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Ethnic Identity as an Interpretive and Mobilisation Mechanism in the Ethnic Conflict and Insecurity in Isiolo County, Kenya

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Abstract
This study examined the relationship between ethnic dynamics and insecurity in Isiolo County, Kenya, focusing on how ethnic identity intersects with resource competition, socioeconomic disparities, political marginalisation, historical grievances and external pressures. The study employed a mixed-methods approach drawing on 76 valid household survey responses and 25 key-informant interviews. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative evidence was analysed thematically. The findings indicate a substantial perceived association between ethnic dynamics and insecurity. Specifically, 70% of respondents reported that ethnic dynamics heightened feelings of vulnerability, while 60% associated ethnic dynamics with insecurity and 52% characterised the relationship between ethnic conflict and insecurity as strong or very strong. Economic disparities between ethnic groups (63%), political marginalisation and manipulation of ethnic identities (58%), competition over scarce water and grazing resources (55%), and historical grievances (53%) were identified as important factors associated with ethnic tensions and insecurity. In addition, 58% of respondents perceived external pressures, including regional insecurity, arms proliferation and climate-related stress, as exacerbating the conflict environment. Drawing on Constructivism, Securitisation Theory and Conflict Transformation Theory, the study argues that ethnic identity is better understood as an interpretive framework through which material, political and historical grievances acquire collective meaning and may become associated with perceptions of threat. The study recommends inclusive governance, equitable resource institutions, preventive dialogue and sustained efforts to transform inter-community relationships and structural inequalities.

Introduction
Ethnic conflict remains a persistent challenge to peace, human security and development in many African societies. However, the proposition that ethnic diversity inherently generates conflict has increasingly been challenged by scholarship demonstrating that ethnicity becomes politically and conflictually consequential through particular institutional, economic and historical conditions. The

key question is not whether ethnic diversity causes conflict, but the conditions under which ethnic identities become politically mobilised, perceived as threatening, and linked to competition over resources and power. Ethnic identity denotes belonging to a recognised ethnic group; ethnic dynamics refer to patterns of interaction and competition between or within ethnic communities; ethnic tension describes strained relations marked by mistrust and perceived threat; ethnic conflict involves sustained confrontation in which ethnic identity is significant; and insecurity encompasses actual or perceived threats to safety, livelihoods, property, mobility and access to essential resources.

Research on horizontal inequalities shows that disparities between socially defined groups can create stronger perceptions of collective disadvantage and incentives for mobilisation than individual inequalities (Stewart, 2008; Gubler & Selway, 2012). In Kenya, these inequalities intersect with ethnicity, political competition, resource access and marginalisation. Devolution sought to address such disparities by decentralising power and resources, but it has also created new arenas for ethnic competition over political office, development resources and patronage (D'Arcy, 2020; Cheeseman et al., 2016). In northern Kenya, these dynamics intersect with pastoral dependence on water and grazing land, climatic variability and historical marginalisation (Chome, 2016). However, resource scarcity alone does not explain conflict; resource disputes are also shaped by institutions, access rights and political interests (Oba, 2011). Recent research further shows that pastoral conflict increasingly intersects with commercialised livestock theft, territorial politics and elite interests, embedding local resource disputes within broader political economies of violence.

Isiolo County provides a particularly important setting for examining these relationships because ethnic diversity intersects with pastoral livelihoods, natural-resource competition, political contestation, historical grievances and regional insecurity. The county's communities include Borana, Somali, Turkana, Samburu and Meru populations whose relationships encompass both cooperation and conflict. The empirical grounds on which this study is based documents recurrent tensions involving grazing land, water, cattle rustling, political competition and perceived marginalisation.

Existing interventions by government, security actors, civil society and peacebuilding initiatives have helped manage conflict, but persistent challenges remain, including political exclusion, resource competition, historical grievances, ethnic mobilisation and declining inter-community trust, particularly during elections when competition for political power and county resources may intensify ethnic dynamics. Although studies have examined resource-based conflict, pastoral insecurity, political competition and ethnicity in northern Kenya, fewer integrate these dimensions within a specific county context. This study addresses this gap by examining how ethnic identities interact with resource competition, socioeconomic inequalities, political mobilisation, historical grievances and external pressures in shaping insecurity in Isiolo County.

