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Urban land conflicts and community responses in Africa: Violence, justice and everyday resistance

Konflikty o ziemię miejską i reakcje społeczności w Afryce. Przemoc, sprawiedliwość i codzienny opór

Abstract: Urban land conflicts in African cities are shaped not only by rapid urbanisation and socio-political inequality, but also by organised and everyday forms of violence, including evictions, land grabs and coercive interventions by state and non-state actors. While much scholarship has examined formal policies, tenure insecurity and informal urban expansion, less attention has been given to community-led strategies for navigating these conflicts. Drawing on documented cases, secondary sources and existing scholarship, this paper examines how urban communities – often marginalised along lines of class, race and gender – respond to land contestation through collective action, local arbitration and everyday placemaking. Using critical and decolonial perspectives, I analyse how historical processes of dispossession, neoliberal land reforms and state disinvestment produce layered forms of urban land precarity. By focussing on documented grassroots responses, the study highlights both the creative, context-specific knowledge that communities contribute to conflict resolution and the forms of violence they face, linking urban land disputes to broader debates on criminality, victimisation and social control. This approach contributes to comparative criminology by situating African urban experiences within global discussions of urban governance, grassroots resilience and transformative justice.

Keywords: urban, land conflict, Africa, urbanization, class, race, gender, cities

Abstrakt: Konflikty o ziemię miejską w afrykańskich miastach kształtowane są nie tylko przez szybką urbanizację i nierówności społeczno-polityczne, ale także przez zorganizowane i codzienne formy przemocy, w tym eksmisję, przejmowanie ziemi oraz oparte na środkach przymusu interwencje ze strony podmiotów państwowych i niepaństwowych. Chociaż w wielu badaniach analizowano formal-

ne polityki, niepewność mieszkaniową oraz nieformalną ekspansję miast, mniej uwagi poświęcono strategiom obieranym przez społeczność w zakresie radzenia sobie z tymi konfliktami. Artykuł ten opiera się na udokumentowanych przypadkach, źródłach wtórnych i istniejącej literaturze. Analizuję w nim, jak społeczności miejskie – często marginalizowane ze względu na klasę, rasę i płeć – reagują na spory o ziemię poprzez działania zbiorowe, lokalny arbitraż i codzienne tworzenie miejsc. Korzystając z krytycznej i dekolonialnej perspektywy, analizuję, jak historyczne procesy wywłaszczenia, neoliberalne reformy rolne i wycofywanie inwestycji państwowych prowadzą do wielowarstwowych form miejskiej niepewności ziemi. Badanie koncentruje się na udokumentowanych inicjatywach oddolnych i podkreśla zarówno kreatywną, kontekstową wiedzę, którą społeczności wnoszą do rozwiązywania konfliktów, jak i formy przemocy, z którymi się spotykają. Badanie łączy spory o ziemię miejską z szerszymi debatami na temat przestępczości, wiktymizacji i kontroli społecznej. To podejście stanowi wkład do kryminologii porównawczej, dodając afrykańskie doświadczenia miejskie do globalnych dyskusji o zarządzaniu miejskim, odporności oddolnej i sprawiedliwości transformacyjnej.

Słowa kluczowe: charakter miejski, konflikt o ziemię, Afryka, urbanizacja, klasa, rasa, płeć, miasta

Introduction

Across Africa, land remains central to social, political and economic life. In rapidly urbanising cities, however, it is increasingly characterised by contestation, fragmentation and violence. Urban expansion, both outward into peri-urban areas and inward through speculative development and elite capture, has transformed land into an arena of intense conflict among state actors, private developers and local communities (Lombard, Rakod 2016; Dadashpoor, Ahani 2019; Froese, Schilling 2019). These conflicts are rarely incidental; they reflect long-standing historical trajectories of dispossession, uneven development and state-sanctioned spatial exclusion. Communities, particularly those marginalised by race, class, gender and historical displacement, must navigate, resist and reclaim land through diverse grassroots strategies. While often overlooked in policy and academic discourse, these strategies are a vital domain of urban politics, revealing how violence, power and contestation are deeply intertwined in everyday urban life.

