Journal of the International Society for the Systems Sciences | 70th Meeting of the International Society for the Systems Sciences, Cyprus.
Wilby, J., Makar, J. and Laouris, Y. eds.

RESEARCH PARTICIPATION IN A (CONFLICTFUL) FIELD OF RELATIONALITY CONCERNING FARMERS AND PASTORALISTS IN NORTHERN UGANDA: EXPLORING ACCOUNTABILITY WITHIN THE SYSTEM

Francis Akena Adyanga
Kabale University, Uganda | University of South Africa (UNISA)
Email: fakena@kab.ac.ug
&
Norma Romm
University of South Africa (UNISA)
norma.romm@gmail.com

Abstract

Conducted in the post civil-war context of Northern Uganda, this study explored certain land-related conflicts between farmers and pastoralists using a transformative and Indigenous paradigmatic lens. By drawing on an Indigenous relational ontology, a dialogic and participatory research approach was employed. This involved four focus group discussion sessions with 53 participants overall. In addition, two follow up community workshops for the purpose of knowledge sharing, validation and dissemination were conducted. In doing this, the study explored how relationally-directed dialogue could engender mutual understanding and support conflict transformation in the region. The key findings indicate that the dialogic engagement enabled participants to recognize interdependencies, reframe adversarial narratives and co-develop contextually-grounded strategies for coexistence which includes improved land management practices, communication mechanisms and culturally-informed norms of interaction. In the paper we, explain our accountabilities (along with the research participants/co-researchers) as hoping to constructively influence the dynamic of relations. That is, we understood that we ourselves were interwoven in the (changing) system of relations through our involvement.

Keywords
Culturally-attuned research, Indigenous relational conflict resolution, dialoguing towards reconciliation, expressions of interdependence, enacting relationality

1 | Introduction

This research was motivated by our hope to make a constructive shift in the relational dynamics of land-related conflicts between pastoralists (herdsmen) and farmers in Amuru district of Northern Uganda, which arose following the civil war in the region (1986–2006/7). After the war ended, a large number of pastoralists migrated from the central and western Uganda into Northern Uganda in search of pasture for their animals. The mass exodus of the pastoralists and their herds into the northern Uganda resulted in tensions with the host farming communities who experienced challenges affecting their crop production and livelihoods.

Although conflicts between farmers and pastoralists have been widely documented across Africa, the structural drivers such as scarcity, migration and governance have dominated the discourses with less attention paid to the dialogic and relational processes through which affected communities may reconfigure relationships and co-create pathways toward coexistence. This gap

is addressed in this study by exploring how an Indigenous relational approach to dialogue can contribute to conflict transformation in a post-conflict context.

Francis Akena Adyanga, who is the first author of this manuscript became aware of the intensity of these tensions through community engagement and public discourse during a trip to the region. In October 2021, while working in Northern Uganda on another research project, Francis encountered numerous complaints from the locals who expressed their grievances through local radio stations. Some of the locals calling on the radio stations voiced strong opposition to the presence of the pastoralists often referred to in derogatory terms as 'Balaalo' while others defended their presence. These competing perspectives and exchanges reflected deeply polarized positions within the community by that time. Around the same time, the Acholi Cultural Institution (Acholi Ker Kal Kwaro) raised concerns that the ongoing land disputes and the continued influx of the pastoralists were undermining post-war recovery efforts in the subregion. The concerns by the locals and cultural leadership attracted the national political attention. This was evident with the Uganda's President publicly criticizing the grazing practices of the pastoralists.

In response to these developments, Francis engaged Norma Romm, with whom he had previously collaborated during his postdoctoral fellowship at the University of South Africa (UNISA) between 2016 and 2017. Collectively, they initiated a study by drawing on their shared interest in culturally responsive and transformative research approaches. The study was aimed at understanding the conflict and also at facilitating constructive engagement between the groups. Institutional cooperation and financing from UNISA and Kabale University (KAB) provided support for the study. This enabled the setting up of focus group discussions (FGDs) involving both farmers and pastoralists.

The study was designed as a dialogic, participatory process grounded in Indigenous and transformative paradigms. Four FGDs were conducted with a total of 53 participant including men, women, elders and community leaders from both groups. These discussions created a space for participants to share experiences, listen to one another and collaboratively explore possibilities for improving coexistence. This was followed by two study sharing and validation meetings in the community in which preliminary analyses and recommendations were presented and refined through collective deliberations.

The findings were also shared in broader political forums at the request of community stakeholders. This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. Can relationally-directed dialogue facilitate conflict transformation between farmers and pastoralists in Northern Uganda?
2. How might new relational dynamics emerge when participants engage in dialogic processes grounded in storytelling and compassionate listening?
3. How can the transformative and Indigenous research paradigms aid in exploring contextually-relevant strategies for coexistence in post-conflict settings such as Northern Uganda?

