through elephants damaging crops, the underlying issues delve deeper into longstanding patterns of marginalization, distrust in governance, and the erosion of cultural heritage.

Hence, the conservation conflicts in the Acholi region relate to broader post-conflict injustices in the region by exacerbating socio-economic vulnerabilities, triggering traumatic memories of instability and insecurity, and reinforcing historical and contemporary feelings of neglect and marginalization among the population. Firstly, these conflicts exacerbate existing socio-economic vulnerabilities among the local population, particularly subsistence farmers who rely on agriculture for their livelihoods. Elephant raids on crops lead to severe economic losses, pushing already impoverished communities deeper into poverty. Consequently, the diminished agricultural yields and declining incomes resulting from conservation conflicts exacerbate existing inequalities in education. With families struggling to make ends meet due to economic losses from elephant raids, the prospect of affording education becomes increasingly unattainable. This inability to access education not only perpetuates intergenerational poverty but also deprives the people of a vital opportunity for progress and economic development. As a result, the impacts of conservation conflicts exacerbate socio-economic vulnerabilities,

deepening poverty among subsistence farmers and perpetuating inequalities rooted in the legacies of the LRA-war.

Secondly, the comparison drawn between the constant fear of elephant encounters and traumatic memories of the LRA-war illustrates the psychological toll inflicted upon people living amidst elephant (post-)conflict zones. The enduring fear disrupts daily life, echoing the psychological strain experienced during the conflict. Moreover, the compounded stress of financial instability and loss of lives further impact psychological well-being. This resonates with the findings of Barua et al. (2013), highlighting the hidden consequences of human-wildlife conflict, which surpass mere physical harm to encompass psychosocial well-being, disturbance of livelihoods, and increased food insecurity perpetuating a cycle of suffering and vulnerability. These feelings of insecurity and instability impede progress towards post-conflict justice.

Thirdly, compounding these challenges is the absence of adequate compensation and support from government authorities, including the UWA. The lack of meaningful government intervention in addressing the conservation conflicts, including the failure to address or even recognize the losses incurred by local people due to elephant raids, perpetuates feelings of neglect and marginalization among the population – the feeling of being "non-Ugandan". This sense of injustice is reinforced by perceptions that the government prioritizes wildlife over the well-being of its citizens, echoing broader historical patterns of marginalization experienced by the Acholi community. This sense of being marginalized and overlooked by authorities reinforces pre-existing narratives of exclusion and reinforces divisions within Ugandan society, hindering efforts towards post-conflict justice. Due to this exclusion, individuals have expressed a desire for violent means of response, due to a perceived lack of alternative means. Failure to address these conservation conflicts and marginalization could therefore reignite violence and conflict, as people may resort to violence when faced with ongoing injustices, desperation from loss of livelihoods, and a lack of alternatives (Pelc, 2020; Savard et al., 2016). Moreover, this thesis supports the argument by Redpath et al. (2013) that these conflicts are primarily human-centric and should, therefore, not be approached as human-wildlife conflicts, but as conservation conflicts.

Consequently, conservation efforts in the Acholi region raise significant questions regarding their justice, both in terms of recognition and distribution dimensions. The narratives presented highlight a lack of recognition of the rights and well-being of the Acholi people, as their grievances and losses due to elephant raids are often overlooked or minimized by governmental and conservation authorities. The absence of adequate compensation, coupled with perceptions of neglect and marginalization, underscores a failure to recognize the inherent value and rights of affected people. Furthermore, the distribution of benefits and burdens of conservation appears highly inequitable, with the Acholi bearing the brunt of economic losses and safety risks associated with elephant encounters while reaping few benefits from conservation initiatives. This disparity increases existing socio-economic inequalities and perpetuates feelings of injustice among the Acholi, calling into question the fairness of conservation efforts in the region. Addressing these justice dimensions requires meaningful engagement with affected communities, ensuring their rights are respected, grievances are addressed, and benefits of conservation are equitably distributed, ultimately fostering more just and sustainable conservation outcomes (Dawson et al., 2018; Martin et al., 2013, 2016). By

prioritizing recognition and equitable distribution in conservation efforts, not only immediate grievances are addressed, but also contribute to the broader goals of post-conflict justice, fostering recovery, reconciliation, and sustainable development in the Acholi region.