Despite growing attention to urban land governance, tenure security and informality, much of the scholarship remains fragmented and technocratic. Policy-focussed studies often emphasise land titling, registration and formal dispute resolution mechanisms, assuming that formalisation will reduce conflict and clarify tenure (Zoomers et al. 2017; Kanai, Schindler 2019; Schirpke et al. 2023). However, evidence demonstrates that formalisation can exacerbate exclusion, reinforce power asymmetries and even generate violence – particularly in contexts where elite actors dominate access to land or the state intervenes selectively (Vesco et al. 2020; De Jong et al. 2021; Mudapakati et al. 2024; Wolford et al. 2024). Such processes often reproduce structural precarity, exposing marginalised populations to threats of eviction, harassment or criminalisation. Missing from this discourse is serious engagement with the agency, knowledge and practices

of communities confronting land conflict – understood not as policy failures to be corrected, but as lived conditions to be navigated, challenged and transformed from below.

This paper introduces the land conflict–community nexus as a conceptual framework to provide a relational and grounded understanding of how land disputes unfold and are addressed in African cities. The nexus approach foregrounds the entanglement of structural dispossession, grassroots responses and the production of urban space. Land is conceptualised not merely as a legal or economic asset, but as a contested terrain imbued with memory, identity and social significance (Huggins, Mastaki 2020; Manara, Pani 2023). Similarly, community is treated as a dynamic site of negotiation, exclusion and solidarity that is capable of both resisting and reproducing dominant spatial orders. By highlighting the interconnections between historical, social and political processes, this framework allows for a more nuanced understanding of urban land conflict as simultaneously structural, violent and relational.

Historical context is crucial for understanding the contemporary land conflicts. In many African cities, disputes are rooted in colonial land regimes that institutionalised racial and ethnic hierarchies through spatial ordering and legal abstraction. These legacies persist in dual or plural legal frameworks where statutory and customary tenure often overlap, frequently to the disadvantage of marginalised groups (Gribat, Pizzo 2020; Taviani 2022). Post-independence governments have sometimes perpetuated or adapted these systems to favour elite actors, formal markets and capital-intensive development. Peri-urban areas are especially vulnerable to overlapping claims and speculative pressures, producing multiscale and violent land struggles (Balestri 2019; Follmann 2022; Elfversson 2023). In many cases, the actors involved in these conflicts – whether private developers, municipal authorities or organised crime groups – employ coercive or illegal tactics to enforce their claims, further intensifying the risks and stakes for local communities.

Despite these structural constraints, communities continue to mobilise documented strategies to assert claims, defend tenure and negotiate access to space. In cities such as Nairobi, Accra, Harare and Johannesburg, residents have established land committees, savings groups, housing cooperatives and neighbourhood associations to protect their interests collectively (Van der Haar, van Leeuwen, De Vries 2020; Elfversson 2023; Elfversson, Höglund 2023; Albertus, Klaus 2024). These mechanisms often operate outside formal legal frameworks, relying on social networks, customary norms or hybrid forms of legitimacy. Some initiatives involve direct resistance – preventing evictions, organising land occupations or constructing self-built infrastructure – while others pursue gradual recognition through visibility and sustained presence. These practices are not simply adaptive or reactive; they are context-specific forms of agency that contest violent spatialities while redefining what it means to belong, dwell and claim rights in the city.

Recognition of these grassroots responses in policy frameworks remains limited. When acknowledged, they are often instrumentalised to legitimise prede-

terminated development agendas or to depoliticise collective action (Lombard 2016; Banks, Lombard, Mitlin 2020; Carrilho, Trindade 2022). This neglect marginalises local knowledge and reinforces exclusion. A critical perspective on the land conflict–community nexus therefore requires shifting from top-down, needs-based interventions towards dialogical, locally driven processes that value community epistemologies and situate their strategies within broader structural and historical conditions (Menzori, de Sousa, Gonçalves 2021; Leitner, Nowak, Sheppard 2023).

By drawing on documented cases and secondary sources, this paper conceptualises community responses not merely as coping strategies, but as political acts grounded in collective memory, relational belonging and spatial justice. It examines the structural and historical conditions that give rise to land conflict in urban and peri-urban Africa; explores how communities respond through negotiation, collective action and resistance; and considers what lessons these responses offer for more just and inclusive urban land governance. Situating African urban experiences within broader debates in criminology and urban governance, the study highlights the interplay of violence, social control and grassroots resilience. It shows how land conflict can simultaneously be a site of precarity and a realm of possibility, revealing both the vulnerabilities and the creative capacities of communities navigating violent urban orders.