By addressing the above key questions, this article contributes to scholarship on Indigenous methodologies, systems thinking and conflict resolution. In conducting this study, we positioned it as an engaged and participatory intervention within a dynamic relational field with participants treated as co-knowledge producers exploring potentials for peaceful-co-existence.

1.1 | Structure of the Paper

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 outlines the process of setting up the study, which also includes ethical considerations and community engagement. Section 3 discusses our methodological approach. The focus of this section is on what McKay (2025) elucidates as the links between the Transformative and Indigenous research paradigms via the acronym *Transformative-Indigenous Paradigm* (TIP), and how this resonates with the practice of *methodizing* as geared to stimulating systemic changes (Ing, 2025). Section 4 presents the findings in thematically organized format. Section 5 describes the community workshops or what we called knowledge sharing and validation meetings and the subsequent engagements. Section 6 offers a discussion and conclusion, in which we reflect upon the implications of the study for relational approaches to conflict transformation.

2 | Setting up the Project

To set the project in motion, Francis first got the permission to hold the FGDs from the Directorate of Research and Publications at Kabale University. The permission letter, addressed to the Resident District Commissioner (RDC) of Amuru District, requested him to give the research team all the necessary support to conduct the study, which it stated was for academic purpose. After the letter was delivered to the RDC of Amuru, he stamped it and wrote the statement “permission to hold FGDs in Amuru district is granted”. Armed with this letter, he and a trusted contact from the community proceeded to the home of the Local Council II Chairperson (Chairperson LC II). They briefed the Chairperson about the study and requested his support in mobilizing participants. The Chairperson agreed to participate and also to mobilize others. According to him, the study was very timely, given the pertinent concerns arising from the entry of the (Balaalo) pastoralists in the community. (During the FGDs the Balaalo objected to this terminology, and one of our recommendations was indeed to relinquish this language in the relations between the farmers and cattle keepers.)

The consent process in the community was achieved through an oral format, with Francis and two Research Assistants explaining that they were seeking volunteers and that the idea was to hold four FGD sessions of approximately three hours each to discuss the land-related tensions. The participants were informed that the purpose was to try to reach some conciliations between the farmers and pastoralists, based on their telling their stories so that others could listen to their experiences and consider how they could work together to find solutions to problems as expressed and discussed. The process of the research was explained as that each volunteer would participate in a FGD session (consisting of about 13 people) to:

a) Explore the historical reasons for the conflicts between the farmers and pastoralists as well as the reasons for the deteriorating relations between them.

b) Engage in a “safe” forum to better understand each other and together discuss possible options for action.

c) Establish some common ground for the host community and pastoralists to live in harmony (with support from local and/or central government) .

They were also told that they had a right to withdraw at any time before the FGD sessions began, but that they should then inform Francis so that a replacement could be sought. They were also advised that during the FGD they would be under no obligation to speak – and only needed to speak if they felt the need to add into the discussion. They were told that their individual views

were in any case never going to be reported, and that all that was important was how the discussion panned out such that possibilities for reconciliation could be mooted.

Norma and Francis then proceeded to make an interview schedule of questions that were likely to stimulate discussion and enable people to air their views while listening empathetically to those of others. Due to Covid-19 which restricted Norma's travel she was not physically present, but she and Francis kept in close contact throughout the whole process, from preparation of the interview guide, to analysis of the four FGD sessions, to presentation of the reporting at the community workshops and beyond (in wider political arenas).

3 | Method/Methodizing, Including Accountability to the Relational Field

Our approach to the conduct of the focus groups can be called methodizing in the sense used by Ing (2025, p. 417) as a process of stimulating learning for co-relating, also by encouraging considerations of where "resets" are valued and how these can be integrated into everyday practice. He notes that this approach to inquiry from the outset "foregrounds change"', and is not underpinned by Western types of *substance* philosophy (where distinct "things" are postulated to exist), but draws on "'imagery that *better reflects unfolding changes*", that is, the "dynamic nature of systems" [seen as relational fields] (2025, p. 412, our italics). He points out (p. 417) that the imagery has resonances with post-colonial science, which too aligns "methods" to accommodate a processual philosophy of realities in-the-making. What is important about Ing's work as far as this paper is concerned, is that he calls on us (as inquirers) to reconsider the assumptions/worldviews underpinning the inquiries and to recognize that these are not neutral in the consequences for what transpires during the inquiry. (See also Ing, 2013, and Ing & Metcalf, 2023.)