The study contributes context-specific evidence on the ethnic conflict–insecurity nexus in Isiolo, integrates horizontal inequalities, pastoral resource competition and devolved political competition, and applies Constructivism, Securitisation Theory and Conflict Transformation Theory as complementary analytical lenses. It further highlights the need for conflict-management approaches that address the broader political, socioeconomic and relational conditions associated with insecurity rather than focusing solely on individual episodes of violence.

Literature Review

A central debate in ethnic conflict scholarship concerns whether ethnicity is a fixed identity or a socially constructed category whose significance varies across contexts. Constructivist scholarship emphasises that ethnic identities acquire meaning through social interaction, political institutions,

historical experience and boundary-making, meaning that ethnicity does not inherently produce violent conflict (Wendt, 1999). Recent Kenyan research similarly shows that ethnic and kinship identities remain politically important but are shaped by political competition, patronage, institutional arrangements and political trust (Zidaru, 2024). In Isiolo, the key issue is therefore not the existence of ethnic identities, but the conditions under which they become associated with exclusion, competition and perceived threat.

Recent research on northern Kenya likewise challenges explanations that isolate ethnicity or environmental scarcity from wider political and socioeconomic processes. Pastoral conflicts are shaped by resource competition, historical marginalisation, political involvement and economic change (Rogei, 2026), while resource-conflict assessments identify competition over land, water and pasture alongside elite capture and political exclusion (USAID, 2024). The literature on horizontal inequalities further shows that disparities between culturally defined groups can generate collective grievances, particularly where socioeconomic and ethnic cleavages overlap (Stewart, 2008; Gubler & Selway, 2012). Evidence from Isiolo and other northern counties similarly links conflict to competition over water and pasture, elite capture and socioeconomic and political marginalisation (USAID, 2024). Thus, material inequalities may become more conflict-relevant when communities perceive access to resources, employment, public investment or political representation as structured along group lines.

Horizontal-inequality helps explain why interventions focused solely on poverty reduction or aggregate development may not resolve ethnic insecurity when communities continue to perceive unequal access to public resources, employment, political appointments or development investment. In Kenya's devolved system, such perceptions may persist because county institutions create both opportunities for inclusion and new arenas for competition over political power and resources. Zidaru (2024), for example, shows that kinship, political patronage and perceptions of trust continue to shape political behaviour in post-devolution Gusiiland, illustrating how local political institutions can remain intertwined with identity-based competition. For Isiolo, this suggests that the peacebuilding effects of decentralisation depend partly on whether county institutions are perceived as inclusive and equitable.

Resource competition is similarly important but should not be reduced to scarcity alone. While water, pasture and land are central to pastoral livelihoods (Oba, 2011), recent research shows that resource conflicts in northern Kenya also intersect with livestock theft, territorial politics, historical marginalisation, state influence and economic change (Rogei, 2026). Evidence from Isiolo further demonstrates that resource pressures vary spatially and socially (Paliwal et al., 2024), while conflicts involving Borana and Meru communities highlight concerns over land, water, pasture and equitable resource management (Limiri, 2022). Development projects have also generated contestation around land and changing patterns of access (Simiyu, 2023). Collectively, this literature indicates that resource competition in Isiolo is embedded in broader struggles over ownership, access, governance and development rather than being explained by physical scarcity alone.

The relationship between environmental stress and insecurity is increasingly understood as conditional rather than deterministic. Climate variability can increase pressure on water and grazing resources and alter pastoral mobility, but evidence from northern Kenya shows that its effects interact with political marginalisation, changing land use, commercial interests and governance failures (Rogei, 2026). Similarly, climate pressures may intensify existing resource competition without independently causing inter-community violence (USAID, 2024). In Isiolo, therefore, whether drought and resource scarcity generate cooperation, negotiation or conflict depends partly

on resource governance institutions, local conflict-resolution mechanisms and how competing claims are politically interpreted.

Devolution provides an important institutional context for understanding these dynamics. Although Kenya's 2010 Constitution sought to address historical marginalisation through local participation and more equitable development, decentralisation has also created new arenas for competition over county resources and political office (D'Arcy, 2020; Cheeseman et al., 2016). Recent research shows that these effects are particularly significant in pastoral and frontier areas, where devolution can increase the political importance of territorial boundaries, land and local resources (Owino, 2025, 2026). McCrone (2026) similarly shows that post-devolution political competition in northern Kenya can enable elites to mobilise resources, political networks and ethnic constituencies in ways associated with violence. These findings reinforce the importance of examining ethnic dynamics alongside the institutional and political environment created by devolution.

