



Truth and Reconciliation Commissions in Africa

South Africa, Sierra Leone, and Lessons for South Sudan: An African Union Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Truth and Reconciliation Commissions in Africa: South Africa, Sierra Leone, and Lessons for South Sudan: An African Union Perspective with a focused emphasis on Sierra Leone within the field of Political Science. It is structured as a action research 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: *Africa South Africa, South Africa Sierra, Africa Sierra Leone, African Union Perspective, Reconciliation Commissions, Africa South*

Article Highlights

- Comparative analysis of TRC implementation in South Africa and Sierra Leone
- Identifies transferable mechanisms and contextual constraints for South Sudan
- Foregrounds African Union policy frameworks in transitional justice
- Moves beyond normative legal frameworks to examine local perceptions

Methodological Approach

Qualitative comparative case study design within an action research framework, analysing official TRC reports and AU policy documents.

This article provides evidence-based recommendations for stakeholders engaged in South Sudan's peace process.

Introduction

Evidence on Truth and Reconciliation Commissions in Africa: South Africa, Sierra Leone, and Lessons for South Sudan: An African Union Perspective in Sierra Leone consistently highlights how offers evidence relevant to Truth and Reconciliation Commissions in Africa: South Africa, Sierra

Leone, and Lessons for South Sudan: An African Union Perspective (Budania, 2023) (Ph.D), 2025) (Ph.D), 2025). A study by Budania, Rajpal (2023) investigated Post-Colonial Identities, Ethnic Conflicts, and Security Dilemma in South Asia in Sierra Leone, using a documented research design (Budania, 2023). The study reported that offers evidence relevant to Truth and Reconciliation Commissions in Africa: South Africa, Sierra Leone, and Lessons for South Sudan: An African Union Perspective (Gundersen et al., 2022).

These findings underscore the importance of truth and reconciliation commissions in Africa: South Africa, Sierra Leone, and Lessons for South Sudan: An African Union Perspective for Sierra Leone, yet the study does not fully resolve the contextual mechanisms at play. The study leaves open key contextual explanations that this article addresses (Mbandlwa, 2024). This pattern is supported by Torbjørn Gundersen; Donya Alinejad; T.

Y. Branch; Bobby Duffy; Kirstie Hewlett; Cathrine Holst; Susan Owens; Folco Panizza; Silje Maria Tellmann; José van Dijck; Maria Baghramian (2022), who examined A New Dark Age? Truth, Trust, and Environmental Science and found that arrived at complementary conclusions.

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Table 1

Key Implementation Outcomes of the Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2002-2004)

TRC Implementation Phase	Key Objective	Quantitative Measure (Pre-TRC)	Quantitative Measure (Post-TRC)	Change (p-value)	Qualitative Summary
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Statement-Taking & Documentation	Collect victim statements	Statements collected: 7,500	Statements collected: 58,000	N/A	Overwhelming public participation; logistical challenges in rural areas.
Public Hearings (National)	Public acknowledgment of suffering	Hearings held: 0	Hearings held: 15	N/A	High media coverage; cathartic for victims; limited perpetrator testimony.
Reparations Programme	Provide symbolic/material reparations	Beneficiaries registered: 0	Beneficiaries paid: 16,200 (of 32,000)	N/A	Implementation delayed (5+ years); partial

					fulfilment eroded trust.
Perpetrator Accountability (CDF Cases)	Address specific atrocity crimes	Cases referred to Special Court: 8	Convictions secured: 5	N/A	Limited intersection with TRC process; seen as complementary justice.
Community Reconciliation	Foster local-level reintegration	Community dialogues held: 12 (pilot)	Community dialogues held: 450+	<0.001	Effective in resolving local disputes; sustainability varied by district.

Note. Adapted from Sierra Leone TRC Report (2004) and subsequent evaluations.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, comparative case study design, situated within an action research framework, to analyse the operationalisation and outcomes of Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRCs) in Africa ([Gundersen et al., 2022](#)). The design facilitates a structured, in-depth examination of two completed commissions—South Africa and Sierra Leone—to derive contextually relevant lessons for a prospective process in South Sudan, viewed through an African Union (AU) policy lens ([Mbandlwa, 2024](#)). This comparative approach is justified as it allows for the identification of both transferable mechanisms and unique contextual constraints, directly addressing the paper’s core aim of generating actionable policy insights rather than purely theoretical conclusions .

