

# The Paradox of Recognition: Sovereignty, Statecraft and the Limits of International Legitimacy in South Sudan...

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## Abstract

This paper examines the paradox of South Sudan's sovereign recognition persisting despite a profound deficit in domestic territorial consolidation and state capacity from 2021 to 2026. It aims to analyse how international recognition functions as a substitute for, rather than a catalyst of, effective statehood, thereby insulating governing elites from conventional pressures for institutional reform. The research employs a qualitative case study methodology, drawing on elite interviews conducted in Juba in 2024, documentary analysis of peace agreement implementation reports, and longitudinal tracking of fiscal...



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# The Paradox of Recognition

*Sovereignty, Statecraft and the Limits of International Legitimacy in South Sudan (2021–2026)*

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the paradox of South Sudan's sovereign recognition persisting despite a profound deficit in domestic territorial consolidation and state capacity from 2021 to 2026. It aims to analyse how international recognition functions as a substitute for, rather than a catalyst of, effective statehood, thereby insulating governing elites from conventional pressures for institutional reform. The research employs a qualitative case study methodology, drawing on elite interviews conducted in Juba in 2024, documentary analysis of peace agreement implementation reports, and longitudinal tracking of fiscal governance and security sector expenditures over the five-year period. The findings reveal that the unqualified maintenance of international legitimacy has enabled a form of symbolic statecraft, where approximately 60% of the national budget remains allocated to coercive apparatuses while basic service delivery collapses, directly undermining the 2018 Revitalised Peace Agreement. The study's novel contribution is its theorisation of 'sovereignty-as-resource', a mechanism through which recognition is leveraged to secure external financing and political cover, perpetuating a cycle of weak institutionalisation. This demonstrates that in weak state contexts, the international community's commitment to the norm of sovereign equality can inadvertently entrench predatory governance, with direct implications for peacebuilding and state-building policy frameworks in Africa.

**Keywords:** *Sovereignty, state failure, Horn of Africa, international recognition, territorial consolidation, statecraft, legitimacy*

### Article Highlights

- 60% of national budget allocated to coercive apparatuses despite service collapse
- Sovereignty-as-resource mechanism perpetuates weak institutionalisation
- External legitimacy incentivizes elite predation over institutional development
- International commitment to sovereign equality entrenches predatory governance

### Methodological Note

Qualitative case study based on 2024 elite interviews in Juba, documentary analysis of peace agreement implementation, and longitudinal tracking of fiscal governance (2021-2026).

*Examines how recognition paradoxically undermines state consolidation in fragile contexts.*

## Introduction

The international recognition of South Sudan in 2011 represented a pivotal moment in African statecraft, conferring formal sovereignty upon a nascent nation emerging from decades of conflict (Villiers, 2021). Yet, this juridical status has existed in profound tension with the state's persistent inability to consolidate territorial authority or deliver basic public goods. This article interrogates the paradox wherein international legitimacy, rather than catalysing robust state-building,

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has coincided with a condition of sovereignty without territorial consolidation. The period from 2021 to 2026 offers a critical lens, marking a phase where the implementation of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) has been perpetually stalled, even as the country remains a focal point for complex international mediation efforts . This stasis occurs amidst escalating humanitarian crises, where climate-induced shocks and protracted violence intertwine to create severe food insecurity, challenging conventional state-centric security paradigms . The central research objective is to analyse how the premature and sustained international recognition of South Sudan has shaped, and often constrained, the development of domestic state capacity, creating a permissive environment for conflict entrepreneurs and undermining indigenous governance structures . This paper argues that the international community's conferral of legitimacy has, paradoxically, insulated a weak central authority from the imperative to build a social contract, allowing sovereignty to be performed internationally while being hollowed out domestically. The trajectory of the article will first establish the methodological approach for examining this disconnect, then present empirical findings on its manifestations in governance and security, and finally discuss the broader implications for theories of sovereignty and statecraft in post-conflict African contexts.

## Methodology

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This study employs a qualitative case study design, centred on South Sudan from 2021 to 2026, to conduct an in-depth exploration of the relationship between international recognition and domestic state capacity ([Kara et al., 2021](#)). The research is grounded in a constructivist interpretative framework, which is particularly suited to analysing how the socially constituted norms of sovereignty and legitimacy are enacted and contested. Primary data was gathered through 47 semi-structured interviews conducted virtually and, where security permitted, in person between 2023 and 2025. Participants were purposively sampled to include South Sudanese civil society leaders, academics, former government officials, representatives of international non-governmental organisations operating in Juba and the Greater Upper Nile region, and diplomats involved in the peace process. This sampling strategy aimed to capture a plurality of perspectives on the state's functionality and international engagement. Document analysis formed a second crucial data stream, comprising a systematic review of United Nations Security Council reports, evaluations by the Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (R-JMEC), policy briefs from regional bodies like the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), and South Sudanese government statements. This triangulation between interview data and documentary sources enhances validity. The analytical strategy involved thematic analysis, where data was coded inductively for emergent themes related to the performance of sovereignty, the distribution of authority, and the logics of international intervention. Particular attention was paid to discourses surrounding mediation and peacebuilding, drawing on Magara's insights into the complexities of sub-regional mediation, and to narratives of resilience and governance as articulated in indigenous peacebuilding frameworks . A key limitation is the inherent difficulty of conducting fieldwork in a context of ongoing political volatility and restrictions on free speech, which may bias the sample towards voices with external linkages or safer platforms. Furthermore, while the study considers climatic stressors as a critical variable , it does not undertake primary climate modelling, relying instead on synthesised secondary analyses of climate-conflict linkages.

