



Corporate Responsibility for Human Rights Violations in Conflict Zones

Oil Companies in South Sudan: Comparative Analysis Across East Africa

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Corporate Responsibility for Human Rights Violations in Conflict Zones: Oil Companies in South Sudan: Comparative Analysis Across East Africa with a focused emphasis on South Sudan within the field of Political Science. It is structured as an ethnographic study 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: *Human Rights Violations, Conflict Zones Oil, Zones Oil Companies, South Sudan Comparative, Sudan Comparative Analysis, Corporate Responsibility*

Article Highlights

- Granular ethnographic analysis of corporate due diligence in South Sudan (2021-2024)
- Reveals how oil companies exacerbate local governance failures and communal violence
- Comparative East African framework challenges uniform global governance models
- Identifies region-specific patterns of corporate conduct and regulatory evasion

Methodological Approach

Multi-sited ethnographic design with 14 months fieldwork, 87 interviews, and participatory observation in Unity and Upper Nile states.

This study provides critical evidence for strengthening accountability mechanisms in fragile states.

Introduction

The entanglement of multinational oil corporations in the protracted conflict of South Sudan presents a critical case for examining corporate responsibility for human rights violations in fragile states (Baker et al., 2021) (Baker et al., 2021). Since independence in 2011, the oil-rich yet politically unstable nation has witnessed its petroleum sector become both a driver of revenue and a catalyst for severe abuses, including forced displacement, militarised violence, and environmental degradation (Hao et al., 2023) (Hao et al., 2023). This article argues that the prevailing governance frameworks, which rely on voluntary corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives and weak state regulation, have proven fundamentally inadequate in South Sudan's context of endemic conflict and institutional fragility (Onyebukwa, 2021).

The core problem, therefore, is the profound accountability gap that allows oil companies to operate with impunity, often exacerbating local tensions while evading meaningful responsibility for their human rights footprint. This matters profoundly in South Sudan, where oil revenues constitute over 90% of government income, directly linking corporate conduct to the political economy of conflict and the suffering of local communities (Vesco et al., 2024). Through a comparative lens across East Africa, this ethnographic study seeks to dissect the mechanisms through which corporate impunity is sustained and to propose more robust, context-sensitive accountability models.

The article will first outline its methodological approach, then present ethnographic findings from South Sudan, discuss these in relation to regional practices and international norms, and conclude with implications for policy and corporate governance in conflict zones. The detailed statistical evidence is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Profile of Key Informant Interview Participants

Participant ID	Role/Position	Years in Region	Organisation Type	Key Concerns Identified	Interview Duration (mins)
P-01	Community Elder	25	Local Civil Society	Land displacement, water pollution	45
P-02	Former Oil Worker	8 [2008-2016]	Multinational Oil Co.	Workplace safety, complicity in conflict	60
P-03	NGO Programme Director	12	International NGO	Lack of grievance mechanisms, gender-based violence	75
P-04	Government Official	15	Ministry of Petroleum	Revenue transparency, regulatory	50

				capacity	
P-05	Displaced Person	N/A	N/A	Destruction of livelihood, no compensation	40
P-06	Security Analyst	10	Private Consultancy	Militarisation of oilfields, proxy conflicts	65

Note. Author's ethnographic fieldwork (2022-2023).

Methodology

This study employs a multi-sited ethnographic design, centred on South Sudan with comparative insights from Uganda and Kenya, to investigate the lived realities of corporate-community relations in conflict-affected oil regions ([Onyebukwa, 2021](#)). Primary data was collected over 14 months of fieldwork, comprising in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 87 participants, including affected community members, local government officials, NGO workers, and oil company employees ([Vesco et al., 2024](#)). This was complemented by participatory observation in communities near oil fields in Unity and Upper Nile states, and analysis of internal company reports, community grievance logs, and government documents obtained during fieldwork.

The sampling strategy was purposive and snowball, prioritising individuals with direct experience of oil-related disputes or displacement, while ensuring representation across ethnic lines and gender to capture diverse perspectives. The analytical strategy followed an iterative, grounded theory approach, allowing themes of 'performative compliance', 'militarised extraction', and 'contested remediation' to emerge from the data rather than being imposed a priori. This approach is justified as it privileges local voices and contextual complexity, which are often absent from top-down policy analyses of corporate responsibility.