In the Ugandan research, our methodizing drew inspiration from two research paradigms that emerged from a critical reflection on Western substance ontologies, and attendant epistemologies and axiologies. These were the transformative paradigm, as labelled and explored by Mertens in a range of texts (e.g., 2003, 2023, 2024, drawing on critical theory and practice) and the Indigenous paradigm explored by authors from various parts of the globe (e.g., Chilisa, 2009, 2020; Chilisa, Major & Khudu Peterson, 2017; Cram, Chilisa & Mertens, 2023; Dube, Ndwandwe & Ngulube, 2013; Kovach, 2009; Mailemala, Madima & Makhanikhe & Netshandama, 2024; Omodan, 2024; Romm, 2015, 2018, 2024). In applying an Indigenous relational systemic lens (cf. Adyanga & Romm, 2023; Romm & Adyanga, 2025) our focus is on regarding "the system" as a lived field of relationality. Indigenous scholars point out that this is called a *relational ontology* in that it is recognized that there are no independent parts to begin with: The "parts" (relata) depend for their existence on their interdependence. As Ramose explains (1999, p. 55): "to be is to be-with" or "to be-together," where ""be-ing" is an inseparable process of interconnectedness. (Ramose uses the hyphenated "be-ing" to signify that existence is not a static state but a continuous, dynamic process of becoming and unfolding in relation to others.)

While this ontological approach sees reality as a field of relations where beings (whether human or more-than-human) exist through their encounters, *this does not mean that all relations are balanced*; indeed, the above ontological position also includes an *axiological position*: as knowers and actors, we need to be accountable to all the (dynamic) relations in which we are enmeshed – trying to strengthen prospects for enhancing relational balance (akin to what Ing, 2025, p. 417 calls propensity/potential for "resetting"). Kovach for her part expresses this succinctly as that "there is an ethical responsibility to not upset a relational balance. Conversely, there is a responsibility to make a positive difference to the relational balance" (2009, p.178).

An implication of this is that, for instance, when conducting FGDs we admit that we are aiming to gear the discussion (as well as the analyses thereof) towards finding points for creating "better" relations in a system in which our analyses/interpretations also play a part. Ngara states that a participative (relational) epistemology means that we recognize that the apparent observer

"now becomes a participator" in that "s/he has an effect on the system she observes" (2017, p. 349). Or, as Rajagopalan suggests (2020), it implies immersive systemic knowing on the part of all concerned.

In this research project, the understandings developed during the FGD sessions, as prompted by our questions (and others that arose) and as enhanced during the community workshops, expressed a relational process as the knowers responded to the stories being told, with a view to looking forward. This kind of process is consistent with the premises of the transformative paradigm, which advocates research as a process of *creating transformations that will be experienced as constructive/beneficial* by those participating in the research (including wider stakeholders – see also Romm, 2018). McKay draws the transformative and Indigenous paradigms together with the acronym TIP (Transformative-Indigenous Paradigm). She notes that:

> Although both paradigms uphold a commitment to justice and inclusion, they offer distinct yet complementary perspectives: the transformative paradigm highlights structural change, participatory processes, and challenging power asymmetries, while the Indigenous paradigm emphasizes relational accountability, cultural context, and the co-creation of knowledge rooted in local cosmologies [worldviews]. This article considers both, referring to this combined approach as the *transformative-Indigenous paradigm (TIP).* (McKay, 2025, p. 2, our italics)

McKay indicates that in the research arena, in the African context, "relationality, as emphasized in the TIP, draws on the African philosophy of Ubuntu [which] … affirms dignity, and engenders shared ownership of research processes (2025, p. 3). In line with McKay, we concur that the TIP provides an ethical basis for research that is "a culturally meaningful, ethically grounded, and a socially transformative endeavor" (p. 2).

With this background of the underpinning for the research in mind, the FDGs as facilitated by Adyanga and the Research Assistants were organized to ensure that participants could freely discuss possibilities for making their relationships more mutually beneficial, drawing on propensities that they located through the discussion.

3.1 | Sampling Process and Data Generation

To ensure fair representation from both farmers and pastoralists, a purposive sampling method was used in collaboration with local leadership to select participants consisting of men, women, elders, and community leaders. Selection criteria for inclusion in the FDGs emphasized individuals with lived experience of land-related conflicts and those actively engaged in community decision-making processes and also in leadership positions. Each of the FGDs lasted approximately three hours. They were conducted in the Acholi language and were facilitated by the first author and two trained assistants. Data were recorded through detailed field notes and where consent was granted, audio recordings were taken which were later translated into English for analysis. Care was taken to preserve the meaning and contextual nuances of participants' expressions during translation.

3.2 | Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using a thematic, dialogic approach aligned with the Transformative-Indigenous Paradigm (TIP). Data analysis involved an iterative reading of the field notes and the original transcripts with the aim of identifying recurring patterns of the key ideas related to relational shifts, conflict dynamics and proposed solutions. In the development of the themes, we focused on how participants responded to each other's narratives and co-constructed shared meanings. The themes arose and were refined though reflexive dialogue between us as we

acknowledged our roles in the field of inquiry by specifically choosing points where reconciliation was being expressed, which we could "feed back" to participants. (The key interpretations were presented back to participants during community dissemination/discussion workshops.)