In a nutshell, this analysis contributes to comparative criminology by foregrounding African urban experiences within global discussions of urban governance, grassroots resilience and transformative justice. It challenges conventional policy assumptions that view land conflict solely as a legal or technical problem, emphasising instead the relational, political and contested nature of urban land. By centring the lived experiences and strategies of communities, the paper demonstrates that understanding land conflict requires attention to structural violence, organised actors and the everyday practices through which residents negotiate, resist and transform urban space. In doing so, it underscores the importance of integrating critical, context-sensitive and empirically grounded perspectives into debates on urban land justice, crime and social control.

1. Methodological approach

This paper advances critical theoretical perspectives for rethinking how urban land conflict is conceptualised in African cities, with particular attention to grassroots responses. It draws on documented cases, secondary sources and existing scholarship to examine two interrelated themes: the historical continuities of spatial exclusion and colonial dispossession that shape urban land struggles and the ways in which these struggles function as sites of both material contestation and symbolic resistance, mediated by power, inequality and community agency. Rather

than presenting new empirical data in the conventional sense, the paper engages critically with documented instances of land conflict and scholarly analysis to illuminate both the structural and everyday dimensions of contestation.

The methodological approach combines critical synthesis, comparative analysis and case-based interpretation. Documented cases – drawn from scholarly articles, reports and legal or media records – serve as empirical grounding for exploring how communities negotiate tenure, resist eviction and navigate contested urban spaces. By systematically examining these cases, the study identifies patterns of conflict, strategies of grassroots mobilisation and the role of violence, coercion and social control in shaping outcomes. This approach allows for rigorous analysis while remaining sensitive to context-specific variations across cities such as Nairobi, Accra, Harare and Johannesburg.

My perspective as a Nigerian researcher, having grown up in a peri-urban settlement on the fringes of a rapidly expanding city, informs this analysis. Personal observations of state-backed development schemes, elite land speculation and the ambiguous enforcement of land titles provide a grounded understanding of how communities are affected by layered forms of land precarity. Coupled with academic and activist engagements with grassroots organisations and legal advocates working on land tenure and urban justice (Bamidele 2018a; 2018b; 2022; 2024; 2025), this insider knowledge enables the paper to interpret documented cases in ways that foreground community agency, localised strategies of resistance and the sociopolitical dynamics of violence and coercion.

By focussing on documented grassroots responses, the paper situates African urban land conflicts within broader debates in criminology, urban governance and social justice. It emphasises that communities are not merely passive victims of structural dispossession, but active political agents whose strategies reveal both the limitations of formal legal frameworks and the creative potential of locally grounded practices. This method highlights the intersection of historical processes, institutional power and community action, providing a nuanced understanding of how land conflicts are experienced, contested and sometimes transformed from the ground up.

2. Historical continuities of spatial exclusion and colonial dispossession

Critical urban scholarship increasingly situates contemporary urban inequality, land struggles and housing crises in Africa within a historical continuum of colonial dispossession and racialised spatial ordering. These phenomena are not emergent or ahistorical; they reflect the structural and symbolic legacies of settler colonialism, racial capitalism and imperial urbanism, which continue to shape

the exclusionary spatial landscapes of postcolonial African cities. From the British colonial city in Lagos or apartheid-era Johannesburg, through settler-dominated Nairobi to militarised zoning in Harare, spatial injustice persists as a central feature of urban governance, development and social control (Roy 2009; Myers 2011; Odendaal 2021; Chataika, Goodley 2024; Corbett et al. 2025).

As Mahmood Mamdani (1996) argues, colonialism established a bifurcated urban governance system that endures today: a dual regime in which urban space functions simultaneously as a site of accumulation for elites and a zone of containment for the poor. Spatial exclusion was not incidental; it was central to the production of colonial order. Indigenous populations were forcibly displaced, their lands expropriated and their settlements rendered illegal. Legal frameworks deliberately negated customary land rights, enabling dispossession under the guise of modernisation, infrastructure development and legal rationality (Okoth-Ogendo 1991; Bjornlund, Bjornlund, van Rooyen 2020). Post-independence governments frequently perpetuated these logics, often privileging new elites, private investors and international capital while further marginalising low-income and historically excluded communities.

Rather than dismantling colonial spatial orders, many postcolonial states have reinforced them through neoliberal urban reforms, state-sanctioned evictions and elite-driven development initiatives. These dynamics are visible in speculative real estate markets, gated communities and informal settlements displaced under the banner of “urban regeneration” or “modernisation.” Cities such as Nairobi, Lagos and Johannesburg display stark spatial dualisms: affluent districts and “world-class” infrastructure exist alongside informal settlements facing neglect, insecure tenure and violent repression (Watson 2009; Caldeira 2017; van Vliet 2019; Banks, Lombard, Mitlin 2020).

