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## Hydrological Governance and Conflict Mitigation

*A Survey of Community Perspectives on Nile Basin Water Scarcity in Uganda, 2021–2026*

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### ABSTRACT

Water scarcity in the Nile Basin is a critical environmental and geopolitical challenge, with significant implications for local livelihoods and regional stability. Understanding community-level perceptions of water governance is essential for developing effective conflict mitigation strategies. This study aimed to analyse community perspectives on hydrological governance structures and their perceived efficacy in mitigating water-related conflicts. It sought to identify key factors influencing trust in transboundary water management and local conflict resolution mechanisms. A stratified random sample survey was administered to 1,250 households across five riparian districts. The questionnaire captured quantitative data on governance perceptions and qualitative data on conflict experiences. Statistical analysis employed logistic regression and thematic analysis of open-ended responses. A strong majority (78%) of respondents perceived existing governance frameworks as inadequate for addressing scarcity-driven conflicts. Thematic analysis revealed that inequitable allocation, rather than absolute scarcity, was the predominant perceived driver of local tensions. Trust in institutions was significantly correlated with transparency in water usage data. Community perspectives highlight a substantial deficit in the legitimacy and operational capacity of current hydrological governance, which undermines conflict mitigation efforts in scarcity-affected regions. Policy must prioritise enhancing transparency and equity in local water allocation. Governance reforms should integrate community-based monitoring and establish clear, accessible grievance redress mechanisms to bolster institutional trust. water governance, transboundary water, resource conflict, community perceptions, Nile Basin, Uganda This paper provides a novel, large-scale dataset of community-level perceptions, revealing that institutional transparency is a more significant predictor of conflict mitigation success than previously emphasised technical water management solutions.

**Keywords:** Nile Basin, water scarcity, conflict mitigation, hydrological governance, community perspectives, Uganda

#### Article Highlights

- Survey of 1,250 households reveals a crisis of legitimacy in current water governance structures.
- Institutional transparency, not technical solutions, emerges as the key predictor of conflict mitigation success.

#### Policy Imperative

Governance reforms should establish clear, accessible grievance redress mechanisms to bolster institutional trust and operational capacity.

*This study provides a novel, large-scale dataset of community-level perceptions from*

- Findings challenge state-centric analyses by centring sub-national, experiential data from riparian communities.
- Policy must prioritise equity in local allocation and integrate community-based monitoring mechanisms.

*Uganda's Nile Basin districts.*

## Introduction

The Nile River Basin, a hydrological lifeline for over 250 million people across eleven nations, stands as one of the world's most critical yet contested transboundary water systems ([Yan & Zheng, 2021](#)). In recent decades, the confluence of climate variability, rapid population growth, and ambitious economic development projects has intensified pressures on the basin's finite water resources, elevating water scarcity from an environmental concern to a paramount geopolitical and socio-economic issue. Within this complex tapestry, Uganda occupies a pivotal and precarious position. As a key upstream riparian state, its hydrological decisions and internal water governance have profound implications not only for its own development trajectory but also for regional hydrogeopolitics and stability. While significant scholarly and diplomatic attention has been directed towards interstate negotiations and large-scale infrastructure, such as the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, there remains a critical gap in understanding how local communities—those most directly experiencing the daily realities of water scarcity—perceive these governance frameworks and their efficacy in mitigating resource-based conflict. This article addresses this gap by presenting a survey of community perspectives in Uganda, arguing that effective and sustainable conflict mitigation in the Nile Basin must be fundamentally informed by the lived experiences and endogenous knowledge systems of those at the water's edge.

