



RESEARCH ARTICLE

LAND CONFLICTS AND INSECURITY OF LAND TRANSACTIONS IN THE COMMUNE OF DÉDOUGOU (BURKINA FASO)

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 18th February, 2026
Received in revised form
24th March, 2026
Accepted 20th April, 2026
Published online 30th May, 2026

Keywords:

Land Conflicts, Land Grabbing, Land Law, Local Governance, Burkina Faso,

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Citation: Dr. Yacouba TENGUERI, Dr. Souleymane KARAMBIRI and Dr. Yamba SIRI. 2026. "Land conflicts and insecurity of land transactions in the commune of Dédougou (Burkina Faso)". *International Journal of Current Research*, 18, (05), 37279-37304.

ABSTRACT

Context: Land conflicts constitute one of the most persistent and destabilising issues in the Sahelian context. In Burkina Faso, the difficult articulation between customary law and modern law, combined with demographic pressure and population displacement caused by insecurity, generates recurring tensions over land. **Methodology:** Drawing upon a qualitative approach, the study seeks to understand the mechanisms through which these conflicts are constructed, sustained, and perpetuated. It is based on 27 semi-structured interviews conducted with customary chiefs, local populations, and individuals directly involved in land conflicts in the commune of Dédougou. **Results:** The findings reveal a coherent architecture of land grabbing founded upon strategies of psychological attrition, collusion amongst customary authorities, and profound failings of administrative and judicial institutions. These conflicts durably undermine households, disrupt life plans, and threaten social cohesion. The study argues for a substantial reform of the land governance framework, articulating customary legitimacy with formal legal security.

INTRODUCTION

The land question occupies a central place in the social, economic, and political dynamics of West African societies. In Burkina Faso, land constitutes not only the principal factor of agricultural production but also a support for social identity, collective memory, and communal legitimacy (Ouédraogo, 2002 ; Zongo, 2009 ; Tengueri, 2023). In rural areas, land resources are embedded within complex relational networks in which power, community belonging, and social recognition are intertwined. Over several decades, demographic growth, urbanisation, pressure on natural resources, and the effects of climate change have contributed to an intensification of land competition and a multiplication of local conflicts (Maïga, 2006 ; Zongo, 2009 ; Siri et al., 2025). To these factors is now added the massive displacement of populations driven by insecurity, which reinforces tensions around access to land between host and resident populations in receiving territories (Siri, 2023 ; Karambiri, Siri et Zongo, 2025). Most countries of sub-Saharan Africa have undertaken agrarian reforms in recent years in order to incorporate traditional land management into administrative procedures. These reforms seek to reconcile legal modernity with the legitimacy of customary practices in matters of land law (Chauveau, 2006 ; Korbéogo, 2006 ; Zongo, 2009 ; Baraka Akilimali, 2021). However, research on land issues in sub-Saharan Africa has widely demonstrated the effects of legal pluralism, the growing commodification of land, and the recomposition of local power structures on land

governance (Zongo, 2009 ; Hall et al., 2015, Rouamba-Ouédraogo et al, 2020). In Burkina Faso, several studies have analysed the effects of land reforms, the dynamics of securing land rights, and conflicts related to access to natural resources. These analyses must be situated within a context marked by demographic pressure, climate change, and population displacement (Siri, 2023 ; Karambiri et al., 2025 ; Siri et al., 2025). These studies have contributed to a better understanding of the tensions pervading rural spaces, the institutional transformations of land tenure, and the accompanying recompositions of power relations. Furthermore, the processes by which locally validated land transactions are subsequently called into question remain insufficiently studied in Burkina Faso. Attrition strategies and post-transactional contestation practices remain particularly under-documented. The central question of this research is : how do local actors produce land conflicts through strategies of social, symbolic, and institutional attrition? Drawing upon a qualitative approach, this study analyses the social and institutional mechanisms that fuel the dynamics of contesting land transactions, the attrition strategies deployed against purchasers, and the shortcomings of the current land governance arrangements in the commune of Dédougou. It aims to illuminate actors' logics, power relations, and institutional failings that contribute to the persistence of land conflicts and the durable weakening of local social cohesion.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework: To analyse land conflicts, our study draws on three complementary approaches: legal pluralism (Griffiths, 1986), the land arenas approach (Chauveau, 2000) and power relations and resources (Bourdieu, 1980). Legal pluralism has enabled an understanding of the coexistence of customary, administrative, and legal norms in land management. As for the land arenas approach (Chauveau, 2000), it served to apprehend conflicts as spaces of negotiation and confrontation between actors. Furthermore, the power and resources approach (Bourdieu, 1980) shed light on power relations and the symbolic resources mobilised by the various protagonists, notably customary authorities. The articulation of these approaches made it possible to analyse land conflicts as the product of interactions between competing norms, actors' strategies, and power relations.

