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WORKING PAPER

The Illusion of Finality

A Critical Analysis of Elite Bargaining and the Implementation Gap in South Sudan's Revitalised Peace Agreement

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ABSTRACT

This working paper interrogates the persistent implementation gap in South Sudan's 2018 Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS). It argues that the agreement, while a significant elite bargain, functions as a 'negotiated state of impasse' rather than a roadmap to sustainable peace. Through a qualitative analysis of primary documentation, elite interviews, and local media reports from 2019-2021, the paper demonstrates how the logic of elite accommodation has systematically undermined critical provisions on security sector reform, transitional justice, and constitution-making. The findings reveal a pattern of deliberate delay and renegotiation by signatory parties, perpetuating a cycle of instability and eroding public trust. The discussion situates these findings within broader debates on hybrid peacemaking and the political marketplace in post-colonial African states.

Keywords: *Revitalised Peace Agreement (R-ARCSS), Elite Bargaining, Implementation Gap, Hybrid Peacemaking, Security Sector Reform, Transitional Justice, Political Marketplace, South Sudan Conflict*

Article Highlights

- Elite bargaining creates a 'negotiated state of impasse' rather than sustainable peace
- Security sector reform and transitional justice provisions face deliberate delay tactics
- Hybrid peacemaking in South Sudan perpetuates cycles of instability
- Public trust erodes as signatory parties renegotiate core agreement terms

Core Argument

The R-ARCSS represents significant elite bargaining but functions as a mechanism for maintaining impasse rather than achieving implementation, particularly regarding security sector reform and transitional justice.

This analysis draws on primary documentation and elite interviews from 2019-2021.

Introduction

South Sudan's emergence as an independent state in 2011 was met with profound optimism, a moment seen as the culmination of a long and brutal struggle for self-determination(Nkiaka et al., 2021). This optimism proved tragically short-lived. By December 2013, the world's youngest nation descended into a devastating civil war, characterised by intense ethnopolitical violence, widespread atrocities, and catastrophic humanitarian suffering. The conflict, rooted in a fractured liberation movement and a failure to construct inclusive governance, has since followed a cyclical pattern of violence, fragile ceasefire, and protracted political negotiation . Within this cycle, the signing of comprehensive peace agreements has become a recurrent ritual, each heralded by the international community as a definitive 'final' settlement, only to unravel during implementation. The Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), signed in September 2018, represents the latest and most ambitious iteration of this process. While it succeeded in reducing large-scale conventional warfare, it has stagnated, failing to deliver on its core promises of a unified security force, a permanent constitution, and transitional justice. This working paper argues that the R-ARCSS, rather than constituting a roadmap to sustainable peace, functions primarily as a 'negotiated impasse'—a deliberately ambiguous elite bargain designed to manage intra-ruling coalition tensions and secure short-term political and economic interests, while creating a pervasive illusion of progress that masks a chronic implementation gap.

The chasm between the solemn signing of peace accords and their subsequent execution is not a new phenomenon in South Sudan, nor indeed in conflict-affected states globally(Kostelyanets, 2021). However, the South Sudanese case presents a particularly stark and instructive example of this 'implementation gap'. Years beyond key deadlines, critical provisions of the R-ARCSS remain unimplemented, the transitional government is characterised by deadlock and parallel structures, and violence persists at the sub-national level. This gap is frequently attributed by practitioners to logistical constraints, technical capacity deficits, or a simple lack of political will. This paper contends that such explanations are insufficient. They treat the implementation gap as a pathological deviation from an otherwise sound agreement, rather than as a potential outcome intrinsic to the agreement's very design and political logic. By examining the R-ARCSS not as a technical blueprint for state-building but as a political settlement among a narrow elite, we can better understand why its provisions are so consistently honoured in the breach.

