

De-conflicting and De-Risking Land in Uganda: A Systems Approach to Tenure Security, Data Integrity and Dispute Resolution

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SUMMARY

Land remains Uganda’s most strategic productive asset, underpinning livelihoods for over 70% of the population. Yet tenure insecurity, driven by overlapping interests on mailo, double titling, fraudulent transfers, titling within protected areas, and weak, parallel dispute resolution mechanisms continues to depress investment, market activity, and social cohesion. Approximately 70% of land remains unregistered, intensifying boundary disputes and inheritance wrangles and limiting access to credit. Since the 1900 Buganda Agreement and the introduction of Torrens title (1908), Uganda’s cadastre and registry have evolved significantly; recent modernization under the Uganda National Land Information System (UgNLIS) has digitized core processes. However, legacy distortions caused by plane-table era overlaps, assumed datums, shrunken/torn sheets, “blue-page” mailo sub-divisions, and inset misuse were transmitted into digital form, weakening data integrity and public confidence.

This paper defines de-confliction and de-risking in the Ugandan context and proposes a systems approach across four pillars: (A) legal and policy harmonization (RTA, Survey Act, occupancy rent instrument, environment–planning checks); (B) redesign of dispute resolution with clear hierarchy, ADR standards, and digital case tracking; (C) block-wise cadastral database cleaning grounded on a strengthened geodetic framework; and (D) scaling registration coverage via SLAAC/CCOs with community safeguards. We present hotspot case notes (Kyadondo 182/185; Mukono clusters), a phased implementation roadmap with KPIs, and a risk register. The program seeks to restore trust in registries, unlock mortgage ability and investment, and align with national and global agendas (Vision 2040, SDGs, UN-GGIM/IGIF). The contribution is a replicable, data-driven model for African contexts confronting layered tenure, legacy distortions, and fragmented dispute fora.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Uganda's land sector is pivotal to economic transformation, spatial planning, environmental stewardship, and social stability. Persistent tenure insecurity, especially on mailo due to layered rights of landlords and lawful/bona fide occupants has reduced productivity by up to an estimated 25%, increased conflict incidence, and constrained investment. Although UgNLIS digitized core operations across Ministry Zonal Offices (MZOs), registry modernization has been hampered by inherited cadastral distortions and a fragmented dispute resolution landscape that encourages forum shopping.

2.0 BACKGROUND

2.1 Historical evolution of tenure and surveying

Uganda's land tenure evolved from pre-colonial customary systems to a hybrid regime after the 1900 Buganda Agreement (mailo) and the 1908 Torrens-based Registration of Land Titles Ordinance. The 1939 Survey Act formalized geodetic and cadastral practice. Nationalization under the 1975 Land Reform Decree disrupted tenure and markets, reversed by the 1995 Constitution and operationalized in the 1998 Land Act (security of occupancy, CCOs). Donor-supported reforms since 2010 established UgNLIS, integrating cadastral and registration workflows.

2.2 Conflict and productivity

Evidence suggests land conflicts reduce agricultural productivity and suppress investment, with disproportionate effects on vulnerable groups (widows, female-headed households). In Uganda, the coexistence of customary tenure with Mailo, freehold and leasehold tenure, having it as the highly unregistered land (~70%), and mailo duo-right disputes are key drivers.

2.3 Data integrity and digital transition

Legacy analog processes (plane-table surveys, manual films/tracings) produced low accuracy cadastre which often times resulted in overlaps, shape distortions, and partition-trail loss (Karamazoo). During digitization, these same overlaps, shape distortions, and partition-trail loss (Karamazoo) were transmitted into UgNLIS (garbage-in/garbage-out), complicating plotting, validation, and public trust.

3.0 Problem Analysis

3.1 Institutional fragmentation

Multiple first-instance fora—courts, Land Tribunals, Local Council Courts, mediators, and traditional leaders—operate without a clear hierarchy. Political and security actors sometimes intervene extralegally. Thin capacity and weak records cause delays and inconsistent outcomes.

3.2 Cadastral data distortions

Drivers include destruction of geodetic points in the 1970s; assumed datums; shrunken/torn sheets; imperial/metric mixing; inset misuse; blue-page sub-divisions (~40,000 unsurveyed mailo interests); and ethics lapses, particularly after divestiture (1995) amid weak professional regulation.

3.3 Consequences

- Overlaps block FIFO plotting and create cross-block/MZO mis-registrations.
- Parcels appear to infringe protected areas due to base-layer distortions, fueling litigation and public confusion.
- Divergences between legacy and new deed plan geometries erode confidence in UgNLIS.

