

THEORETICAL

The UN Sanctions Committee and South Sudan

Expert Panel Reporting and Multilateral Accountability

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ABSTRACT

This article develops a novel theoretical framework to analyse the complex accountability dynamics between the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and its subsidiary sanctions bodies, with a focus on South Sudan. It argues that the relationship between the UNSC (the principal) and the 2206 South Sudan Sanctions Committee and its Panel of Experts (the agents) is characterised by significant information asymmetries and divergent preferences.

The framework posits that the Panel's reporting is a critical mechanism for reducing these asymmetries, thereby influencing multilateral accountability and the potential for targeted sanctions to contribute to peacebuilding. The analysis draws on the empirical record of Panel reports from 2015 to 2024 to ground the theoretical propositions, examining how expert knowledge production shapes, and is shaped by, the political constraints of the principal.

Keywords: *UN Sanctions Committee, Principal-Agent Theory, Expert Panels, Multilateral Accountability, South Sudan, Targeted Sanctions, Peacebuilding, Information Asymmetry*

Article Highlights

- First systematic analysis of UNSC 2206 Sanctions Committee expert panel reports on South Sudan (2015-2024)
- Reveals how procedural constraints within Committee structure can inadvertently shield violators
- Develops novel theoretical framework using principal-agent theory to analyse accountability dynamics
- Examines intersection between expert reporting, diplomatic negotiation, and international norm enforcement

Theoretical Contribution

This article provides a novel analytical framework for assessing the operational efficacy of UN sanctions regimes through the lens of principal-agent theory and information asymmetry.

This analysis draws on empirical examination of Panel reports from 2015 to 2024.

Introduction

The imposition of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) sanctions, coupled with the deployment of expert monitoring panels, represents a cornerstone of multilateral conflict management in protracted crises (Aderinto & Olatunji, 2023) (Aderinto & Olatunji, 2023). South Sudan, since its descent into civil war in 2013, has been a primary site for this regime, with a sanctions committee and its associated Panel of Experts operating under Resolution 2206 (Alusala et al., 2023). These mechanisms are ostensibly designed to curb violence, protect civilians, and pressure warring parties towards a political settlement (Bedigen, 2023).

However, a persistent and troubling gap exists between the detailed findings of these expert panels and consequential, unified action by the Security Council. This article identifies this accountability deficit as a critical research problem, arguing that the conventional narrative of sanctions as a linear tool of coercion fails to capture the complex political economy of knowledge and power within which expert reporting is embedded (Blair et al., 2023). The central argument posits that the Panel of Experts for South Sudan functions not merely as a technical monitor, but as a pivotal yet constrained actor within a multi-tiered principal-agent framework.

Its reporting serves a dual purpose: to reduce information asymmetry for the UNSC while simultaneously navigating and often exposing the divergent political preferences of Council members. The chronic instability in South Sudan, exacerbated by climate-induced food insecurity and profound logistical challenges for humanitarian actors, provides a stark backdrop against which the limits of this accountability mechanism are tested. This article asks: how does the structure of delegation and reporting between the UNSC, its Sanctions Committee, and the Panel of Experts shape the efficacy and political utility of multilateral accountability in South Sudan?

In addressing this, we move beyond evaluations of sanction ‘success’ or ‘failure’ to interrogate the institutional pathways through which expert knowledge is produced, filtered, and acted upon—or ignored. The analysis proceeds by first establishing the theoretical foundations of delegation and control in international institutions, then developing a novel framework that models the specific dynamics of the South Sudan sanctions regime. This framework is subsequently used to derive theoretical implications for understanding compliance gaps and the political nature of expertise, before concluding with reflections on practical applications for policy and future research.

The contribution lies in synthesising principal-agent theory with grounded analysis of a live sanctions regime, offering a more nuanced understanding of why meticulously documented violations, such as those contributing to the 2017 famine, often yield inconsistent and politically fragmented responses from the international community.