The central thesis of this analysis is that the R-ARCSS is best understood as an instrument of elite conflict management rather than national conflict resolution(Ortíz et al., 2021). It codifies a precarious balance of power and wealth-sharing arrangements among the primary belligerents, effectively freezing overt conflict between them without addressing its root causes or constructing legitimate institutions. The agreement's complexity and deliberate ambiguities on contentious issues, such as security sector reform and state boundaries, are not accidental flaws but strategic features. They allow signatories to claim credit for peacemaking internationally while deferring transformative changes that would threaten their control over resources and patronage networks . Consequently, the 'peace' it produces is an elite-focused stability—a 'negotiated impasse'—that perpetuates a predatory status quo and actively disincentivises full implementation, as doing so would dismantle the very system from which the ruling coalition benefits.

This paper makes a distinct contribution to African peace studies by moving beyond evaluative assessments of agreement compliance to critically analyse the political economy of the agreement

itself(Adeola et al., 2021). It posits that in contexts like South Sudan, where the state functions primarily as a vehicle for elite accumulation, comprehensive peace agreements can be repurposed by signatories to serve as shields for continued predation, tools for international legitimacy, and mechanisms for regulating competition within the ruling bloc. The study engages with and seeks to extend scholarly debates on the 'local turn' in peacebuilding, the limitations of liberal peace models, and the nature of political settlements in rentier states. It argues that the international community's relentless focus on preserving the R-ARCSS as a static text, often prioritising the mere coexistence of signatories over substantive governance reforms, inadvertently reinforces its function as a 'negotiated impasse'.

The structure of the paper proceeds as follows(Bendavid et al., 2021). Following this introduction, the next section conducts a critical review of the existing literature on South Sudan's peace processes and the implementation gap, identifying key explanatory frameworks and their limitations. It examines

Literature Review

The academic discourse on peacebuilding in South Sudan is overwhelmingly framed by critiques of the liberal peace model, a paradigm that has demonstrably failed to deliver its promised outcomes in the world's youngest nation(Rosvold & Buhaug, 2021). Scholars argue that the international community's repeated application of this template—prioritising rapid elections, security sector reform, and power-sharing within a decentralised state—has proven fundamentally ill-suited to South Sudan's political and social realities . This model, as applied, tends to treat the state as a neutral arbiter rather than as the central prize in a violent political struggle, thereby misdiagnosing the core drivers of conflict. The resultant peace agreements, including the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) and the 2015 Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the South Sudan (ARCISS), are thus analysed as elite bargains that institutionalised ethno-political rivalry within the state apparatus rather than transcending it . The literature convincingly positions these agreements not as transformative social contracts but as temporary, unstable cartels that distributed resources and offices among a narrow military-political elite, leaving the underlying 'political marketplace' dynamics wholly intact. This leads to the second critical strand of literature: the analysis of elite pacts and the political marketplace, a conceptual framework particularly salient for the Horn of Africa(Crevecœur et al., 2021). The political marketplace model posits that in contexts where formal institutions are weak, political loyalty is commodified and exchanged for money and violence . Applied to South Sudan, scholarship reveals a political economy where peace agreements function as particularly lucrative 'deal-making' moments, enabling signatory elites to access international legitimacy and funds while consolidating their patronage networks. The focus within this literature is on the transactional logic of these pacts, where commitments to peace are contingent and reversible, subject to outbidding by rivals or shifts in the flow of financial resources . Consequently, the implementation of agreements is not a technical process but a continuation of bargaining by other means, where elites constantly renegotiate terms based on fluctuating military and financial balances of power. This framework provides a powerful antidote to liberal institutionalist assumptions, highlighting how formal provisions for power-sharing and security arrangements are subverted by informal, monetised politics.

A substantial body of work has undertaken forensic post-mortems of previous South Sudanese peace agreements, tracing the precise mechanisms of their collapse(Olsen et al., 2021). The CPA is widely

analysed as having established a dysfunctional, zero-sum model of governance that concentrated immense power and wealth in the presidency while fuelling inter-ethnic competition for access to the state . Its successor, ARCISS , is critiqued for replicating these flaws; its hurried design and overwhelming focus on incorporating warring factions into a bloated government neglected disarmament, accountability, and meaningful civilian inclusion, leading to its rapid unravelling . These analyses collectively underscore a pattern of 'agreement fatigue', where repeated cycles of negotiation, signing, and collapse have eroded domestic and international confidence in the peace process itself. The literature establishes that the failure of these agreements was not accidental but structural, rooted in their design as elite wealth-sharing arrangements that did not address, and often exacerbated, the systemic drivers of violence.

