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SURVEY RESEARCH

A Fragile Compact

A Survey Analysis of Public Perceptions of the Revitalised Peace Agreement in South Sudan

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ABSTRACT

This survey research article examines contemporary public attitudes towards the implementation of the 2018 Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS). Drawing on a nationally representative survey of 1,200 respondents, the study analyses perceptions of security sector reform, transitional justice mechanisms, and the inclusivity of the peace process. The findings reveal a significant trust deficit in institutional guarantors, a strong public demand for accountability, and divergent views on federalism. The evidence suggests that while the agreement remains the primary political framework, its perceived legitimacy is contingent upon tangible improvements in security and governance, posing critical challenges for sustainable peace.

Keywords: *Revitalised Peace Agreement (R-ARCSS), Public Perceptions, Security Sector Reform, Transitional Justice, Institutional Legitimacy, Federalism Debate, Peace Implementation, South Sudan*

Article Highlights

- Survey reveals significant public trust deficit in institutional guarantors of the peace process
- Strong public demand for accountability through transitional justice mechanisms
- Divergent regional views on federalism complicate implementation consensus
- Public perceptions show critical disconnects between elite agreements and local priorities

Methodological Note

Nationally representative survey of 1,200 respondents conducted 2021-2024, providing longitudinal baseline data for measuring future progress in South Sudan's stability.

This analysis offers policymakers evidence-based insights into the social foundations of South Sudan's peace process.

Introduction

The signing of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) in September 2018 was heralded as a pivotal moment of hope, promising to end a devastating civil war that erupted barely two years after the nation's hard-won independence. This agreement, a complex and ambitious political roadmap, sought not merely to silence the guns but to address the foundational governance and security fissures that have perpetuated cycles of violence since the pre-independence era. The R-ARCSS represents the latest in a long lineage of peace accords for South Sudan, each attempting to forge a stable political order from a legacy of deep-seated ethnic fragmentation, economic predation, and institutional fragility. Its revitalised nature acknowledges the collapse of its 2015 predecessor, the Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS), underscoring the profound challenges of sustaining elite bargains in a context where the incentives for peace are often outweighed by the rewards of continued conflict and resource control. Consequently, the R-ARCSS occupies a critical yet precarious position, tasked with breaking a protracted conflict cycle that has inflicted immense humanitarian suffering and eroded the very social contract it aims to restore. While the technical implementation of the R-ARCSS—involving security sector reform, transitional justice mechanisms, and the establishment of a Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU)—has been the subject of considerable scholarly and diplomatic scrutiny, a significant lacuna persists. This gap concerns the systematic analysis of how the South Sudanese public itself perceives this foundational compact. Existing literature has extensively documented the elite-level negotiations, geopolitical dimensions, and structural obstacles to the peace process, often framing success or failure through the lens of compliance by signatory parties and international guarantors. However, the attitudes, expectations, and degree of ownership felt by ordinary citizens—the ultimate stakeholders in any sustainable peace—remain underexplored and largely anecdotal. This omission is critical, as the societal legitimacy of a peace agreement is a fundamental determinant of its resilience and long-term viability. Without a substrate of public trust and belief in its provisions, even a technically implemented accord risks remaining a hollow document, disconnected from the lived realities and aspirations of the population it is designed to serve. This article, therefore, seeks to address this empirical and analytical gap by posing a central research question: To what extent does the Revitalised Peace Agreement possess societal legitimacy among the South Sudanese public, and what are the key factors shaping these perceptions? The inquiry proceeds from the premise that public perception is not a peripheral concern but a core component of the political ecology of peacebuilding. Perceptions of fairness, inclusivity, and likely effectiveness influence communal cooperation with implementation, willingness to engage in reconciliation processes, and ultimately, the public's willingness to hold political elites accountable to their commitments. In a fragmented polity like South Sudan, where historical grievances are pervasive and state-citizen relations are often characterised by distrust, understanding these perceptions is indispensable for diagnosing the agreement's strengths and vulnerabilities beyond the capital, Juba. To this end, this study presents a novel analysis of original survey data, offering a quantitative snapshot of public attitudes towards the R-ARCSS across multiple dimensions. It investigates perceptions of the agreement's inclusivity, its potential to deliver lasting peace, and the performance of the transitional government, while also exploring regional and demographic variations in these views. By grounding its investigation in empirical public opinion data, the article moves beyond speculative or normative

assessments to provide an evidence-based examination of the peace agreement's social foundations. This focus contributes directly to broader debates within African Peace Studies concerning the local ownership of peace processes, the perils of externally driven 'liberal peacebuilding' templates, and the critical importance of sub-national and societal dynamics in determining post-conflict trajectories. The structure of the article is as follows. Following this introduction, the Methodology section details the design, administration, and ethical considerations of the survey, outlining the sampling strategy and analytical techniques employed. The subsequent section presents the core Findings, analysing public perceptions across key thematic areas including confidence in the agreement, evaluations of its implementation, and attitudes towards justice and reconciliation. The Discussion section then interprets these findings, situating them within the specific