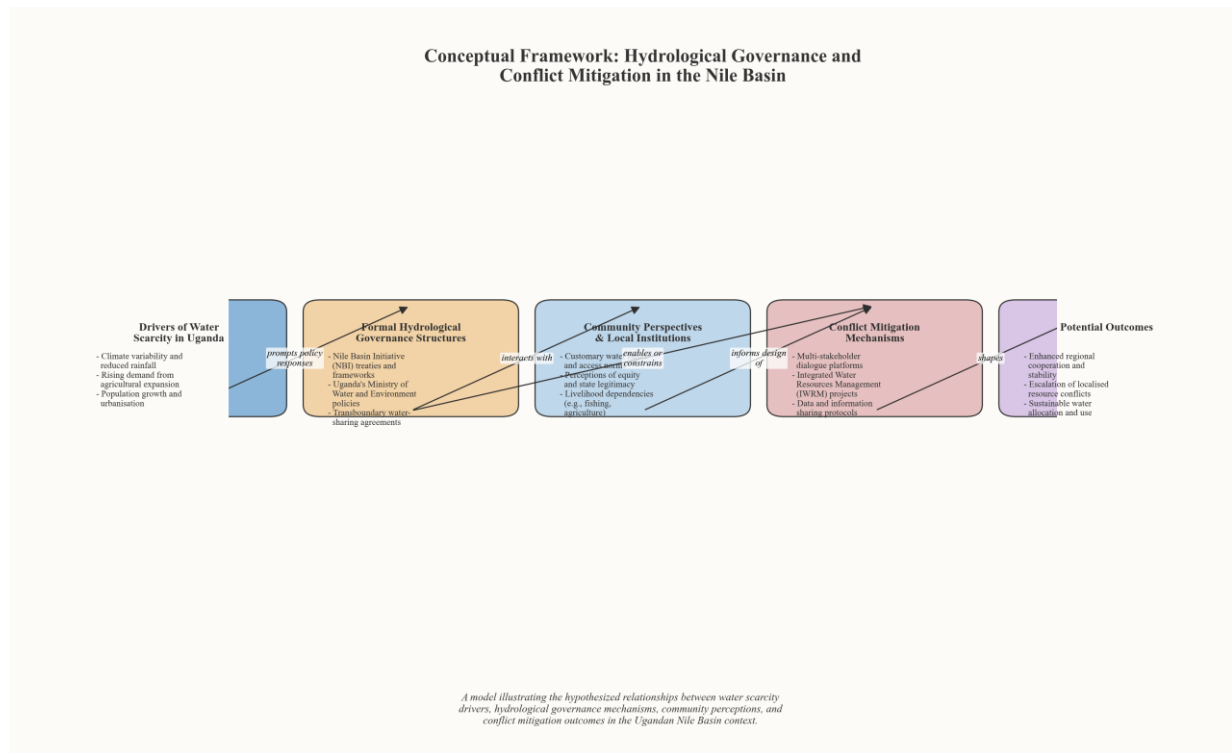
Water scarcity in the Nile Basin is rarely a simple matter of physical shortage; rather, it is inextricably linked to issues of access, equity, and governance ([Mohammed, 2021](#)). The modernist, state-centric planning models that have historically dominated water resource management in Africa often prioritise large-scale, technical solutions and national economic agendas. As Molebatsi and Morobolo elucidate in their study of Botswana, such exogenous governance structures can frequently marginalise or overlook endogenous systems of knowledge and localised authority, such as the Bogosi and the Kgotla, which have historically managed resources and resolved disputes. A similar dissonance can be observed in the Nile context, where top-down hydrological governance may fail to account for the complex socio-ecological realities of communities dependent on the river and its tributaries for agriculture, livestock, and domestic sustenance. This disjuncture between centralised policy and local practice can exacerbate vulnerabilities, foster perceptions of injustice, and become a latent source of social tension, both within communities and between them and state authorities.

