



Public Service Reform in South Sudan

Capacity Building, Merit, and Political Interference: The Role of Civil Society

Abraham Kuol Nyuon (Ph.D)^{1,2,3}

¹ Associate Professor of Politics, Peace, and Security

² Principal, Graduate College, University of Juba

³ SUSI Scholar on U.S. Foreign Policy

Correspondence: nyuonabraham@gmail.com

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Author notes

Abraham Kuol Nyuon (Ph.D) is affiliated with Associate Professor of Politics, Peace, and Security and focuses on Business research in Africa.

ABSTRACT

This article examines Public Service Reform in South Sudan: Capacity Building, Merit, and Political Interference: The Role of Civil Society with a focused emphasis on South Sudan within the field of Business. It is structured as a commentary 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: *Public Service Reform, South Sudan Capacity, Sudan Capacity Building, Capacity Building Merit, Public Service, Service Reform*

Article Highlights

- Public service reform in South Sudan faces endemic political interference undermining meritocratic principles
- Historical liberation structures perpetuate loyalty-based appointments over competence in administration
- Civil society organizations can provide crucial external oversight and technical partnership
- Capacity building must address political dimensions beyond technical training programmes

Core Argument

This commentary proposes recasting civil society organizations as strategic partners in designing transparent, performance-based human resource systems, moving beyond watchdog roles to active governance interventions.

This analysis foregrounds institutional dynamics specific to post-conflict African states.

Introduction

The establishment of a professional, merit-based public service stands as a foundational pillar for state legitimacy and effective governance, yet in South Sudan, this objective remains profoundly elusive(Axster et al., 2021)(Axster et al., 2021). Decades of conflict and the legacy of a liberation

movement's structures have created a public administration system where capacity deficits, political interference, and the erosion of meritocratic principles are endemic (Bank, 2021) (Bank, 2021). This commentary argues that meaningful public service reform in South Sudan is inextricably linked to the strategic mobilisation and inclusion of civil society, which can act as a crucial counterweight to entrenched patronage networks (Borras & Edelman, 2021).

The core problem is not merely a technical shortage of skills but a deeply political one, where the state apparatus often functions as an instrument for elite accommodation rather than public goods delivery. As D'Agoût & Dut elucidate in their analysis of the SPLA insurgency, the 'improvisational' and fragmented command structures that characterised the liberation struggle have, in many ways, been transposed onto the post-independence state, prioritising loyalty over competence (D'Agoût & Dut, 2025). This historical context is further complicated by what Axster et al. term the 'carceral archipelago' of colonial and neoliberal security logics, which have shaped institutional forms across the region, often divorcing administration from public accountability.

The consequence, as seen in comparative contexts like Sierra Leone analysed by Bank, is a public expenditure framework vulnerable to capture and inefficiency, undermining development. This article's objective is to delineate the specific nexus between capacity building, the principle of merit, and political interference in South Sudan's public service, and to articulate a coherent role for civil society in disrupting this debilitating triad. We contend that civil society organisations (CSOs), if strategically engaged, can provide the external oversight, technical partnership, and grassroots advocacy necessary to foster a more transparent and performance-oriented bureaucracy.

The trajectory of the argument will first establish the historical and structural roots of the current dysfunction, then analyse the potential pathways for civil society intervention, drawing lessons from transnational agrarian movements noted by Borras & Edelman regarding mobilisation for institutional change, before concluding with pragmatic implications for policymakers and practitioners.

Analysis and Discussion

The analysis of public service reform in South Sudan must begin by acknowledging that the challenges of capacity building and meritocracy cannot be addressed through training programmes and policy manuals alone; they are fundamentally political problems (Borras & Edelman, 2021). The historical inertia from the liberation period, where military and political loyalty was the primary currency, continues to suffuse administrative appointments (D'Agoût & Dut, 2025). D'Agoût & Dut demonstrate how command fragmentation and political discord within the SPLA were managed through a system of personalised allegiances, a model that has perpetuated a culture where public offices are often viewed as spoils of war or political settlement rather than posts requiring specific expertise.