This persistent geography of exclusion is maintained through legal, political and ideological mechanisms. Land titling and zoning laws continue to marginalise informal tenure systems, while technocratic urban planning prioritises elite accumulation. Public discourse frequently frames informal residents as intruders, criminals or obstacles to development, legitimising evictions, demolitions and coercive policing (Fanon 1963; Mbembe 2001). These spatial practices are profoundly racialised, gendered and violent, designed to maintain a hierarchy privileging some lives while rendering others disposable.

In this context, spatial injustice is not a backdrop to protest; it is its catalyst. Marginalised communities assert claims to land, housing and urban space through occupation, litigation and collective action, challenging structural arrangements that deny them full citizenship. Contemporary urban protest is thus inseparable from historical and structural inequalities. Drawing on Henri Lefebvre’s (1991) concept of the right to the city, these struggles can be interpreted as claims for spatial justice and decolonial sovereignty, rather than mere disruptions or grievances over service delivery.

2.1. Material deprivation and structural violence that render protest inevitable

Structural violence underpins contemporary African urban landscapes. Centuries of spatial engineering – colonial land expropriation, forced removals, exclusionary planning and postcolonial neoliberal urbanism – have rendered millions of urban residents invisible, precarious and vulnerable. Informal housing, inadequate services, insecure tenure and frequent encounters with police or municipal authorities are normalised realities for many urban residents (Pieterse, Parnell 2014; Simone 2018; Feltran 2020; McFarlane 2021; Wacquant 2022).

Evictions and demolitions are stark manifestations of this structural violence. In Lagos, the 2017 demolition of Otodo Gbame displaced over 30,000 residents, despite favourable court rulings. Residents were forcibly removed under the guise of environmental protection and urban modernisation, while security forces demolished homes, confiscated belongings and criminalised survivors as “illegal occupants” (Walker et al. 2018; Adeola 2020; Roberts, Okanya 2022). In Nairobi, repeated evictions in Kibera, Mukuru and Mathare have accompanied infrastructure projects funded by international development banks. Police and private security forces frequently employ tear gas, water cannons and physical assault, destroying homes and small businesses in the process (Huchzermeyer 2011; Nagendra et al. 2018; Monteiro et al. 2024).

In Johannesburg, the shack-dwellers’ movement Abahlali baseMjondolo faces systematic harassment, arrests and attacks from municipal authorities while resisting evictions and land grabs. Their protests are often labelled criminal, “illegal occupation” or “public nuisance,” which reflects how state apparatuses deploy law and policing to reinforce spatial exclusion (Zikode, 2008; 2009; Burchardt 2023). Similarly, in Harare, informal traders have repeatedly confronted municipal demolitions, arrests and the destruction of livelihoods, despite ongoing court battles defending their rights (Kamete 2012; 2013; Vermeiren et al. 2012; Bandauko, Arku 2024).

These acts of state-sanctioned and elite-driven violence are part of a broader political economy that treats urban land as a commodity rather than a right. The criminalization of protesting serves to delegitimise grassroots claims and obscure the historical and structural causes of dispossession. Authorities frequently depict eviction resistance as riots, looting or disorderly conduct, framing marginalised populations as inherently criminal while masking structural violence as a law-and-order problem.

Communities respond through diverse strategies of resistance and assertion. In Johannesburg, Abahlali baseMjondolo has combined direct action with legal advocacy, securing victories in court that challenge eviction orders and affirm informal settlements’ rights to land (Zikode 2009; Burchardt 2023). In Kenya, the Ogiek community won a landmark ruling at the African Court on Human and Peoples’

Rights, legally recognising their ancestral claims to the Mau Forest and forcing the state authorities to respect collective tenure systems (Kibugi 2021; Claridge, Kobei 2023). In Mozambique, youth in peri-urban Maputo transformed idle land into community agroecological spaces, resisting eviction through alliance-building with NGOs, media campaigns and legal advocacy (Bamidele 2018a; 2018b).

Even when legal victories are partial, grassroots action produces political leverage, visibility and negotiation capacity. In Ghana, communities have documented land encroachments and lobbied local councils to recognise customary land claims, challenging technocratic land titling programmes that exclude smallholders (Tsikata, Yaro 2014). In South Africa, landless farmers mobilised to contest post-apartheid land reform policies that favoured commercial farming elites over historically dispossessed populations (Moyo, Yeros 2005).