METHODOLOGY

General approach and epistemological stance: This research is grounded in a qualitative and comprehensive approach, in the sense of Weber (1965), aiming to apprehend land conflicts in their social and subjective depth. It seeks to grasp actors' rationality, their logics of action, and their representations, rather than to produce statistically representative data. This epistemological stance affords access to the complexity of lived situations and to the plurality of viewpoints present (Blanchet & Gotman, 2007 ; Kaufmann, 2011).

The research rests on an inductive approach: analytical categories were progressively constructed from field data, through an iterative process of back-and-forth between empirical materials and the literature (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This approach, akin to grounded theory, makes it possible to avoid the imposition of pre-established interpretive frameworks upon realities that are often more complex and nuanced than general theoretical models suggest.

Study area and population: The study was conducted in the commune of Dédougou, situated in the Boucle du Mouhoun region of Burkina Faso. The field survey covers several rural localities, namely Passacongo, Tionkuy, Noakuy, and Dédougou. These localities are characterised by strong land pressure and by the multiplication of land transactions involving purchasers from outside the village communities. They are also witnessing a resurgence of land conflicts linked to the growing economic valorisation of agricultural land and to the recomposition of power relations around the control of land resources. The study population comprises four categories of actors, selected on account of their distinct and complementary roles in local land dynamics.

Customary chiefs constitute the first category. In the Burkinabè context, customary chiefs play a central role in land management and in the arbitration of land conflicts. They are the custodians of customary norms governing the allocation and use of land, and often represent the first instance of recourse in the event of a dispute (Ouédraogo, 2002). Their word is invested with strong symbolic authority, which may be mobilised both to protect the rights of some and to prejudice the interests of others. The inclusion of this category in the sample aimed to understand how these actors perceive and

manage land conflicts, and to what extent their practices contribute to the resolution or aggravation of disputes. The local population constitutes the second category. It encompasses inhabitants of the rural and peri-urban areas concerned by land dynamics, without necessarily being directly involved in a conflict at the time of the survey. These informants make it possible to situate conflicts within their social and historical context, to understand collective representations of land ownership, and to grasp the diffuse effects of disputes on community life (Chauveau, 2000). Persons involved in land conflicts represent the third category, principally real estate companies and private individuals. They constitute the core of the research. These individuals, directly engaged in an active or recent land dispute, afford privileged access to the concrete mechanisms of conflicts, the strategies of the various stakeholders, and the personal, familial, and social consequences of these situations. The testimonies gathered from this category constitute the principal material for analysis. Law enforcement officers constitute a fourth category solicited by the various actors to manage conflict-related issues arising from transactions. The distribution of respondents is set out in the table below.

Table 1. Distribution of Respondents

Categories of Actors	Number
Customary Chiefs	1
Persons Involved in Land Conflicts	13
Real Estate Company	2
Police	1
Local Population	10
Total	27

Source : Field Survey, February 2026

Data collection method: the semi-structured interview: Data collection was based on the semi-structured interview, a method suited to an in-depth understanding of complex social phenomena (Blanchet & Gotman, 2007) such as rural land conflicts. An interview guide was developed around several themes: the conditions of land acquisition, the triggering of conflicts, the actors involved, the strategies deployed, the recourses mobilised, and the consequences experienced. Interviews were conducted in French or in a local language according to the respondents' preference, with recourse to an interpreter when necessary. Each interview was audio-recorded, with the explicit consent of participants, and subsequently transcribed in full.

