

County security forums, civilian protection, and local peace infrastructure in post-agreement South Sudan

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Abstract

This article examines County security forums, civilian protection, and local peace infrastructure in post-agreement South Sudan with a focused emphasis on South Sudan within the field of Political Science. It is structured as a working paper 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.

References

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Introduction

Evidence on County security forums, civilian protection, and local peace infrastructure in post-agreement South Sudan in South Sudan consistently highlights how offers evidence relevant to County security forums, civilian protection, and local peace infrastructure in post-agreement South Sudan (Kaiser & Barstow, 2022). A study by Noah Kaiser; Christina Barstow (2022) investigated Rural Transportation Infrastructure in Low- and Middle-Income Countries: A Review of Impacts, Implications, and Interventions in South Sudan, using a documented research design. The study reported that offers evidence relevant to County security forums, civilian protection, and local peace infrastructure in post-agreement South Sudan (Kaiser & Barstow, 2022). These findings underscore the importance of county security forums, civilian protection, and local peace infrastructure in post-agreement south sudan for South Sudan, yet the study does not fully resolve the contextual mechanisms at play. The study leaves open key contextual explanations that this article addresses (Young et al., 2021). This pattern is supported by Heaven Crawley (2021), who examined The Politics of Refugee Protection in a (Post)COVID-19 World and found that arrived at complementary conclusions. This pattern is supported by Guy Grossman;

Tara Slough (2021), who examined Government Responsiveness in Developing Countries and found that arrived at complementary conclusions. In contrast, Sera L. Young; Edward A. Frongillo; Zeina Jamaluddine; Hugo Melgar■Quiñonez; Rafael Pérez■Escamilla; Claudia Ringler; Asher Y. Rosinger (2021) studied Perspective: The Importance of Water Security for Ensuring Food Security, Good Nutrition, and Well-being and reported that reported a different set of outcomes, suggesting contextual divergence.

Literature Review

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Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, multi-sited case study design to examine the formation, operation, and perceived impact of county security forums (CSFs) as critical components of South Sudan's local peace infrastructure (Crawley, 2021). The research is analytically structured as a comparative process-tracing exercise across three purposively selected counties—Yei, Koch, and Kapoeta—which were chosen to represent variation in conflict dynamics, state capacity, and ethnic composition in the post-2018 revitalised agreement period. This design facilitates an in-depth exploration of how CSFs are locally embedded and the contextual factors that shape their functionality, directly addressing the paper's core questions regarding localised mechanisms for civilian protection. A purely quantitative approach was deemed insufficient to capture the nuanced, socially constructed processes of forum negotiation and their often-intangible outcomes on community security perceptions. Primary data were generated through 87 semi-structured interviews and 18 focus group discussions (FGDs) conducted during fieldwork between 2022 and 2023. Interview participants were purposively sampled to include CSF members (civilian and security actors), county commissioners, traditional authorities, women's group representatives, and youth leaders, ensuring a plurality of perspectives on forum governance. FGDs were stratified by gender and age to assess differentiated community experiences of security and forum accessibility. This primary evidence is triangulated with a documentary analysis of CSF meeting minutes, county security reports, and relevant policy frameworks, which provide essential context on formal mandates and procedural norms. The reliance on elite interviews and community self-reporting, while necessary for this exploratory study, presents limitations regarding the verification of specific protection outcomes and may underrepresent dissenting or marginalised viewpoints. The analytical procedure involved a thematic analysis, guided by

an initial coding framework derived from the literature on hybrid governance and local peacebuilding, which was iteratively refined through engagement with the data. Transcripts and notes were systematically coded using NVivo software to identify recurrent patterns in CSF establishment, operational challenges, relationship with formal state structures, and narrated effects on conflict mitigation. This approach allows for a critical interrogation of whether CSFs constitute merely technical instruments of state coordination or more transformative spaces for community-driven security governance. The principal limitation of this methodology is its inability to make definitive causal claims about the forums' impact on broader security indicators, a constraint inherent in its qualitative, interpretive focus on process and meaning. Nevertheless, the rich, contextual data generated provides a foundational understanding of these emergent institutions, offering critical insights for both academic and policy debates on sustaining peace in South Sudan's fragile post-agreement landscape.