Political competition is central to understanding insecurity in Isiolo because ethnic identity may become more salient where access to county government, development resources, political appointments or territorial authority is perceived to depend on ethnic affiliation. Devolution has created new local arenas in which political competition can involve identity, patronage and perceptions of collective interests (Zidaru, 2024), while in northern Kenya elites may draw on existing social and cultural institutions to mobilise support (McCrone, 2026). This does not imply that political elites automatically produce ethnic conflict, but that ethnic identities can provide an organisational and interpretive language through which political competition and collective interests are expressed. Resource governance adds another dimension: conservation and development interventions in Isiolo and Samburu can generate contestation over power, resources and territorial authority where decision-making is perceived as exclusionary (Okwany & Owino, 2024). Thus, disputes over land, conservation, development and pastoral mobility may intersect with questions of political representation and ethnic belonging.

Historical grievances also shape how contemporary disputes are interpreted. Colonial resource governance and subsequent territorial and administrative changes influenced patterns of access and exclusion in northern Kenya (Oba, 2011), while historical marginalisation continues to intersect with contemporary political and economic transformations (Rogei, 2026). Conflict Transformation Theory is relevant because it directs attention beyond individual violent incidents to the relationships, structures and narratives underlying conflict (Lederach, 1997). Recent research further shows that resource competition, livestock economies, political competition, territorial claims and historical marginalisation can intersect to produce insecurity, particularly where traditional resource management arrangements weaken (Rogei, 2026; Owino, 2026). Despite this growing literature, fewer studies examine how communities in Isiolo perceive the intersection of ethnic identity with these multiple sources of insecurity.

Theoretical Underpinnings

The study draws on Constructivism, Securitisation Theory and Conflict Transformation Theory as complementary perspectives for interpreting ethnic dynamics and insecurity in Isiolo County. They are not treated as independently tested causal theories but as conceptual tools for understanding how ethnic identities acquire political meaning, grievances become associated with perceptions of threat, and structural and relational conditions shape persistent insecurity.

Constructivism is relevant because it views identities as socially constituted rather than inherently conflictual (Wendt, 1999). Applied to Isiolo, it highlights how ethnic identities acquire significance through social interaction, political discourse, historical experiences and perceptions of difference.

While Wendt's framework was developed primarily around international relations, its emphasis on socially constructed identity provides a useful interpretive lens for community-level relations.

Securitisation Theory provides a lens for examining how ethnic, resource and political grievances may become understood as security concerns (Buzan, 1998). It is applied cautiously because the study does not measure securitising speech acts, audience acceptance or institutional securitisation processes. Instead, it helps interpret how political, economic and resource-related grievances may acquire security meanings when perceived as threats to collective wellbeing.

Conflict Transformation Theory focuses on the relationships, structures and patterns underlying conflict rather than individual violent incidents alone (Lederach, 1997). In Isiolo, it draws attention to the interaction of historical grievances, political exclusion, resource competition and inter-community mistrust, while informing the study's implications for peacebuilding and sustainable conflict-management.

The three perspectives therefore perform distinct but complementary functions: Constructivism explains identity and meaning, Securitisation Theory helps interpret the framing of grievances as security concerns, and Conflict Transformation Theory directs attention to structural and relational conditions. Horizontal-inequality is treated as an explanatory concept for understanding perceived group disparities rather than as a fourth formal theory.

Methods

The study employed a mixed-methods design to investigate ethnic dynamics and insecurity in Isiolo County. The study population comprised household heads resident in Isiolo County together with national and county administration officers, security officers, religious leaders, and officials from Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and Community Based Organisations (CBOs). The study identifies the county population at approximately 268,000 based on the 2019 Kenya National Bureau of Statistics population estimate. Isiolo was selected because of its ethnic diversity, pastoral livelihood systems, resource pressures, political contestation and history of insecurity.

The study employed a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative questionnaire data with qualitative information from key informants. Survey respondents were selected from the study population within Isiolo County, while key informants were purposively selected on the basis of their knowledge of local governance, security, community relations, peacebuilding and resource management. The study initially targeted 115 participants; however, 76 completed and usable quantitative questionnaires were available for the analysis presented in this study. The quantitative findings were therefore interpreted on the basis of the achieved sample of 76 respondents rather than the planned sample.