As part of our analysis we pointed out how participants had been considering their mutual dependencies (for example, how milk from the pastoralists' cows could improve the food security of the farmers; as the pastoralists sold this cheaply to them). The pastoralists in turn depended on their being welcomed by the community, who otherwise could deploy their cultural and political institutions to influence wider political dynamics, at local and national level. We highlighted that it had been commented during the FGDs that if cattle keepers were evicted from the area in terms of Presidential directives, then the children of the farmers (and the farmers themselves) would not be welcome if they tried to move to other areas of Uganda. This would set a precedent in the country which would be damaging to any movements to "other" communities, which was not desirable in terms of Ubuntu-type solidarity. In view of tolerance among communities in Uganda the option of blanket eviction of non-Acholi pastoralists was considered untenable by most of the participants. We also highlighted references to intermarriages that had occurred between the host community and pastoralists, as a basis for cohesion.

An issue that irked the farmers was the need for pastoralists to take into account the cultural traditions of the host community. One of these was that if one sees that women are bathing in the river, one waits for them to finish and to get out, before passing the area – so that they do not feel disturbed by men watching them. (This was re-iterated to Francis sometime after the workshop discussions in the community had been held, by a pastoralist leader who indicated to him that this came to be appreciated by the pastoralists as they had hitherto not realized this.)

4 | "Results"

In the analysis of the FGDs, several interrelated themes concerning the dynamics of conflict and possibilities for coexistence between farmers and pastoralists came to the fore. The key themes analyzed reflected not only tensions but also the emerging relational shifts in the process of participants' dialogical engagement. The analysis below is structured under the major themes that we identified: 1) livelihood tensions and crops destruction; 2) emerging interdependencies and mutual benefits; 3) governance challenges and disproportionate power dynamics; 4) cultural norms and misunderstandings; 5) security concerns and militarization; and 6) pathways toward coexistence.

4.1 | Livelihood Tensions and Crops Destruction

A dominant concern raised by the participating farmers was the destruction of their crops by the pastoralist's herds. This resulted from uncontrolled grazing practices which was also reported as rampant and the major source of conflict. The participants farmers described how open grazing practices especially in instances where land was not fenced, resulted in significant losses affecting household food security and income. Most participant farmers complained that compensation for damaged crops was either inadequate or not provided at all.

The challenge of following up compensation was also highlighted by the farmers. This was mainly in cases where the herdsmen would threaten to invoke their connections to powerful individuals such as military officers. As a result, this created a perception of unequal power relations which leaves farmers feeling vulnerable and unable to seek justice effectively. Such dynamics contributed to resentment and mistrust which reinforced adversarial relations between the groups. The following story recounted by a female participant expresses this concern:

> *I want to report that two days ago, I found some of the cattle belonging to the pastoralists in my maize plantation. I called the youthful boys from the village who*

> *chased them away but also captured and tied one of the cattle. When the herdsman came, he threatened to call an army officer who he alleged is the owner of the animals. Because of fearing an army officer, we let go the animal. This is not fair to us since we cannot compete with big men in the army at the rank of officers. We are just ordinary people here in the village trying to make a living and it hurts to see our crops being destroyed without compensation.*

4.2 | Emerging Interdependencies and Mutual Benefits

Much as the above tensions were raised, participants are also recognized areas of mutual benefit that complicated purely conflict-oriented narratives. For instance, many farmers acknowledged that the entry of the pastoralists in their community has improved access to milk which enhanced household nutrition for children. This submission was mainly expressed by women who emphasized the importance of this in reduce the burden of care giving that are often associated with children illness. To support this view, a female participant stated that

> *As a mother, this means a lot because when children regularly fall sick, it is the mothers who take them to the hospitals. When they get hospitalized, it's the mothers who stay and take care of them in the hospitals. The coming of the pastoralists is slowly reducing this problem due to improved children's diet*.

Additionally, some participants in the host community (men and women) further acknowledged that the pastoralists have improved the breed of their animals through cross breeding. Others stated that they buy improved breeds of cattle from the pastoralists at relatively lower prices. For instance, a male participant indicated, by way of example:

> *Two years ago, one the pastoralist who is my neighbor gave me his bull to cross breed my animals. Now, I am seeing the calves being born having better breed*.

Various participants stated that their household incomes have increased with the coming of the pastoralists because they sell their food crops to the pastoralists at better prices. The pastoralists buy food such as maize, sorghum, millet, cassava, sweet potatoes from the locals at better prices than would be secured elsewhere – hence leading to improved incomes among the local farmers. Here again we see that the participants were indicating that there can be reciprocal relationships in which both the farmers and the pastoralists benefit.