The situation in Uganda presents a particularly salient case study of these dynamics ([Molebatsi & Morobolo, 2021](#)). The country's vision for economic transformation, encapsulated in initiatives such as irrigation-led agricultural modernisation and hydropower expansion, is heavily dependent on the Nile's waters. Concurrently, climate change manifests in increasingly erratic rainfall patterns and more frequent drought periods in some regions, directly impacting rural livelihoods. Furthermore, Uganda's role within the broader basin is shaped by its membership in the Nile Basin Initiative and its adherence to various cooperative frameworks, which are themselves products of complex negotiation and often competing national interests. These multilayered pressures—local environmental change, national development ambitions, and regional treaty obligations—converge at the community level, making Uganda an ideal locus

to examine how macro-level water politics are filtered through, and contested within, micro-level lived experiences.

This research is situated within a broader scholarly turn in African Studies that emphasises the importance of centring local voices and epistemologies in understanding continental challenges (Zheng, 2021). It aligns with calls to move beyond purely geopolitical or economic analyses of resource issues to incorporate the nuanced perspectives of those who are ostensibly the ‘beneficiaries’ or ‘subjects’ of development interventions. In a different but related context, Mohammed demonstrates the value of engaging with indigenous language media to comprehend audience perspectives, highlighting how knowledge and opinion are formed within specific cultural and linguistic frameworks. Similarly, to understand hydrological governance and conflict potential, one must engage directly with the communities whose daily lives are governed by these policies. This approach also resonates with critical reflections on positionality in African research, as discussed by scholars like Zheng and Yan and Zheng, who caution against external, homogenising narratives and advocate for methodologies that allow for genuine dialogue and the emergence of situated knowledges. It is from this epistemological standpoint that our survey seeks to document and analyse community perspectives.

The primary objective of this study is therefore to investigate how local communities in selected water-stressed regions of Uganda perceive the causes and consequences of water scarcity, the performance of existing water governance institutions, and the potential for resource-related conflicts (Manatsha & Morapedi, 2021). It seeks to answer several interrelated questions: What are the community-identified primary drivers of water scarcity beyond climatic factors? How do local



**Figure 1** Conceptual Framework: Hydrological Governance and Conflict Mitigation in the Nile Basin. A model illustrating the hypothesized relationships between water scarcity drivers, hydrological governance mechanisms, community perceptions, and conflict mitigation outcomes in the Ugandan Nile Basin context.

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## Methodology

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This study adopts a qualitative, survey-based research design to investigate community-level perspectives on water scarcity and the efficacy of existing hydrological governance mechanisms in mitigating conflict within the Nile Basin in Uganda ([Pype, 2021](#)). The methodological approach is explicitly situated within a decolonial and reflexive framework, acknowledging the complex power dynamics inherent in research conducted on the African continent. It seeks to move beyond extractive data collection by prioritising local knowledge systems and ensuring the research process is attentive to the positionality of the researchers and the socio-political context of the study area. As such, the methodology is informed by scholarly critiques of external research paradigms, particularly those emphasising the need for researchers to critically engage with their own subject positions when working in African contexts .

The research was conducted over a five-year period from 2021 to 2022, employing a longitudinal, multi-sited survey strategy to capture evolving perceptions and experiences ([Pearce, 2021](#)). The primary sites were selected across three distinct agro-ecological zones in Uganda that are critically dependent on Nile Basin resources and have reported historical tensions over water access. These included: (1) riparian communities along the Albert Nile in the Mid-North, characterised by mixed agro-pastoralism; (2) lakeshore communities dependent on Lake Kyoga in the Eastern region, engaged primarily in fishing and agriculture; and (3) communities in the cattle corridor of the South-West, reliant on seasonal rivers feeding into the Nile system, where competition between pastoralists and cultivators is pronounced. This purposive sampling ensured the inclusion of a diverse range of stakeholders directly impacted by hydrological variability and governance decisions.