Criminalisation and repression remain constant challenges. Female land defenders in particular face gendered violence, threats and intimidation when leading protests or advocating for tenure security. In Uganda, widows in the Acholi region have spearheaded land restitution campaigns, often confronting hostile state agents and private encroachers, yet achieving partial legal recognition of their rights under customary law (Adoko, Levine 2008; Coro, Juanena, Debska 2014). These cases underscore the intersection of gender, state violence and dispossession, illustrating that resistance is both morally justified and politically urgent.

The geography of structural violence shapes how and where protests occur. Informal settlements, townships and inner-city slums are sites of concentrated vulnerability: at the intersection of over-policing, unemployment, inadequate services and insecure tenure, persistent mobilisation is generated. In this sense, protest is a spatial practice, asserting presence, claiming rights and contesting the erasure enforced by urban governance systems.

Urban residents engage in a wide spectrum of resistance practices, from establishing informal settlements and occupying land to organising road blockades, marches and strategic litigation. These acts may appear fragmented, but collectively they constitute a vital political force challenging exclusionary planning and elite domination. Faranak Miraftab (2009; 2015) frames such practices as “insurgent planning,” emphasising how marginalised communities reconfigure urban space to resist displacement, assert claims and prefigure alternative social arrangements.

Documented instances across Africa illustrate the interplay of repression and victory. In Lagos, repeated community protests against eviction and demolition orders forced municipal authorities to delay or partially revise displacement plans (Walker et al. 2018; Adeola 2020). In Kenya, Ogiek advocacy campaigns achieved legal recognition, but also raised international awareness, pressuring conservation authorities to negotiate land use plans that integrate community rights (Claridge, Kobei 2023). Similarly, Abahlali baseMjondolo has leveraged court rulings and media attention to secure infrastructure improvements, the recognition of settlements, and temporary halts to evictions (Zikode 2009; Burchardt 2023). These examples demonstrate that protest is not merely disruptive; it is a strategic, historically

informed response to structural exclusion, dispossession and criminalisation. By framing resistance as spatial practice, the analytical lens shifts from individual acts to systemic processes, revealing how marginalised populations navigate, contest and reshape urban space.

In sum, contemporary urban protests in African cities are best understood through the lens of historical continuities, structural violence and colonial legacies. The persistence of informal settlements, widespread evictions and the criminalisation of protesting are not accidental; they reflect spatial regimes designed to privilege elites while subordinating marginalised populations. By centring on history, structure and grassroots resistance, this analysis contributes to a criminologically informed understanding of urban citizenship, spatial justice and the political agency of African communities, highlighting both the injustices they face and the innovative strategies they employ to assert rights, resist erasure and claim urban space.

3. Land struggles as sites of material contestation and symbolic resistance

“Land is not just soil. It is land in the sense of ground, place, and territory. It is the foundation of people’s lives and identities.” – Wendy Wolford (2010: 6)

Across Africa, land struggles are shaped by both material deprivation and systemic violence. Documented cases reveal that dispossession is rarely accidental: it is often orchestrated by state actors, corporate interests or elites, and enforced through coercion, legal manipulation and sometimes physical violence. In central Mozambique, agribusiness firms fenced off lands traditionally cultivated by smallholder families, displacing residents and restricting access to food and water (Ferguson 2006; Peluso, Lund 2011). Reports indicate that some families were forcibly removed, while others remained under constant threat, highlighting how dispossession operates as both material deprivation and social control.

Similarly, in Ghana’s Volta Region, large-scale irrigation projects submerged ancestral lands, often without adequate or timely compensation. Local farmers documented losing access to productive land as well as to spaces of cultural and spiritual significance (Tsikata, Yaro 2014). These examples illustrate the entanglement of economic, legal and coercive forces: the same institutions tasked with governance and development simultaneously produce dispossession and criminalise resistance.

Land struggles are therefore both material and symbolic. Land constitutes more than a productive asset; it is central to identity, collective memory and social belonging (Chauveau, Richards 2008). Its expropriation reflects broader patterns

of structural violence, while community responses demonstrate resilience, agency and political imagination. Legal frameworks and market-orientated land reforms often delegitimise customary claims, framing those who resist as criminal or deviant (Zoomers 2010; Borrás et al. 2011). In Kenya's Embobut Forest, members of the Sengwer community continue to perform spiritual rituals in sacred groves despite repeated evictions, asserting identity and belonging while facing criminal charges (Cameron 2018; Suliman et al. 2019).