The data were subjected to thematic analysis (Bardin, 2013). Open coding was first used to identify recurring units of meaning. These units of meaning were subsequently grouped into analytical categories and then into central themes relating to strategies of land contestation, attrition mechanisms, the role of customary authorities, and institutional failings. In addition to the semi-structured interviews, direct observations were conducted on certain disputed spaces, notably contested plots, demarcation operations, and interactions between actors involved in land conflicts. These observations made it possible to contextualise the discourses gathered and to better grasp the effective practices of the various protagonists.

Purposive sampling: Sampling was carried out by purposive selection (Miles & Huberman, 2003). This technique consisted of selecting participants not according to criteria of statistical

representativeness, but on the basis of their relevance to the research objectives and their capacity to illuminate the phenomenon under study. The selection criteria retained included: direct or indirect involvement in a land conflict, the position occupied in the local land field (customary chief, owner, purchaser, witness), and the diversity of geographical situations and types of conflicts documented. This approach was complemented by a snowball sampling technique (Kaufmann, 2011). Sampling was discontinued when theoretical saturation was reached, that is to say when new interviews no longer yielded substantially new information (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In total, twenty-seven (27) interviews were conducted, distributed across the four (04) categories of actors, namely customary chiefs, the local population, and persons directly engaged in land conflicts.

RESULTS

The land acquisition process and its structural vulnerabilities: The data gathered reveal that land conflicts frequently have their origins in the very conditions of land acquisition. The transactions analysed present a recurring configuration: a purchaser external to the community, sometimes urban or peri-urban, negotiates a plot of land with sellers belonging to a village community. These transactions are generally concluded with the formal agreement of local representatives and are accompanied by signed documents. Yet they rapidly prove to be contested. The case of respondent 4, a teacher at a departmental secondary school, illustrates this vulnerability in an emblematic manner. In 2023, he acquired a six-hectare plot from family X, for a sum of six (06) million CFA francs, contracted in the form of a bank loan. The transaction was conducted in the presence of village elders, with agreed price, signed documents, and demarcation carried out for one hundred thousand CFA francs with the assistance of a technician. Less than two months after the purchase, the sellers reneged on the agreement, invoking the claim that part of the plot belonged to a third entity, Pasacongo. This challenge to property rights over part of the acquired land reveals a first level of vulnerability. Indeed, this transaction is characterised by the absence of a formal land title, which leaves property rights in an exploitable zone of indeterminacy.

A second case, involving an owner residing in Fada, presents a similar configuration. The purchaser had nonetheless taken care to have his acquisition validated by a bailiff, thereby engaging both available normative registers, the customary and the formal. Despite this step, a customary authority from Naokuy initiated a series of repeated summonses, invoking 'new developments' each time and calling into question the legitimacy of the transaction. This pattern of post-transaction contestation constitutes one of the structuring elements of the documented conflicts. The third case concerned a real estate company that had acquired a plot for subdivision purposes. However, following the transaction, the seller deemed the sum insufficient and resold the plot to another real estate company that was offering a more attractive price. The conflict was settled by the customary authorities, who ordered the repayment of the money to the first purchaser. This alternative dispute management favours the highest bidder.

Conflict actors and their attrition strategies: Analysis of the interviews reveals a relatively coherent actor architecture in the documented land conflicts. On the side of the contestants, customary chiefs or their representatives, influential members of village communities, and occasionally individuals presenting forged property titles are systematically identified. On the side of the victims, one finds principally 'external' purchasers, particularly persons originating from another locality, residing in town, or belonging to a social category perceived as economically better-off.

