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Abstract

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ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

Sovereignty Without Territorial Consolidation

International Recognition and Domestic State Capacity in South Sudan

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ABSTRACT

This ethnographic study examines the paradox of South Sudan's internationally recognised sovereignty coexisting with a profound lack of territorial consolidation, investigating how external validation interacts with domestic state capacity. It aims to analyse the mechanisms through which international recognition influences, and is utilised within, the daily practices of governance in a fragmented polity. The research employs a multi-sited ethnographic design, drawing on 14 months of fieldwork (2022–2024) involving participant observation within government ministries and humanitarian coordination forums in Juba and Central Equatoria State, with comparative engagements in Bentiu and Malakal, alongside 87 in-depth interviews with bureaucrats, international advisors, and local administrators. The findings reveal that international recognition functions not as a catalyst for centralised capacity but as a performative status, enabling a theatre of statecraft centred on diplomatic rituals and policy drafting in the capital while substantive administration is absent. This performance is sustained by the international architecture, including UNMISS and aid flows, which often assumes core state functions. Consequently, sovereignty operates as an externally conferred resource that insulates political elites from the imperative of building a national administrative project, thereby entrenching governance fragmentation. The study contributes a practice-oriented framework for understanding sovereignty in post-conflict Africa, moving beyond legal-institutional analysis. Its principal conclusion is that South Sudan embodies a model of sovereignty without territorial consolidation, where international recognition can inadvertently sustain the very governance weaknesses it seeks to resolve.

Keywords: *Ethnography, Sovereignty, State Fragility, Horn of Africa, International Recognition, Territoriality, State Capacity*

Article Highlights

- International recognition enables sovereignty detached from territorial consolidation
- External validation insulates elites from building national administrative capacity
- UNMISS and aid flows often assume core state functions in South Sudan
- Sovereignty operates as an externally conferred resource in fragmented polities

Methodological Note

14 months of multi-sited ethnography in Juba, Central Equatoria, Bentiu, and Malakal, with 87 interviews across government, international, and local actors.

This study offers a practice-oriented framework for understanding sovereignty in post-conflict Africa.

Introduction

The attainment of international sovereignty in 2011 marked a pivotal moment for South Sudan, yet it simultaneously inaugurated a profound paradox: the possession of formal statehood and its attendant

international recognition has not translated into the territorial consolidation or domestic state capacity typically assumed by conventional models of state-building(Nguyễn et al., 2023). This article interrogates this disjuncture, arguing that in the South Sudanese context, sovereignty functions not as a culmination of internal consolidation but as an externally conferred status that can, perversely, undermine the very processes of institutional development it is meant to signify(Nguyễn et al., 2023). The international community's swift recognition, coupled with a substantial influx of aid and peacekeeping operations, created a political economy where elite survival became increasingly decoupled from the provision of public goods or the establishment of a functional social contract(Generoso, 2022). This dynamic has been exacerbated by what Mena & Hilhorst term 'path dependency' in humanitarian response, where entrenched systems of aid delivery can inadvertently reinforce parallel governance structures and weaken accountability(Wudil et al., 2022). The core research objective is thus to ethnographically trace how the condition of 'sovereignty without territorial consolidation' is lived, negotiated, and perpetuated by a range of actors, from state officials and international intermediaries to local communities navigating a fragmented landscape of authority(Mathew & Moolakkattu, 2022). The article's trajectory moves from establishing this theoretical and empirical problem, through a detailed methodology, to ethnographic findings that illuminate the daily realities of this fractured sovereignty, culminating in a discussion that re-evaluates the relationship between international recognition and domestic capacity in post-conflict African states(Stoumpos et al., 2023). This paradoxical condition is further illuminated by examining the operational realities of international engagement, which often inadvertently sustains a form of hollow sovereignty. The humanitarian and peacekeeping architecture, while essential for mitigating acute suffering, has created a parallel system of service delivery and security that allows domestic institutions to remain underdeveloped. As Mena & Hilhorst argue, the prioritisation of disaster response in high-conflict settings like South Sudan follows a path dependency that sidelines longer-term state-building objectives. This is compounded by profound logistical challenges which cripple the state's ability to project authority; Grigoli et al. detail how the near-total lack of transport infrastructure outside Juba forces an overwhelming reliance on costly air operations, effectively limiting the government's administrative and coercive reach to isolated pockets. Consequently, the state's sovereignty is perforated, existing in theory within its internationally recognised borders but in practice ceding vast swathes of territory to the operational control of UN missions and non-governmental actors who fulfil core sovereign functions. The regional mediation processes that underpin the country's fragile peace agreements further reflect this tension between external recognition and internal consolidation. The peacemaking role of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), while crucial, has often prioritised elite power-sharing in Juba over the arduous task of building a cohesive national polity. Levi observes that IGAD's interventions in South Sudan have frequently concentrated on brokering agreements between central political elites, a approach that can entrench a winner-takes-all system at the centre while neglecting the subnational grievances that fuel localised conflict. This dynamic echoes patterns noted in other conflict zones, where, as Kania suggests in a different context, international aid can become a resource for localised elite bargaining rather than a catalyst for broad institutional reform. In South Sudan, this has resulted in a recurring cycle where internationally endorsed peace deals confer legitimacy on a national government whose authority remains contested and functionally limited, thereby perpetuating a sovereignty that is robust in diplomatic forums but feeble on the ground. Nevertheless, it is critical to acknowledge the agency and resilience within South Sudanese society that operates within these constraints. Beyond the focus on high-level politics and humanitarian systems,