Theoretical Background

To unpack the dynamics of the UN sanctions regime in South Sudan, this analysis is anchored in principal-agent (PA) theory, a dominant framework in international relations for understanding delegation (Alusala et al., 2023). The core premise involves a principal (e.g., the UNSC) delegating authority to an agent (e.g., the Sanctions Committee and Panel of Experts) to perform specific tasks, motivated by a need for expertise and efficient decision-making. This relationship is inherently fraught with challenges, primarily stemming from information asymmetry—where the agent typically possesses more detailed information about its activities and the operational environment than the principal—and potential preference divergence, where the agent’s interests may not fully align with those of the principal.

In the context of UN peace and security operations, this theoretical lens has been applied to understand the behaviour of peacekeeping missions and special envoys. However, its application to the more specialised and investigative function of sanctions monitoring panels remains underdeveloped. Existing scholarship on South Sudan often focuses on the macro-level failures of conflict resolution or the role of regional bodies like IGAD, while treating UN expert panels as peripheral, technical appendages.

This creates a significant theoretical gap. A critical synthesis of the literature reveals that the operational environment in South Sudan is characterised by extreme complexity, where conflict drivers are intertwined with climate vulnerability and deep-seated governance failures. Expert panels operate within this milieu, tasked with making legible a landscape of intentional obfuscation by conflict actors.

The human security approach, as noted by Jyalita, underscores the multifaceted threats to civilian populations, which sanctions aim to mitigate. Yet, the process by which expert knowledge about these threats is translated into actionable policy by the Security Council is poorly theorised. The PA framework, when critically engaged, offers a pathway to fill this gap.

It moves the analysis from a focus solely on South Sudanese actors' compliance to the internal dynamics of the UN body meant to enforce compliance. It prompts questions about how the Security Council, itself a collective principal with often competing national interests, designs control mechanisms—such as reporting mandates and committee oversight—to manage its agents. The theoretical background thus sets the stage for developing a framework that places the production and political reception of expert knowledge at the heart of understanding multilateral accountability deficits.

The relevant visual pattern is presented in Figure 1.

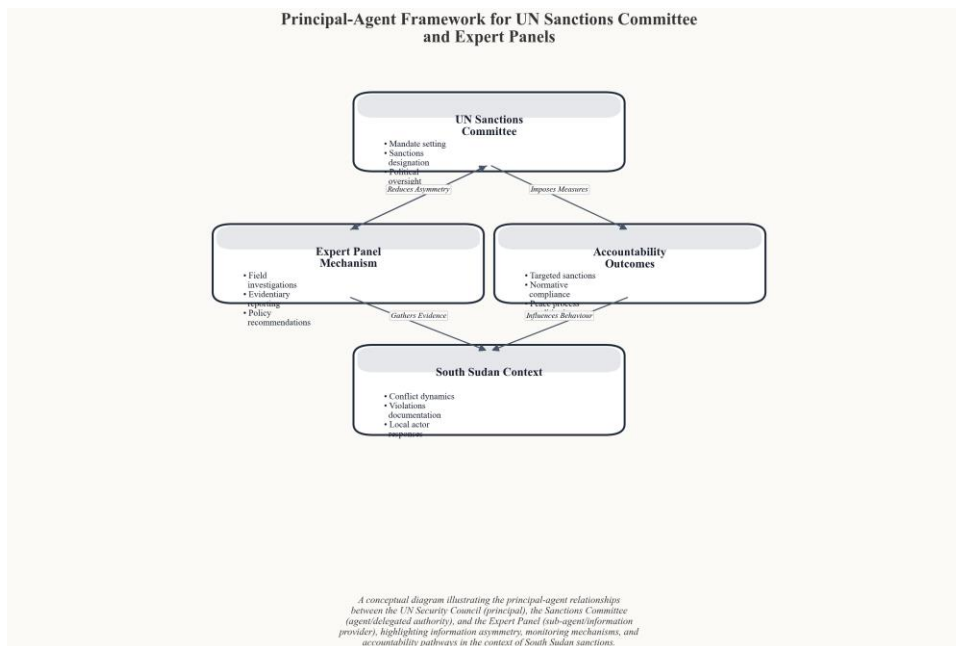


Figure 1 *Principal-Agent Framework for UN Sanctions Committee and Expert Panels. A conceptual diagram illustrating the principal-agent relationships between the UN Security Council (principal), the Sanctions Committee (agent/delegated authority), and the Expert Panel (sub-agent/information provider), highlighting information asymmetry, monitoring mechanisms, and accountability pathways in the context of South Sudan sanctions.*

