



Public Procurement and Corruption in South Sudan

Systemic Failures and Reform Imperatives: A Critical Examination

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Public Procurement and Corruption in South Sudan: Systemic Failures and Reform Imperatives: A Critical Examination with a focused emphasis on South Sudan within the field of African Studies. It is structured as a perspective piece that organises the problem, the strongest verified scholarship, and the main analytical implications in a concise publication-ready format.

The paper foregrounds the most relevant institutional, policy, or theoretical dynamics for the African context and closes with a practical conclusion linked to the core argument.

Keywords: *South Sudan Systemic, Sudan Systemic Failures, Public Procurement, South Sudan, Sudan Systemic, Systemic Failures*

Article Highlights	Core Argument
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Formal procurement rules are systematically subverted by informal patronage networks Weak oversight institutions lack independence and political backing for enforcement Procurement acts as an instrument for elite rent-seeking rather than public service Reform requires political commitment over externally prescribed technical solutions 	<p>Procurement corruption represents a systemic governance failure directly connected to state fragility and erosion of public trust, requiring reforms grounded in political realism rather than technical prescriptions.</p> <p><i>This perspective synthesizes contemporary evidence from 2021-2025 to propose a context-specific reform framework.</i></p>

Introduction

Public procurement, a critical function of state expenditure, represents a primary conduit for corruption in fragile states, with South Sudan offering a particularly acute case study ([Bank, 2021](#)) ([Bank, 2021](#)). The nation's procurement landscape is characterised by systemic failures that divert essential resources, undermine development, and perpetuate a cycle of instability and poverty ([Erlich et al., 2021](#)) ([Erlich et al., 2021](#)). As Fernández notes, corruption in Africa often thrives where institutional

checks are weakest, a description that fits South Sudan's post-independence context precisely([Fernández, 2023](#)).

This perspective piece critically examines how deeply embedded corrupt practices within procurement processes constitute a fundamental governance crisis, arguing that these are not mere administrative lapses but rather symptoms of a captured state apparatus. The objective is to delineate the specific mechanisms of procurement corruption in South Sudan, analyse the failure of existing anti-corruption frameworks, and articulate imperative reforms grounded in both accountability and political realism([Mattei et al., 2021](#)). The trajectory of the article will first establish the current, dysfunctional landscape, then proceed to a critical analysis of the underlying political economy, before considering the implications for state-building and proposing a coherent reform agenda.

Drawing on broader lessons from public sector auditing and expenditure management, as discussed by Mattei et al. , this examination seeks to move beyond generic diagnoses to offer a context-specific critique of a system in urgent need of overhaul.

Current Landscape

The current landscape of public procurement in South Sudan is one where formal rules are systematically subverted by informal networks of patronage and elite capture([Fernández, 2023](#))([Bank, 2021](#)). Procurement laws and regulations, often modelled on international best practice, exist on paper but are rendered ineffective by a pervasive culture of impunity and political interference([Mattei et al., 2021](#))([Erlich et al., 2021](#)). As observed in similar post-conflict environments, weak oversight institutions, such as the South Sudan Anti-Corruption Commission and the National Audit Chamber, lack the independence, capacity, and political backing to enforce compliance([Fernández, 2023](#)).

Consequently, procurement processes—from tender announcements to contract awards and execution—are frequently manipulated. This manifests in non-competitive single-source contracting, inflated costs, and the awarding of contracts to shell companies linked to politically exposed persons([Mattei et al., 2021](#)). The result is a staggering drain on public resources, which directly impacts the delivery of basic services.

The Sierra Leone Public Expenditure Review , while focused on another context, highlights a common pathology: when procurement is compromised, capital budgets for infrastructure and health are disproportionately affected, leading to ghost projects, substandard work, and incomplete facilities. In South Sudan, this dynamic is exacerbated by the country's reliance on oil revenues and donor funds, both of which are funnelled through a procurement system that acts less as a mechanism for public service and more as an instrument for elite rent-seeking, thereby entrenching the very inequalities that fuel conflict.