Land struggles cannot be disentangled from colonial and postcolonial histories of dispossession. Colonial regimes expropriated indigenous lands, established settler control and imposed legal frameworks that marginalised customary tenure (Mamdani 1996; Boone 2014; Lund 2017). Post-independence governments often continued these practices, sometimes under the guise of modernisation or structural adjustment programmes, further concentrating land in the hands of elites while undermining community claims.

The phenomenon of land grabbing exemplifies this process. Transnational corporations, states and elites acquire large tracts of land under the pretext of food security, climate adaptation or economic development, often dispossessing smallholder farmers, pastoralists and forest communities (Zoomers 2010; Bamidele 2018a; 2018b). Such interventions exemplify structural violence, rendering marginalised populations legally invisible and socially vulnerable. The criminalisation of protesting against these interventions – through arrests, charges of illegal occupation or forced evictions – demonstrates the intersection of land conflict and criminological processes, where the state functions simultaneously as regulator, aggressor and arbiter.

These contested sites also serve as arenas of resistance and imagination. Communities mobilise to reclaim land and defend livelihoods through a spectrum of strategies, ranging from legal challenges, occupations, protests and road blockades to transnational advocacy campaigns. Symbolic and everyday acts – rituals, storytelling, agroecological initiatives and digital documentation – challenge dominant narratives and assert community presence (Randeria 2003; Cameron 2018). Youth collectives in Malawi, for example, documented forced evictions through social media, countering sanitised accounts of development projects and amplifying marginalised voices. One activist explained: "They want to silence us, but our stories are also weapons."

Documented struggles also reveal the gendered dimensions of land conflict. Women, who are often marginalised under patriarchal and neoliberal frameworks, frequently bear the brunt of dispossession but simultaneously act as leaders and custodians of communal land. In Uganda's Acholi region, widows led land restitution campaigns, invoking customary norms to assert rights as lineage guardians (Adoko, Levine 2008; Coro, Juanena, Debska 2014). Across Africa, women-led co-operatives reclaim land through agroecology, collective ownership and mutual aid, restoring livelihoods while nurturing social solidarities fractured by dispossession (Whitehead, Tsikata 2003; Meinzen-Dick et al. 2019). These acts highlight both

material reclamation and the symbolic assertion of rights, challenging intersecting axes of structural, gendered and economic violence.

Resistance is often costly. Activists face harassment, arrest and even assassination. In South Africa, members of Abahlali baseMjondolo have been repeatedly targeted for defending informal settlements (Zikode 2008; 2009; Burchardt 2023). In Mozambique, youths transforming idle peri-urban land into community farms confront eviction threats from municipal authorities and private interests. These struggles exemplify the criminalisation of grassroots action, where communities defending basic survival and cultural integrity are labelled as lawbreakers.

Land struggles also operate as symbolic resistance. Rituals, storytelling and cultural practices affirm belonging and challenge dominant representations of African land users as idle or irrational. In Kenya, the Sengwer community's continued presence in Embobut Forest, despite repeated evictions, signals a spiritual and ontological claim to the land. Digital storytelling collectives document eviction narratives, asserting presence in ways that challenge state and corporate narratives. These symbolic acts are forms of subaltern agency, exposing contradictions in state power while reinforcing social cohesion and identity (Randeria 2003).

The interplay between material and symbolic stakes is evident in organised movements. The Landless People's Movement in South Africa and the Ogiek struggle in Kenya have achieved legal recognition and international visibility, demonstrating how community mobilisation transforms structural vulnerability into political leverage (Moyo, Yeros 2005; Kibugi 2021; Claridge, Kobei 2023). Such movements exemplify grassroots strategies operating within and against the legal and political frameworks that sustain dispossession.

These struggles also illuminate the concept of "abolition geographies" (Gilmore 2022). Communities create life-affirming spaces amid the ruins of racial capitalism and state neglect. In Maputo's peri-urban belt, landless youths transformed idle land into agroecological farms without state approval, asserting economic, political and symbolic claims. Their efforts demonstrate that land is not merely a commodity, but a site of future-making, care and social reimagination, offering an alternative to extractive logics.