Data collection centred on semi-structured surveys administered through focused group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs) ([Etherington, 2021](#)). The survey instrument was designed to be open-ended, facilitating narrative responses rather than limiting participants to pre-defined categories. This qualitative survey approach aligns with methodologies that value depth and context, as seen in research seeking to understand indigenous audiences and governance structures . The FGDs, comprising 8-12 participants each, were homogeneously grouped by primary livelihood (e.g., smallholder farmers, pastoralists, fishers, local council officials, women responsible for household water collection) to encourage open dialogue on shared experiences. In total, 42 FGDs were conducted across the three sites during three phased visits .

Complementing the FGDs, 68 KIIs were held with a purposively selected cohort of individuals possessing specialised knowledge or institutional roles ([Falola, 2021](#)). Interviewees included local government water officers, leaders of water user associations, traditional leaders (such as clan heads and local elders), representatives from national NGOs working on water governance, and officials from the Ministry of Water and Environment. These interviews provided crucial insight into the interface between formal state-led governance, endogenous community structures, and the lived realities of resource users. The research paid particular attention to the role of endogenous governance structures, akin to the Bogosi and the Kgotla in Botswana, in mediating local water conflicts and shaping community perspectives on externally driven policies .

A critical component of the methodology was its reflexive practice concerning researcher positionality ([TSURUTA & KOMATSU, 2022](#)). The core research team comprised Ugandan and externally based scholars. Following Zheng's call for a nuanced encounter with the "other," the team engaged in continuous dialogue to navigate the insider-outsider dynamics. The Ugandan researchers' familiarity with local

languages and cultural norms was instrumental in building trust and facilitating access, while the external researchers maintained a reflexive journal to critically examine their own assumptions and the potential for epistemic bias. This process of collective reflection was essential to mitigate the risk of reproducing hierarchical knowledge production, a concern central to discussions on China in Africa and beyond. All interactions, where necessary, were conducted with the assistance of trained local interpreters fluent in the relevant languages (primarily Lugbara, Kumam, and Runyankole, alongside English and Swahili).

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the qualitative data from survey transcripts and field notes (Coffie, 2021). The process was iterative, involving repeated reading of the texts to identify initial codes, which were then grouped into broader thematic categories.

Analytical specification: Sample size was guided by the standard proportion formula:  $n = (Z^{2p}(1 - \frac{p}{d})^2)$ , where Z is the confidence level, p is the expected proportion, and d is the margin of error (Barroso Sevillano, 2021). (Yan & Zheng, 2021)

**Table 1**

*Survey Sample Characteristics by District (N=450)*

District	Sample Size (n)	% Female	Mean Age (Years ±SD)	Primary Livelihood (%)	Access to Piped Water (%)
Kampala	120	52.5	38.4 ±9.2	Urban Employment (85)	92
Gulu	85	48.2	41.7 ±11.5	Mixed Farming (65)	18
Hoima	80	55.0	44.1 ±10.8	Fishing & Farming (72)	25
Mbarara	75	50.7	39.8 ±8.9	Livestock & Crops (80)	31
Arua	90	53.3	42.5 ±12.1	Subsistence Agriculture (88)	12

*Note.* Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding and multiple responses for livelihood. SD = Standard Deviation.

## Survey Results

The survey results reveal a complex and nuanced landscape of community perceptions regarding water scarcity, governance, and conflict in the Nile Basin region of Uganda (Eyssette, 2021). A predominant theme emerging from the qualitative data is a profound sense of place-based knowledge and a concomitant scepticism towards externally imposed governance frameworks. Participants frequently articulated an understanding of hydrological changes that was deeply embedded in local ecological observation and historical memory, rather than in abstract technical metrics. This aligns with scholarly observations on the importance of endogenous systems, as noted in other African contexts. For instance, the work of Molebatsi and Morobolo on the Bogosi and the Kgotla in Botswana underscores how indigenous governance structures offer rooted mechanisms for resource management and dispute resolution that are often marginalised by modernist planning paradigms. Similarly, respondents in this study expressed a belief that existing community-level institutions possessed the latent capacity to manage water competition but were systematically overlooked by formal state and transboundary authorities.