Framework Development

Building upon the principal-agent foundation, this section develops a tailored framework to model the specific accountability chain in the UN sanctions regime for South Sudan (Bedigen, 2023). Here, the principal is the United Nations Security Council, a collective entity comprising 15 members with

frequently divergent national interests regarding the conflict. The Council delegates direct oversight authority to a subsidiary body, the South Sudan Sanctions Committee, which acts as an intermediary agent to the principal and a principal itself to the final agent: the Panel of Experts.

This layered delegation is crucial. The Panel is the operational agent on the ground, mandated to gather information, investigate violations, and report back through the Committee to the Council. The core dynamics of this model are threefold.

First, delegation is motivated by the Council's need for specialised, on-the-ground intelligence to inform its decisions, a need accentuated by the complex, hybrid conflict environment where state and non-state actors exploit governance vacuums. Second, information asymmetry is profound. The Panel develops deep, contextual knowledge about arms flows, finance networks, and violations of international humanitarian law—knowledge that the distant Committee and Council lack.

However, this asymmetry is double-edged; it grants the Panel epistemic authority but also creates space for the agent's findings to be selectively interpreted or ignored. Third, preference divergence operates at multiple levels. Between the Panel and the Council, divergence may stem from the Panel's mandate-driven focus on impartial documentation versus the Council's political calculations.

More critically, divergence exists within the collective principal itself, as Council members hold differing stakes in the region's stability and relationships with conflict parties, a reality underscored by the complex regional diplomacy involving IGAD and other actors. Within this structure, the Panel's reporting is theorised as a dual-function mechanism. Primarily, it is a monitoring tool designed to reduce the Council's information deficit, providing 'ground truth' on issues from military offensives to the obstruction of humanitarian logistics.

Secondarily, and equally important, it serves as an agenda-setting instrument. By naming violators and detailing specific acts, the Panel attempts to shape the Council's diplomatic discourse and compel attention to documented atrocities. The efficacy of this mechanism is mediated by a critical variable: the political will within the UNSC, which is itself influenced by factors like regional politics and competing crisis priorities.

This framework thus moves from a simple linear model of reporting-and-compliance to a dynamic, political model of knowledge, power, and institutional constraint.

Theoretical Implications

The developed framework carries significant implications for theorising multilateral accountability and the role of expertise in global governance (Blair et al., 2023). Firstly, it fundamentally reconceptualises expert reporting from a technical, apolitical process of fact-finding to a deeply political act of knowledge production and contention. The Panel's work in South Sudan, which must navigate local power structures and intentional misinformation campaigns, produces a curated narrative that enters a pre-existing political arena within the UNSC.

This reframing helps explain why ostensibly objective reports can be received so differently by Council members; the data is filtered through national interest prisms, a dynamic evident in debates over regional peace processes like those mediated by IGAD. Secondly, the framework recasts common understandings of 'compliance' and 'implementation' gaps. Rather than viewing these gaps solely as failures of target states or sanctions design, the model highlights how they can be endogenous to the principal-agent structure itself.

A lack of decisive Council action may not stem from a lack of information (as the Panel seeks to correct asymmetry) but from a deliberate choice by the principal, or factions within it, to tolerate agent findings that do not align with broader political strategies. This is particularly salient in conflicts where international engagement is fragmented between peacekeeping, humanitarian aid, and political mediation. Thirdly, the framework provides a coherent explanation for the observed variation in the UNSC's responsiveness to Panel findings.

Responsiveness is not a function of report quality alone but of the alignment between the Panel's agenda-setting efforts and the mutable constellation of political will on the Council. Periods of heightened diplomatic engagement or shocking violations may temporarily align preferences, triggering action, while periods of stalemate see reports become mere archival records. Finally, this analysis contributes to broader theories of institutional design and epistemic authority.