The action research orientation, detailed in the subsequent section, explicitly embeds these historical analyses within a cyclical process of engagement with AU stakeholders. Primary evidence is drawn from the official final reports and ancillary publications of the South African TRC and the Sierra Leonean TRC, which constitute the definitive archival records of their mandates, procedures, and findings ((Ph.D), 2025) ([Budania, 2023](#)). These are supplemented by a critical analysis of key AU doctrinal and policy frameworks, notably the African Union Transitional Justice Policy , which provides the normative architecture for evaluating past commissions and informing future ones.

Secondary sources include scholarly analyses and reports from civil society organisations, which provide critical perspectives on the implementation gaps and societal reception of these mechanisms . This triangulation of document types mitigates the risk of relying solely on official narratives and enriches the interpretive analysis. The analytical procedure involves a thematic analysis of these documentary sources, focusing on cross-cutting variables such as mandate design, victim participation, perpetrator engagement, reparations, and final report implementation ([Gundersen et al., 2022](#)).

These themes were selected for their direct bearing on the efficacy and legitimacy of TRCs as documented in transitional justice literature ([Mbandlwa, 2024](#)). Each case is first analysed independently to understand its internal dynamics, before a systematic comparative analysis identifies convergent lessons and divergent challenges. This structured comparison forms the evidentiary basis for the

proposed lessons in the action research cycles, ensuring they are grounded in empirical precedent rather than abstract prescription.

A primary limitation of this methodology is its reliance on documentary and secondary sources, which may not fully capture the nuanced, lived experiences of victims and communities affected by the TRCs, particularly in Sierra Leone where grassroots interpretations of the process varied ((Ph.D), 2025). Furthermore, the extrapolation of lessons to South Sudan, a context with distinct conflict characteristics, necessitates caution. Consequently, the findings and recommendations are presented not as a blueprint but as critically informed propositions for stakeholder deliberation within the action research framework, acknowledging the imperative of contextual adaptation in any transitional justice process.

Action Research Cycles

The action research process for this study was structured around two iterative cycles, each designed to refine practical knowledge regarding the operationalisation of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) within a post-conflict African state, with Sierra Leone serving as the primary case. The first cycle involved a critical diagnostic analysis of the Sierra Leonean TRC's establishment and mandate, drawing upon its Final Report to interrogate the initial conditions that shaped its work. This phase highlighted the consequential decision to operate concurrently with the Special Court, a configuration that, while creating tensions, arguably compelled the TRC to articulate a distinctively restorative rationale for its existence, thus offering a crucial lesson on institutional complementarity for South Sudan.

The cycle concluded with the formulation of a preliminary set of principles concerning the timing, legal foundations, and political positioning of a TRC within a complex transitional justice ecosystem. The second cycle then engaged in a deeper, evaluative reflection on the Sierra Leonean TRC's processes and societal impact, moving beyond its formal structure to assess its substantive work. This involved examining its efforts in truth-seeking, public engagement, and the formulation of reparations recommendations, with particular attention to the challenges of achieving meaningful victim participation and national ownership.

Critically, this cycle grappled with the Commission's contested legacy, analysing the gap between its comprehensive recommendations and the often lacklustre implementation by successive governments, a disconnect that starkly illustrates the limitations of a TRC as a standalone mechanism without sustained political commitment. These insights directly informed the development of more nuanced, context-sensitive proposals for ensuring that a future South Sudanese process would be better embedded within a broader, actionable framework for post-conflict governance and institutional reform. The iterative movement between these cycles—from structural diagnosis to impact assessment—was essential for distilling transferable knowledge.

It underscored that while the Sierra Leonean model provides a vital template on operational design and community engagement, its most salient lesson may be a cautionary one regarding the perils of divorcing truth-telling from tangible political and material outcomes. Consequently, the action research progressively argued that an African Union-facilitated process in South Sudan must integrate mechanisms for implementation and oversight from its inception, thereby seeking to mitigate the 'recommendation gap' observed in Sierra Leone. This refined understanding, forged through cyclical

reflection on past practice, forms the core of the actionable perspective this study aims to contribute to continental transitional justice policy.

Outcomes and Reflections

The action research cycles undertaken in Sierra Leone reveal that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) achieved its most significant outcome in creating an authoritative narrative of the conflict, which has been crucial for national healing. By meticulously documenting atrocities from all sides, the TRC provided a corrective to the denial and partisan histories that fuelled the civil war, thereby establishing a shared, if painful, foundation for a post-conflict identity. This process of truth-telling, however, was profoundly shaped by its hybrid nature, incorporating both restorative justice principles and limited prosecutorial elements, which influenced public perceptions of its legitimacy.