4.0 De-confliction and De-risking

De-confliction comprises coordinated legal, technical, and social measures that prevent and resolve ownership/boundary/use disputes: clarify rights hierarchies (mailo), standardize ADR, cleanse cadastral fabric, and institutionalize gatekeeping/triage.

De-risking reduces uncertainties for right-holders and investors: authoritative geodetic ties, environmental/plan conformance checks, robust audit trails, cybersecurity, and investor-facing due diligence (conflict, environmental, and social risk).

Reflections on the ownership, administration, management, practice and regulation of land in Uganda

4.1 The Constitution of Uganda, 1995

Uganda got a new Constitution in 1995, which, among other things, brought about fundamental reforms in the ownership, tenure and management of land. The Land Act, 1998 operationalised these Constitutional reforms. Most significant among these are that land belongs to the citizens of Uganda and ownership is under four types of tenure, namely, customary, freehold, mailo and leasehold. The Constitution further made provisions that include: Government may acquire land

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in public interest; Government or a local government shall hold in trust and protect natural lakes, rivers, wetlands, forest reserves, national parks and land reserved for ecological and tourist purposes; Non-citizens may acquire leases; the Uganda Land Commission is to manage Government land; District Land Boards and District Land Tribunals are to be established; Government or a local government shall hold in trust and protect natural lakes, rivers, wetlands, forest reserves, national parks and land reserved for ecological and tourist purposes and Parliament is also to make a law providing for the acquisition of registered interest by lawful or bona fide occupants.

4.2 The Land Act, 1998

The Constitution together with the Land Act (which operationalizes the constitutional provisions) put in place measures and institutions to enable the citizens hold the constitutional land. Most significant of this is the recognition of customary tenure as legitimate tenure and providing for its regulation, administration and management. These laws enable the customary owners to acquire certificates of ownership and to convert customary and leasehold tenure to freehold and, for security of occupancy on mailo, freehold or leasehold land for lawful or bonafide occupants. Further to this provision include: a person may apply for a freehold, or may convert their customary ownership to freehold; communities may form Communal Land Associations and manage common land under a Common Property Management Scheme; tenants on registered land have security of occupancy and can apply for a certificate of occupancy for the land they occupy; spouses and children must consent to transactions in land on which the live, occupy and derive sustenance. For orphans, the Land Committee must give consent; a Land Fund was established to assist people to acquire registerable interests in land, and to facilitate Government to resettle landless people; the Uganda Land Commission, District Land Boards, and District Land Tribunals were operationalized; and District Land Offices, Sub-county Area land committee were established.

The Land Act created the ideal but gigantic land administration institutions that caused implementation pitfalls. Even with adequate financial resources, the supply of trained and competent professionals was and is still insufficient.

Resulting from the challenges involved in the implementation of the Land Act, 1998 amendments to the Act were enacted in 2001 – to enable Magistrates' Courts and Local Council Courts to continue handling land disputes until the Dispute resolution institutions were established; in 2004 – to mainly streamline the administrative structures of the land administration system.

4.3 The Survey Act, 1939

The Survey Act, in regards to regulation and control of land surveying activities in Uganda, establishes the legal framework for the regulation of all land surveying work in Uganda by vesting authority in the Commissioner for Surveys and Lands to direct, supervise, and approve surveys, while also providing for the licensing and discipline of surveyors; this ensures that

surveys used for land registration, boundary definition, and development planning are conducted to recognized technical standards and by qualified professionals.

The Act provides for the survey procedures, boundary demarcation and obligations of landholders by empowering government and licensed surveyors to enter land, issue notices to landowners and occupiers, require the pointing out and marking of boundaries, clear survey lines, and place or maintain boundary marks, while obliging landholders to preserve these marks; these provisions are intended to secure accurate boundary definition but also directly affect land occupation and use, making them central to boundary certainty and potential disputes.

The Act further provides for the enforcement powers, offences and cost recovery mechanisms through offences and penalties for obstruction of surveys, tampering with survey marks or failure to comply with lawful survey requirements, and it allows survey costs and expenses to be recovered from landowners or charged against the land; these provisions support compliance and cost sharing in survey operations but can generate tension where boundaries are contested or where landholders dispute survey findings or associated costs.