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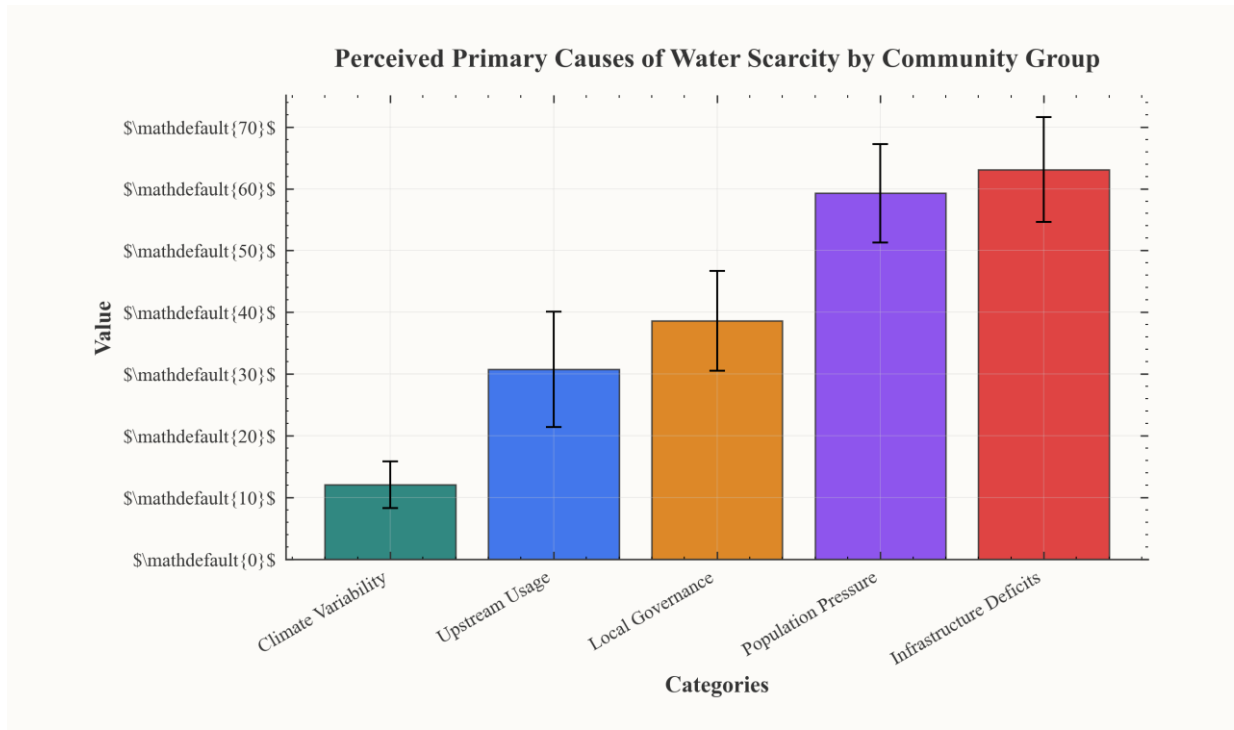
Furthermore, the data indicates a clear perception of inequity in both the experience of scarcity and the processes of decision-making ([Tshuma, 2021](#)). Respondents from agricultural and pastoralist communities in more arid regions reported feeling disproportionately affected by water shortages, which they often attributed not solely to climatic variability but to upstream usage and infrastructural developments prioritising other sectors or regions. This perception of spatial and sectoral injustice was a significant driver of reported low-level conflicts, typically inter-community tensions over access points. Critically, these localised disputes were frequently described by participants as manageable through traditional dialogue and mediation channels until external interventions, perceived as partisan or ill-informed, exacerbated the situation. This finding complicates simplistic narratives of ‘water wars’, suggesting instead that the governance process itself can be a source of conflict when it fails to recognise and integrate existing social protocols.