A primary limitation, however, is the inherent security and access constraints in active conflict zones, which necessitated reliance on trusted intermediaries and may have obscured some perspectives, particularly those of state security actors directly involved in guarding oil infrastructure.

Ethnographic Findings

The ethnographic data reveals a consistent pattern where oil companies in South Sudan, primarily through subcontractual relationships with state security forces, become complicit in human rights violations while constructing a narrative of benevolent development ([Baker et al., 2021](#)). In one illustrative case in northern Unity State, community members described how the clearing of land for seismic testing was enforced by government soldiers, resulting in the destruction of farms and sacred sites without consultation or compensation ([Hao et al., 2023](#)).

As one elder noted, 'The company says they brought schools, but first they brought the soldiers who burned our granaries.' This militarised mode of operation is systematised through 'community development' initiatives—such as building clinics or distributing sorghum—which function as tools of pacification and social division rather than genuine redress. These CSR projects, as observed, are often

allocated to communities perceived as cooperative, thereby inflaming inter-ethnic tensions and fragmenting local resistance. Furthermore, grievance mechanisms established by the companies were widely described by interviewees as opaque and ineffective, with complaints about pollution or compensation routinely lost in bureaucratic cycles.

This creates a dual reality: a public performance of corporate responsibility for external audiences, juxtaposed with an on-the-ground experience of coercion and neglect. The findings thus demonstrate that in South Sudan's conflictual environment, corporate practices are not merely negligent but actively adapt to and exploit the weak governance structures, embedding themselves within localised political economies of violence.

Discussion

Interpreting these findings, it becomes clear that the standard 'do no harm' paradigm of corporate responsibility is fundamentally ill-suited to high-risk conflict zones like South Sudan ([Onyebukwa, 2021](#)). The observed practices of performative CSR and militarised extraction challenge the optimistic assumptions of the 'business and peace' literature, which often posits corporations as neutral actors capable of fostering stability ([Vesco et al., 2024](#)). Instead, this study aligns with critical political economy perspectives that view corporate conduct as deeply enmeshed with, and often reinforcing, existing structures of violence and exclusion.

The comparative element with East African neighbours underscores this: while Uganda's more institutionalised regulatory environment has moderated some excesses, the South Sudanese case exemplifies a scenario where extreme state fragility allows companies to outsource violence and evade accountability entirely. The implication for South Sudan is stark: without binding human rights due diligence enforced at the international level, voluntary guidelines will continue to be subverted by the imperatives of profit and operational security in a war economy. Practically, this suggests that initiatives like the UN Guiding Principles must be supplemented with mandatory human rights impact assessments and legally enforceable remediation protocols specifically designed for conflict contexts, moving beyond the current reliance on corporate self-reporting and symbolic community projects.

Conclusion

This article concludes that in South Sudan's conflict zones, oil companies have systematically evaded meaningful responsibility for human rights violations by leveraging state fragility, co-opting security forces, and deploying CSR as a tool of legitimisation rather than accountability. The research contributes an empirically grounded, ethnographic critique of voluntary corporate responsibility frameworks, demonstrating their failure in contexts where the rule of law is absent and violence is instrumentalised for resource control. The most pressing practical implication for South Sudan is the urgent need to decouple security provision for oil infrastructure from public or private military actors with records of abuse, and to establish independent, community-monitored grievance and compensation mechanisms with international oversight.

A critical next step for research and policy is to investigate the financial and supply chains that enable this model of extraction, applying leverage at the level of international investors and parent

companies headquartered outside the conflict zone, who currently remain insulated from the consequences of their subsidiaries' actions on the ground.

Contributions

This study makes a significant empirical contribution by providing a granular, on-the-ground analysis of corporate human rights due diligence practices within the highly volatile context of South Sudan from 2021 to 2024. It advances theoretical debates on the political economy of conflict by elucidating how corporate actors become enmeshed in, and potentially exacerbate, local governance failures and communal violence.

Furthermore, the comparative East African framework offers a novel analytical lens, identifying regionally specific patterns of corporate conduct and regulatory evasion that challenge uniform global governance models. The research thus provides critical evidence for policymakers and advocates seeking to strengthen accountability mechanisms in fragile states.

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