The attrition strategy constitutes the central mechanism of the documented conflicts. It rests on a series of combined methods. Repeated summonses exhaust the victim. The interviews reveal that the customary authorities of Noakuy regularly summon the purchaser, invoking 'new developments' each time, without ever concluding on the status of the acquired land. As respondent 4 describes: «Every time the chief of Noakuy summons me, it is to tell me there is a new development.» This permanent instability of the rules of the game psychologically weakens the victim and increases their burden in terms of travel and time. Extortion disguised as customary protocol constitutes a second method. Victims are regularly invited to perform 'sacrifices' or to offer gifts in order to 'pacify' the situation. Respondent 17 (a purchaser in the village of Noakuy) reports having paid an initial sum of one hundred thousand (100 000) CFA francs to the Noakuy authorities, then an additional seventy-five thousand CFA francs to the chief of Tionkuy, who was nonetheless a signatory to the initial purchase documents. These payments produce no result: «I gave something to Noakuy. When you give, they tell you afterwards that they saw nothing.»

Administrative manipulation further complicates the situation. Files are deliberately obfuscated, boundary markers are destroyed by the sellers themselves, and surveyors responsible for demarcation are intimidated or sometimes complicit. «They have so tangled the matter that I can no longer find my way through it», testifies respondent 10. The progressive reduction of the contested area (from ten to eight hectares in one case, from six to four hectares in the other) suggests a logic of fragmentation designed to progressively undermine the victims' rights. This emerges from the interviews with respondent 7 :

I had purchased 12 hectares from some Mossi relatives near the Souri toll gate. When I sought to initiate the administrative process to secure my plot, I learnt that the children were contesting the sale. They claimed that their relative had not consulted them. I did not wish to drag the matter through the courts, so we split the difference. I submitted the documents to the town hall, and they asked me to pay approximately one million CFA francs in taxes and other fees. I enlisted one of my former neighbours who was working in Dédougou to follow up the file. When he went to the land domain service at the town hall, it transpired that I was unable to pay. Indeed, the sketch of another owner overlapped with part of my plot. A new matter had thus arisen. I then tried to find out who this neighbour was, but it was impossible to obtain an answer. The administration merely informed me that part of my land was also being claimed by someone else, but the technical services recorded no name in their files. I am convinced that this is a fraudulent manoeuvre involving those officials to prevent me from occupying my land.

Physical threats complete the arsenal of the contestants. Individuals claim to be able to mobilise ‘villagers’ to expel the legitimate owner. The gendarmerie is sometimes summoned by the usurpers themselves in order to turn the State’s coercive apparatus against the victim. This emerges from the statements of respondent 4: «He called the gendarmerie, because he appeared to be the true owner.»

The role of customary chiefs in land conflicts: The interviews conducted with customary chiefs and the testimonies of victims paint a contrasting picture of these actors. On the one hand, customary chiefs present themselves as guarantors of the social order and natural arbiters of land disputes, custodians of an irreplaceable knowledge of local territories and symbolic legitimacy. On the other hand, several documented cases reveal their direct involvement in the dynamics of dispossession. In the analysed conflicts, customary chiefs appear in three distinct configurations. The first is that of the active contestant. The chief directly challenges a transaction he did not initiate or from which he did not benefit, demanding a form of retribution (in money or in land) to retrospectively endorse the sale. The second is that of the failing arbitrator, leaving complainants to be ‘passed around’ without ever reaching a decision. The third is that of the passive accomplice who benefits indirectly from the manoeuvres of other actors, through informal payments or the retrocession of land.

The statement of respondent 4 captures in striking fashion the perception that victims have of these actors: «Customary chief X seemed to be someone who was above the law.» This perceived impunity constitutes one of the most destabilising factors for persons in conflict, who find themselves confronted with authorities supposed to protect them and who turn against them instead.

Institutional failings and ineffective recourses: The interviews reveal, in a convergent manner, the limits of the recourses available to victims of land conflicts. Whether approaching customary chiefs, administrative services, or security forces, persons in conflict encounter walls of indifference, complacency, or corruption. The gendarmerie is mentioned in several interviews, but its role proves ambiguous. In one case, the victim contacted the gendarmerie to report threats on their plot. The response of the officers was limited to advising him to ‘come back later’, without any concrete intervention. In another case, it was the usurpers who contacted the gendarmerie to present themselves as the true owners. These situations illustrate the vulnerability of victims in the face of institutions whose mandate ought to be to protect them.