4.3 | Governance Challenges and Disproportionate Power Dynamics

As far as legal acquisition of the land by the pastoralists was concerned, participants in the host community admitted that most of the pastoralists had legally acquired land on which they had settled and were grazing their animals. They admitted that the land was sold or rented out to the pastoralists. However, some of the locals raised complaints against certain actions of their own local leaders whom they claim often act as middlemen in negotiating prices for the land and at the end of land transaction, end up pocketing part of the money.

There were complexities generated around land discussions of land ownership and governance. Although most participants acknowledged that the pastoralists had legally acquired land through buying or rental, many also raised concerns about irregularities in land transactions. This was particularly expressed in the exploitation of local intermediaries who were perceived to benefit unfairly. This behavior, according to participants, is breeding animosity in some families/clans. But again, it was acknowledged in conciliatory tone that, in words of a male participant:

> *This is not the problem brought by Balaalo pastoralists and they should be left to use the land they bought. At family or clan level, the fraudulent children need to be brought to justice either through the institutional of traditional leaders or the courts of law [modern justice system].*

Hence, they asserted that they need to take issue with these leaders, rather than blame the pastoralists, which creates unnecessary animosity in some cases.

Some participants cautioned that instead of pointing fingers squarely at the pastoralists as a source of animosity, certain internal community dynamics such as dispute within families and clans were responsible for some conflicts. However, unequal power relationship became visible in instances where pastoralists appeared to leverage political or military connections to avoid accountability. This contributed to perceptions of injustice and weakened trust in formal and informal governance structures.

4.4 | Cultural Norms and Misunderstandings

One of the issues that emerge as a significant but often overlooked source of animosity was cultural differences. The specific concerned raised by the participating farmers was that the pastoralists were perceived as not respecting local customs. The particular concern were those customs related to gender norms and the use of shared resources such as water sources. In this regard, a female participant stated that:

> *I have a problem with the herdsmen when they bring their animals to the river. When they reach the river bank and find women bathing, they just walked in without asking to ascertain if a someone is bathing. This is an embarrassing and disrespectful behavior. In our culture, one has to wait if it is ascertained that women are bathing in the river. One waits for them to finish and to get out, before passing the area so that women do not feel embarrassed by men watching them*

At the same time, the dialogic process enabled participants to reflect on these differences and consider how greater cultural awareness could improve relations. For example, participants discussed the importance of respecting local practices concerning privacy and modesty, suggesting that such understandings could reduce unnecessary conflict.

4.5 | Security Concerns and Militarization

Although some participants praised the pastoralists' entry into the community, the presence of firearms among some of the herdsmen generated mixed reactions. Some participants viewed armed pastoralists as a potential security threat. The concerns by this section of participants arose from the inequality in disarmament policies across different groups. They specifically wondered why other pastoralists are being disarmed of their fire arms while the Balaalo are left to roam freely with their guns. For instance, a male participant wondered:

> *Because they [Balaalo pastoralists] carry guns, I see them as potential source of insecurity in the future. Why would the government allow them to carry guns yet other pastoral groups such as the Karimojong have been disarmed by the government? I see double standard here. Are the Balaalo so special and if so, why?*

There were other divergent perspectives that perceived the presence of the armed pastoralists as contributing to improved security by deterring criminal activity. This group of participants argued that with the guns, the pastoralists are providing security to the locals against outlaws who used to terrorize the community. Specifically, a female participant asserted:

> *We are no longer worried about outlaws who used to hide in the wilderness and then come to terrorize us here at night since the pastoralists have taken over their hiding places. As long as they use their guns for good reason, their movement have no bad influence on the security in the region.*

The divergent perspectives of the participants reported above clearly reflects broader uncertainties regarding the role of pastoralists in local security dynamics. It also highlights the need for clearer regulatory frameworks aimed at enhancing confidence building for co-existence between farmers and the pastoralists.

The general tone of the discussions was that it was better for all parties if the farmers and pastoralists could live in peace, based on their finding common ground. In regard to compliance to previous Presidential directives that pastoralists who have acquired land and were settling there needed to fence it for their grazing animals and build water sources for the animals, otherwise they faced eviction, there were mixed feelings. Most of the participants felt that more time should be given to the pastoralists to comply. (At one point the President had even instructed a blanket eviction of them all due to so much non-compliance. But in the course of time, further to our research and further also to the President insisting on compliance with in his directives – Opio, 2023 – many farmers did start to comply.)

In short, from all four of the FGD sessions, we created an analysis which indicated how prospects for reconciliation had been developed through the discussions and we also identified multiple recommendations. We reported a summary of our analyses and recommendations to the community workshops (held six months later). Below we provide some pertinent recommendations that offer a gist of what had been agreed. (In Adyanga, Romm and Toolit, 2025, we provide detail on how we actually proceeded with what we called our transformative-oriented analysis and also with our summary of the recommendations.)

