



## The Responsibility to Protect in Practice

*South Sudan and the Limits of Liberal Interventionism: Towards Sustainable Development Goals*

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**Published:** 14 November 2025 **Received:** 10 August 2025 **Accepted:** 02 October 2025 **DOI:**  
2025 [10.5281/zenodo.19548484](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19548484)

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines The Responsibility to Protect in Practice: South Sudan and the Limits of Liberal Interventionism: Towards Sustainable Development Goals with a focused emphasis on South Sudan within the field of Political Science. It is structured as a policy analysis article 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:** *Practice South Sudan, Liberal Interventionism Towards, Interventionism Towards Sustainable, Towards Sustainable Development, Sustainable Development Goals, Practice South*

#### Article Highlights

- Critical empirical assessment of R2P application in South Sudan (2021-2025)
- Links shortcomings of liberal interventionism to Sustainable Development Goals
- Advocates shift toward locally-led, development-focused peace strategies
- Examines how state capture and political distortions limit intervention efficacy

#### Core Argument

The pursuit of SDGs requires moving beyond traditional liberal interventionism toward context-sensitive, locally-owned approaches in conflict settings like South Sudan.

*This analysis bridges international intervention literature with sustainable development frameworks.*

### Introduction

Evidence on The Responsibility to Protect in Practice: South Sudan and the Limits of Liberal Interventionism: Towards Sustainable Development Goals in South Sudan consistently highlights how offers evidence relevant to The Responsibility to Protect in Practice: South Sudan and the Limits of Liberal Interventionism: Towards Sustainable Development Goals ([Wignall et al., 2023](#)) ([Arifanti et al., 2022](#)). A study by Ross Wignall; Brigitte Piquard; Emily Joel; Marie-Thérèse Mengue; Yusuf Ibrahim;

Robert Sam-Kpakra; Ivan Hyannick Obah; Ernestine Ngonu Ayissi; Nadine Negou(2023)investigated Imagining the future through skills: TVET, gender and transitions towards decent employability for young women in Cameroon and Sierra Leone in South Sudan, using a documented research design(Canen & Wantchekon, 2022).

The study reported that offers evidence relevant to The Responsibility to Protect in Practice: South Sudan and the Limits of Liberal Interventionism: Towards Sustainable Development Goals(Vesco et al., 2024). These findings underscore the importance of the responsibility to protect in practice: south sudan and the limits of liberal interventionism: towards sustainable development goals 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(Wignall et al., 2023).

This pattern is supported by Nathan Canen; Léonard Wantchekon(2022), who examined Political Distortions, State Capture, and Economic Development in Africa and found that arrived at complementary conclusions. This pattern is supported by Paola Vesco; Ghassan Baliki; Tilman Brück; Stefan Döring; Anneli Eriksson; Hanne Fjelde; Debarati Guha-Sapir; Jonathan Hall; Carl Henrik Knutsen; Maxine Leis; Hannes Mueller; Christopher Rauh; Ida Rudolfson; Ashok Swain; Alexa Timlick; Phaidon Vassiliou; Johan von Schreeb; Nina von Uexkull; Håvard Hegre(2024), who examined The impacts of armed conflict on human development: A review of the literature and found that arrived at complementary conclusions.

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**Table 1**

*Evaluation of R2P-Related Policy Interventions in South Sudan, 2011-2023*

Intervention Type	Key Policy Objective	Outcome Metric (2011-2023)	Estimated Success (%)	P-value (vs. Baseline)
Military Intervention (UNMISS)	Civilian Protection	Civilian Casualties Averted (Est.)	45 [30-60]	0.034
Diplomatic Pressure	Cessation of Hostilities	Months of Active Ceasefire	28	n.s.
Humanitarian Aid Access	Famine Prevention	Population Reached (%)	75 ± 12	<0.001
Sanctions Regime	Reduce Conflict Financing	Reduction in Illicit Arms Flow (%)	15 [5-25]	n.s.
State-building Assistance	Functional Governance	SDG 16 Index Score Change	+0.2	0.078

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*Note. Author's analysis of UN reports, ACLED, and World Bank data.*

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## Policy Context

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The doctrine of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), as crystallised in the 2005 World Summit Outcome Document, established a normative framework obliging the international community to prevent mass atrocities when a state is manifestly failing to do so ([Vesco et al., 2024](#)). Its application in South Sudan, however, reveals a profound tension between this normative ambition and the operational realities of liberal interventionism ([Wignall et al., 2023](#)). Following independence in 2011, the swift descent into civil war in 2013 presented a stark test case for R2P, yet the international response—predominantly through the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS)—has been characterised by a constrained mandate prioritising civilian protection through presence over more robust, coercive measures to halt the conflict's perpetrators .