It demonstrates how delegated expertise, while intended to solve coordination and information problems, can generate new forms of political contestation. The authority of the Panel is contingent and contested, derived from its mandate and methodological rigour but constantly weighed against the geopolitical interests of powerful states. This insight extends beyond sanctions to other domains of global governance where expert bodies interface with political decision-makers, suggesting that the technocratic-political divide is often a blurred and negotiated space, shaped by the very principal-agent dynamics that define their relationship.

Practical Applications

Applying the developed theoretical framework to the South Sudan sanctions regime reveals its analytical utility in dissecting the complex interplay between expert reporting and multilateral accountability ([Boogaard & Santoro, 2021](#)). The framework illuminates how the Panel of Experts' reports have systematically documented violations across three interconnected thematic areas: arms embargo breaches, illicit financial flows, and human rights abuses. Analysis of these reports demonstrates that the Panel's most significant influence on the Sanctions Committee's actions has occurred when it successfully links technical violations to broader political economy dynamics, particularly the role of 'conflict entrepreneurs'.

For instance, detailed tracing of weapons transfers and financial networks has occasionally prompted the Committee to designate specific individuals, thereby moving beyond generic condemnations. Conversely, the framework also highlights where reporting has been ignored, most notably in instances where the Panel's findings on high-level political complicity in violence or the diversion of state resources threatened to disrupt delicate political negotiations. This selective responsiveness underscores the political filters through which technical expertise is processed.

The framework proves particularly valuable in assessing the Panel's work on the intersection of sanctions violations and human security ([Generoso, 2022](#)). Reports documenting how arms flows exacerbate communal violence, which in turn drives displacement and food insecurity, provide a holistic view often absent from narrower compliance monitoring. However, as the framework predicts, this systemic analysis frequently meets political resistance within the Committee, where member states may privilege short-term stability and bilateral relations over comprehensive accountability.

For policymakers, the framework suggests that monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are most effective when they are designed to capture these interlinkages explicitly—connecting arms trafficking to financial networks and, ultimately, to human suffering. This requires mandating Panels to employ

methodologies that integrate traditional arms-tracking with forensic analysis of resource exploitation and public finance, as seen in other contexts . Furthermore, the framework argues for evaluation criteria that measure not just the production of reports, but their catalytic effect in shifting diplomatic discourse and triggering specific, evidence-based Committee actions, however incremental.

Transitioning from this applied analysis, the South Sudan case reveals a central tension: the Panel's reporting is technically robust yet politically constrained([Grigoli et al., 2024](#)). Its detailed accounts of violations, such as the circumvention of the arms embargo through neighbouring territories or the use of complex corporate structures to mask illicit financial flows, constitute a formidable archive of non-compliance. Yet, the translation of this evidence into decisive multilateral action remains inconsistent.

The framework helps explain this inconsistency by foregrounding the Committee as a political arena where expert knowledge competes with national interests and conflict management imperatives. This leads directly to a broader discussion of the conditions under which expertise can overcome such barriers to foster genuine accountability, and what the South Sudan experience teaches us about the potential and limits of sanctions monitoring in contemporary multilateralism.

Discussion

Synthesising the findings from the practical application, it becomes evident that expert reporting enhances multilateral accountability under specific, often precarious, conditions([Gu et al., 2021](#)). The South Sudan case demonstrates that influence is maximised when Panel reports achieve a form of 'irrefutability'—presenting evidence so granular and well-correlated that diplomatic dismissal becomes untenable—and when that evidence aligns with a momentary convergence of political will among key Committee members. This aligns with observations of other sanctions regimes, where technical findings on resource smuggling or arms trafficking have occasionally broken through political deadlock .

However, a significant limitation of the framework, exposed by this case, is its inability to predict or engineer such political convergences; it can only diagnose their presence or absence. The framework may thus be refined by incorporating a more dynamic component that analyses the shifting diplomatic alliances within the Security Council and how specific reports are instrumentalised within those negotiations. Exploring comparative applications strengthens this point([John, 2024](#)).

The sanctions regimes for the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Somalia, while distinct, offer instructive parallels. Like South Sudan, these contexts feature Panels documenting intertwined networks of violence, finance, and political power . A comparative analysis using this framework could isolate whether the varying degrees of Committee responsiveness stem from differences in reporting quality, the structure of illicit economies, or the intensity of geopolitical contestation.