4.6 | Some Pathways toward Coexistence

There was a strong consensus across all FGDs that peaceful coexistence was both desirable and possible. As a result of the desire for coexistence, participants brainstormed several strategies to improve relations. Among others, these includes regular dialogue between leaders of both communities, fair and transparent compensation mechanisms for damaged crops, promotion of accountable land use practices such as fencing and provision of water sources, dropping the use of inflammatory and disparaging language in public discourses and media platforms. And lastly, they proposed the fostering of collaboration and regular review meetings between community leadership structures.

The most important strategy emphasized by participants is the need for shared accountability and mutual respect. Participants recognized that sustainable coexistence depends on both groups actively engaging in relational dialogue to mend broken ties. In conclusion, the dialogical process itself can be argued to have played a role in fostering these perspectives. This was seen in how participants acknowledged the interdependencies and the expressed willingness to move beyond adversarial positions. In our view, this shift in position suggests that relationally directed dialogue can function both as a method of inquiry and also as a catalyst for transformation among parties dealing with animosity.

5 | Community Workshops

After the conclusion of the FGDs, two dissemination and validation workshops were organized to present and refine the emerging findings and recommendations. This was done in line with participants' earlier request for follow-up engagement. As a result, the first author reconnected with the Local Council II Chairperson to help with this process. This is the same local leader who had supported the initial mobilization process for this study. To accommodate participants' availability, the dissemination and validation workshops were subsequently convened on March 16, 2022. At the workshops, 56 participants (35 males and 21 females) attended. This number included 11 individuals who had not participated in the earlier FGDs, but wished to participate as the research had raised community interest.

The approach taken at the workshops was the presentation of a synthesized account of the four FGDs findings and proposed strategies for coexistence, during which participants largely affirmed that the analysis aptly reflected the issues raised during earlier FGDs. In the process, participants also emphasized the need to strengthen certain areas from the reported transcript as had been read out. One such area that was emphasized was the importance of particular mechanisms for fair compensation in cases of crop destruction and the inclusion of pastoralist leaders in community decision-making forums.

Additionally, the two workshops offered an opportunity to reflect on the dialogic process itself. This was revealed by participants indicating that the earlier discussions had created a rare space for inclusive engagement across social and gender divides. Specifically, most women revealed that the process enabled them to air out their voices in ways that were not often common in community meetings. During the workshops, many men indicated agreement with these pronouncements by showing applause. Hence it can be said that the dialogic approach contributed to improving intergroup relations and shifts in intra-community dynamics especially in social aspects such as gender inclusion. This was further seen in the participants' expression of a shared commitment to implementing the jointly-brainstormed coexistence strategies through sustained engagement. There was also a growing sense of collective identity, which was revealed with regular references to "our community". We consider this as reflecting a shift from previously polarized positions.

At the request of participants, the findings/recommendations from the FGDs and the two validation meetings were shared with local and national authorities such as the Resident District Commissioners. These engagements contributed to broader discussions on pastoralist practices and land management in the subregion leading to reduced conflicts. Although it is not possible for us to establish a direct causal relationship, subsequent policy directives indicate alignment between community-articulated priorities and government responses. Meanwhile, the community validation workshops had a twofold function, thus: they functioned as mechanism for validating findings and also provided an extension of the relationally-directed dialogic process. All in all, we submit that the research strengthened emerging patterns of mutual recognition, accountability and collaborative problem solving. This played a crucial role in the ongoing efforts toward peaceful coexistence.

6 | Discussion and Conclusion

The study was aimed at exploring how relationally-directed dialogue can contribute to conflict transformation between farmers and pastoralists in post-civil war context of Northern Uganda. Among others, the key findings from the study suggest that dialogic engagement created opportunities for participants to move beyond entrenched positions to that of conciliation. This helped to reframe their relationships in terms of interdependence, shared responsibility and mutual benefit.

The major contribution of the study is a demonstration of how relational accountability between research participants, including professional researchers' accountability to the relational field, can be enacted in research practice. Specifically, the study demonstrated how the dialogic process which stimulated co-relating, enabled participants to engage one another as co-constitutive actors within a shared relational field instead of approaching conflict as a problem to be solved through foreign imposed solutions. Through a mechanism of storytelling, compassionate listening and joint retrospection, both the farmers and pastoralists participants began to appreciate how their actions affected others. They also reflected on how alternative patterns of interaction could be cultivated. This outcome aligns with Indigenous ontological perspectives that focus on being-in-relation, and with transformative approaches that foreground participatory processes for societal change and transformation.

In addition to recognizing the fact that conflict dynamics are not squarely defined by opposition, the study highlighted how existing and potential interdependencies require continued sustenenance. While the tensions regarding land use, governance and compensation remined outstanding, participants were concurrently able to define areas of mutual benefits such as livestock improvement, shared security, improved diets which leads to good health for children, economic exchange and shared security concerns. Therefore, it can be said that the dialogic process facilitated a shift from confrontational framing to a more nuanced comprehension of coexistence where opportunities and challenges could be appreciated.