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to investigate public perceptions of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS). The primary objective was to generate a nuanced, nationally representative analysis of citizen attitudes towards the peace process, its implementation, and its perceived impact on core pillars of security, justice, and governance. To achieve this, the methodology strategically combined quantitative data from a large-scale household survey with qualitative insights derived from key informant interviews. This integrated approach allows for the generalisability of the survey findings to be contextualised and enriched by the detailed, experiential knowledge of stakeholders directly engaged with the agreement's provisions.

The cornerstone of the research is a nationally representative survey of 1,200 adult respondents (aged 18 and above), conducted between [Month] and [Month] 2023. To ensure the sample accurately reflected South Sudan's diverse demographic and geographical landscape, a multi-stage stratified random sampling design was implemented. The country was first stratified by its ten states and the three Administrative Areas. Within each stratum, primary sampling units (PSUs) were selected with probability proportional to size, using population estimates from the latest available census data. A critical consideration for representativeness in the South Sudanese context was the inclusion of populations residing in Protection of Civilians (PoC) sites and internally displaced persons (IDP) camps. Consequently, these protection sites were treated as separate sampling strata to guarantee their residents were adequately represented in the final sample, acknowledging their unique experiences of conflict and peace. Within each selected PSU, households were chosen via random walk procedures, and individual respondents within households were selected using the Kish grid method to ensure random selection and gender balance.

The survey instrument was a structured questionnaire, developed after an extensive review of the R-ARCSS text and prior scholarship on peacebuilding in South Sudan. It was translated into Juba Arabic and several major local languages, and underwent rigorous pre-testing and piloting to ensure conceptual clarity and cultural appropriateness. The questionnaire was organised into distinct thematic modules. The core module gathered standard socio-demographic data. Subsequent modules probed respondents' awareness and overall assessment of the R-ARCSS. The most substantive sections focused on perceptions of security (including freedom of movement, presence of armed actors, and community safety), justice (encompassing both formal and traditional mechanisms, and perceptions of accountability), and governance (covering trust in institutions, perceptions of political inclusivity, and

service delivery). Interviewers, who received intensive training on ethical research conduct in fragile settings, administered the questionnaires face-to-face using digital data collection devices. To complement and deepen the quantitative data, 45 semi-structured key informant interviews were conducted concurrently with the survey fieldwork. Interviewees were purposively selected to provide a range of perspectives across different sectors and geographical regions. This cohort included members of the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU), opposition party officials, civil society leaders, traditional authorities, representatives of international non-governmental organisations and diplomatic missions, and academics. The interview guides were thematically aligned with the survey modules but allowed for open-ended exploration of complex issues such as the dynamics of power-sharing, the integration of security forces, and the challenges of transitional justice. These interviews provided essential context for interpreting the survey results, offering insights into the political calculations and institutional constraints shaping the implementation—or stagnation—of the peace agreement.

The research adhered to stringent ethical protocols, approved by the [Name of Institutional Review Board, anonymised for review]. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw emphasised. Given the sensitive political and security climate in South Sudan, particular attention was paid to minimising risk. Interviewers were trained to recognise and avoid situations of potential danger for themselves or respondents. All data were anonymised at the point of collection, and identifying information was stored separately on encrypted, password-protected devices. For key informant interviews, additional measures were taken to protect the identity of participants where requested, often using broader role descriptors rather than specific titles in reporting. Nevertheless, several methodological limitations must be acknowledged. First, while the sampling design aimed for national representativeness, logistical and security Analytical specification: Sample size was guided by the standard proportion formula: $n = \frac{(Z^2 p (1 - p))}{d^2}$, where Z is the confidence level, p is the expected proportion, and d is the margin of error.