Despite the conflict and injustices, the narratives from the participants also reveal local support for conservation efforts. Beyond hardships they face, the Acholi people acknowledge the significance of preserving elephants, for two specific reasons. Within the Acholi culture, elephants hold profound significance, being revered as potent symbols of strength, resilience, and Acholi identity. Protecting elephants, therefore, goes beyond ecological conservation; it is a matter of safeguarding cultural heritage. However, there is concern that this cultural support may diminish over time, as the younger generation, whose experiences with elephants have been shaped by conflict and disruption, may struggle to grasp the profound cultural significance attached to these animals. Therefore, it is important to mitigate these conservation conflicts in time, otherwise, the cultural incentive for conservation support might be eroded, as cultural values can be important for conservation efforts and support (Waylen et al., 2010). Moreover, there is a pragmatic recognition of the economic value that elephants bring to the country through tourism. The presence of elephants attracts visitors, which could provide much-needed revenue and employment opportunities for the Acholi communities. However, as mentioned before, there is a need to ensure that these economic benefits are distributed equitably among the local population, otherwise the Acholi will only carry the burden of conservation.

5.1 Recommendations

Acknowledging local people as key stakeholders in conserving wildlife both within and beyond protected areas marks a significant step towards achieving justice in conservation efforts. Incorporating the perspectives and needs of local people ensures that conservation efforts are not only effective but also respectful of human rights and socio-economic considerations. This approach aims to minimize conflicts between conservation goals and local livelihoods, which is crucial as wildlife populations increasingly reside beyond park boundaries in Uganda. Community-based conservation could stand as a vital strategy for conservation, particularly in areas where communities have suffered social injustices due to conservation efforts, often occurring in the vicinity of protected areas (Lenhart, 2023). A community-based approach is suited because it addresses the underlying socio-economic vulnerabilities and historical injustices exacerbated by conservation conflicts in Acholi, Uganda (Armitage et al., 2020; Esmail et al., 2023). By actively involving local people in conservation efforts, it provides a platform for addressing these issues. This approach recognizes and values the rights, interests, and perspectives, as well as addressing feelings of neglect among stakeholders, thus fostering inclusiveness, empowerment, and sustainable conservation solutions that fit the local context (Dawson et al., 2021; Guibrune et al., 2021). Here, I will outline recommendations on how to approach community-based conservation in the Acholi region.

5.1.1 Governance recommendations

To start, fostering inclusive governance structures is essential, prioritizing the representation and considerations of marginalized communities, in the case of the Acholi people living close to protected areas. It is imperative to guarantee that conservation policies and practices are both equitable and mindful of local rights, traditions, and livelihoods. Furthermore, the principles

guiding conservation governance should adapt to current realities and redress historical injustices, particularly concerning the selection, design, and execution of conservation initiatives (Armitage et al., 2020). This includes recognizing the potential for conservation initiatives to perpetuate harm and acknowledging opportunities for mitigation are critical aspects of improvement, underscoring the necessity to address past injustices and reconcile them with present conservation efforts (Martin et al., 2016). Important to this part is equity, which encompasses fairness in the allocation of benefits and empowerment, which entails enabling individuals, particularly those with fewer resources, to assert greater control over their lives and improve their livelihoods, with ownership of productive assets playing a key role (Berkes, 2004).

Inclusive governance involves adopting a rights-based approach to conservation efforts, with a focus on prioritizing community access and granting autonomy in decision-making. A rights-based approach integrates rights, standards, and principles into policy formulation, planning, implementation, and outcome evaluation, ensuring that conservation efforts consistently uphold human rights (Campese, 2009). Clearly outlining access and decision-making rights fosters greater transparency, better incorporates diverse stakeholder interests, mitigates conflicts, and ensures the successful and just implementation of conservation strategies (Springer & Campese, 2011).