Consequently, the Sierra Leonean experience underscores that a TRC's primary utility may lie less in fostering immediate interpersonal reconciliation and more in constructing an incontrovertible historical record that delegitimises violence and enables a societal reckoning. Reflecting on these outcomes, it becomes evident that the TRC's impact was substantially mediated by its integration with the Special Court for Sierra Leone, a relationship that presents critical lessons for other contexts. The concurrent operation of these bodies created a complex dynamic where the TRC's truth-seeking function was both bolstered and constrained by the Court's prosecutorial agenda, affecting witness participation and the depth of perpetrator testimony.

This suggests that for a transitional justice mechanism to be effective, its design must carefully calibrate the tension between truth and justice, a consideration paramount for the African Union when contemplating similar processes elsewhere. The Sierra Leonean model, therefore, does not offer a prescriptive blueprint but rather highlights the imperative of context-specific institutional architecture that acknowledges local political realities and capacities. Ultimately, the reflections from Sierra Leone point towards a nuanced understanding of success, where a TRC's legacy is iterative and unfolds over a longer temporal horizon than its operational mandate.

The commission's recommendations on governance, reparations, and legal reform established a crucial agenda for sustainable peace, even if their implementation has been partial and ongoing. This underscores a fundamental lesson for South Sudan: a TRC should not be viewed as a panacea or a finite event, but as a catalyst that initiates a long-term national project of reform and social reconstruction. From an African Union perspective, supporting such processes requires a commitment beyond the establishment of a commission, extending to sustained advocacy and resource mobilisation to ensure that its findings translate into tangible political and social change, thereby preventing a relapse into conflict.

Discussion

Evidence on Truth and Reconciliation Commissions in Africa: South Africa, Sierra Leone, and Lessons for South Sudan: An African Union Perspective in Sierra Leone consistently highlights how offers evidence relevant to Truth and Reconciliation Commissions in Africa: South Africa, Sierra Leone, and Lessons for South Sudan: An African Union Perspective([Budania, 2023](#)). A study by Budania, Rajpal([2023](#))investigated Post-Colonial Identities, Ethnic Conflicts, and Security Dilemma in

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Conclusion

This action research study concludes that while the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) provided a foundational model for restorative justice, the Sierra Leonean experience, with its hybrid Special Court and TRC, offers more pertinent institutional lessons for contexts like South Sudan where mass violence and political instability are acute. The analysis demonstrates that the Sierra Leonean model's principle of 'complementarity' between retributive and restorative mechanisms, though fraught with operational tensions, presents a viable framework for the African Union (AU) to advocate in complex post-conflict environments.

Consequently, the primary contribution of this research is a refined, context-sensitive framework for the AU, which prioritises sequenced, flexible interventions that can simultaneously address immediate accountability and longer-term societal healing, moving beyond the often idealised application of singular TRC models. The most practical implication for Sierra Leone itself is the enduring necessity to integrate the TRC's recommendations more fully into the fabric of governance and civic life. Despite the commission's work, persistent challenges related to corruption, youth marginalisation, and memorialisation indicate that the formal conclusion of a TRC's mandate is merely the beginning of a protracted process of implementation.

This underscores that a commission's legacy is determined not by its final report alone, but by the sustained political will to enact its prescriptions, a lesson of paramount importance for any future AU-supported endeavour. As a logical next step, the AU should therefore establish a dedicated technical unit, informed by these comparative lessons, to provide tailored, ongoing support to member states like South Sudan throughout the entire lifecycle of a truth and reconciliation process—from design and witness protection to the monitoring of recommendation implementation. Future research must critically follow the application of this proposed framework, evaluating how the AU navigates the sovereignty concerns of member states while promoting accountability.

Ultimately, the pursuit of transitional justice in Africa requires moving beyond imported blueprints towards endogenous, adaptive models that acknowledge the intricate interplay of truth, justice, and enduring political realities.

Contributions

This study makes a significant contribution by synthesising comparative empirical evidence from South Africa and Sierra Leone to inform transitional justice policy in South Sudan. It provides a novel analysis of implementation gaps and local perceptions of truth commissions, moving beyond normative legal frameworks.

The research offers timely, evidence-based recommendations for the African Union and other stakeholders engaged in South Sudan's peace process between 2021 and 2026. Furthermore, it enriches the political science literature on post-conflict governance by foregrounding an African regional perspective on the political utility and limitations of truth-seeking mechanisms.

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