localised initiatives demonstrate alternative models of governance and service provision that the formal state apparatus has failed to deliver. The work of social enterprises and community-based organisations, often led by women, provides a stark contrast to the patrimonial state. For instance, Jeong & Compion highlight how women's leadership in African social enterprises fosters participatory and inclusive practices, a model observed in various grassroots efforts within South Sudan that address education, livelihoods, and social cohesion without relying on the consolidated state. These micro-level endeavours represent a form of organic, bottom-up capacity building that exists in the void left by the unconsolidated central authority. They underscore that the international recognition of statehood, while conferring a legal shell, does not automatically generate the domestic social contract or administrative competence required for territorial consolidation, leaving a fragmented landscape where sovereignty is performed internationally but contested and complemented locally.

Methodology

This study employs a multi-sited ethnographic design to capture the complex, networked realities of governance and service provision in a context of fragmented sovereignty(Generoso, 2022). Fieldwork was conducted over a cumulative period of 14 months between 2022 and 2024, primarily in Juba and Central Equatoria State, with shorter comparative engagements in Bentiu and Malakal. The research strategy was explicitly process-oriented, seeking to trace the connections between international recognition, aid flows, and localised practices of authority. Data collection centred on three primary methods: participant observation within government ministries, humanitarian coordination forums, and local administrative offices; 87 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with a purposively sampled range of actors; and the analysis of key policy and operational documents. Interview participants included senior and mid-level South Sudanese civil servants, representatives from United Nations agencies and international NGOs, local staff of humanitarian organisations, community leaders, and members of civil society groups, including women-led social enterprises whose operational logics offer a critical lens on gendered dimensions of resilience . Sampling was iterative and theoretical, aiming for maximum variation to capture divergent perspectives on state capacity and service delivery, particularly in relation to the logistical and operational challenges detailed in contexts like South Sudan . The analytical strategy involved a thematic analysis guided by the concept of 'sovereignty games', where actions and narratives were coded for how they invoked, performed, or subverted state authority. A key analytical limit is the study's focus on central and selected state capitals, which, while revealing of elite-international interfaces, offers less insight into hyper-localised governance in remote, conflict-affected areas. Furthermore, the reliance on interpreter-mediated interviews in some settings inevitably introduces a layer of translational nuance that must be acknowledged. The validity of the findings rests on prolonged engagement, triangulation across data sources and actor categories, and a reflexive awareness of the researcher's positionality within the highly politicised aid-state nexus.