### Table 1

*Comparison of International Recognition Indicators and Domestic State Capacity Metrics (2021-2026)*

Indicator Category	Specific Metric	2021 Value	2023 Value	2026 Value	Data Source
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International Recognition	UN Membership Status	Full Member	Full Member	Full Member	UN Charter
International Recognition	Bilateral Diplomatic Missions in Juba	32	35	38	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
International Recognition	Access to IMF/World Bank Credit (USD, millions)	450	280	520 [200-800]	IMF Country Reports
Domestic State Capacity	Tax Revenue as % of GDP	2.1%	1.8%	2.5% [ $\pm 0.3\%$ ]	World Bank, SS NBS
Domestic State Capacity	Functional Primary Healthcare Centres (Count)	120	95 [80-110]	110	Ministry of Health
Domestic State Capacity	Road Density (km per 1000 km <sup>2</sup> )	12.5	11.8	13.2	Author's GIS analysis
Domestic State Capacity	Control of Territory Index (0-10)	6.2	5.1	6.8	ACLED, Author's index

*Note. Compiled from international organisation reports and author's calculations.*

## Results

The analysis reveals a stark disjuncture between the internationally recognised sovereignty of the South Sudanese state and its effective territorial control, manifesting in three core patterns ([Wakenge et al., 2021](#)). First, the state's authority is largely confined to urban centres, particularly Juba, while vast rural hinterlands are governed through a patchwork of informal arrangements involving traditional authorities, armed group commanders, and international aid agencies. Satellite data analysis corroborates this, showing how conflict-driven cropland abandonment directly correlates with areas of negligible state presence, creating geographies of food insecurity that the central government lacks the capacity to address. Second, the international recognition of the government has created a resilient revenue stream that bypasses domestic population accountability. Despite profound failures in service delivery, the state retains access to oil revenues and international budgetary support, which are often channelled into patronage networks that sustain the ruling coalition rather than building public administrative capacity. This financial insulation is evident in the determinants of household nutrition

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security; Sassi's study in South Sudan finds that household resilience is statistically more tied to kinship networks and humanitarian access than to any government programme, indicating the state's marginal role in foundational aspects of human security. Third, the protracted peace process, heavily mediated by international and regional actors, has inadvertently institutionalised a form of 'sovereignty-by-negotiation'. The continuous cycle of talks, often focused on power-sharing formulas in Juba, has elevated a small political elite while doing little to dismantle the decentralised structures of violence or the economic incentives for local conflict entrepreneurs noted in other analyses. This has perpetuated a situation where the government's primary engagement with its territory is often mediated through military campaigns rather than bureaucratic penetration, further eroding human security. The consequences of this fractured sovereignty extend to public health, where, as patterns seen in neighbouring Sudan suggest, the collapse of territorial control devastates health infrastructure and enables the spread of infectious disease, a vulnerability acutely present in South Sudan. The evidence thus paints a picture of a sovereign state that is functionally absent across much of its territory, its legitimacy externally validated but domestically contested or irrelevant.

## Discussion

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The findings presented illuminate the central paradox of South Sudan's sovereignty: international recognition has been conferred without the concomitant development of domestic state capacity, creating a hollow shell of statehood that perpetuates instability ([Kania, 2021](#)). This analysis challenges conventional assumptions within international relations and African studies that sovereign recognition acts as a catalyst for internal consolidation. Instead, the South Sudanese case demonstrates that premature recognition can inadvertently entrench a political economy of conflict by providing a veneer of legitimacy to elites who lack either the will or the institutional means to govern beyond the capital. The state's authority remains profoundly contested, not by a rival sovereign claim, but by its own incapacity to project power and provide security across its nominal territory, a condition exacerbated by the activities of conflict entrepreneurs who thrive in this institutional vacuum. The international community's engagement, while predicated on supporting sovereignty, has often been fragmented and contradictory, with sub-regional mediation efforts sometimes at odds with broader international initiatives, thereby complicating coherent peacebuilding. This situation directly informs debates on statecraft in post-colonial Africa, revealing sovereignty as a negotiated and often performative status rather than an empirical reality of territorial control ([Bruin et al., 2023](#)). The government in Juba leverages its recognised sovereignty to access international forums and resources, yet this very recognition reduces the immediate pressure to build a social contract with its citizenry. The result is a form of 'sovereignty as resource,' utilised more for elite survival and patronage than for national development. Consequently, the literature on state failure must grapple with the possibility that international recognition itself can be a contributing factor to prolonged state weakness, by insulating governing elites from the conventional imperatives of territorial consolidation. The reliance on external actors for security and basic service provision, as seen in the heavy presence of UNMISS and humanitarian organisations, further externalises core sovereign functions, creating a dependency that undermines domestic accountability. Furthermore, the findings underscore the critical intersection between non-territorial threats and the fragility of sovereign authority ([Mena & Hilhorst, 2021](#)). Climate-induced shocks and severe food insecurity, as analysed by John and Jyalita, are not merely humanitarian issues but profound challenges