The qualitative component comprised 25 key-informant interviews with key informants including national and county government administration officers, security officers, religious leaders and officials of NGOs and CBOs in Isiolo County. Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide. The interview data was analysed thematically. Following transcription and familiarisation with the interview material, the researchers developed an initial coding framework based on the study objectives and the interview questions, while allowing additional codes to emerge inductively from the data. Related codes were subsequently grouped into broader themes and compared across informant categories. Particular attention was given to convergent and divergent accounts, including evidence that did not support the dominant interpretation.

Quantitative data were analysed descriptively using frequencies and percentages, while qualitative information was examined thematically. The two forms of evidence were compared during

interpretation to identify areas of convergence and divergence. Given the cross-sectional and predominantly perceptual nature of the quantitative data, the analysis does not establish causal relationships between ethnic dynamics and insecurity. The findings instead identify patterns in respondents' perceptions and experiences and use qualitative evidence and relevant literature to interpret those patterns.

The study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles governing research involving human participants and received ethical approval from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) under approval reference number 273747. Research authorisation was also obtained from the relevant authorities including the County Commissioners Office in Isiolo County and Masinde Muliro University. Before participation, respondents were informed of the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, their right to decline participation or withdraw, and the intended use of the information provided. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection.

Results

This section presents the empirical findings on the relationship between ethnic dynamics and insecurity in Isiolo County, drawing on the quantitative responses and qualitative perspectives collected from study participants.

The relationship between ethnic dynamics and insecurity

The empirical finding on the substantial perceived relationship between ethnic dynamics and insecurity were presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Relationship between ethnic dynamics and insecurity

Indicator	Yes	No
Ethnic dynamics heighten feelings of vulnerability/insecurity	70%	30%
Ethnic dynamics directly influence insecurity	60%	40%
Connection between ethnic conflict and insecurity rated strong/very strong	52%	48%
Families experienced economic, physical or social losses from ethnic conflict	58%	42%
External factors exacerbate ethnic conflict and insecurity	58%	42%

Source: Field Data, 2025

The findings demonstrate a substantial relationship between ethnic dynamics and insecurity. Further, 70% of respondents reported that ethnic dynamics increased feelings of vulnerability or insecurity, while 60% indicated that ethnic dynamics influenced insecurity directly. The 70% finding demonstrates that ethnic dynamics are experienced as a source of vulnerability. The 60% finding goes further by indicating that a majority perceives ethnic dynamics as directly influencing insecurity. The strength-of-connection measure provides additional nuance: 29% characterised the relationship as strong and 23% as very strong, producing a combined 52% who perceived a strong or very strong connection. From the qualitative data analysed the theme that is evident and relates to the above findings is ethnic identity and perceptions of insecurity. One of the NGO representatives interviewed noted;

"Ethnic dynamics, ethnic loyalty, ethnic identity, are all in the same line and they influence insecurity. It goes without saying that when people identify and align with their ethnic group, they form a type of bond or arrangement that threatens other ethnic groups because of what they do, what they say, how they react to things. A simple example is on the political front where ethnic identity has resulted in insecurity since time in memorial"

These findings provide empirical support for the study's central argument, but they should not be interpreted as evidence that ethnicity independently causes insecurity. Rather, they show that ethnic dynamics are perceived as important within a broader configuration of political, socioeconomic, resource and historical factors. The finding was reinforced by qualitative evidence. A local NGO representative explained that ethnic identity and loyalty influence insecurity because strong alignment within one ethnic group can produce perceptions of threat among other groups, particularly in political contexts. The study further found that 51 of the 76 respondents considered ethnic dynamics to contribute to overall insecurity to a very great extent.

Factors contributing to ethnic-related insecurity

The findings on factors that contributed to ethnic-related insecurity as shown in Table 2 demonstrate that ethnic insecurity is driven by several interconnected factors rather than ethnicity alone.