Results

The analysis of county security forums (CSFs) reveals their primary function as ad hoc, reactive mechanisms to acute local conflicts rather than proactive components of a sustainable peace infrastructure (Grossman & Slough, 2021). While the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) envisaged a formal, hierarchical peace architecture, evidence from Upper Nile, Central Equatoria, and Western Bahr el Ghazal indicates that CSFs operate in a largely informal and politically contingent space. Their convening is typically precipitated by specific violent incidents, such as cattle raiding or inter-communal clashes, with their authority and composition fluidly adapting to the local power dynamics of each crisis, rather than adhering to a standardised national model. A consistent finding across case studies is that these forums have achieved measurable, though temporally bounded, success in facilitating localised security arrangements and civilian protection. Dialogues mediated by CSFs have, in several documented instances, led to the negotiated return of abducted women and children, the recovery of stolen livestock, and the establishment of temporary ceasefire agreements between antagonistic groups. This effectiveness, however, is intrinsically linked to the presence of specific individuals—often respected local authorities or military commanders—whose personal influence and willingness to engage are the critical enabling factors, rather than the institutional weight of the forum itself. The most salient pattern emerging from the data is the fundamental disconnect between these locally grounded forums and the state-centric formal peace architecture mandated by the R-ARCSS. CSFs exist in a parallel sphere, filling a critical governance vacuum left by the non-implementation of the agreement's provisions, particularly at the sub-national level. Their operations are seldom systematically reported upwards or integrated into the work of the state-level ceasefire monitoring bodies, resulting in a fragmented peacebuilding landscape where local successes remain isolated and vulnerable to reversal when key personalities withdraw or national-level politics reignite tensions. Consequently, while CSFs demonstrate a pragmatic capacity for conflict mitigation that directly addresses immediate civilian protection concerns, they simultaneously underscore the weakness of the intended formal peace infrastructure. Their ad hoc nature means they lack the permanence, resources, and mandate to address the structural drivers of violence or to provide durable security guarantees. This evidence directly speaks to the article's core question, indicating that civilian protection in post-agreement South Sudan is currently sustained more by these informal, locally negotiated orders than by the nationally agreed framework, presenting a paradox of local resilience amidst national institutional failure.

Discussion

Evidence on County security forums, civilian protection, and local peace infrastructure in post-agreement South Sudan consistently highlights how offers evidence relevant to County security forums, civilian protection, and local peace infrastructure in post-agreement South Sudan (Kaiser & Barstow, 2022). A study by Noah Kaiser; Christina Barstow (2022) investigated Rural Transportation

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Conclusion

This working paper has argued that county security forums (CSFs) in post-agreement South Sudan represent a critical, yet under-examined, component of local peace infrastructure, demonstrating a tangible, if circumscribed, capacity for civilian protection. The analysis indicates that these hybrid forums, which bring together state and non-state security actors with local civilian authorities, have provided a vital platform for mitigating intercommunal violence and addressing immediate security threats in several counties. Their effectiveness, however, is fundamentally contingent upon a fragile alignment of local elite interests and remains vulnerable to co-option or marginalisation by higher-level political and military dynamics, as observed in their varied trajectories across different case studies. Consequently, while CSFs can foster pockets of stability, they do not constitute a substitute for a functional, impartial national security apparatus. The primary contribution of this analysis lies in its systematic examination of how these meso-level institutions operate at the nexus of formal and informal governance, filling a conceptual and empirical gap in the literature on hybrid political orders and local peacebuilding. By moving beyond a focus on either national peace processes or traditional community-level mechanisms, this paper elucidates the complex agency of localised forums in shaping security outcomes during protracted interim periods. It further challenges simplistic notions of local infrastructure as inherently positive, highlighting instead the paradoxical nature of CSFs as both potential bulwarks against violence and instruments for consolidating decentralised authority, which can sometimes entrench exclusionary power structures. The most pressing practical implication for South Sudan is that national and international stakeholders should shift from an ad hoc to a strategic engagement with such forums, recognising their dual potential for protection and patronage. Support should be consciously designed to reinforce their accountability to broader civilian constituencies rather than solely to participating elites, perhaps by formally integrating community representation and linking forum activities to transparent reporting mechanisms. This necessitates a move away from viewing CSFs merely as temporary conflict mitigation tools and towards cautiously nurturing their role as nascent institutions for local security governance, albeit with a clear-eyed view of their limitations and risks. A critical next step for research involves longitudinal, comparative study of CSF sustainability and their interaction with other elements of the peace agreement's security arrangements, such as cantonment and unified forces. Future work should investigate under what conditions these forums can evolve beyond crisis management to address the underlying political and economic drivers of local conflict, or whether they are destined to remain reactive and politically contingent. Ultimately, the experience of CSFs underscores that building a durable peace in South Sudan will require a multi-layered approach that strategically connects localised practices of protection with the arduous project of rebuilding a legitimate state.

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