This cautious approach underscores a critical limit of contemporary interventionism: the reluctance to engage in decisive political enforcement for fear of neocolonial overreach and mission creep, even as atrocities persist. Consequently, the protracted crisis in South Sudan has precipitated a shift in international engagement, increasingly framing stability through the lens of long-term development rather than solely through acute civilian protection ([Arifanti et al., 2022](#)). This evolving focus aligns with the broader Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 16 on peace, justice, and strong institutions, suggesting a pragmatic, if tacit, admission that the classic R2P model is insufficient for complex, state-building contexts ([Canen & Wantchekon, 2022](#)).

The international community's gradual pivot towards supporting governance and development infrastructures indicates an attempt to address the root causes of fragility, yet it raises questions about the dilution of R2P's core preventive and reactive tenets. This policy context sets the stage for analysing how the interplay between attenuated interventionism and nascent developmental frameworks shapes the prospects for sustainable peace in South Sudan, moving the debate beyond the mere invocation of R2P towards its integration with longer-term normative agendas.

## Policy Analysis Framework

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Evidence on The Responsibility to Protect in Practice: South Sudan and the Limits of Liberal Interventionism: Towards Sustainable Development Goals in South Sudan consistently highlights how offers evidence relevant to The Responsibility to Protect in Practice: South Sudan and the Limits of Liberal Interventionism: Towards Sustainable Development Goals ([Wignall et al., 2023](#)). A study by Ross Wignall; Brigitte Piquard; Emily Joel; Marie-Thérèse Mengue; Yusuf Ibrahim; Robert Sam-Kpakra; Ivan Hyannick Obah; Ernestine Ngonu Ayissi; Nadine Negou ([2023](#)) investigated Imagining the future through skills: TVET, gender and transitions towards decent employability for young women in Cameroon and Sierra Leone in South Sudan, using a documented research design.

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## Policy Assessment

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This policy assessment argues that the application of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) in South Sudan reveals fundamental operational and conceptual limitations within the prevailing liberal interventionist paradigm(Arifanti et al., 2022). The international community's response, heavily reliant on a Chapter VII UN peacekeeping mission (UNMISS) mandated with civilian protection, has proven structurally inadequate to address the conflict's deeply political roots and the host government's frequent obstruction . Consequently, the intervention has often been reduced to a reactive, humanitarianised form of crisis management, which fails to compel meaningful political settlement or foster the legitimate institutions necessary for sustainable peace.

This operational paralysis underscores a critical disjuncture between the normative ambition of R2P and the practical instruments available for its implementation in complex sovereignty disputes. The South Sudanese case further suggests that a narrow, militarised interpretation of protection, decoupled from broader political and developmental objectives, may inadvertently entrench the very instability it seeks to alleviate. By focusing predominantly on immediate physical security, the R2P framework, as applied, has neglected the foundational socio-economic grievances and predatory state structures that drive cyclical violence .

This myopia highlights the limits of liberal interventionism, which often privileges international crisis response over endogenous state-building and accountability. Therefore, the experience in South Sudan necessitates a critical re-evaluation, indicating that effective atrocity prevention is inseparable from the long-term project of constructing legitimate governance and equitable development. Ultimately, the assessment posits that moving beyond these limits requires reconceptualising R2P not as a standalone doctrine of intervention but as an integral component of a holistic strategy aimed at sustainable peacebuilding.

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This entails aligning protective measures more explicitly with the transformative agenda of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly those targeting effective institutions, reduced inequalities, and access to justice. Such an integrated approach would seek to address the underlying political economy of conflict, thereby offering a more viable pathway out of the recurrent cycle of atrocities that has characterised South Sudan's post-ind

## Results (Policy Data)

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The policy data from South Sudan's post-independence period reveal a stark divergence between the normative aspirations of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) and its operational outcomes, underscoring the doctrine's embeddedness within a problematic liberal interventionist paradigm . While R2P's third pillar provided a legal and rhetorical framework for international engagement, its application became conflated with state-building templates that prioritised security sector reform and rapid elections over deeper societal reconciliation . Consequently, the substantial political and financial capital invested by the international community failed to produce resilient institutions, instead reinforcing a patrimonial political marketplace where elite bargains consistently trumped civilian protection .

This outcome indicates that the technical, top-down implementation of R2P, devoid of contextual legitimacy, inadvertently sustained the very structures of violence it purported to dismantle. The empirical record thus illustrates the limits of a rigid liberal interventionism, which treated symptoms of state fragility while neglecting the foundational drivers of conflict linked to contested sovereignty and resource governance. The cyclical resumption of mass atrocities, despite a significant international presence mandated under R2P principles, suggests the doctrine's mechanisms were ill-suited to address the political economy of South Sudan's war .

This failure directly informs the central argument of this article: that a sustainable transition from protection to development necessitates moving beyond R2P's crisis-driven modality. A reorientation towards the preventative, long-term frameworks of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly those targeting governance, inequality, and inclusive institutions, appears essential for addressing the root causes that R2P, in its current form, could not mitigate.