Administrative authorities appear ineffective. Several respondents report having undertaken lengthy journeys to meet officials who sent them from one office to another without providing any solution. One of them summarised: «It seemed as though they had agreed to give me the runaround until I was worn out.» This strategy of institutional exhaustion, which may be deliberate or simply the product of bureaucratic inertia, durably affects persons in conflict. Access to formal justice remains highly limited. The costs of judicial proceedings, the distance of courts, the mistrust towards a legal system perceived as alien to local realities, and the fear of reprisals

constitute so many barriers that dissuade victims from bringing their case before judicial bodies. In the absence of effective recourse, victims are compelled to negotiate with their aggressors or to relinquish their rights. *The human and social consequences of land conflicts:* The documented land conflicts have devastating effects on the lives of those who fall victim to them. These effects manifest at several levels: material, psychological, familial, and social. At the material level, the losses are considerable. The case of respondent 4 illustrates the extent of the damage. He borrowed six million CFA francs to purchase the plot, one hundred thousand CFA francs for demarcation, one hundred and seventy-five thousand CFA francs paid in extrajudicial ‘settlements’, and over six hundred thousand CFA francs invested in bricks and construction work, all for no result. The bank continues to demand repayment of the loan, without any plot being available to secure or valorise this investment. This case illustrates the spiral of impoverishment into which victims may be plunged.

The psychological consequences are equally severe. Respondents describe a state of chronic exhaustion, intense stress, a sense of injustice, and helplessness. One of them confided: «I am exhausted» and «I am dying from all of this.» Another attributed his illness as a direct consequence of the conflict. These psychological states affect the victims’ capacity to work, to make decisions, and to carry their plans to fruition. The repercussions on family structures are equally severe. In the case of respondent 4, the conflict led to the breakdown of both his conjugal unions, the return of his brothers to Mali due to lack of resources, and the disengagement of his parents, who had sold their livestock to contribute to the purchase of the plot. The isolation is total: «I now live alone in Bondokuy.» These effects illustrate how a land conflict can dismantle family solidarity networks, which constitute the principal safety net in contexts of significant precarity. At the social and community level, the documented conflicts create lasting fractures between social groups, fuel mistrust, and weaken systems of local cooperation. They also discourage investment in the areas concerned, contributing to the perpetuation of their economic marginalisation. Analysis of the cases studied reveals a recurring pattern in the production and perpetuation of land conflicts. The process generally begins with a locally recognised land transaction, before being called into question by actors mobilising arguments of customary or territorial legitimacy. The contestation opens a phase of prolonged negotiations marked by repeated summonses, successive challenges to concluded agreements, and various financial demands presented as conditions for settling the dispute. The totality of these practices progressively generates economic, administrative, and psychological exhaustion in purchasers. In several situations, the dynamic ends with the abandonment of the plot or a renegotiation of land rights under conditions unfavourable to the purchaser. Such a process may be interpreted as a strategy of land attrition.

DISCUSSION

Normative pluralism as a generator of land insecurity: In the commune of Dédougou, land dynamics crystallise acute stakes in which economic rationalities, customary legitimacies, and State regulations are intertwined (Zongo, 2009 ; Kaboré, 2013). Agricultural expansion, the growing commodification

of rural and peri-urban spaces, and the intrusion of outside purchasers exacerbate local tensions ((Maiga, 2006 ; Zongo, 2009 ; Kaboré, 2013 ; Siri et al., 2025). Whilst the Burkinabè State has initiated significant legislative reforms, notably the Agrarian and Land Reorganisation (RAF), Law No. 034-2009/AN on the rural land tenure regime, and local land charters, disputes remain recurrent and complex. These contentious cases reveal the limits of Burkinabè legal pluralism, characterised by a conflictual coexistence between customary norms and positive law. Whilst traditional authorities retain a preponderant role in local arbitration, administrative and judicial institutions struggle to guarantee effective and inclusive land security.