As a result of the Act's primary role in determining boundaries, the conduct of surveys and obligations on landowners, it raises concerns about its feasibility in addressing a mixture of legacy and contemporary issues in land. The Act itself is mainly about regulating land surveying, but misapplication, ambiguity or enforcement gaps in these provisions can trigger disputes over land boundaries and ownership. In an unfamiliar turn, the act further provides for the powers of the Commissioner of Surveys and Mapping to authorize for surveys – and again puts another authority in the line Minister to authorize for special surveys; the act recognizes the practice of surveying to be for government surveyors – contrary to the government restructuring agenda that privatized the practice of surveying in Uganda among others provisions.

Even with the enactment of the Surveyors Registration Act of 1974, which provides for the registration, regulation, and discipline of professional surveyors, inconsistencies remain between the two legal instruments. These inconsistencies create uncertainty in roles, oversight, and accountability between government and private surveyors, underscoring the need for harmonization and modernization of the legal framework to reflect contemporary land administration practice, private sector participation, and emerging technological and governance realities.

4.4 The Registration of Titles Act, 2023

The Registration of Titles Act is founded on the Torrens system, under which a certificate of title issued by the Registrar is conclusive evidence of ownership; once a person is registered as proprietor, their title cannot be defeated except in limited circumstances such as fraud or where an interest is noted on the register, thereby providing strong legal certainty and security of tenure.

The Act provides for a compulsory registration and priority of interests and requires that all dealings in land, including transfers, leases, mortgages and easements must be registered to have legal effect and it establishes that priority among competing interests is determined by the order of registration.

The Act further sets out procedures and safeguards for title protection to include: bringing land under the registration system, maintaining an official land register and using safeguards such as notices, caveats and assurance fees to protect competing claims, manage risks from defective titles and promote transparency and confidence in land administration.

However, the key provisions of the Registration of Titles Act of Uganda still harbor land conflicts because of how these provisions interact with reality including unclear ownership, overlapping claims, administrative gaps, competing interests or misuse of the provisions therein.

4.5 The National Environment Act, 2019

The National Environment Act establishes the legal framework for protecting land, water, wetlands, forests, and other natural resources by requiring that land use and development activities conform to principles of sustainability, environmental conservation, and inter-generational equity; this means that landowners and developers must use land in ways that do not cause environmental degradation or undermine ecological systems.

The Act requires Environmental and Social Impact Assessments (ESIAs) for projects or land developments likely to have significant environmental effects, and it integrates environmental considerations into national, district, and local land-use planning; these provisions ensure that land development decisions are informed, precautionary, and coordinated, but they also legally restrict land use until environmental approval is granted.

The Act establishes institutions such as the National Environment Management Authority (NEMA) with powers to issue permits, impose environmental easements, enforce compliance orders, and halt harmful land uses, while also recognizing the right of every person to a clean and healthy environment, allowing individuals and communities to challenge land uses or developments that threaten environmental integrity through administrative or judicial action.

It should be noted that the provisions in the National Environment Act (Uganda) contributes to land conflicts because when applied in practice, these environmental land-use controls intersect with land rights, competing interests in land and tenure arrangements – sometimes leading to tension among landowners, communities, investors and government authorities.

4.6 The Physical Planning Act, 2010

The Physical Planning Act establishes a structured physical planning system to include the Ministry's department of Physical Planning, District and Urban Physical Planning Committees, and technical planning units responsible for guiding, preparing, approving and coordinating

land development; these institutions ensure that land development aligns with approved physical development plans and national planning standards, *but they also centralize authority over how land may be used or developed.*

The Act provides for the preparation and approval of national, regional, district, urban and local physical development plans, which designate land uses such as residential, commercial, industrial, agricultural, transportation and public spaces; once approved, these plans are legally binding and guide land subdivision, construction and change of land use, thereby shaping orderly development while *potentially restricting individual land-use preferences.*

The Act requires that development permission be obtained before carrying out building works, subdivision or change of land use and it grants planning authorities powers to enforce compliance through stop notices, demolition orders and penalties for illegal development; these provisions promote planned and sustainable urban and rural development, but *they can also generate disputes where developments are undertaken without approval or where landowners contest planning decisions.*