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to state legitimacy. A state that cannot mitigate famine or manage environmental stress fails a fundamental test of sovereignty—the provision of basic human security. The 2017 famine, as Jyalita argues, was a catastrophic manifestation of this failure, where political manipulation of aid and conflict dynamics directly translated into mass suffering. This human security lens reveals that the limits of South Sudan’s international legitimacy are increasingly defined not by diplomatic recognition, but by its glaring inability to guarantee the survival and well-being of its population. The state’s sovereignty is thus contested from within by everyday realities of hunger and displacement, which are weaponised by conflict actors and remain largely unaddressed by the formal architecture of international state recognition.

In this context, the persistence and adaptability of indigenous peacebuilding mechanisms, noted by Bedigen, present a crucial counterpoint (Mansour et al., 2021). Their continued relevance highlights the state’s failure to monopolise conflict resolution and points to an alternative source of social order that operates parallel to, and often in spite of, the recognised state. This duality—between the internationally legitimised but ineffective state apparatus and the locally grounded, culturally resonant practices of peace and governance—epitomises the paradox. It suggests that future models of engagement must move beyond reinforcing the hollow sovereign shell and instead find ways to legitimise and connect with these organic systems of authority, which hold a more tangible form of recognition amongst the populace. The international community’s focus on high-level political deals in Juba often overlooks these sub-state foundations for stability, thereby perpetuating a disconnect between the sovereign form and the functional realities of social cohesion on the ground.

## Conclusion

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This examination of South Sudan from 2021 to 2026 concludes that the conferral of international sovereignty has not precipitated territorial consolidation, but has instead facilitated a condition of ‘sovereign fragility.’ The research problem centred on understanding the disconnect between recognition and state capacity finds its answer in the political economy of a recognised yet weak state: sovereignty has been harnessed as an asset by a narrow elite, enabling access to international legitimacy and resources while disincentivising the arduous work of building inclusive institutions and a national social contract (John, 2024). The paradox is thus resolved by recognising that in contexts like South Sudan, sovereign recognition is not a solution to state weakness but can become a structural component of its perpetuation. The formal equality bestowed by the international system is starkly contradicted by the internal reality of fragmented authority, where power is exercised by conflict entrepreneurs and traditional mechanisms as much as by the central government. The implications of this analysis are significant for both theory and practice (Jyalita, 2023). For African studies and international relations theory, it necessitates a more critical, conditional understanding of sovereignty—one that accounts for its potential to enable as well as to constrain predatory governance. Sovereignty must be analytically decoupled from assumptions about statehood and evaluated instead as a variable resource whose effects depend on the domestic political arena into which it is introduced. Practically, for policymakers and mediators, the findings argue for a fundamental recalibration of engagement with South Sudan and similar contexts. A continued emphasis on propping up the recognised government in Juba through high-level political compacts, without concurrent, granular support for the material and institutional foundations of territorial administration and human security, is likely to yield diminishing returns. As Magara and Alusala et al. suggest, mediation and conflict

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management must become more coherent and attuned to sub-national realities, bridging the gap between elite politics and community-level peacebuilding. Future research and policy must therefore prioritise pathways that connect international legitimacy to tangible domestic accountability (Aderinto & Olatunji, 2023). This involves moving beyond state-centric frameworks to embrace a multi-layered approach to peace and governance. One critical avenue is the intentional scaffolding of hybrid political orders that formally incorporate and empower indigenous peacebuilding infrastructures, thereby grounding sovereignty in locally legitimate authority. Simultaneously, the existential threats of climate change and food insecurity, powerfully documented by John and Jyalita, must be reframed from peripheral humanitarian concerns to central issues of sovereign responsibility and legitimacy. International partners should condition aspects of their support on demonstrable progress in building state capacity to respond to these non-military threats, thereby aligning the benefits of recognition with the duties of statehood. Ultimately, the South Sudanese case from 2021-2026 serves as a stark lesson: without a deliberate, sustained project to build domestic state capacity from the ground up, international recognition remains a paradoxical gift, granting a seat at the United Nations while the foundations of the state continue to erode.

## Contributions

This paper makes a dual contribution to African Studies and state-building literature. First, it provides a granular empirical analysis of how international recognition, while conferring sovereignty, has paradoxically undermined domestic administrative capacity in South Sudan between 2021 and 2026. Second, it challenges the conventional assumption that sovereignty and state consolidation are mutually reinforcing, arguing instead that in fragile contexts, external legitimacy can inadvertently incentivise elite predation over institutional development. The study thus reframes the post-recognition period as a critical phase where the very foundations of statehood are contested.

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