Political economy of land insecurity and land recovery strategies: The land conflicts studied go well beyond simple disagreements regarding property rights. They are inscribed within economic logics associated with the growing valorisation of land. The emergence of contestations after the conclusion of locally recognised transactions and following the commitment of investments by purchasers suggests the existence of strategies aimed at recovering plots that have become economically attractive. Such a configuration aligns with the analyses of Berry (1993) according to which land rights in Africa are subject to permanent negotiations and renegotiations under the effect of social relations and economic interests. Land thus appears less as a definitively transferred asset than as a resource whose control remains continually disputed.

The persistence of post-transactional contestations also refers to the work of Boone (2014), for whom land stakes constitute stakes of power. Control over land determines access to economic, social, and political resources, which encourages attempts by certain local groups to maintain or recapture strategic land positions. This is further inscribed in the broader transformations of African land tenure described by Hall, Scoones et Tsikata (2015), characterised by the growing commodification of land and an intensification of competition over land resources. The disputes analysed thus reflect the inscription of local power relations within a broader context of the economic valorisation of rural spaces (Zongo et Mathieu, 2000). The persistence of such practices does not result solely from the economic stakes associated with the control of land. It also refers to the limits of the institutional arrangements responsible for preventing, regulating, and resolving land conflicts (Korbéogo, 2006 ; Zongo, 2009). Examination of the recourses mobilised by actors thus affords an appreciation of the fragilities of local land governance.

Institutional failings and the fragility of land governance: The analyses highlight the limits of the institutional arrangements supposed to ensure the protection of land rights. Respondents describe lengthy procedures, inconclusive interventions by the relevant services, and difficulties in obtaining a definitive decision enabling the security of their rights (Rouamba/Ouédraogo et al., 2020). This situation refers to what Mamdani (1996) terms institutional duality, characterised by the coexistence of State administrative structures and customary authorities exercising regulatory functions simultaneously. In such a context, responsibilities often appear diffuse, creating spaces of uncertainty favourable to the prolongation of conflicts. The persistent ambiguity in the role of local authorities is also highlighted. Presented as bodies of mediation and regulation, some are perceived by

respondents as parties to the conflicts or as indirect beneficiaries of prolonged negotiations. This reading contributes to weakening confidence in local dispute resolution mechanisms. To this must be added the difficulties encountered in mobilising administrative and judicial recourses, which illustrate the limits of land governance highlighted by Herbst (2000) and Lavigne Delville (2010). The insufficient articulation between customary legitimacy and legal security favours the persistence of conflictual situations and reduces the effectiveness of land rights protection. The conflicts observed in Dédougou thus reflect less an absence of norms than a difficulty in ensuring their coherent recognition and application by all the institutions concerned.

CONCLUSION

This study has shed light on the concrete mechanisms through which land conflicts are constructed, sustained, and perpetuated in the commune of Dédougou. Initially regular transactions are rapidly contested, and sophisticated strategies of psychological attrition are deployed by indigenous actors to dispossess land purchasers in their locality. These conflicts reveal collusions with customary authorities who are supposed to be guarantors of social cohesion but whose conduct further indicates profound failings in institutional recourses. The consequences of these conflicts for individuals and families include economic impoverishment (bank loans), the dissolution of family ties (isolation), psychological suffering, and social marginalisation. In a context already weakened by security crises and population displacement, these dynamics contribute to aggravating the vulnerability of populations and undermining social cohesion. These findings call for a substantial reform of the land governance framework, articulating customary legitimacy with formal legal security. The challenge is to build land institutions that effectively protect the rights of all stakeholders, including those who are external to local land communities, and that offer accessible and effective recourses in the event of a dispute. This study contributes to an understanding of the social mechanisms of production of land insecurity by highlighting attrition strategies founded upon post-transactional contestation, repeated negotiations, and the progressive exhaustion of purchasers. The findings, drawn from a limited number of conflictual situations in the commune of Dédougou, are not intended for statistical generalisation. Comparative research in other contexts would make it possible to assess the scope of these mechanisms and their variations according to local configurations.

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