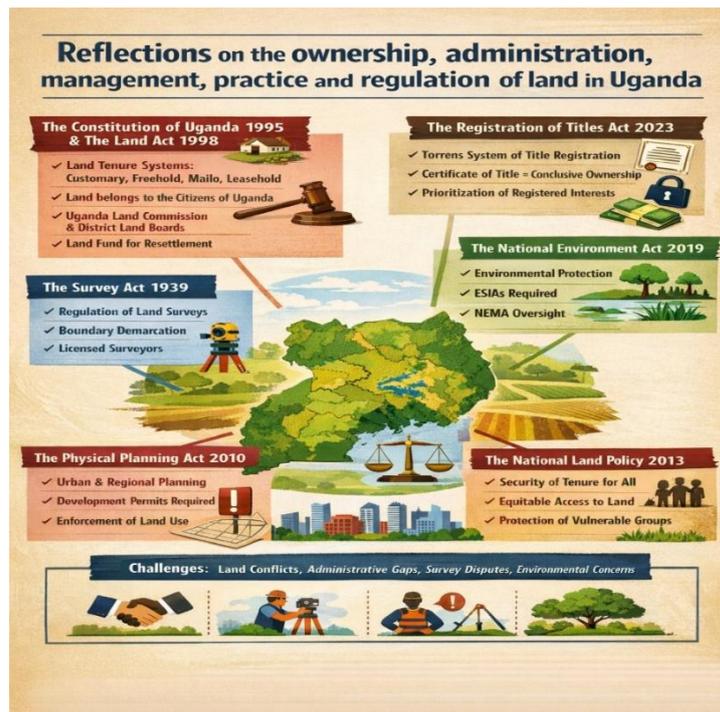
4.7 The National Land Policy, 2013

The National Land Policy emphasizes strengthening security of tenure for all land holding systems in Uganda (customary, freehold, leasehold and Mailo) by recognizing customary land rights as equal in legal status to registered rights, promoting systematic demarcation and documentation of land interests and protecting the rights of vulnerable groups such as women, children, pastoralists and tenants by occupancy; these provisions aim to reduce land disputes and enhance confidence in land ownership and use.

The Policy promotes equitable access to land and efficient land administration by guiding land acquisition, land markets, valuation, taxation and compensation, while also integrating sustainable land use and environmental management principles into land governance; it seeks to balance economic development, social equity and environmental protection by coordinating land use planning, natural resource management and infrastructure development.

The Policy calls for reforms in land administration institutions, including strengthening land registries, survey and mapping systems and local land management structures, as well as promoting alternative land dispute resolution mechanisms such as mediation and customary justice systems alongside formal courts; it also emphasizes coordination among government agencies and clarity in land governance roles to improve efficiency, transparency and accountability in land management.

Much as the National Land Policy has greatly improved management and administration of land in Uganda, it however remains key in triggering conflicts in land because the Policy interacts with existing land tenure systems, competing interests and implementation realities which can re-open historical boundary disputes within families, clans or between neighboring communities where boundaries were traditionally flexible or undocumented; resistance to enhanced tenant or women's rights, leading to disputes.



DE-CONFLICTING AND DE-RISKING LAND FOR INCLUSIVE TENURE SECURITY, DATA INTEGRITY AND SUSTAINABLE LAND USE IN UGANDA

5.1 Key Practical Snapshots

5.1.1 Cadastre and Registry records for Kyadondo Blocks 182 and 185

The above Mailo blocks were created following the 1900 Buganda Agreement between the British colonial administration and the Kingdom of Buganda, under which land in Buganda was systematically surveyed and subdivided into each block measured approximately one square mile (640 acres), although in practice some were smaller or irregular due to natural features and prior occupation. This process formalized land ownership and facilitated indirect colonial rule.

These mailo blocks were allocated mainly to the Kabaka, royal family, chiefs, and notable elites as private property, while a portion was reserved as Crown land, transforming land from a customary communal system into individualized, inheritable and transferable ownership.

This colonial arrangement fundamentally altered land relations in Uganda and remains a major influence on land tenure, administration and conflict today.

From 1900 to 2025 (and maybe beyond) – 100+ years, the citizens who acquired ownership rights in the above mailo blocks have been living in uncertainty about the traceability of the rights in the land – caused by among others; legacy plane-table overlaps, blue-page sub-divisions and inset misuse.

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Action:

The Ministry with clear baseline of the National Land Information System (UgNLIS) cadastre and registry records; the contemporary National Geodetic Network (UGRF); the updated National Coverage of orthophoto at 30cm; the National Topographic and Cadastre records; carried out correctional re-survey to rectify these blocks.

The process included assembling of all sheets/field survey books; GNSS re-ties to old controls and to the modern geodetic network; orthophoto and photo alignment; sensitization and ADR sessions. Through this, the Ministry managed to rectify the deed plans, titles and publish change logs to the general public. This act restored ownership confidence and secured land rights for the occupiers of the land in blocks 182 and 185.