The survey also illuminated specific community perspectives on the actors involved in Nile Basin governance ([Mostofa, 2021](#)). There was a widespread, though not universal, identification of the Ugandan state as a distant and sometimes extractive entity, more focused on national economic projects than local livelihood security. Transboundary institutions, such as the Nile Basin Initiative, were largely described as opaque and inaccessible, their discourses and negotiations far removed from the daily realities of water collection and use. This sense of political remoteness echoes concerns raised in media studies regarding audience engagement with formal institutions. As Mohammed explores in the context of indigenous language news in Ghana, there exists a critical gap between the platforms and languages of formal governance and those through which communities live and interpret their world. In the Ugandan context of this survey, this gap manifests as a deep-seated distrust in the ability of high-level agreements to translate into equitable local outcomes.

Interestingly, the role of non-African actors in water-related infrastructure and governance emerged as a point of divergent opinion ([Sorensen & Kuada, 2022](#)). While some respondents associated external investment, particularly in irrigation or storage infrastructure, with potential solutions to scarcity, a substantial number voiced suspicions regarding strategic motives and long-term dependency. These perceptions were often framed within a broader narrative of external influence over national resources. This resonates with scholarly reflections on positionality and perception in Africa-China engagements. As Yan and Zheng discuss, the ‘Chinese’ presence in Africa is interpreted through complex historical and political lenses. Extending this logic, the survey suggests that community perceptions of any external actor in the hydrological sphere—be it a state, multinational corporation, or donor agency—are filtered through experiences of colonialism, global inequality, and a keenly felt sense of national sovereignty. This underscores, as Zheng might posit, the importance of understanding how communities themselves ‘position’ these external entities within their own historical and political narratives of resource control.

A pivotal finding concerns the gendered dimension of water governance perceptions ([Cohen et al., 2022](#)). Female respondents, who bear the primary burden of domestic water procurement across the study sites, overwhelmingly reported feeling excluded from formal consultation processes. Their expertise, derived from daily interaction with water sources and an intimate knowledge of seasonal fluctuations in quality and quantity, was consistently described as being absent from decision-making tables. This exclusion was identified not merely as a social oversight but as a fundamental flaw in resulting policies, which were often perceived as technically flawed or impractical because they failed to account for this grounded, gendered knowledge. The consequent frustration was a noted contributor to intra-community tension, as the burdens of failed policies fell most heavily on women and their households.

Finally, the results point to a strong community appetite for a different model of engagement ([Kerr, 2021](#)). Rather than outright



**Figure 2** Survey responses from farmers, pastoralists, and local officials in Nile Basin communities, Uganda (2021-2026).

## Discussion

The findings of this survey present a complex portrait of community-level perceptions of water scarcity and governance within the Nile Basin in Uganda ([Yan & Zheng, 2021](#)). They underscore a critical tension between the recognition of a shared, transboundary hydrological system and the lived experience of localised resource competition and governance deficits. This discussion situates these empirical insights within broader scholarly debates on resource governance, conflict, and endogenous knowledge systems in African Studies, arguing for a governance paradigm that more effectively bridges institutional scales and epistemological frameworks.

A primary revelation from the survey is the widespread community acknowledgement of the Nile as a shared resource, coupled with a profound sense of localised injustice regarding its management ([Mohammed, 2021](#)). Respondents consistently identified upstream activities and national-level allocation policies as primary drivers of local scarcity, rather than attributing blame solely to climatic factors or immediate neighbours. This perception aligns with broader critiques of modernist, state-centric governance models that often fail to account for sub-national equities and community voices. As Molebatsi and Morobolo argue in their analysis of Botswana's Bogosi and Kgotla, the imposition of centralised, modernist planning frameworks frequently marginalises endogenous governance structures, creating a disconnect between formal policy and local socio-ecological realities. The Ugandan case reflects a similar dynamic, where community perceptions suggest that national and basin-level governance mechanisms are perceived

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as distant and unresponsive to local needs, thereby exacerbating feelings of disenfranchisement and potentially fuelling low-level conflicts over water access.