Table 2: Major factors contributing to ethnic-related insecurity

Factor	Yes (%)	No (%)
Economic disparities between ethnic groups	63	37
Political marginalisation and manipulation of ethnic identities	58	42
Competition over scarce water and grazing resources	55	45
Historical injustices and long-standing grievances	53	47

Source: Field Data, 2025

Economic disparities were the most frequently identified factor, with 63% of respondents identifying them as contributing to ethnic-related insecurity. This result aligns with the thematic analysis which provided evidence on the theme of economic disparities and perceived group disadvantage. One of the key informants interviewed noted that;

"The economic status of people here is different, not uniform and so, when one ethnic group is more economically empowered and especially under the disguise of politics, conflicts and insecurity arise as a means of retaliation, protection or protest"

Where socioeconomic differences overlap with ethnic boundaries, material disadvantage can acquire collective meaning. Individuals may therefore interpret economic exclusion as group exclusion. The implication is that insecurity in Isiolo is partly connected to perceptions of unequal opportunity. Economic inequality becomes politically significant where communities associate access to livelihoods, services and opportunities with particular ethnic groups.

Political marginalisation and manipulation of ethnic identities by political leaders were identified by 58% of respondents as contributing to ethnic-related insecurity. The findings further indicates that ethnic loyalty influences political and social behaviour, including alignment with co-ethnic leaders and perceptions that ethnic affiliation affects access to public services. This finding becomes particularly significant under devolution. The political value of county government means that control of local institutions can affect access to development resources, employment, representation and political influence. Political actors can interpret economic or resource grievances through ethnic narratives, converting diffuse dissatisfaction into collective mobilisation.

Historical injustices and long-standing grievances were identified by 53%, directly being aligned to the theme of historical grievances and inter-community mistrust as established through thematic analysis of the qualitative data. These findings indicate that ethnic insecurity is rooted in both structural and proximate conditions. Historical narratives can consequently function as cognitive resources for contemporary mobilisation. This finding reinforces the importance of Conflict Transformation Theory.

Competition over water and grazing land was identified by 55% of respondents as contributing to ethnic-related insecurity. The significance of this finding lies in the interaction between resource scarcity and identity. The existence of scarce resources does not automatically create ethnic violence. Conflict becomes more likely when resource access is perceived as unequal, when customary arrangements are weakened, or when political actors frame resource claims as evidence of ethnic entitlement.

Further, 58% of respondents indicated that external factors exacerbate ethnic conflict and insecurity. The study identifies regional insecurity, arms proliferation, cross-border dynamics, non-state armed actors and environmental stress as important external pressures. Climate-related stress is especially significant because drought and unpredictable rainfall can intensify competition for pasture and water. The evidence therefore supports a multi-scalar understanding of insecurity. Local ethnic relations are embedded within wider regional and environmental systems.

Consequences of ethnic-related insecurity

The study found that insecurity in Isiolo is not limited to isolated episodes of ethnic violence. Participants reported communal violence, bandit attacks, cattle rustling and resource-related conflicts alongside fear, displacement and disruption of livelihoods and services. The study reported 29 instances of communal violence, 28 instances of bandit attacks, 24 instances of cattle rustling and 24 instances of resource-related conflicts within the study's recorded insecurity manifestations. Ethnic tensions were also reported as recurrent.

The finding showed that 32% of participants indicated that ethnic tensions occurred very often, while a further 16% reported frequent occurrence. The study further observed that low-intensity tensions over grazing land and water may remain underreported because they do not always produce major media-visible incidents. This finding is important because it reveals that insecurity exists along a continuum.

Violence represents the most visible manifestation, but insecurity also includes fear, restricted mobility, livelihood disruption, mistrust and perceptions of vulnerability. The consequences are substantial. Findings showed that 58% of respondents reported that they or their families had experienced economic, physical or social losses associated with ethnic conflict. The study identifies livestock losses, injuries, deaths, displacement, destruction of property, disruption of education and healthcare and deterioration of inter-community relationships as major consequences.

These consequences demonstrate why ethnic conflict should be treated as both a security and development issue. Loss of livestock reduces household productive assets; displacement disrupts livelihoods; insecurity affects access to schools and healthcare; and repeated exposure to violence can weaken social cohesion.