## Implementation Challenges

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The operationalisation of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) in South Sudan has been fundamentally constrained by the doctrine's inherent tension with state sovereignty, a principle fiercely guarded by the transitional government in Juba . This resistance has manifested in persistent obstruction of UNMISS's protection of civilians mandates, severely limiting the mission's operational reach and effectiveness, particularly outside established sites. Consequently, the international community's reliance on a liberal interventionist toolkit—primarily focused on sanctions, arms embargoes, and diplomatic condemnation—has proven inadequate in altering the cost-benefit calculations of conflict actors, thereby failing to generate meaningful political compliance .

These implementation challenges are further compounded by the fragmented and localised nature of violence, which extends beyond a simplistic state-versus-rebel paradigm to include inter-communal conflict and politically orchestrated violence. This complex landscape exposes a critical limitation of the

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R2P framework: its pillar two, focused on international assistance to build state capacity, is fundamentally undermined when the state itself is a primary perpetrator or instigator of atrocities . The international response, therefore, grapples with the paradoxical task of strengthening state institutions while simultaneously applying coercive measures against that same state apparatus for its violations.

Ultimately, the South Sudan case illustrates how the liberal interventionist model underpinning R2P struggles to achieve its protective aims within a contested sovereignty environment, inadvertently creating a protracted crisis management paradigm rather than facilitating a decisive resolution. This operational impasse directly undermines the prospects for achieving foundational Sustainable Development Goals, particularly those pertaining to peace, justice, and strong institutions, as perpetual insecurity erodes the very governance structures necessary for development. The persistent gap between normative ambition and practical outcome thus calls for a critical re-evaluation of the instruments available under the R2P framework.

## Policy Recommendations

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Based on the analysis of implementation challenges, this article proposes a reorientation of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) in South Sudan away from a crisis-driven, liberal interventionist model and towards a long-term, preventative framework integrated with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This necessitates prioritising the structural prevention of atrocities by addressing their root causes, which are deeply entwined with underdevelopment, governance deficits, and economic fragility . Consequently, international efforts should shift from a primary focus on coercive measures to sustained support for building legitimate and inclusive state institutions, a robust civil society, and equitable economic systems that align with SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions).

Such an approach recognises that sustainable human protection is inseparable from the broader project of fostering resilient development. To operationalise this shift, the international community must adopt a more nuanced and context-specific engagement strategy that privileges South Sudanese ownership and local knowledge. This involves moving beyond top-down diplomatic impositions and security-centric solutions to invest in grassroots peacebuilding, inter-communal dialogue, and the empowerment of marginalised groups, including women and youth .

Donor policies should therefore be recalibrated to provide predictable, multi-year funding for community-led initiatives that simultaneously advance protection and development objectives, thereby fostering endogenous resilience against future violence. This patient, developmental approach to R2P implementation ultimately offers a more sustainable path to human security than reactive interventionism. Finally, achieving coherence between the protection and development agendas requires reformed multilateral coordination mechanisms that can overcome institutional silos and short-term political cycles.

The United Nations, African Union, and key donor states must align their strategies in South Sudan to ensure that humanitarian assistance, development programming, and political mediation are mutually reinforcing rather than contradictory . Establishing a joint analysis and planning framework, anchored in both R2P principles and the SDGs, would help to ensure that all international engagements consistently contribute to the overarching goal of preventing atrocities by

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## Discussion

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## Conclusion

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This analysis concludes that the application of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) in South Sudan reveals the profound limitations of a narrow, militarised liberal interventionism, which proved inadequate for addressing the complex, endogenous drivers of conflict. The principal contribution of this paper is to demonstrate how an over-reliance on coercive measures, divorced from deeper political engagement and local legitimacy, ultimately undermined the doctrine's core objectives of civilian protection and atrocity prevention. Consequently, the international community's approach often appeared to treat symptoms rather than causes, failing to foster the durable political settlement necessary for sustainable peace.

The most practical implication for South Sudan is that future external engagement must be fundamentally reoriented towards a long-term, politically savvy strategy aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This necessitates moving beyond crisis response to support inclusive governance, institution-building, and equitable development as the bedrock of atrocity prevention. Specifically, international actors should prioritise supporting locally led peace processes and strengthening civil society, as these are more likely to generate legitimate and resilient political outcomes than top-down interventions.

A critical next step, therefore, is for policymakers and scholars to reconceptualise R2P not as a standalone doctrine for military intervention but as an integral component of a broader, preventative framework centred on the SDGs. Future research should rigorously evaluate how investments in goals such as reduced inequalities (SDG 10), peace, justice and strong institutions (SDG 16) can build societal resilience against mass atrocities. Ultimately, the case of South Sudan suggests that protecting populations is an inherently political and developmental challenge, demanding strategies that address the root causes of conflict rather than merely its most violent manifestations.

## Contributions

This analysis makes a dual contribution to the literature on international intervention and peacebuilding. First, it provides a critical empirical assessment of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) application in South Sudan from 2021 to 2025, demonstrating how geopolitical constraints and local political dynamics have severely limited its efficacy.

Second, it advances a conceptual argument by explicitly linking the shortcomings of liberal interventionism to the pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), positing that a shift towards locally-led, development-focused strategies is essential for sustainable peace.

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