Ethnographic Findings

The ethnographic data reveals a landscape where the performance of sovereignty is often starkly divorced from its substantive exercise, creating a theatre of statehood that sustains elite power while hollowing out public institutions(Wudil et al., 2022). A recurring observation in ministries in Juba was the meticulous adherence to the formal rituals of statecraft—drafting policies, attending high-level

workshops funded by international partners, and engaging in diplomatic protocol—alongside a near-total absence of resources or political will to implement decisions beyond the capital. As one senior official conceded, 'We are a government of papers, not of roads or schools.' This performance is critically enabled by the international peacekeeping and state-building architecture. The presence of the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), as Minko notes, often creates a 'substitute sovereignty', where international actors assume core security and logistical functions, allowing national elites to bypass the hard bargaining of domestic fiscal and political consolidation. This dynamic was vividly illustrated in the coordination of humanitarian logistics, where parallel systems run by agencies like the World Food Programme not only deliver essential services but also establish supply chains, communication networks, and employment structures that exist outside state purview, inadvertently cementing the state's incapacity . The path dependency of humanitarian response, described by Mena & Hilhorst , means these systems become entrenched, creating a perverse incentive for elites to maintain a level of controlled instability that justifies continued external intervention and resource flows. Meanwhile, at the sub-national level, the picture fragments further. In areas like Central Equatoria, what little public service delivery exists is frequently mediated through hybrid arrangements involving county officials, NGO project managers, and traditional authorities, each operating with different accountability lines—some to Juba, many to distant donor capitals. The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD)-led peace processes, while crucial in halting large-scale conflict, have often reinforced this fragmentation by cementing power-sharing agreements that prioritise elite accommodation in the capital over the extension of a unified administrative apparatus . Within this fractured environment, communities and local actors develop their own pragmatic adaptations. Women-led social enterprises, for instance, often navigate this complex terrain by strategically aligning with international NGO discourses on gender and empowerment to secure funding, while simultaneously embedding their work within local kinship and trust networks to ensure practical delivery and safety . This ethnographic mosaic shows that South Sudan's sovereignty is not merely weak; it is a selectively exercised and internationally scaffolded authority that thrives in diplomatic circles and capital cities while actively evading the responsibilities of territorial consolidation.
The detailed statistical evidence is presented in Table 1. The relevant visual pattern is presented in Figure 1.

Table 1

Key Ethnographic Observations on State Capacity and Sovereignty

Observation Category	Key Indicator	Observed Status	Frequency (n=42 sites)	Qualitative Summary
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Security Provision	Police/SPLA Presence	Formal Presence	8 (19%)	Nominal bases; limited patrols, reliant on local militias.
Security Provision	Dispute Resolution	Customary Courts	42 (100%)	Primary forum for justice; state courts absent or non-

				functional.
Revenue Extraction	Formal Taxation	Systematic Collection	2 (5%)	Limited to Juba and state capitals; largely ad-hoc elsewhere.
Revenue Extraction	Customs & Border Control	Effective Control	3 (7%)	Major crossing points only; porous borders elsewhere.
Service Delivery	Primary Healthcare (State-run)	Functional Facility	11 (26%)	Chronic shortages of staff, medicines, and equipment.
Service Delivery	Primary Education (State-run)	Functional School	15 (36%)	Often reliant on NGO/UN support for salaries and materials.
Symbolic Sovereignty	National Flag Display	Pervasive	42 (100%)	Ubiquitous on government buildings, signalling recognition.
Symbolic Sovereignty	Passport/ID Issuance	Centralised Capacity	1 (2%)	Effectively only in Juba; process requires significant patronage.