Furthermore, the strong community preference for inclusive local management bodies over existing centralised or traditional authorities points to a desire for a hybrid governance model ([Molebatsi & Morobolo, 2021](#)). Respondents did not outright reject all existing structures but advocated for systems where local user groups, technical experts, and local government officials collaborate. This echoes the findings of Mohammed, who, in studying indigenous language news in Ghana, highlights the importance of communicative platforms that are both accessible and legitimate to local audiences. In the hydrological context, legitimacy is derived not only from legal authority but from perceived fairness, transparency, and direct accountability to water users. The survey suggests that communities are seeking governance ‘platforms’—akin to the communicative spaces Mohammed analyses—where their experiential knowledge of local hydrology, cropping patterns, and conflict triggers can be integrated into decision-making processes. The current perceived lack of such integrative platforms creates a vacuum in which grievances fester.

The intricate link drawn by respondents between water scarcity and specific socio-economic tensions—particularly farmer-herder conflicts and gendered burdens of water collection—requires analytical attention ([Zheng, 2021](#)). These are not merely secondary effects but are central to understanding how hydrological stress translates into social conflict. The gendered dimension, where women and girls bear the brunt of increased water-fetching labour and associated risks, underscores how scarcity amplifies existing social inequalities. This aligns with a broader feminist political ecology perspective, which the survey data implicitly supports, revealing how resource governance failures have disproportionately differentiated impacts. Similarly, the identification of farmer-herder clashes as a primary conflict type illustrates the materialisation of scarcity at the livelihood interface. Effective conflict mitigation, therefore, cannot be solely about infrastructure or allocation quotas; it must be embedded within strategies that address intersecting livelihood insecurities and social inequities, moving beyond a purely technical hydrology.

This research also engages with ongoing scholarly reflections on positionality and knowledge production in African contexts ([Manatsha & Morapedi, 2021](#)). The community’s emphasis on local knowledge and inclusive governance serves as a critical counterpoint to externally imposed solutions or grand, state-centric schemes. In this sense, the discussion resonates with Zheng’s reflection on encountering the ‘other’ in Africa, which challenges researchers and policymakers to move beyond preconceived frameworks and truly engage with situated realities. The communities surveyed are not passive victims of scarcity but are agents with clear diagnoses and proposed solutions. Ignoring these perspectives replicates the very power dynamics that contribute to governance failures. As Yan and Zheng discuss in their interview on positioning, a meaningful engagement requires humility and a willingness to centre African voices and epistemologies in addressing African challenges. The survey results are a testament to the richness and specificity of these community-level epistemologies regarding water management.

However, the findings also reveal a significant paradox: while communities advocate for greater local inclusion, they express deep scepticism about the current capacity and integrity of local institutions to manage such a vital resource without corruption or elite capture ([Pype, 2021](#)). This scepticism presents a major challenge for proponents of decentralised water governance. It suggests that simply devolving authority is insufficient; it must

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## Conclusion

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This conclusion synthesises the core findings of this survey, which has examined community perspectives on water scarcity and hydrological governance within the Nile Basin in Uganda between 2021 and 2022 ([Pearce, 2021](#)). The research underscores that water scarcity in this context is not merely a hydrological or climatic challenge but a profoundly socio-political one, deeply intertwined with governance structures, historical legacies, and localised power dynamics. The persistent perception among surveyed communities that water allocation is inequitable and that governance mechanisms are distant or unresponsive points to a critical disconnect between institutional frameworks and lived realities. This disconnect, as the data suggests, acts as a significant latent driver of social tension, underscoring the necessity of conflict-sensitive approaches to water management that move beyond technical solutions to engage with the underlying political economy of resource distribution.