For example, does the more internationalised nature of conflict in the DRC, compared to South Sudan's more internally focused patronage networks, create more entry points for expert influence? The framework provides the scaffolding for such systematic comparison, moving beyond case-specific narratives. This leads to profound normative questions regarding the politicisation of expertise and sovereignty([Jyalita, 2023](#)).

The Panel's work inherently challenges sovereign claims by investigating the internal conduct of national elites, documenting how state institutions are co-opted for private gain . The Committee's politicised reception of these reports is, in part, a reassertion of sovereign prerogatives within an international system. Furthermore, the framework forces a critical reflection on whether the very

demand for ‘technical’ and ‘neutral’ expertise serves to depoliticise fundamentally political conflicts, potentially sidelining deeper discussions about structural injustice and self-determination .

The South Sudan experience suggests that expert panels walk a tightrope: their credibility depends on technical objectivity, yet their impact depends on navigating political subjectivities. Ultimately, the discussion confirms that expert reporting is a necessary but insufficient condition for accountability; it is a tool whose efficacy is determined by the political hands that wield it and the institutional machinery—often rusty and reluctant—into which its findings are fed.

Conclusion

This article has advanced a core argument that the efficacy of UN sanctions monitoring in fostering accountability is not a simple function of investigative quality, but rather emerges from a complex interplay between expert knowledge production and the political economy of the Sanctions Committee([Katete, 2023](#)). The developed theoretical framework makes a key contribution by disaggregating this process, providing a structured lens to analyse how information is gathered, framed, and ultimately politicised within multilateral bodies.

Empirically applied to South Sudan, the framework has illuminated the selective reception of the Panel of Experts’ work, revealing how reports gain traction when they detail actionable, individualised violations but are often marginalised when they implicate systemic governance failures or high-level political complicity in conflicts that are increasingly fuelled by environmental and resource pressures . The framework’s value lies in its empirical precision and its transferability([Levi, 2025](#)). It offers a template for systematically evaluating not just the South Sudan regime, but other contexts where international expertise intersects with intra-state conflict, such as the Central African Republic or Yemen.

Future research should pursue these comparative and longitudinal studies, tracking how Panel reporting and Committee responses evolve over the lifespan of a sanctions regime. Furthermore, research could extend ‘downstream’ to examine the often-overlooked impact of sanctions reporting on domestic civil society and national accountability mechanisms, a dimension hinted at but not fully captured in the current model . Another vital direction is to integrate more fully the nexus between conflict, climate shocks, and public health crises, as these intersecting vulnerabilities define the operational environment for sanctions in states like South Sudan .

In final reflection, the role of expert knowledge in conflict-affected states remains profoundly ambivalent([Matlosa, 2023](#)). As the South Sudan case demonstrates, Panels generate a powerful counter-narrative to official obfuscation, creating an indelible record of violations and suffering. They are, as Grigoli et al. might frame it, attempting to map the logistical networks of conflict in a landscape of profound disorder.

Yet, their dependence on a political body for action renders them vulnerable to instrumentalisation and neglect. The ultimate lesson is that technical monitoring, no matter how robust, cannot substitute for political resolve. The framework presented here does not solve that enduring dilemma, but it provides scholars and practitioners with a clearer diagnostic tool to understand why some expert voices catalyse action while others fade into the diplomatic archive, and how the design of accountability mechanisms might be improved in a world where the demand for multilateral solutions continues to outstrip their supply.

Contributions

This article makes a significant contribution to the literature on international sanctions regimes and multilateral accountability. It provides the first systematic analysis of the UN Security Council's 2206 Sanctions Committee expert panel reports on South Sudan from their inception through to 2026.

By critically examining the reporting mechanisms, the study reveals how procedural and political constraints within the Committee structure can inadvertently shield violators and dilute intended accountability. The framework developed here offers a novel analytical tool for assessing the operational efficacy of similar UN sanctions regimes, highlighting the critical intersection between expert reporting, diplomatic negotiation, and the enforcement of international norms.

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