Analysis and Argumentation

A critical analysis reveals that the failures in South Sudan's procurement system are not accidental but are structurally embedded within the political settlement that ended the civil war([Bank, 2021](#)). The system functions as a key instrument for maintaining a fragile peace by redistributing economic rents to competing elites, thereby prioritising political stability over developmental efficiency([Erlich et al., 2021](#)). This argument contends that technocratic solutions focusing solely on legal and procedural

reforms—such as digitising tender portals or training procurement officers—are destined to fail because they ignore this fundamental political economy.

The systemic corruption is sustained by a deliberate weakening of oversight bodies. As Mattei et al. argue, effective public sector auditing requires independence and the power to sanction, conditions conspicuously absent in South Sudan where audit reports are routinely ignored and investigators face intimidation. Furthermore, the integration of military and business interests, where senior officials and their affiliates are the primary beneficiaries of state contracts, creates a powerful vested interest against meaningful reform.

Therefore, the core argument is that procurement corruption is a stabilising mechanism for the regime, making reform an intensely political challenge rather than a mere administrative one. Any anti-corruption initiative that does not account for this reality, and that fails to alter the cost-benefit calculus for the ruling coalition, will be co-opted or neutralised, as Fernández suggests has happened with numerous anti-corruption commissions across the continent.

Implications and Outlook

The implications of this entrenched procurement corruption are profound, extending beyond financial loss to undermine the very foundations of state legitimacy and South Sudan's long-term viability (Fernández, 2023). It perpetuates a vicious cycle where public distrust in government grows, tax compliance remains negligible, and citizens are deprived of essential infrastructure, healthcare, and education (Mattei et al., 2021). This environment fuels grievances and can become a catalyst for renewed conflict, as excluded groups vie for access to the same corrupt system.

The outlook, however, is not inevitably bleak. A realistic reform imperative must begin by acknowledging the political constraints and seeking incremental, yet strategic, interventions. One potential pathway is to leverage external dependencies, such as donor-funded projects and conditional budget support, to create 'islands of integrity' within specific high-priority sectors like health or road construction.

Here, independent third-party monitoring and guaranteed protection for whistle-blowers, concepts supported by broader auditing research, could be piloted. Simultaneously, building a coalition for change requires engaging with reform-oriented elements within the civil service and business community, while publicly linking procurement outcomes to service delivery to mobilise civic pressure. The experience from other countries, as noted in expenditure reviews, shows that sustained focus on transparency in contract execution and payment can yield improvements even in difficult settings.

Ultimately, the outlook depends on shifting the focus from criminalising individual acts of corruption to dismantling the systemic incentives that make procurement the lifeblood of a predatory political system.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this critical examination posits that corruption in South Sudan's public procurement is a systemic feature of its political order, not a malfunction. The answer to the research problem lies in recognising that technical fixes are insufficient without concurrent political engagement aimed at

altering the incentives for elite behaviour. The article's contribution is to frame the procurement crisis as a central pillar of South Sudan's governance dilemma, where short-term elite pacification is purchased at the cost of long-term state failure and societal ruin.

The most practical implication for policymakers, both domestic and international, is that reform efforts must be politically smart, targeting specific, manageable entry points where transparency can be enforced and accountability demonstrated, thereby building momentum for broader change. A critical next step would be to commission and publicly disseminate forensic audits of a few strategically selected, high-value procurement contracts, applying the analytical frameworks suggested by Mattei et al. , to concretely demonstrate the scale of leakage and mobilise evidence-based advocacy. Without such decisive action that moves beyond rhetoric, the systemic failures in public procurement will continue to be the primary obstacle to South Sudan's development and stability, condemning its citizens to perpetual cycles of poverty and conflict.

Contributions

This perspective piece makes a distinct contribution by synthesising contemporary evidence from 2021-2025 to argue that procurement corruption in South Sudan is a systemic governance failure, rather than merely a technical or administrative problem. It provides a critical, context-specific analysis that connects procurement malfeasance directly to the fragility of the state and the erosion of public trust.

Furthermore, the study proposes a coherent framework for reform that prioritises political commitment and institutional integrity over externally prescribed technical solutions, offering a necessary corrective to prevailing approaches in the literature and in practice.

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