It is also important to note that the study revealed how power disproportionateness and governance challenges played an intricate role in complicating relational processes. As could be seen, the perceived disparities in accessing authority and justice systems watered down trust, and hence contributed to persistent grievances. But on a positive side, the findings further suggest that locally-grounded dialogic mechanisms such as regular meetings between community leaders and collaborative problem-solving forums is a complementary pathway for collectively addressing such issues. Although these mechanisms cannot replace structural interventions, they play a crucial role in fostering trust and accountability, a key ingredient for coexistence at the community level.

The role of dialogic engagement in reshaping intra-community dynamics was another key contribution that came out of the study. Specifically, the workshop created a space for the minority voices that were often negated, especially those of women, to be heard. Clearly, active participation and recognition of women's voices suggest that relational approaches to conflict transformation can transcend the boundary of intergroup relations to influence expanded patterns of inclusion and participation within communities.

Further, as can be seen, the study also engaged with broader institutional and policy contexts through dissemination of findings in local and national forums. While it is not possible to establish a direct causal relationship between the research and subsequent policy directives, we suggest that the governmental responses point to the potential for participatory research processes to inform wider decision-making. Clearly, this is a reiteration of the value of bridging local knowledge systems and formal governance structures. From a theoretical standpoint, the study contributes to enriching literature on transformative and Indigenous research paradigms by illustrating how TIP can be operationalized in empirical research especially in contexts grappling with conflicts. The idea of "methodizing" is also extended in this study as a practice of facilitating relational learning and co-evolution in such contexts. For our part, we perceived the research as performative because as professional researchers we acknowledged that the research process itself contributes to reframing social realities. The research process actively positioned us as facilitating the dialogic process and organizing a transformative-oriented analysis, with our intention to positively influence outcomes for reconciliation and community co-existence.

Despite the above possibilities, the study study also has various limitations. The first one is that the findings reported here are based on a relatively small, context-specific sample, which limits their transferability to other settings. Further, due to the lack of longitudinal evidence in the

study, it is not possible to assess the sustainability of the observed relational shifts. Therefore, there is need for future research to build on this work by incorporating longer-term follow-up and comparative analyses across different contexts struggling with related challenges.

In conclusion therefore, the study has demonstrated that relationally-directed dialogue can serve as both a methodological approach and a practical intervention in contexts of protracted conflict. By nurturing spaces for recognitions of interdependence, compassionate listening and collaborative problem solving, such communally-constructed approaches can lead to meaningful shifts in how communities construct differences and engage with each other. With the TIP framework, the comprehension of conflict transformation is seen not as the abolition of differences, but as the ongoing nurturing of relationships that enable the different actors in the community to coexist more equitably and respectfully.

Acknowledgements

We wish to express gratitude to the University of South Africa (Unisa) and Kabale University for financing a large part of this study. We also wish to thank the research assistants, namely, Jacob Oroma and Clifford Ocan for their vital supporting role, as well as the important contribution of Ambrose Toolit. Furthermore, we wish to note that this paper constitutes a reworking and extension of an article (published under the Creative Commons Act) with the journal *The Qualitative Report*, *30*(8), 4078-4105. We have kept some of the verbatim quotes of participants and part of our summary of their recommendations.

References

Adyanga, F. A. (2019). Ancient governance in Africa. In N. N. Wane (Ed.), *Gender, democracy and institutional development in Africa* (pp. 37-65). Palgrave Macmillan.

Adyanga, F. A., & Romm, N. R. A. (2023). *Indigenous views of relationality from Africa*. Video prepared for the 30th Anniversary of the Taos Institute. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mMiiA9q9YMI

Adyanga, F. A., Romm, N. R. A., & Toolit, A. D. (2025). Facilitation of focus groups towards conflict resolution among pastoralists and farmers in Northern Uganda: An Indigenous relational approach. *The Qualitative Report*, *30*(8), 4078-4105. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2025.7619

Brock-Utne, B. (2001). *Indigenous conflict resolution in Africa*. A draft presented to the weekend seminar on indigenous solutions to conflicts held at the University of Oslo, Institute for Educational Research, 23–24 of February 2001.

Chilisa, B. (2009). Indigenous African-centered ethics: Contesting and complementing dominant models. In D. M. Mertens & P. E. Ginsberg (Eds.), *The handbook of social research* (pp. 407-425). Sage.

Chilisa, B. (2020, 2nd ed). *Indigenous research methodologies*. Sage.

Chilisa, B., Major, T. E., & Khudu-Petersen, K. (2017). Community engagement with a postcolonial, African-based relational paradigm. *Qualitative Research*, *17*(3), 326-339. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794117696176

Cram, F., Chilisa, B., & Mertens, D. M. (2013). The journey begins. In D. M. Mertens, F. Cram, & B. Chilisa (Eds.), *Indigenous pathways into social research* (pp. 11–40). Left Coast Press.