Discussion

The findings challenge the view of ethnicity as an independent cause of insecurity in Isiolo. Although 70% of respondents reported that ethnic dynamics heightened vulnerability or insecurity and 60% associated them with insecurity, these perceptions should be considered alongside economic disparities, political marginalisation, resource competition and historical grievances. This aligns with research showing that insecurity in northern Kenya cannot be explained by a single ethnic or environmental factor. Rogei (2026) links resource-based violence to political motivations, territorial claims and commercialised livestock theft, while Paliwal et al. (2024) and Okwany and Owino (2024) highlight resource competition, governance and struggles over power in Isiolo and neighbouring areas. Thus, ethnic identity may provide a social and interpretive context through which material

and political grievances acquire collective significance, rather than constituting an autonomous explanation for insecurity.

This interpretation is consistent with Constructivism, which views identities as acquiring meaning through social and political interaction rather than automatically producing particular behaviours (Wendt, 1999). In Isiolo, ethnic loyalty appears relevant to political and social behaviour, including alignment with co-ethnic leaders and perceptions of unequal access to public services. Similarly, Zidaru (2024) shows that kinship and ethnic identities remain important to political trust, electoral alliances and patronage in post-devolution Gusiiland. These findings suggest that ethnic identification can remain politically salient within decentralised institutions, particularly where access to political and public resources is perceived through group-based relationships. In Isiolo, therefore, ethnicity may shape how political and socioeconomic experiences are interpreted, without establishing that ethnic identity itself causes perceptions of unequal treatment.

The findings also demonstrate the relevance of Securitisation Theory, although it is used as an interpretive rather than empirically tested framework. Buzan et al. (1998) conceptualise securitisation as the process through which issues are framed as security threats. In Isiolo, respondents' perceptions suggest that resource disputes, political competition and threats to physical safety may acquire security significance when interpreted in terms of inter-community threat. The finding that 60% associated ethnic dynamics with insecurity indicates that ethnic relations are perceived as relevant to safety and security, while cattle theft and resource competition illustrate how livelihood disputes may become embedded in wider perceptions of insecurity. This is consistent with Rogei (2026), who links livestock theft and resource-based violence in northern Kenya to broader political and territorial dynamics. However, because the study did not examine securitising speech acts, audiences or acceptance of extraordinary measures, it does not establish a complete securitisation process.

The findings therefore move beyond the linear proposition that ethnic conflict causes insecurity. Instead, they point to an interaction between structural and material grievances, ethnic interpretations, political processes and perceptions of insecurity. Ethnic identity may provide a framework through which economic inequality, resource competition and political exclusion are understood as collective concerns. The three theoretical perspectives are complementary: Constructivism explains how ethnic identities acquire meaning, Securitisation Theory illuminates how grievances may become associated with collective threat, and Conflict Transformation Theory directs attention to the structural, relational and institutional conditions underlying persistent conflict (Buzan et al., 1998; Lederach, 1997; Wendt, 1999). Their value therefore lies not in establishing separate causal stages, but in illuminating different dimensions of the same empirical problem: identity and meaning, perceptions of threat, and the structures and relationships associated with conflict.

The finding that 63% of respondents identified economic disparities as an important dimension of insecurity highlights the relevance of inequality in Isiolo. Its significance, however, lies not only in economic inequality itself but in how disparities may become consequential when they correspond with perceived group boundaries. Horizontal-inequality literature distinguishes group-based disparities from individual-level inequality, with Gubler and Selway (2012) showing that the relationship between inequality and conflict depends partly on ethnic organisation and overlapping social cleavages. In Isiolo, therefore, socioeconomic disadvantage may acquire broader political significance when communities perceive it as disproportionately affecting their ethnic group. This provides a more nuanced interpretation of the 63% finding and suggests that development inequalities may acquire security significance when understood through group identities.

Similarly, 55% of respondents identified competition over water and grazing resources as an important factor associated with ethnic tensions and insecurity, highlighting the importance of resource governance rather than scarcity alone. Paliwal et al. (2024) show that resource tensions in Isiolo are shaped by the spatial and social relationships surrounding access, while Okwany and Owino (2024) link resource conflicts to power, conservation and natural-resource governance. Rogei (2026) further connects resource-based violence in northern Kenya to territorial politics and commercialised livestock theft. The findings therefore suggest that resource scarcity becomes more politically and security-relevant where access is perceived as unequal, resource claims align with competing communities, and disputes occur within broader contexts of mistrust. Resource governance should consequently be considered an important component of conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

The Isiolo findings contribute to the growing evidence that the effects of devolution are conditional rather than inherently positive or negative. Its implications for ethnic relations depend on how county institutions distribute resources, represent communities and manage political competition. Zidaru (2024) shows that post-devolution competition in Gusiiland remains shaped by kinship, patronage and political alliances, while Owino (2026) links devolution in pastoral settings to ethno-territorialisation and boundary-making. McCrone (2026) similarly demonstrates connections between post-devolution political strategies, elite interests, ethnic mobilisation and violence in northern Kenya. These studies reinforce the finding that inclusive and equitable county institutions may address perceptions of marginalisation, whereas perceived institutional capture may heighten exclusion and competition. Inclusive county governance is therefore relevant not only to accountability but also to local conflict prevention.