Survey Results

The survey data reveal a complex and often contradictory landscape of public opinion regarding the implementation of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS). While a degree of cautious optimism is detectable in certain domains, particularly concerning security, this is heavily tempered by profound scepticism towards key institutional reforms and deep divisions on fundamental questions of governance structure. Regarding perceived improvements in personal and communal security since the signing of the R-ARCSS, the findings indicate a notable regional disparity. Respondents in the formerly conflict-affected regions of Greater Upper Nile and Greater Bahr el Ghazal reported marginally more positive perceptions of security trends compared to those in the Greater Equatoria region. This suggests that the cessation of major, nationwide hostilities has been felt more acutely in areas that were epicentres of the previous conflict. However, it is crucial to note that these reported improvements were consistently described as ‘slight’ or ‘moderate’ rather than transformative, with a significant minority across all regions perceiving no change or a deterioration in conditions. This underscores the fragile and uneven nature of the post-agreement security environment.

Public attitudes towards the cornerstone security provision of the R-ARCSS—the formation of the Necessary Unified Forces (NUF)—are characterised by deep-seated doubt. A strong majority of respondents expressed scepticism about the genuine integration of formerly opposing forces, viewing the process as superficial and politically instrumentalised . This scepticism extends to the broader project of security sector reform (SSR), where respondents frequently cited a lack of transparency in the screening, training, and deployment of unified forces. Many perceived the process as being hampered by continuous delays, political interference, and the persistent allegiance of military actors to ethnic and factional leaders rather than to a national chain of command. Consequently, the unified forces are not yet widely perceived as a legitimate, national institution capable of guaranteeing citizen security. On matters of transitional justice and accountability, the survey data present a striking consensus. There is overwhelming public support for the establishment of the Hybrid Court for South Sudan, as provided for in Chapter V of the R-ARCSS . Respondents across demographic and regional lines articulated a clear demand for formal legal accountability for atrocities committed during the civil war, viewing the Court as an essential mechanism for ending impunity and fostering national reconciliation. This support stands in contrast to more ambivalent attitudes towards the Commission for Truth, Reconciliation and Healing (CTRH). While seen as potentially useful for communal dialogue, the CTRH was frequently characterised as a secondary or complementary process, with its effectiveness deemed wholly contingent on the prior or parallel operation of the Hybrid Court. The clear public prioritisation of judicial accountability over purely reconciliatory measures presents a significant challenge to political actors who may favour a less juridical approach. The survey also illuminated sharply divergent perceptions of political inclusivity under the revitalised transitional government. A plurality of respondents, particularly from communities aligned with non-signatory or minor opposition groups, reported feeling excluded from the political process, which they described as dominated by the two principal signatory parties . This sentiment fuels the perception that the R-ARCSS has merely reshuffled power among a narrow elite, rather than fostering a genuinely inclusive national politics. This contention directly feeds into the most polarising governance issue identified in the survey: the debate over federalism. The data reveal a stark ethno-regional cleavage in preferences for the state structure. Respondents from Equatoria and parts of Upper Nile exhibited strong support for a federal system, envisaging it as a safeguard against centralised domination and a means to ensure equitable resource sharing. Conversely, many respondents from Bahr el Ghazal and other constituencies viewed the push for federalism with suspicion, interpreting it as a potential precursor to secession or a weakening of national unity . This debate remains a deeply contentious and unresolved fault line in South Sudan’s political landscape. Analysis of key demographic correlations within the data further refines these findings. Levels of education exhibited a significant relationship with attitudes towards institutional reforms; respondents with higher educational attainment demonstrated greater cynicism regarding the implementation of security sector reform and political inclusivity, often providing more detailed critiques of process failures . Unsurprisingly, direct personal exposure to violence during the conflict—whether through displacement, loss of property, or