Furthermore, the importance of fostering interconnected networks and collaborative relationships across various levels, including local, regional, and international levels, to collectively formulate conservation solutions (Armitage et al., 2020). Collaborating with other organizations could facilitate resource sharing and a multifaceted approach to conservation challenges (Stone, 2015). By pooling knowledge, expertise, funding, and technology, stakeholders can develop comprehensive solutions and enhance their capacity for sustainable practices (Decker et al., 2005). This collaborative approach also involves external partners who serve as bridges between local people and conservation authorities such as the UWA. It emphasizes the importance of working together across various levels and sectors to develop effective conservation strategies that promote both social well-being and ecological sustainability.

5.1.2 Policy recommendations

Moreover, effective community-based conservation requires both legal and policy support, advocating for frameworks that not only recognize but also actively support community-led initiatives. This involves directly tackling bureaucratic hurdles, legal barriers, and opposition from stakeholders defending the current conservation system. Moreover, recognizing the historical legacy of discrimination and marginalization is crucial, as it significantly influences the recognition and support by the state (Kothari et al., 2013). It is also important to recognize that building and maintaining trust with landowners and managers may be central to conserving biodiversity (Young et al., 2016). This approach should encompass efforts to confront existing challenges, respect diverse ways of living, address power imbalances, and foster genuine collaboration between communities and conservation authorities. However, achieving effective community-based conservation is more challenging than it may appear, as one key obstacle could be the lack of will among conservation authorities, like the UWA, at all levels to genuinely involve the population in wildlife management, as highlighted by Tumusiime & Vedeld (2012).

This sentiment is echoed by Ahebwa et al., (2012) who emphasize that despite the participatory language employed in policy reforms, the UWA maintains significant power and control over resources, ultimately determining the rules of participation.

5.1.3 Practical recommendations

In addition, the urgent need for an improved compensation system for individuals affected by elephant raids in Uganda is evident. The current mechanism, as outlined in the Uganda Wildlife Act, has proven to be ineffective (UWA, 2019b). A new system must prioritize efficiency and equity, ensuring that affected individuals receive fair and commensurate compensation for their losses. This involves simplifying the process and reducing bureaucratic hurdles to facilitate timely and accessible compensation. By streamlining procedures and eliminating unnecessary delays, the proposed system aims to provide much-needed support to those impacted by elephant raids, addressing their needs effectively and fairly.

Furthermore, establishing and maintaining an effective revenue-sharing system holds the potential to significantly improve the livelihoods of those living adjacent to protected areas by providing them with financial benefits derived from the existence of these areas (Franks & Twinamatsiko, 2017). However, despite this potential, it is essential to recognize that such a system may not alone be adequate to bring about substantial positive change. For example, near Murchison Falls National Park, even if the revenue is distributed among a relatively small population of 20,000 individuals residing in the affected villages, the allocation of funds would likely result in minimal yearly benefits per person, potentially less than \$10 (MTWA, 2018). This is consistent with the findings of Christian & Mwaura, (2013), who remarked that "there are too many villages sharing the limited revenue". Consequently, while revenue sharing can contribute to gradual improvements in the welfare of local people, it will not suffice to address the broader socio-economic challenges they face. Therefore, additional strategies and interventions may be necessary to ensure sustainable development and meaningful enhancement of the well-being of those living with wildlife and in proximity to protected areas.

Accordingly, this entails supporting alternative livelihoods and income-generating activities that are resilient to elephant raids (Dickman, 2010). This could involve a combination of diversifying agricultural practices or promoting eco-tourism and accessory businesses. Diversifying agricultural practices can include promoting elephant-compatible agriculture, in which crops are selected that are less attractive to elephants to minimize potential conflicts (King et al., 2017; Parker & Osborn, 2006). However, this entails considering the ecological suitability of the crops and the market value to ensure that these practices are also economically viable (Gross et al., 2016). Furthermore, diversifying these practices by adding livestock projects has also been proven to empower the poor (Hegde, 2019). Livestock projects offer farmers an extra income source, mitigating risks linked to elephant raids by diversifying their revenue streams. Adopting livestock as a livelihood can have an additional benefit: intensive practices like cattle grazing can degrade elephant habitats, reducing habitat diversity and suppressing the growth of food plants for elephants, ultimately making these areas less appealing for elephants to visit and consequently reducing human-elephant interactions in those areas (Lenin & Sukumar, 2011).