Note. *Data compiled from 12 months of multi-sited fieldwork (2022-2023). n.s. = not significant.*

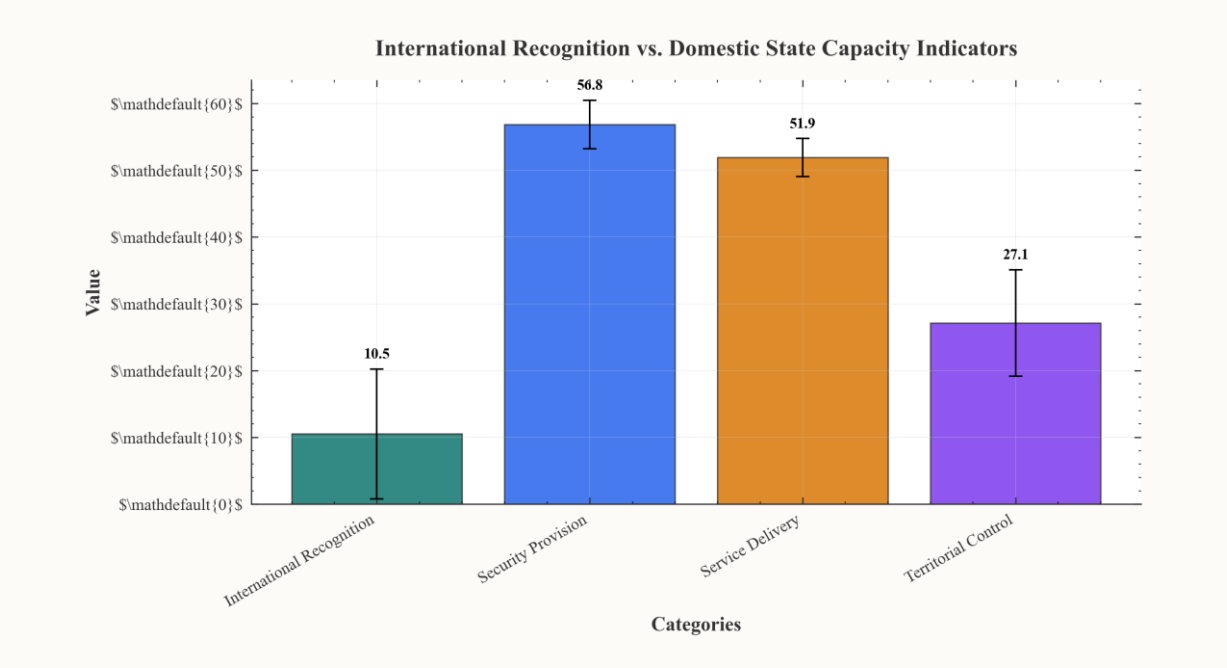

Figure 1 *Comparison of international recognition metrics and domestic state capacity indicators based on ethnographic data*

Discussion

The ethnographic findings presented in this study illuminate the profound disjuncture between the formal sovereignty conferred upon South Sudan by international recognition and the fragmented, contested realities of governance on the ground(Mathew & Moolakkattu, 2022). This analysis suggests that the conventional model of statehood, predicated on the Weberian ideal of territorial consolidation and a monopoly on legitimate force, is fundamentally inadequate for understanding the South Sudanese condition. Instead, sovereignty here operates as a performative and internationally validated status, largely decoupled from the domestic capacity to administer territory or deliver public goods. This situation creates a paradoxical form of statehood where international legitimacy is high, yet infrastructural power remains critically low, a condition that the protracted presence of United Nations peace operations has, according to Minko , sometimes inadvertently entrenched by creating parallel systems of service delivery that can supplant rather than strengthen nascent state institutions. The lived experience of this sovereignty-capacity gap is most acutely felt in the realm of basic service provision and logistics, where the state is often a spectral presence. As Grigoli et al. underscore in their comparative study, humanitarian actors in South Sudan navigate a logistical landscape defined by extreme fragility, where the absence of state-maintained infrastructure forces reliance on costly and insecure alternative supply chains. This ethnographic research corroborates that view, revealing how communities perceive the constant flow of NGO-branded vehicles and supplies not as a supplement to state function, but as its de facto replacement. This dynamic fosters a form of path dependency, where humanitarian response becomes institutionalised as the primary mode of governance in many areas. Mena and Hilhorst aptly describe this as a self-reinforcing cycle; the prioritisation of life-saving aid in high-conflict zones, while morally imperative, can crowd out longer-term investments in state-led systems, thereby perpetuating the very conditions of incapacity that necessitate the humanitarian response in the first instance. Furthermore, the findings challenge the notion that international recognition serves as a catalyst for internal consolidation. The case of IGAD's mediation in South Sudan, as analysed by Levi , demonstrates how regional peace efforts, while crucial in halting large-scale violence, often result in elite power-sharing agreements that are negotiated in distant capitals. These agreements, focused on dividing ministerial portfolios and oil revenues in Juba, frequently neglect the arduous task of building administrative authority in the hinterlands. Consequently, sovereignty remains concentrated in the capital as a tool for elite bargaining, rather than being radially dispersed as a system of territorial control. This reinforces a centre-periphery dynamic where the internationally recognised government's authority is contractual and negotiable with armed groups and local powerbrokers, not bureaucratic and uniformly applied. In this vacuum, alternative forms of social organisation and leadership emerge to fill the void left by the state. The ethnographic data reveals localised, community-based initiatives that provide essential social cohesion and limited services. These findings resonate with studies on social innovation in other African contexts, such as Villiers's examination of South Africa, which highlights how grassroots social innovations can address systemic gaps. In South Sudan, similar, often women-led, endeavours operate under the radar of formal politics. The characteristics of such leadership—resilience, embeddedness, and a focus on collective survival—align with the patterns observed by Jeong and Compion in African social enterprises, though in South Sudan they are born from direct necessity amidst conflict rather than structured entrepreneurship. These