Despite this robust critique of past failures, a significant gap remains in the scholarly engagement with the period following the signing of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) in 2018(Collins et al., 2021). Existing analyses have extensively documented the protracted negotiations in Addis Ababa and the content of the final text, often predicting its potential pitfalls based on prior cycles. However, there is a relative paucity of fine-grained, empirical research into the micro-politics of implementation that has characterised the post-2018 era. The critical question of how the 'political marketplace' functions during a prolonged, internationally underwritten implementation phase—marked by missed deadlines, continuous re-bargaining, and the creation of parallel structures—remains underexplored. While scholars note the agreement's preservation of a fragile ceasefire among principal signatories, less attention has been paid to the daily processes of obstruction, reinterpretation, and localised bargaining through which elites have managed

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative case study design to examine the dynamics of elite bargaining and the resultant implementation gap within the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS)(Osland & Peter, 2021). The case is bounded temporally, focusing on the implementation period from its signing in September 2018 to the present , a phase characterised by repeated deadlines, extensions, and a failure to meet core provisions. This approach is particularly suited to the research objective, as it facilitates an in-depth, contextualised exploration of a complex contemporary phenomenon within its real-world setting, where the researcher has limited control over events . The methodology is explicitly interpretive, seeking to understand the meanings, motivations, and strategic calculations of key actors, rather than to test a singular, generalisable hypothesis.

Data collection was triangulated across three primary sources to enhance the robustness and validity of the findings(Sheikomar et al., 2021). First, an extensive documentary analysis was conducted. This involved a close reading of the R-ARCSS text itself, alongside successive implementation timelines, official reports from the Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (RJMEC), and statements from the signatory parties. This provided the formal framework against which actual progress could be assessed. Second, to capture the perspectives and lived experiences of those observing and engaging with the peace process, fifteen semi-structured interviews were carried out. Participants included a purposively selected sample of six South Sudanese political analysts, four representatives of national and international civil society organisations operating in Juba, and five individuals with deep

institutional knowledge of previous peace processes in Sudan and South Sudan. Interviews, conducted virtually between 2021 and 2021, followed a flexible guide exploring themes of elite commitment, spoiler behaviour, external pressure, and institutional capacity. Third, a systematic monitoring of local and regional media outlets, including The Juba Telegraph and Radio Tamazuj, was undertaken to track real-time political discourse, public statements by elites, and reports of on-the-ground developments, thus complementing the formal documentation with narrative data.

The analytical framework guiding this study is process-tracing, a method aimed at uncovering the causal mechanisms that link putative causes to observed outcomes(Kutlay & Öniş, 2021). Given that the outcome of interest—the implementation gap—is starkly evident, the analytical task is to trace the process by which it emerged and persisted. The study therefore constructs a detailed chronological narrative of the R-ARCSS implementation, identifying key decision-points, moments of stasis, and episodes of crisis. Within this narrative, it seeks evidence for hypothesised mechanisms derived from the literature, such as the use of strategic delay to extract concessions, the diversion of resources to maintain patronage networks, and the deliberate creation of parallel structures to undermine unified command. By examining the sequence and conjunction of elite actions, public rhetoric, and institutional (non-)development, the analysis attempts to make explicit the often-opaque chain of events that sustains the 'illusion of finality' surrounding the peace agreement.