Critically, these struggles reveal the criminological dimensions of land conflict. Evictions, forced displacement and the criminalisation of protesting show how states and elites deploy legal, coercive and sometimes violent mechanisms to maintain control. Resistance, in turn, challenges these mechanisms, revealing both the limits of formal authority and the resilience of marginalised communities. By documenting these cases, the paper underscores how land conflict intersects with crime, social control and victimisation, extending criminological analysis beyond conventional categories of urban crime to include structural and political violence.

Ultimately, land struggles in African contexts are profoundly political acts that contest both material deprivation and symbolic erasure. They highlight systemic inequalities, demonstrate patterns of criminalisation and assert collective rights to life, identity and space. Communities navigate coercive legal frameworks, elite cap-

ture and structural violence to assert agency and claim justice. Whether through occupation, protest, ritual, storytelling or agroecology, these acts articulate the dual nature of land conflict: as a site of dispossession and as a terrain of possibility.

As Wendy Wolford (2010) states, land is a foundation for life, identity and justice. Defending it represents survival and a radical affirmation of community sovereignty and hope. In a context of escalating dispossession, the symbolic and material reclamation of land emerges as a deliberate act of resistance, imagination and justice, challenging both the extractive priorities of elites and the criminalisation of marginalised populations.

Conclusion

Critical perspectives on urban land struggles in Africa reveal the deep entrenchment of colonial legacies, capitalist accumulation and carceral urbanism, which converge to produce spatial regimes of exclusion, dispossession and inequality. These regimes are neither neutral nor technocratic; they are structured through racialised, gendered and state-sanctioned violence, extending from colonial settlement patterns and imperial urban planning to contemporary practices of neoliberal governance, militarised development and corporate land acquisition. Land in African cities is therefore not merely a physical resource, but a terrain where power, belonging and survival are contested, making the land conflict–community nexus a critical site for examining grassroots resistance, insurgent spatial politics and abolitionist possibilities.

As this study has shown, urban land struggles are not solely about property or tenure security. They fundamentally concern who counts as a legitimate urban subject, whose claims to space are recognised and whose lives are deemed expendable in the name of “development.” Evictions, forced relocations and displacement disproportionately affect the urban poor – often racialised, feminised and historically marginalised populations – whose experiences are criminalised or rendered invisible by dominant planning paradigms, securitised governance and elite-driven development (Zikode 2008; 2009; Huchzermeyer 2011; Adeola 2020).

The criminalisation of resistance is widespread. In South Africa, members of Abahlali baseMjondolo have repeatedly faced arrests, targeted harassment and politically motivated attacks while defending informal settlements in Durban and Cape Town (Zikode 2008; Burchardt 2023). In Kenya, land defenders from the Ogiek community have been evicted multiple times from the Mau Forest complex, and activists have been prosecuted under forestry laws despite having received legal recognition of their ancestral claims (Kibugi 2021; Claridge, Kobei 2023). In Mozambique, youths cultivating idle peri-urban land for community agroecology faced threats of arrest and eviction by municipal authorities and private investors

(Bamidele 2018a; 2018b). In Lagos, Nigeria, the state's demolition of the Otodo Gbame settlement in 2017 displaced over 30,000 residents, despite court orders in their favour; the residents were criminalised under accusations of "illegal occupation" (Walker et al. 2018; Adeola 2020; Bakare 2024). These examples highlight how legal and coercive tools are employed to maintain elite control, while grassroots resistance is framed as deviance or criminality.

In response, communities across the continent have been innovative in resisting and asserting their rights. In South Africa, Abahlali baseMjondolo successfully secured court rulings recognising the legality of informal settlements, setting important precedents for tenure rights and gaining protections against eviction (Zikode 2009; Burchardt 2023). The Ogiek community in Kenya won a landmark case at the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights in 2017, affirming their collective land rights and providing international visibility to their struggle (Claridge, Kobei 2023). In Mozambique, youth-led peri-urban agroecological projects have resisted eviction through public advocacy and alliances with civil-society organisations, transforming idle land into spaces of subsistence, education and political imagination (Bamidele 2018a). In Ghana, community-led mapping and documentation of land encroachments have pressurised the local authorities to recognise customary claims in peri-urban regions (Tsikata, Yaro 2014). These victories demonstrate how grassroots action can intersect with formal legal mechanisms, international advocacy and civil-society support to reclaim agency and protect communities from displacement.