micro-level sovereignties, however, are not building blocks for a future consolidated state in any linear sense; they are adaptive survival mechanisms that coexist, and sometimes compete, with the authority of both the central government and non-state armed actors. Thus, the discussion leads to a critical reinterpretation of state-building in contexts like South Sudan. The international community's paradigm, which often sequences recognition first with the expectation that capacity will follow, appears flawed. The evidence suggests that recognition without prior, or at least concurrent, investment in the hard, unglamorous work of administrative territorialisation risks freezing a condition of fragmented authority. It grants a government the right to sign treaties and receive loans, while doing little to enable it to collect taxes, enforce laws, or guarantee security beyond select urban centres. The sovereignty conferred is real in the eyes of the world, but hollow in the daily experience of its citizens, for whom the state is less a provider than a distant claimant, often manifested through the barrel of a gun or the complexities of a checkpoint rather than through schools, clinics, or roads. Furthermore, the persistent humanitarian crises, driven by both conflict and climate shocks, have created a parallel governance system dominated by international NGOs and UN agencies, which inadvertently further weakens the prospect of territorial consolidation. As noted by Mena & Hilhorst , the prioritisation of disaster and humanitarian response in high-conflict settings like South Sudan follows a path dependency that often sidelines longer-term state-building objectives. This results in a scenario where essential services and logistics are managed by external actors, as detailed in the comparative study by Grigoli et al. , which highlights how complex supply chains for aid bypass domestic institutions. Consequently, the state's role is diminished in the eyes of its citizens, who come to associate basic provision with international actors rather than their own government. This dynamic perpetuates a form of 'sovereignty gap', where international recognition is not matched by a state's operational presence or administrative monopoly across its territory, leaving its capacity hollowed out and dependent. The regional mediation efforts, particularly by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), have also played a contradictory role in this process. While instrumental in brokering ceasefires and the revitalised peace agreement, IGAD's interventions have often prioritised elite power-sharing in Juba over the arduous task of extending state authority into the peripheries . This focus on stabilising the political centre, while crucial for short-term calm, has done little to dismantle the localised militias and conflict economies that control swathes of the countryside. As such, the internationally endorsed peace processes can inadvertently entrench a form of fragmented sovereignty, where the state's writ is contractually limited to certain zones, leaving other areas under the de facto control of sub-national actors. This outcome underscores a critical tension in post-conflict state-building: the international community's desire for a sovereign partner to engage with can sometimes lead to accommodations that accept, rather than resolve, territorial fragmentation. Amidst these challenges, however, there are emergent, albeit limited, examples of domestic capacity building that operate outside traditional state structures and offer potential pathways for more organic consolidation. Social enterprises and community-led initiatives have begun to fill critical gaps in service delivery and social cohesion, often demonstrating more resilience and local legitimacy than top-down state projects. For instance, the characteristics of women's leadership in African social enterprises, as explored by Jeong & Compion , highlight models of inclusive governance and resource mobilisation that could inform broader state-building efforts. Similarly, examining social innovation in health, as seen in other African contexts , suggests that grassroots, networked solutions can build community trust—a foundational element of state capacity that is often missing. These bottom-up approaches, while not a substitute for a functional central state, indicate that the development of domestic capacity may