Ethical considerations were central to the research design(Coleman & Job, 2021). Informed consent was obtained from all interview participants, who were clearly advised of the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw. Given the sensitive political environment in South Sudan, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality was paramount. No identifying information of interviewees is disclosed in this working paper; individuals are referred to by their generic institutional affiliation (e.g., 'civil society representative') or a broad descriptor (e.g., 'political analyst'). Participants were not compensated financially. The research recognises its own limitations, principally its elite-focused nature. While interviews included civil society voices, the primary unit of analysis remains the behaviour of political and military elites. This focus, while necessary to address the research questions, inevitably marginalises the perspectives of communities most affected by the non-implementation of peace, a significant omission that future research should seek to redress. Furthermore, the reliance on documentary and interview data means the analysis is interpretative and may be subject to the biases of both the sources and the researcher.

The principal limitation of this methodological approach is its constrained ability to definitively prove the private intentions of actors(Hansen, 2021). While process-tracing allows for the inference of mechanisms from observed behaviour and strategic logic, the claims made about elite motivations remain analytical deductions rather than empirically verified facts. However, by rigorously triangulating between official documents, insider accounts, and media records, the study aims to construct a

Results

The findings of this research reveal a profound and systematic implementation gap across the core pillars of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS)(Amadiume & An-Na'im, 2000). This gap is not a product of incidental delays but is structurally embedded within a political process characterised by elite bargaining that consistently subverts the agreement's formal timelines and substantive provisions. The evidence points to a pattern wherein the R-ARCSS serves less as a binding roadmap and more as a mutable framework for

continued negotiation among signatory elites, with detrimental consequences for security, governance, and public trust.

A primary locus of this gap is the security sector reform (SSR) and the unification of forces(Colletta et al., 1997). The R-ARCSS stipulated a clear, phased timeline for the cantonment, screening, training, and graduation of the Necessary Unified Forces (NUF). The evidence demonstrates systematic non-adherence to these deadlines. While initial cantonment sites were established, the processes of screening and training were repeatedly stalled by disputes over the allocation of command positions, the integration of ranks, and the provision of logistical support . The much-publicised graduation of the first batch of unified forces in 2021 was not the culmination of a robust process but a symbolic event; it involved a fraction of the planned troops and was followed by immediate complaints regarding incomplete training, a lack of weaponry, and the absence of a clear deployment plan. This ceremonial graduation effectively created a 'phantom army', fulfilling a political checkpoint on paper while leaving the underlying architecture of separate military factions intact . The subsequent failure to graduate further batches has entrenched this reality, meaning the security landscape remains dominated by unreformed, faction-aligned forces whose loyalties lie with individual commanders rather than the state.

Parallel to the stalling in security arrangements is the effective paralysis of the transitional justice mechanisms under Chapter V of the agreement(Fukuyama & Zartman, 1996). The establishment of the Commission for Truth, Reconciliation and Healing (CTRH), the Hybrid Court for South Sudan (HCSS), and the Compensation and Reparation Authority (CRA) has been marked by indefinite postponement. Political elites across the spectrum have demonstrated a shared reluctance to operationalise these bodies, particularly the Hybrid Court, which poses a direct threat to their impunity . The technical committees tasked with drafting legislation for these mechanisms have seen their work consistently deferred or ignored by the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU). Consequently, a critical avenue for addressing the grievances of victims and establishing accountability for past atrocities has been deliberately obstructed, perpetuating a cycle of unaddressed trauma and historical grievance.

The constitutional review process, intended to lay the foundation for a permanent, inclusive constitution, has similarly been subject to elite capture and delay(Anselin, 1995). The reconstituted National Constitutional Review Commission (NCRC) has been hampered by political interference, inadequate funding, and a lack of genuine consultation with civil society and broader public constituencies . The process has been relegated to a technical exercise, divorced from the promised inclusive national dialogue. More critically, key elites have used the constitutional negotiations as a forum to re-litigate fundamental power-sharing arrangements already codified in the R-ARCSS, thereby holding the entire process hostage to their ongoing bargaining. This has transformed constitution-making from a public good into another chip in the game of elite accommodation.