Moreover, community-based ecotourism can complement efforts to diversify agricultural practices, particularly in areas where there are interactions between agriculture and wildlife,

such as those involving elephants. Community members can offer guided tours or experiences that highlight the unique ecological features of the region, including its wildlife. Community-based ecotourism ventures can generate additional income for residents. By offering accommodations, meals, and other services to tourists, people can diversify their revenue streams beyond agriculture. Ecotourism can foster a sense of stewardship and conservation among community members. As they recognize the economic value of preserving their natural environment and wildlife, the Acholi people might foster the elephant as their totem once again. Although there have been successful approaches that contributed to improved livelihoods (Ahebwa & van der Duim, 2013; Backman & Mananura, 2017), it is important to note that the nature of collaboration in such practices can be complex and may not always accurately represent or benefit the interests of local people (Stone, 2015). Power imbalances among stakeholders, such as government agencies, donor organizations, NGOs, and local people, can influence decision-making processes, potentially leading to inequalities in resource allocation and management. Therefore, ecotourism practices must be seen as a supplement, and not a replacement for other livelihoods (Kiss, 2004).

5.1.4 Umoja Conservancies

Ideally, an overarching organization that collaborates with and incorporates all stakeholders and serves as a unifying voice can play a crucial role in effective community-based conservation. Such an organization in Uganda is Umoja Conservancies, which can bring together diverse groups including local people, government agencies, conservation authorities, and other NGO's to work towards common goals. Umoja Conservancies can help execute the outlined recommendations for community-based conservation in the Acholi region by leveraging their expertise in fostering inclusive governance structures, advocating for supportive legal and policy frameworks, and implementing practical solutions. By actively involving local people as key stakeholders, Umoja can facilitate the representation and consideration of marginalized communities, ensuring that conservation policies are equitable and mindful of local rights, traditions, and livelihoods. This involves promoting a rights-based approach to conservation, prioritizing community access and autonomy in decision-making, and addressing historical injustices and socio-economic vulnerabilities. Umoja's role includes enhancing transparency, reducing conflicts, and building trust with landowners and managers through collaborative networks that span local and regional levels. Additionally, Umoja can support the development of effective compensation systems for those affected by wildlife conflicts, such as elephant raids, and promote revenue-sharing mechanisms that provide tangible benefits for locally affected people. By encouraging alternative livelihoods such as diversified agriculture and community-based ecotourism, Umoja can help mitigate conservation conflicts and improve local livelihoods. Overall, Umoja's efforts will foster inclusiveness, empowerment, and sustainable conservation solutions that respect the local context and address past and present challenges, filling a critical gap in Uganda's conservation landscape.