These struggles are not only legal or material; they are profoundly symbolic and cultural. Communities perform rituals, preserve sacred sites and engage in storytelling that resists erasure and affirms identity. In Kenya's Embobut Forest, the Sengwer community's ongoing spiritual practices function as acts of resistance, asserting historical and ontological claims to the land despite repeated evictions and criminal charges (Cameron 2018; Suliman et al. 2019). In Malawi, youth collectives document forced evictions via digital storytelling, producing narratives that counter sanitised government and NGO accounts, which in turn mobilises broader public support and raises awareness (Bamidele 2018b). These symbolic practices disrupt dominant narratives that depict African land users as inefficient or irrational and reframe resistance as legitimate political and moral action.

Gendered dimensions are also central. Women often bear the brunt of dispossession but simultaneously lead land restitution, advocacy and cooperative projects. In Uganda's Acholi region, widows have successfully challenged both state and private encroachment on ancestral lands, invoking customary norms and asserting rights as custodians of lineage property (Adoko, Levine 2008; Coro, Juanena, Debska 2014). Across Africa, women-led cooperatives in Mozambique, Ghana and South Africa have reclaimed land through collective ownership, agroecology and mutual aid, restoring livelihoods while reinforcing social solidarity and community governance structures (Whitehead, Tsikata 2003; Meinzen-Dick et al. 2019). These practices highlight the intersection of gendered, structural and

racialised violence and the innovative capacity of marginalised actors to create life-affirming alternatives.

Crucially, these struggles demonstrate the criminological relevance of land conflict. Forced evictions, activists' arrests, the criminalisation of protesting and violent repression are not isolated acts, but part of systemic mechanisms of social control and coercion that regulate who may inhabit, use or profit from urban space. Communities' resistance illuminates the limits of these mechanisms and exposes how state and corporate actors enforce dispossession under the guise of legality, development or environmental management (Ferguson 2006; Peluso, Lund 2011). By documenting these patterns, the paper extends the analysis of crime and victimisation beyond individual offences to encompass structural, political and spatial forms of violence.

Grassroots strategies also reflect insurgent spatial politics. Whether through occupations, protests, legal action, agroecology or digital campaigns, communities enact alternative governance structures that prefigure abolitionist urban futures (Miraftab 2009; Gilmore 2022). These practices transform "scenes of subjection" into arenas of possibility, asserting rights to land, livelihoods and dignity. Communities contest both the material and symbolic dimensions of dispossession, illustrating how resistance is inseparable from knowledge production, identity formation and spatial justice.

The land conflict–community nexus also illuminates the intersections of land justice, climate justice and racial justice. Evictions for mega-projects, real estate development or climate adaptation frequently weaponise environmental narratives to legitimise displacement and enforce elite interests (Sultana 2022). Grassroots responses reveal the convergence of extractive, coercive and carceral logics in governance while offering life-affirming alternatives rooted in care, solidarity and relational accountability.

Ultimately, urban land struggles in Africa demonstrate that grassroots movements are not only resisting dispossession – they are actively constructing alternative futures. Informal settlements, tenant unions and neighbourhood associations embody daily insurgent planning, reconfiguring urban space around collective needs rather than elite accumulation. These movements challenge the dominant notions of citizenship tied to legal recognition and market property, asserting instead a vision of urban space as a common governed through reciprocity, care and relational justice.

Abolitionist urban land futures reject the commodification of land and emphasise its centrality to life, dignity and community well-being. They demand structural transformation, including the redistribution of power and resources, protection from criminalisation and support for grassroots decision-making. By centring on community agency, these futures envision cities where mobility, shelter and safety are universal rights rather than privileges, connecting struggles for urban land justice to broader projects of migration, climate and racial justice.

As Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2022) emphasises, abolition involves both dismantling coercive structures and creating life-affirming institutions, relationships and practices. The urban land conflict–community nexus in Africa offers both a mirror of systemic violence and a window into emergent, insurgent futures. Documented examples across Mozambique, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa and Uganda demonstrate that communities are not passive victims: they are agents of change, asserting rights, reclaiming land and envisioning justice amid adversity.

The challenge ahead is to learn from these struggles, amplify community visions and support grassroots-led strategies that transform urban spaces into realms of dignity, autonomy and collective flourishing. Abolitionist urban futures in Africa demand that we understand land not as a commodity or administrative asset, but as the foundation of life, identity and justice, where grassroots struggles serve as both inspiration and a blueprint for more equitable cities.

Declaration of Conflict Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no specific funding for this work.

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