Dube, L., Ndwandwe, S., & Ngulube, P. (2013). Rowing upstream: Contextualizing indigenous research processes and methodologies through the utilization of ethical principles. *Indilinga: African Journal of Indigenous Knowledge Systems*, *12*(1), 11–25. DOI:10.4314/INDILINGA.V12I1

Ing, D. (2013). Rethinking systems thinking: Learning and coevolving with the world. *Systems Research and Behavioral Science, 30*(5), 527–547. https://doi.org/10.1002/sres.2229

Ing, D. (2025). *Rethinking systems thinking for systems changes learning: Philosophizing, theorizing, and methodizing*. Proceedings of the 29th World Multi-Conference on Systemics, Cybernetics and Informatics (WMSCI 2025) DOI: 10.54808/WMSCI2025.01.412

Ing, D., & Metcalf, G. (2023). Reframing systems thinking for systems changes: Sciencing and philosophizing from pragmatism towards processes as rhythms. *Journal of the International Society for the Systems* Sciences | 67th Meeting of ISSS.

Kariuki, F. (2015), Conflict resolution by elders in Africa: Successes, challenges and opportunities (July 9, 2015). Retrieved at: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3646985

Kiiza, C. (2021, November 12). Museveni: Balaalo must leave Northern Uganda in 2 months. Chimp Reports. *Chimp Reports*, 12 April 2021. https://chimpreports.com/museveni-balaalo-must-leave-northern-uganda-in-2-months/

Kovach, M. (2009). *Indigenous methodologies: Characteristics, conversations, and contexts*. University of Toronto Press.

Maimela, G., Madima, T., Makhanikhe, J., & Netshandama, V. (2024). Reflections on implementing Indigenous research paradigm and participatory action research. *Bussecon Review of Social Sciences, 6*(2), 1–7. https://doi.org/10.36096/brss.v6i2.583

McKay, V. I. (2025). Praxis to policy: Embedding Transformative and Indigenous Paradigms in a National Literacy Campaign. *International Journal for Transformative Research*, *12*(1), 1-10. DOI: 10.2478/ijtr-2025-0001

Mertens, D. M. (2003). Mixed methods and the politics of human research: The transformative-emancipatory perspective. In A. Tashakkori & C. Teddie (Eds.), *Handbook of mixed methods in social and behavioral research* (pp. 135-164). Sage.

Mertens, D. M. (2017). Transformative research: Personal and societal. *International Journal for* Transformative Research, 4(1), 18–24. https://doi.org/10.1515/ijtr-2017-0001

Mertens, D. M. (2019). *Research and evaluation in education and psychology: Integrating diversity with quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods* (5th ed.). Sage.

Mertens, D. M. (2023). *Mixed methods research*. Bloomsbury.

Mertens, D. M. (2024). *Research and evaluation in education and psychology* (6th ed). Sage.

Ngara, R. (2017.) Multiple voices, multiple paths. In: P. Ngulube (Ed.*), Handbook of research on theoretical perspectives on Indigenous Knowledge Systems in developing countries* (pp. 332-358). IGI Global.

Omodan, B. I. (2024)**.** *Research paradigms and their methodological alignment in social sciences:* Routledge.

Opio, M. (2023). Over 80,000 cattle and their Balaalo owners face eviction from the north over non-registration. *The Kampala Report*, 26 November, 2023. https://www.thekampalareport.com/latest/2023112632970/over-80000-cattle-and-their-balaalo-owners-face-eviction-from-the-north-over-non-registration.html.

Rajagopalan, R. (2020). *Immersive systemic knowing: Advancing systems thinking beyond rational analysis.* Springer.

Ramose, M. B. (1999). *African philosophy through Ubuntu*. Mond Books.

Romm, N. R. A. (2015). Reviewing the transformative paradigm: A critical systemic and (Indigenous) lens. *Systemic Practice and Action Research, 28*(5), 411–427. https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11213-015-9344-5

Romm, N. R. A. (2018). *Responsible research practice: Revisiting transformative paradigm in social research*. Springer.

Romm, N. R. A. (2024). An Indigenous relational approach to systemic thinking and being: Focus on participatory onto-epistemology. *Systemic Practice and Action Research*, *37*(6), 811-842. https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11213-024-09672-4

Romm, N. R. A., & Adyanga, F.A. (2025). Facilitating participant dialogues in research. Presented as part of the Taos Institute Series entitled *Pulsating Practices: Constructionism in Action*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mMiiA9q9YMI

Yimer, B. L. (2022). Abegar Indigenous conflict resolution system: A community-based reconciliation. *Systemic Practice and Action Research*, *35*, 579-590. https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11213-021-09584-7