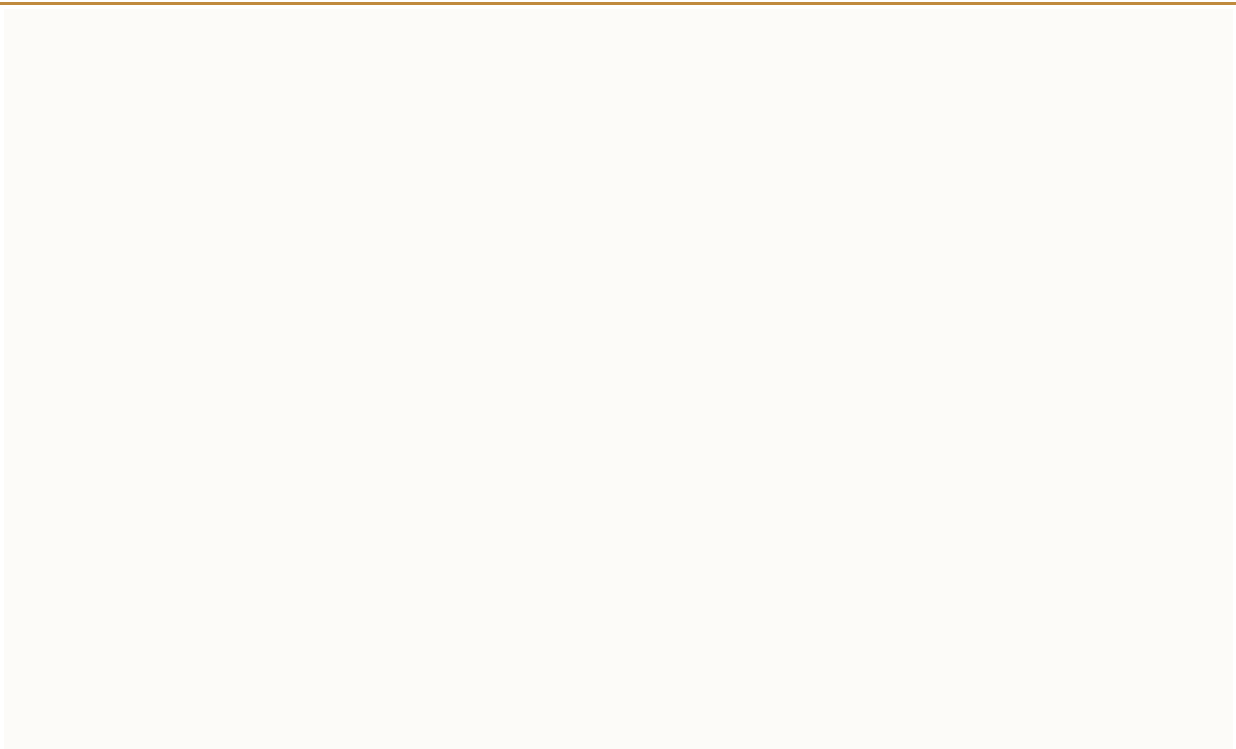


Figure 1 Percentage of respondents expressing confidence in the implementation of key R-ARCSS components: Security Sector Reform, Transitional Justice, Federalism Arrangements, and Institutional Legitimacy.