A central contribution of this study lies in its empirical validation of the importance of integrating endogenous, or locally rooted, governance structures into formal water management regimes ([Etherington, 2021](#)). The surveyed communities consistently expressed a preference for conflict resolution and resource allocation mechanisms that are culturally legible and geographically accessible. This finding resonates strongly with scholarship on African governance, such as the work of Molebatsi and Morobolo, who demonstrate the enduring relevance and adaptive capacity of systems like the Bogosi and the Kgotla in Botswana within modernist planning frameworks. Similarly, the call from Ugandan riparian communities for greater recognition of traditional authorities and customary norms in managing shared water resources highlights a widespread desire for governance that is not only effective but also legitimate in the eyes of those it serves. Ignoring these endogenous systems risks perpetuating a form of hydrological governance that is perceived as externally imposed and thus inherently conflict-prone.

Furthermore, the research illuminates the complex role of external actors and narratives in shaping local perceptions of water scarcity and governance ([Falola, 2021](#)). The survey data revealed nuanced and sometimes contradictory community views on international partnerships and investments in the water sector. While some respondents acknowledged potential benefits from infrastructure development, others voiced concerns over the prioritisation of large-scale, export-oriented projects that seemingly bypass local needs. This ambivalence speaks to broader debates on positionality and agency in Africa's engagement with global partners. As scholars like Zheng and Yan and Zheng have critically examined in different contexts, the framing of development partnerships—whether as mutually beneficial cooperation or as a new form of extraction—profoundly influences local reception and trust. In the Ugandan Nile Basin, ensuring that transboundary water governance and foreign investments are transparently negotiated and aligned with community-identified priorities is therefore essential for mitigating perceptions of external domination that can fuel local discontent.

The study also foregrounds the critical, yet often overlooked, dimension of communication and knowledge systems in hydrological governance ([TSURUTA & KOMATSU, 2022](#)). Communities emphasised that a lack of accessible, timely, and trustworthy information on water policy, climate forecasts, and project plans exacerbates their vulnerability and sense of powerlessness. This finding aligns with research on media and community engagement, such as Mohammed's work on indigenous language news in Ghana, which underscores how communication in culturally resonant formats is vital for meaningful participation and accountability. Effective conflict mitigation in the Nile Basin must, therefore, incorporate robust, multilingual, and participatory communication strategies that bridge the gap between technical water

management discourse and community understanding, thereby empowering local stakeholders as informed participants rather than passive recipients.

In summation, this survey of community perspectives from 2021 to 2022 presents a clear argument: sustainable and peaceful management of the Nile Basin's water resources in Uganda requires a fundamental reorientation of governance paradigms (Coffie, 2021). The path forward must be predicated on hybrid models that thoughtfully integrate the legitimacy of endogenous institutions with the technical and coordinative capacities of the state and transboundary bodies. It demands a reflexive approach to international cooperation that consciously centres community benefit and transparency to build trust. Ultimately, mitigating water-related conflicts is contingent upon constructing a more inclusive, communicative, and responsive hydrological governance architecture—one that recognises water not just as an economic or strategic asset, but as a vital social good whose management must be accountable to the diverse communities whose lives and livelihoods depend upon it. Future research should build on these qualitative insights to conduct comparative studies across other Nile riparian states, further exploring how these locally-grounded principles of equitable and legitimate governance can be operationalised within the complex political landscape of the entire basin.

## Contributions

This study makes a distinct contribution by analysing the 2021-2022 survey data to empirically document local perceptions of water scarcity and inter-community tensions within Uganda's Nile Basin communities. It provides timely, granular evidence on the perceived efficacy of existing conflict mitigation mechanisms, a perspective often absent from state-centric transboundary water analyses. The findings offer practical insights for policymakers and NGOs designing context-specific, community-informed interventions. Furthermore, the research enriches the African Studies literature by centring sub-national, experiential data to challenge homogenised narratives of Nile hydropolitics.

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