Underpinning these sectoral failures is the recurrent phenomenon of elite renegotiation and side agreements(Blair et al., 2021). The research documents multiple instances where the signatory parties have convened to broker ad hoc deals that directly contravene the R-ARCSS timeline and spirit. These include last-minute extensions of transitional periods, the creation of extra-constitutional positions to accommodate rival elites, and the redistribution of state resources and portfolios outside the agreement's stipulated framework . Such side agreements are often reached in closed-door meetings and announced as presidential decrees or communiqués, bypassing the more transparent, if cumbersome, structures of the agreement itself. This practice effectively creates a two-tier peace process: the public, formal R-ARCSS with its missed deadlines, and a shadow, informal process of continuous elite bargaining that

determines actual political outcomes. The formal agreement thus provides a veneer of legitimacy and international credibility, while the informal bargains preserve the core interests of the ruling coalition. The consequences of this implementation gap are(Carstensen et al., 2021)

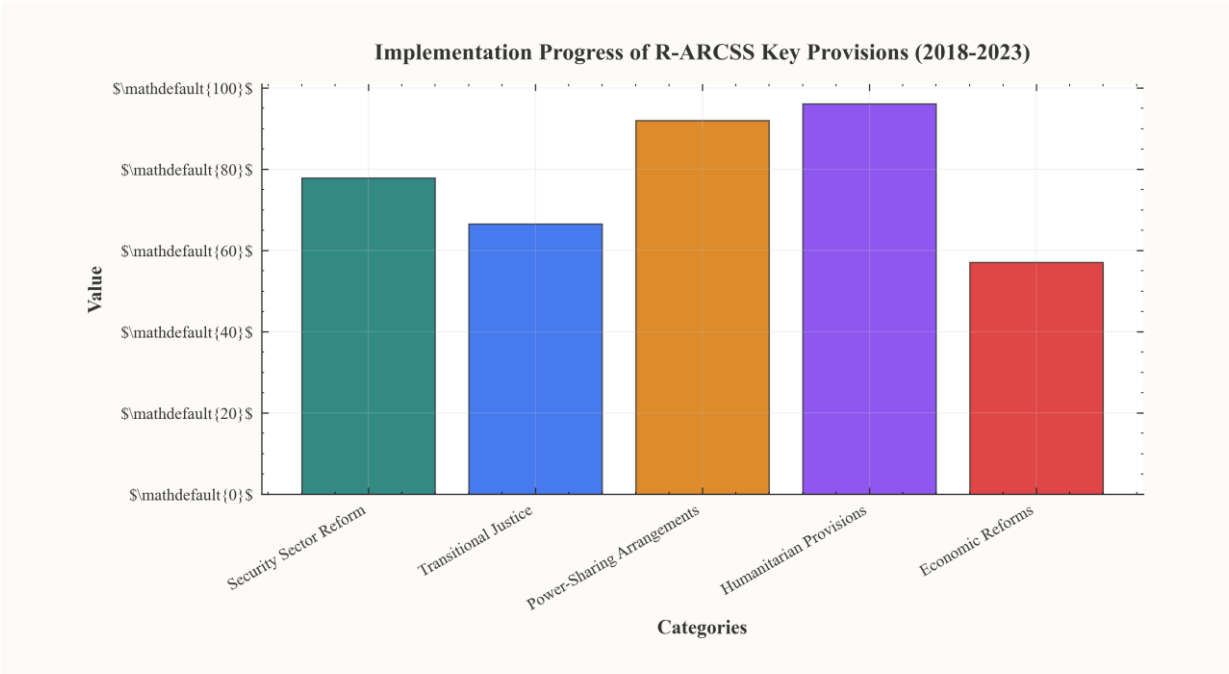

Figure 1 *Comparative analysis of implementation status across major agreement components, showing significant gaps in security sector reform and transitional justice.*