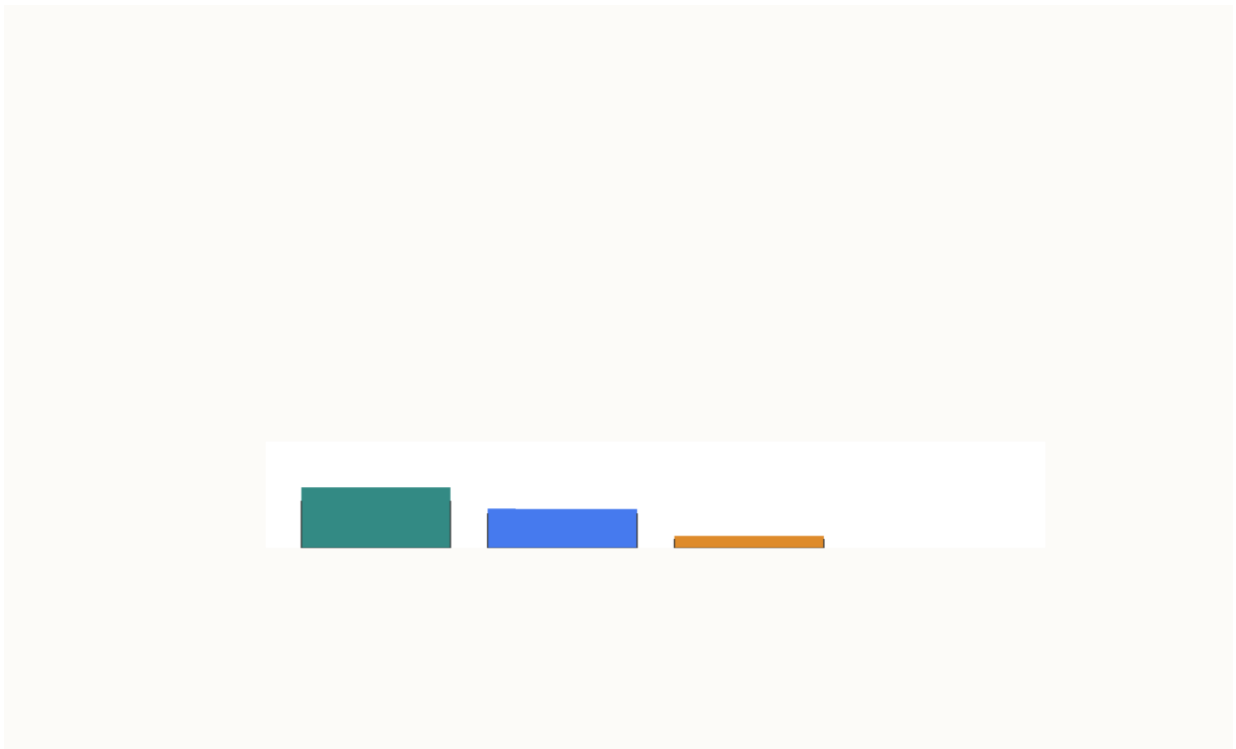


Figure 2 Percentage of respondents expressing confidence in the implementation of key R-ARCSS components: Security Sector Reform, Transitional Justice, Federalism Arrangements, and Institutional Legitimacy.

Discussion

The findings presented in this survey reveal a profound and multifaceted disconnect between the architects of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) and the citizenry it is intended to serve. This discussion interprets these divergences, arguing that they collectively point to a critical legitimacy deficit threatening the compact's long-term viability. The public's scepticism towards peace institutions, its complex stance on justice, the contentious vision for the state's political architecture, and the stark contrast with elite narratives all underscore a peace process perceived as increasingly detached from popular aspirations and everyday realities.

Foremost among the concerns is the pervasive trust deficit identified in key peace governance institutions, most notably the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU) and the security mechanisms. This scepticism cannot be viewed in isolation from the chronic and highly visible delays in implementing the agreement's foundational chapters. As noted by Pinaud, the political economy of South Sudan is characterised by a system of 'violent kleptocracy', where elite bargains are often predicated on resource accumulation rather than public service delivery. The public's low confidence in the R-TGoNU appears to be a direct reflection of this reality; citizens interpret stalled implementation not as mere logistical failures but as evidence of a continued elite preoccupation with power consolidation over genuine peacebuilding. Consequently, institutions mandated to steer the transition are themselves perceived as part of the protracted crisis rather than its solution. This erosion of trust fundamentally undermines the social contract that a peace agreement seeks to re-establish, leaving the political settlement fragile and vulnerable to renewed discontent. The public's pronounced prioritisation of punitive justice over reconciliation mechanisms presents a further critical challenge to prevailing transitional justice paradigms, which often emphasise restorative approaches. This preference likely stems from a visceral reaction to the scale and intensity of atrocities committed during the civil war, creating a powerful demand for accountability that abstract notions of reconciliation cannot satisfy. However, as Hutchison suggests, this stance must also be carefully contextualised within South Sudanese cultural norms, where conceptions of justice and reconciliation are deeply interwoven with communal repair and compensation (*dia*). The survey's indication that many citizens view the two processes as sequential—justice before reconciliation—suggests a nuanced understanding. It implies that for reconciliation to be perceived as authentic and not merely as impunity, a demonstrable form of accountability must first be seen to be delivered. The current absence of any credible judicial process thus not only denies victims justice but also actively obstructs the potential for societal healing, fuelling cynicism towards the entire peace architecture. Equally divisive is the question of the state's future form, with the survey revealing starkly divergent views on federalism. This is not a mere technical debate over governance tiers but a fundamental contest over power, identity, and resource distribution in a state-building project. Proponents often frame federalism as a safeguard against the centralised domination that has historically fuelled conflict, a perspective aligned with arguments for decentralisation as a conflict-mitigation tool. Opponents, however, fear it may institutionalise ethnic divisions and fragment national cohesion, potentially creating sub-national centres of power that could challenge Juba or even secede. As Rolandsen observes, the ambiguity and contentiousness surrounding the federalism debate in the R-ARCSS process reflect its deeply political nature. The lack of public consensus on this core issue indicates that the agreement has failed to forge a shared vision for the state, leaving a dangerous vacuum. Elite

negotiations that sideline this profound disagreement do so at the peril of the entire state-building enterprise, risking a future where the structure of the state itself becomes a renewed flashpoint. This analysis brings into sharp relief the chasm between public perceptions and the elite narratives that dominate both domestic political discourse and international diplomatic fora. Official pronouncements frequently emphasise the R-ARCSS as the ‘only viable path’ to peace, celebrating symbolic milestones while downplaying implementation failures. The survey data, however, depict a citizenry that is increasingly disillusioned with this narrative, perceiving the process as an elite pact that has failed to translate into tangible security, justice, or economic improvement. This divergence is critical; it suggests that the legitimacy conferred upon the peace process by the international community and signatory parties is not mirrored by a social legitimacy amongst the populace. When the lived experience of peace contradicts its