5.1.2 Cadastre and Registry records for Mukono Town (now Municipality) Clusters

Pursuant to the 1900 Buganda Agreement on Mailo land and to the provisions made in the Independence Constitution of Uganda, 1962, which established the administrative and territorial coverage of Uganda and further to the 1964 Urban Authorities Act (now Local Government Act) – which provided for the creation, survey and mapping of the boundaries for the Urban Areas, administration as well as management of land by the Urban Authorities, created an emerging conflict in jurisdictional land ownership was – causing overlapping boundaries of the Mailo blocks (mailo land) and interests in ownership that would be acquired through the Urban Authorities in the form of leases or freeholds. Cross – block misfits in mailo and lease/freehold and protected – area proximities where also discovered.

Action:

The Ministry using the National Land Information System (UgNLIS) cadastre and registry records; the contemporary Uganda Geodetic Reference Network (UGRF); the updated National Coverage of orthophoto at 30cm; the National Topographic and Cadastre records, carried out a re-survey to rectify this anomaly.

The process included assembling of all sheets/field survey books; GNSS re-ties to old controls and to the modern geodetic network; orthophoto and photo alignment; sensitization and ADR sessions. Through this, the Ministry managed to rectify the Urban Authority boundary, deed plans, titles and publish change logs to the general public. This act restored citizen confidence in administration and management of land resources and secured land rights for the citizens.

5.1.3 Cadastre and Registry records for SLAAC/CCO/COO and CLA Clusters

A Land Information Management System (UgNLIS) based on systematic demarcation will enable more efficient physical and economic planning at the district and national level for the

provision of social and economic services ‘provide additional funding’ and help to strengthen the local tax base so as to finance sustainable development for poverty eradication.

An important component of tenure security is the confidence with which one can transact (lend, sell, lease) in land. With population growth, specialization and incorporation of rural areas into market economies and the importance of being able to transact in property rights rises. There is already a thriving informal land market in some areas. Recording of land ownership should reduce the costs associated with transactions.

There is evidence that the most occurring types of land disputes with potential to erupt into social strife are either boundary related (30%) and/ or encroachment based (26%). When there is documentary evidence to a parcel of land, the conflict is deterred and sanity restored.

Secondly, production benefits are more likely to accrue from tenure reform of which systematic demarcation is part and better land management where farm support services are made available. There is a strong case for focusing the implementation of the Land Act in areas where infrastructure and services are being made available and where returns are likely to be greatest in the short run.

Action:

The Ministry has partially implemented SLAAC in over 20 districts (local administrative units) across the country. The recorded number of titles as a result of this implementation is slightly over 450,000 titles classified into: individuals (both single or joint with equal shares); government institutions; religious institutions and companies or corporate entities.

Further to the SLAAC, the Ministry has implemented the CCO/COO and CLAs across the country resulting into over 90,000 titles classified into: individuals (both single or joint with equal shares – CCOs and COOs) and community associations – CLAs.

The Ministry achieved a recommendable over 40% registration of interests of women either singly or jointly owned with men or relatives in equal shares in these interventions.

5.2 Key Areas of focus to deconflict and derisk land for sustainable development in Uganda

To ensure sustainable land management and minimize conflicts and associated risks in land acquisition and ownership, the following key focus areas outline targeted interventions to deconflict and derisk land in Uganda by strengthening legal frameworks, dispute resolution systems, cadastral data integrity and inclusive registration practices.

5.2.1 Legal and policy harmonization

Amend Registration of Titles Act to provide for digital/electronic deeds; rectification workflows; anti-fraud controls; audits; amend the Survey Act and Surveyors Registration Act to provide for the use of modern equipment (GNSS mandates; accuracy classes; Quality Assurance/Quality Control; ethics/CPD); issue a statutory instrument on nominal ground rent and escalation; mandate geospatial checks for planning/registration with data-sharing MOUs (NFA/UWA/Wetlands).

5.2.2 Dispute Redress System redesign

Establishing single-intake triage at MZOs; define hierarchical routing; standardize mediation; digitize case management; protect vulnerable groups; record georeferenced settlement plans as registrable instruments.

5.2.3 Cadastral database cleaning & re-baselining

Rehabilitate UGRF/CORS and passive marks; run block-wise cleaning sprints at hotspots; resolve insets and blue-pages; correct units/Coordinate Reference System inconsistencies; lock authoritative layers with versioning/audit trails.