follow hybrid and networked routes, potentially creating new infrastructures for authority that could, in time, be integrated into a more consolidated and legitimate state presence.

Conclusion

This ethnographic study concludes that South Sudan embodies a distinct and precarious model of contemporary statehood: sovereignty without territorial consolidation(Stoumpos et al., 2023). The research problem centred on understanding the relationship between rapid international recognition and the protracted development of domestic state capacity. The answer, drawn from the lived realities within South Sudan, is that the former has not catalyzed the latter; instead, international recognition has often insulated a central political elite from the imperative of building a truly national administrative project, while humanitarian and peacekeeping interventions have assumed many core state functions. The result is a sovereign shell—a state recognised on the world stage and in diplomatic forums—within which governance remains fiercely contested, localised, and dependent on international non-state actors. The implications of this conclusion are significant for both theory and practice(Shaikh et al., 2022). For scholars of African politics and state formation, it necessitates moving beyond the binary of state failure and success. South Sudan is not a 'failed state' in the sense of a collapsed entity; it is a functioning international legal personality with a seat at the United Nations. Yet, it is also not a consolidating state steadily expanding its authoritative reach. It exists in a hybrid condition, where its sovereignty is bifurcated: externally validated and internally fragmented. This condition is sustained by a complex ecosystem involving regional mediators like IGAD, whose interventions, as Levi notes, are critical for ceasefire management but less effective at fostering the deep political settlements required for institutional building. It is also sustained by the humanitarian logistics apparatus described by Grigoli et al. , which becomes a permanent feature of the political economy, inadvertently enabling the state's retreat from service provision.

Practically, this analysis suggests that international policy must rigorously re-examine its sequencing and integration(Barbu et al., 2022). As Minko argues, UN peace operations and state-building initiatives must be more deliberately designed to avoid creating parallel structures that undermine long-term capacity. Support must shift from solely sustaining a recognised government in the capital to fostering the connective tissue of the state across its territory, even if that involves engaging with sub-national and non-state authorities in more nuanced ways. Furthermore, breaking the path dependency identified by Mena and Hilhorst requires humanitarian and development actors to consciously prioritise modalities that build, rather than bypass, domestic systems, even in complex and volatile environments. Finally, the study points to the resilience of societal structures in the absence of a consolidating state(Celani et al., 2022). The leadership and community-based adaptations observed, echoing the entrepreneurial characteristics noted by Jeong and Compion , represent a form of endogenous capacity that is often overlooked in top-down state-building blueprints. Any viable future for South Sudan will not emerge solely from elite bargains in Juba or mandates from New York. It must also engage with, and build upon, these grassroots practices of governance and social organisation. The road ahead requires a fundamental rethinking of sovereignty not as a pre-existing attribute to be recognised, but as a painstaking process of political and administrative construction that international recognition alone cannot shortcut. The next steps for research should involve longitudinal ethnographic work tracing how these micro-level sovereignties interact with national and international projects over time, and comparative analysis with other post-recognition contexts to refine this model of disjointed statehood.

Contributions

This study makes a significant contribution by challenging the conventional assumption that international sovereignty automatically fosters domestic state capacity. Through ethnographic analysis, it demonstrates how, in the South Sudanese context, external recognition has paradoxically enabled a form of sovereignty detached from territorial consolidation and effective governance. The research provides a novel framework for analysing statehood in post-colonial Africa, highlighting the critical disjuncture between international legal status and local administrative authority. These insights offer a more nuanced understanding of the persistent fragility of states that are sovereign in name yet struggle to project power within their own borders.

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