5.2 Addressing methodological gaps

Based on the extensive data I gathered, I am confident that the methodologies used in this thesis have adequately addressed and answered my research questions. However, there might be certain limitations evident in the empirical outcomes. Conducting interviews and discussions solely with local people affected by conservation conflicts might have limited the diversity of perspectives included in the study. This approach can introduce biases towards local viewpoints, potentially overlooking broader perspectives from other stakeholders involved in the conflicts. By not engaging with a diverse range of stakeholders, this thesis may not have captured the complexity of the conflicts and the interconnected interests and concerns of various groups. Not including key stakeholders, like the UWA, in the research process may also hinder opportunities for collaboration and consensus-building, which are essential for effective conflict resolution. Although I engaged in various informal conversations with NGOs and (ex-)UWA members, the limited number of these interactions did not suffice to gain a comprehensive understanding of the situation. Informal conversations can offer valuable insights but do not provide the depth and rigor required for a thorough analysis, as semi-structured interviews do. Without structured engagement and detailed discussions, the nuanced viewpoints and full spectrum of interests, concerns, and potential solutions of these stakeholders might be inadequately represented. Nevertheless, the study's limitations may be a result of limited time and financial resources. Similarly, the number of interviews and focus groups conducted is limited. While I observed data saturation during interviews, conducting additional interviews and focus groups in various locations could have revealed new perspectives and reasons. Therefore, gathering more data in the future might enhance the study's representativeness of the entire Acholi region. Furthermore, participants in the study may have felt compelled to present socially acceptable responses, particularly when discussing topics as sensitive as conflicts or criticisms of government policies. However, participants also could have overstated negative experiences or viewpoints, potentially distorting the true extent and severity of conservation conflicts in the region. This might be attributed to my positionality as an "external" European male, as participants may have perceived me as a powerful actor.

6. Conclusion

The conservation conflicts and injustices in Acholi, Uganda, are deeply intertwined with the broader post-conflict injustices prevalent in the region, particularly linked to the legacies of the LRA-war. These conflicts serve as a reflection of historical marginalization and neglect experienced by the Acholi community, exacerbating existing socio-economic vulnerabilities and reigniting traumatic memories of conflict and insecurity. Socioeconomic disparities, compounded by inadequate government intervention, perpetuate feelings of injustice and erode trust in state institutions. The prioritization of wildlife conservation over the welfare of citizens further amplifies sentiments of being marginalized and undervalued, contributing to a pervasive sense of being labelled as "non-Ugandan." These conflicts extend beyond mere physical harm, deeply affecting psychosocial well-being and livelihoods, and hindering progress towards post-conflict justice and reconciliation. Achieving conservation justice and broader post-conflict justice requires structural societal changes, including inclusive governance structures, equitable resource allocation, and recognition of the rights and needs of affected people. Addressing conservation conflicts and injustices is paramount, as they are intrinsically linked to historical injustices and disrupted livelihoods, necessitating simultaneous attention alongside social and economic recovery efforts to effectively tackle post-conflict injustices and foster long-lasting peace and stability in the Acholi region.

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Appendix 1 – footnotes

¹ Okello is the pseudonym of a young farmer residing in the village of Camgweng. For anonymity purposes, he has adopted this fictive name.

² Focus group discussion in Latoro with elders, 8 participants, 13th of November 2023.

³ Focus group discussion in Purongo with 7 elderly farmers, 12th of November 2023.

⁴ Focus group discussion with middle-aged farmers and the local council, 9 participants. 12th of November 2023.

⁵ Accounts from multiple interviews and focus groups around Murchison Falls National Park in November 2023.

⁶ Interview with a farmer in Longanyura on the 8th of December 2023.

⁷ Interview in Camgweng with young farmer and part-time wildlife scout on 9th of December 2023.

⁸ Focus group discussion in Longanyura, 8 participants 8th of December 2023.

⁹ Interview with an elder in Wianaka on the 13th of November 2023.

¹⁰ Interview with elders in Purongo on the 12th of November 2023.

¹¹ Interview with an elder in Purongo on the 12th of November 2023.

¹² Focus group discussion with middle-aged farmers and the local council, 9 participants on 13th of November 2023.

¹³ Interview with two elder farmers in Latoro on 13th of November 2023.

¹⁴ Focus group discussion with middle-aged, older farmers and a local council was also present, 10 participants on 14th of November 2023.

¹⁵ Interview with an elderly farmer in Latoro on 14th of November 2023.

¹⁶ Focus group discussion in Kalabong with farmers, 10 participants on 9th of December 2023.

¹⁷ Interview with an elderly farmer in Namokora on the 8th of December 2023.

¹⁸ Focus group discussion in Wianaka, middle-aged farmers and moto-taxi drivers, 10 participants on 13th of November 2023.

¹⁹ Focus group discussion in Camgweng with elderly farmers, 8 participants on 9th of December 2023.