5.2.4 Registration coverage & community safeguards

Scale SLAAC/CCOs with inclusive mapping; joint/spousal and vulnerable-group protections; pre-transaction investor due diligence; insurance pilots.

Proposed integrated Approach to Deconflicting and Derisking Land in Uganda

Proposed Approach	Proposed Actions	Benefits/Results	Policy & SDG Alignment
 Legal & Policy Harmonization	Digital deeds, anti-fraud controls, GNSS standards, nominal ground rent regulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Secure and modernized land registration; Accurate geospatial integration 	  
 Dispute Redress System Redesign	Single intake triage, standardized mediation, geo-referenced settlements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Faster, transparent dispute resolution; Protection of vulnerable groups 	  
 Cadastral Database Cleaning	UGRF/CORS rehab, cadastral audits, data versioning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accurate and reliable land records; Reduced boundary conflicts 	  
 Registration & Community Safeguards	SLAAC/CCOs scaling, joint & vulnerable group protection, investor due diligence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inclusive tenure security; Safeguards for women & the vulnerable 	  

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CONCLUSION

De-conflicting and de-risking land in Uganda requires a holistic, systems-based approach that addresses the root causes of land grievances while strengthening the technical, legal and institutional foundations of land governance. Persistent disputes are largely driven by overlapping rights, weak documentation, environmentally sensitive land use, inconsistent land processing procedures and limited use of credible expert evidence in courts in dispute resolution. Addressing these challenges demands coordinated reforms across the entire land administration and justice value chain.

Effective grievance management must move beyond reactive dispute resolution to preventive mechanisms grounded in transparent land registration, community participation and early verification of rights. Clear, accurate and accessible land records, supported by professional surveying, boundary adjudication and harmonised registries are essential to reducing uncertainty and contestation in land rights. Strengthening land processing workflows in the UgNLIS, from application to registration, minimizes discretionary decision-making, delays and opportunities for error or fraud that often trigger conflicts.

Environmental considerations are central to de-risking land, as disputes frequently arise from encroachment on wetlands, forests, buffer zones and other protected areas. Integrating environmental data, zoning regulations and land use planning into registration and adjudication

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processes ensures that tenure security is achieved without compromising ecological sustainability or public interest obligations.

The effective use of expert evidence in courts, particularly from government and as well as licensed surveyors, valuers, environmental experts and land administrators is critical to improving the quality, consistency and credibility of judicial decisions on land matters. Courts that are supported by standardized geospatial evidence, authoritative topographic and cadastral records and clear professional testimony are better positioned to resolve disputes conclusively and deter protracted litigation.

Ultimately, de-conflicting and de-risking land in Uganda depends on reinforcing trust in land institutions through professionalism, transparency, digital transformation and inter-agency coordination. By aligning land registration, environmental governance, expert evidence and judicial processes within a coherent framework, Uganda can reduce land-based grievances, safeguard environmental resources, enhance tenure security and promote equitable and sustainable socio-economic development.

Therefore, de-conflicting and de-risking land in Uganda requires a whole-of-system response with emphasis on modernized laws, coherent dispute hierarchies, a clean and authoritative cadastre grounded on UGRF/CORS and inclusive registration drives with community safeguards. De-conflicting and de-risking land can shorten transaction times, lower costs, expand mortgageability and reduce expropriation liabilities for public works, while delivering tangible peace dividends in hotspot areas. This process offers a scalable template for African countries managing hybrid tenure and legacy technical data.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

The authors of this document have worked in the Ministry of Lands, Housing and Urban Development for over 15 years with major specialties in the Surveys and Mapping, Land Administration and Management. They are Professional Members of the Institution of Surveyors of Uganda (ISU) and Mr. Ibrahim MAGEMESO is a Registered Land Surveyor with the Surveyors Registration Board (SRB) in the Country.

Some of their key achievements in the transformation of the Land Administration, Management and Governance in Uganda include: establishing a functional Uganda Geodetic Reference Framework (UGRF); implementation of the the Base Mapping Project and the High Resolution Orthorectified Satellite Imagery Mosaic for Uganda (OResIM); implementation of Systematic Land Adjudication and Certification (SLAAC); Customary Certificate of Ownership (CCO); Certificate of Occupancy (COO) and Communal Land Association (CLA); implementation of Uganda National Land Information Systems (UgNLIS); among others.

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