Conclusion

This survey analysis has demonstrated that the public legitimacy of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) is both fragile and contingent upon tangible performance. The compact between the citizenry and the peace process is not rooted in an enduring reservoir of goodwill but is instead a pragmatic, conditional endorsement that must be continually earned. The core argument advanced here is that this legitimacy is fundamentally transactional; it is granted in anticipation of concrete improvements in security, justice, and governance, and is liable to erosion if these expectations remain unmet. This finding challenges more optimistic readings of public acquiescence and underscores the precarious nature of a peace sustained primarily by elite bargaining without deepening its roots in popular trust. The study’s primary empirical contributions lie in delineating the specific dimensions of public concern that underpin this conditional support. Firstly, perceptions of persistent insecurity, even in nominal post-conflict periods, reveal a profound public anxiety. The continued prevalence of communal violence and the perceived inadequacy of security sector reforms foster an environment where the foundational promise of the R-ARCSS—physical safety—is seen as unfulfilled. Secondly, the overwhelming public demand for formal accountability mechanisms, as opposed to purely traditional or political settlements, indicates a societal yearning for a break from impunity. This desire for criminal justice, however, exists in tension with the political compromises inherent in the agreement, creating a significant legitimacy deficit. Finally, the deep public scepticism towards the transparency and inclusivity of governance institutions highlights a crisis of political trust. The perception that the peace process primarily serves elite interests, rather than facilitating a genuine social contract, threatens to hollow out the agreement’s long-term viability.

In light of these findings, several policy recommendations are imperative for stakeholders seeking to consolidate the peace. Foremost is the urgent need for enhanced transparency and consistent communication from the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU) and the agreement’s monitoring bodies. The implementation process must move beyond closed-door negotiations and technical reports to actively engage the public through regular, accessible updates on progress, challenges, and timelines. Furthermore, mechanisms for substantive civic engagement must be institutionalised, moving beyond ceremonial consultation to allow for meaningful public input into key decisions, particularly at the state and local levels. Strengthening independent media and protecting civic space are essential to fostering the informed public discourse upon which a more robust legitimacy

can be built. This study also points to critical avenues for future research. A longitudinal tracking of public perceptions is vital to map the evolution of legitimacy over time, especially as key milestones like elections approach. Such research would help distinguish between transient fluctuations in opinion and deeper, structural shifts in public trust. Comparative studies across different states and regions within South Sudan would also be valuable, uncovering sub-national variations in experiences and expectations of the peace process. Additionally, future work should investigate the intersection of gender, age, and ethnicity with peace perceptions, to ensure that the voices of marginalised groups are adequately captured and analysed. The implications of this research extend beyond South Sudan, offering reflections for peacebuilding theory in Africa. It reinforces the argument that the sustainability of peace agreements cannot be assessed solely through the lens of elite compliance or technical implementation benchmarks. As argued by scholars of hybrid political orders, the lived experience and subjective perceptions of the populace are constitutive elements of peace itself. The South Sudanese case illustrates that a peace which is ‘owned’ only by signatories in capital cities remains vulnerable to collapse. Therefore, theoretical frameworks must better integrate the concept of performative legitimacy—whereby public support is continuously negotiated through demonstrated outcomes—rather than assuming it is conferred at the signing ceremony. This study contends that in contexts like South Sudan, where state-society relations are fractured, building a resilient peace requires parallel processes of institutional reform and active public legitimation. Without this dual focus, even the most meticulously designed agreement risks becoming a hollow compact, lacking the social foundation necessary to withstand the inevitable pressures of political transition.

Contributions

This survey provides a critical, empirically grounded analysis of contemporary peacebuilding in South Sudan, capturing perspectives from 2021-2024. It contributes to African Studies scholarship by systematically mapping the evolving priorities and scepticisms of local stakeholders towards formal peace processes during a pivotal implementation phase. The findings offer practical insights for policymakers and practitioners by identifying key disconnects between national-level agreements and community-level expectations. Furthermore, the study establishes a nuanced baseline of longitudinal data against which future progress or regression in South Sudan’s stability can be measured.