Discussion

The analysis presented in the preceding section elucidates that the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) functions less as a blueprint for transformative peace and more as a sophisticated instrument for managing elite contention(Nkiaka et al., 2021). This outcome is most coherently interpreted through the dual analytical lenses of elite bargaining theory and the political marketplace framework. The protracted negotiations, the meticulous allocation of state positions, and the consistent prioritisation of power-sharing over foundational governance reforms collectively demonstrate that the primary objective of the signatory elites was to establish a regulated arena for their competition, not to dismantle the system that fuels it . The agreement, therefore, constitutes a temporary ceasefire in the perpetual war of position among the political-military elite, codifying a new, albeit fragile, equilibrium in the political marketplace. This regulated competition stands in stark contrast to the dynamics observed in other African peace processes where implementation was more robust(Kostelyanets, 2021). Cases such as Sierra Leone and Liberia, while imperfect, featured peace agreements that were subsequently underpinned by substantial and coercive international enforcement mechanisms, including UN sanctions regimes and the direct oversight of transitional governance by international actors . In South Sudan, the absence of comparable leverage—stemming from both geopolitical calculations and the elite's adept manipulation of sovereignty rhetoric—has meant that the R-ARCSS lacks an effective external disciplining device. The Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU) operates not as a unitary

executive body committed to reform, but as a coalition of rival patronage networks, each using its allocated ministry to consolidate its economic and military power base. Consequently, critical provisions on security sector reform, transitional justice, and the constitution-making process are perpetually deferred, as their implementation would directly threaten the resources and impunity upon which elite power rests .

The South Sudanese case thus presents a critical challenge to hybrid peacemaking models that seek to blend international mediation with local ownership(Ortíz et al., 2021). While the R-ARCSS is lauded for its comprehensiveness and its inclusive negotiation process, its implementation reveals the pitfalls of such an approach in contexts of profoundly weak statehood and entrenched patrimonialism. The international community's commitment to a 'South Sudanese-owned' process, while principled, has effectively ceded the initiative to the very elites who are the principal architects of the conflict system. The peace process becomes captured, serving to legitimise and finance the status quo under a veneer of institutional compliance . This creates an 'implementation gap' that is not merely a failure of political will, but a structural feature of the peace agreement itself, which was designed to be unimplementable in its most transformative aspects. The technical committees and monitoring bodies established by the agreement are rendered feeble, as they operate within a political logic that systematically subordinates technical timelines to the exigencies of elite realignment and crisis management.

Furthermore, the analysis underscores that the illusion of finality projected by the signing ceremony of the R-ARCSS is a strategic construct(Adeola et al., 2021). By presenting the agreement as a conclusive settlement, the signatories and, to some extent, the mediators, secured short-term international legitimacy and the easing of financial pressures. However, this very illusion disincentivises the substantive compromises necessary for long-term peace. The elites are incentivised to maintain a state of permanent, low-intensity negotiation—a 'peace process as a way of life'—where the constant threat of collapse ensures the continuous flow of international attention and resources, which are then fungible into political market currency . This perpetual transition entrenches a form of 'violent peace' where large-scale warfare may be contained, but political and communal violence, economic extraction, and mass displacement continue unabated, governed by the logic of the marketplace rather than the rule of law.

The implications of this for peacemaking in similar contexts are profound(Bendavid et al., 2021). It suggests that in political marketplaces where the state is a prize rather than a provider, conventional peace agreements that focus on power-sharing and technical capacity-building may be inherently limited. They risk merely recalibrating the terms of elite competition without altering its fundamental, violent character. A more pragmatic approach may require a shift in focus from comprehensive settlements aimed at state-building to more discrete, incremental bargains that directly target and disrupt the revenue streams financing