This directly undermines capacity building initiatives, as investments in training are rendered futile if the institutional incentive structure rewards connections over competence. Consequently, political interference becomes systemic, not anomalous, creating a public service that is frequently unresponsive to citizen needs and inefficient in resource utilisation. Here, the role of civil society must evolve beyond traditional service delivery or advocacy into a more nuanced function of institutional accompaniment and accountability.

Drawing parallels from the scrutiny of public financial management, Bank's work on Sierra Leone highlights how transparent expenditure tracking is vital for accountability. South Sudanese CSOs can emulate this by developing the expertise to monitor budget execution and service delivery outcomes, thus providing an evidence-based counter-narrative to patronage-driven governance. Their independence allows them to champion meritocratic principles by publicly auditing recruitment processes and performance metrics, creating societal pressure for reform.

Furthermore, civil society can act as a crucial bridge in capacity building, not as a substitute for the state but as a partner. CSOs often possess grassroots legitimacy and contextual knowledge that external consultants lack. They can co-design and deliver training that is relevant and can advocate for the implementation of learned skills within the bureaucracy.

Importantly, as suggested by the dynamics observed in transnational agrarian movements by Borras & Edelman, successful mobilisation for change often requires building broad-based alliances that can alter the political calculus. South Sudanese civil society must therefore build coalitions across sectors—including with reform-minded elements within the public service itself—to advocate for a new governance compact. This coalition could work to insulate technical appointments from political patronage, advocate for a transparent, competitive salary structure to reduce corruption, and promote a public narrative that values performance and integrity.

The discussion thus centres on civil society not merely as a watchdog but as an essential actor in recalibrating the political economy of the public service, making the costs of interference visible and the benefits of meritocracy tangible to both elites and citizens.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the protracted crisis of public service reform in South Sudan—caught between the imperatives of capacity building, the ideal of merit, and the reality of political interference—demands a reconceptualisation of the actors involved in the reform process ([Axster et al., 2021](#)). This commentary has argued that a sustainable solution is unattainable without the deliberate and strategic integration of a robust civil society ([Bank, 2021](#)). The historical patterns of fragmentation and personalised governance, as analysed by D'Agoût & Dut, have created a resistant status quo that internal bureaucratic initiatives alone cannot overcome.

The contribution here is to explicitly position civil society as a necessary external agent of change, capable of performing functions of oversight, partnership, and advocacy that are currently missing or suppressed. The most practical implication for South Sudan is that donors and the national government must move beyond viewing CSOs solely as implementing subcontractors and instead invest in their long-term institutional capacity to analyse, monitor, and campaign on issues of governance and public administration. This requires funding for core functions, protection of civic space, and their formal inclusion in reform design bodies.

As evidenced in the examination of public expenditure by Bank, transparency is a powerful disinfectant, and civil society is best placed to wield it. The next logical step, therefore, is the piloting of multi-stakeholder public service reform compacts in specific sectors, such as health or revenue authority, where civil society, reform-minded government officials, and independent experts collaboratively set transparent recruitment and performance benchmarks, monitor outcomes, and

publicly report findings. This model, inspired by the coalition-building strategies seen in transnational movements discussed by Borras & Edelman , would create tangible proof-of-concept, demonstrating that a merit-based system delivers better results for both citizens and the state.

Ultimately, building a competent and trusted public service in South Sudan is a political endeavour as much as a technical one, and civil society's role is to help win that political battle by making the case for meritocracy irresistible.

Contributions

This commentary makes a distinct contribution by analysing public service reform through a business-oriented lens, focusing on institutional capacity as a critical asset for national development. It provides a contemporary, evidence-based critique of the persistent tension between meritocratic principles and political interference from 2021 to 2026.

Furthermore, it proposes a novel framework for civil society organisations, recasting them not merely as watchdogs but as strategic partners in designing and auditing transparent, performance-based human resource systems. This reframing offers practical, governance-focused interventions aimed at building a more effective and accountable civil service.

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