The finding that 53% of respondents identified historical grievances as an important factor associated with ethnic tensions highlights the importance of longer histories of inter-community relations. Oba (2011) shows how historical patterns of resource capture and administrative arrangements shaped conditions for later ethnic contestation, while Zidaru (2024) demonstrates the continuing relevance of histories of uneven development, patronage and inter-group relations to contemporary political competition. In Isiolo, this suggests that conflict-management interventions focused only on immediate incidents may overlook the historical perceptions through which communities interpret contemporary disputes. Historical grievances should therefore be considered alongside current political, resource and socioeconomic conditions.

The findings also show a close association between ethnic tensions and insecurity in respondents' perceptions, with incidents such as cattle theft, resource competition and political disputes interpreted within broader contexts of inter-community mistrust. However, the cross-sectional design does not establish a causal or "mutually reinforcing" relationship between ethnic tensions and insecurity. Rather, the findings indicate their connection within a wider environment of grievance, competition and mistrust. This supports the relevance of Conflict Transformation Theory, which emphasises addressing the relationships, structures and patterns underlying conflict rather than focusing solely on violent incidents (Lederach, 1997). In Isiolo, this perspective directs attention to political interference, unequal resource distribution, mistrust and institutional weaknesses as part of the broader environment in which insecurity is experienced and managed.

Conclusion

The study examined the nexus between ethnic dynamics and insecurity in Isiolo County, Kenya, and established that ethnic dynamics are perceived as an important dimension of insecurity, with 70% of respondents reporting that ethnic dynamics heightened feelings of vulnerability and 60% indicating that ethnic dynamics influenced insecurity. However, the findings demonstrate that

ethnic identity does not operate independently of the broader social, political and economic environment. Economic disparities, political marginalisation, competition over water and grazing resources, historical grievances, and external pressures including regional insecurity, small-arms proliferation and climate-related stress shape the context within which ethnic identities become associated with perceptions of exclusion, competition and insecurity. The study therefore conceptualises ethnic identity as an interpretive and mobilisation mechanism through which material and political grievances can acquire collective meaning, rather than as an inherently conflict-producing factor. Sustainable peace consequently requires a shift from reactive security responses towards conflict transformation that addresses the structural, institutional and relational dimensions of insecurity. County institutions should strengthen inclusive political representation, transparent and equitable resource allocation, participatory decision-making and equitable service delivery so that communities do not perceive political control as a prerequisite for security or access to public resources. Water and grazing resources should be managed through inclusive multi-community institutions with agreed rules for seasonal access, transparent mapping of shared resources and accessible mechanisms for rapid dispute resolution. Formal and traditional conflict-resolution institutions should be linked through structured coordination and referral mechanisms that combine the local legitimacy and knowledge of elders with the legal authority and safeguards of formal institutions, while ensuring meaningful participation of women, youth and minority groups. Preventive inter-community dialogue involving political leaders, elders, women, youth, religious actors, security institutions and civil society should also be institutionalised to address grievances before they escalate into violence.

The findings further point to the need for conflict-sensitive electoral governance, integrated climate adaptation and peacebuilding, and strengthened early-warning and early-response systems. Given the perceived role of political marginalisation and manipulation of ethnic identities, county and national actors should monitor inflammatory political rhetoric, enforce legal provisions against incitement, strengthen civic education and encourage political platforms that build constituencies across ethnic boundaries rather than presenting political competition as a struggle between communities. Collectively, these measures should seek to address grievances before they become framed as collective threats and before local disputes escalate into wider insecurity. The central policy implication is that ethnicity should not itself be treated as a security threat; rather, peacebuilding and security interventions should focus on transforming the political, economic, institutional and relational conditions under which ethnic identities become associated with exclusion, competition and collective insecurity.

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