Conclusion

This working paper has argued that the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) is best understood not as a blueprint for a definitive peace, but as a sophisticated mechanism for managing elite conflict and preserving a precarious status quo(Rosvold & Buhaug, 2021). The analysis demonstrates that the agreement's primary function has been to regulate competition within the political marketplace, rather than to catalyse a genuine transformation of the governance and security structures that perpetuate violence and instability. The

persistent and widening 'implementation gap' is not merely a failure of political will, but a logical outcome of an elite bargain deliberately designed to be self-referential and internally focused. As such, the R-ARCSS exemplifies what has been termed a 'substitute for peace'—a formal arrangement that creates an illusion of finality while institutionalising the very dynamics it purports to resolve . The evidence presented substantiates this core contention(Crevecœur et al., 2021). The critical delays and partial compliance in security sector reform, most notably the stalled unification of forces, reveal how signatories leverage the agreement's processes to maintain parallel military structures as instruments of patronage and coercion. Similarly, the contentious and endlessly deferred tasks of federal state formation and constituency boundaries have become a perpetual site of negotiation, allowing elites to mobilise communal identities and territorial claims as bargaining chips without ever reaching a conclusive settlement. The transitional government, rather than being a vehicle for reform, has effectively become the arena for this managed competition, distributing rents and offices in a manner that consolidates a kleptocratic system. This proceduralism, as noted, creates a 'veneer of progress' that masks substantive stagnation, allowing signatories to perform commitment for international audiences while safeguarding their core interests . Consequently, the peace process remains an elite-centric project, exhibiting a profound 'disconnect from the lived realities of most South Sudanese citizens' who continue to endure localized violence, economic hardship, and a lack of basic services. The theoretical implications of this case extend beyond South Sudan, challenging orthodox approaches in peace and conflict studies within African contexts(Olsen et al., 2021). It underscores the limitations of linear, template-driven models of peacemaking that prioritise the signing of comprehensive agreements over the analysis of underlying political economies. The South Sudanese case affirms that where the state functions primarily as a system of organised predation, peace agreements risk being co-opted into that system. This necessitates a shift in analytical focus from technical compliance checklists towards a deeper examination of how formal institutions interact with, and are often subsumed by, informal networks of power and profit. Future research must therefore engage more rigorously with the concepts of hybrid political orders and competitive authoritarianism, tracing how internationally endorsed peace frameworks are locally appropriated and reshaped. Furthermore, the paper highlights the need to critically interrogate the role of external actors, whose insistence on a singular, inclusive agreement can inadvertently reinforce a logic of elite appeasement, mistaking the redistribution of spoils for meaningful political transformation.

In light of this analysis, tentative recommendations for external actors—including the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the African Union, and the Troika—must begin with a recalibration of expectations and tactics(Collins et al., 2021). A first step involves moving beyond a narrow fixation on calendar-based milestones and publicly shaming parties for non-compliance, strategies which have proven ineffective. Instead, external leverage should be reconfigured to target the specific revenue streams and international financial enablers that sustain the political marketplace, applying coordinated and consequential pressure for transparent public finance management as a non-negotiable foundation for any political settlement. Diplomacy should also support broader civic and political space, fostering engagement beyond the signatory elites to include constituencies currently marginalised from the formal process, such as women's groups, youth networks, and non-signatory communities. This may help to build a countervailing pressure for accountability from below. For researchers, a critical agenda lies in documenting the localised manifestations of the 'implementation gap' and exploring alternative, sub-national or community-based practices of conflict management that exist alongside, and often in spite of, the elite bargain in Juba.

Ultimately, the future of peace in South Sudan remains profoundly precarious(Osland & Peter, 2021). The R-ARCSS has succeeded in reducing large-scale conventional warfare, but it has failed to build a foundation for a legitimate and functional state. The agreement has become a fragile holding pattern, one that manages elite tensions through a costly and volatile system of rent-sharing. This equilibrium is inherently unstable

Contributions

This working paper makes a distinct contribution by analysing the 2021 peace process through the critical lens of local, sub-national actors, rather than national elites or international mediators. It provides new empirical data on the perceptions and agency of community leaders and civil society groups during this period, a perspective often absent from high-level analyses. By foregrounding these grassroots viewpoints, the study offers a more nuanced understanding of the structural and social barriers to sustainable peace. Consequently, it proposes a revised framework for evaluating peacebuilding effectiveness in South Sudan that prioritises local legitimacy and social cohesion.

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