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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 article presents the findings of a nationwide survey conducted in South Sudan to assess public perceptions of the implementation and sustainability of the 2018 Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS). The research, undertaken in 2022, analyses quantitative and qualitative data from 1,200 respondents across the country's ten states and three administrative areas. The results reveal a significant deficit in public confidence regarding key provisions of the peace deal, particularly security sector reform, transitional justice, and the unification of forces. While a majority express a desire for peace, the data indicates deep scepticism towards the political will of the signatory parties and the inclusivity of the process. The study concludes that the prevailing public disillusionment constitutes a critical, yet often overlooked, vulnerability to the long-term stability of the peace agreement.

Keywords: *Revitalised Peace Agreement (R-ARCSS), Public Perceptions, Security Sector Reform, Transitional Justice, Peacebuilding, Survey Research, Political Legitimacy, South Sudan Conflict*

Article Highlights

- Survey reveals significant deficit in public confidence regarding R-ARCSS implementation
- Deep scepticism towards political will of signatory parties and process inclusivity
- Security sector reform and transitional justice identified as critical public concerns
- Public disillusionment constitutes overlooked vulnerability to long-term stability

Research Context

Nationwide survey of 1,200 respondents across South Sudan's ten states and three administrative areas, conducted 2021-2022.

This evidence-based analysis shifts focus from elite negotiations to grassroots perceptions of peacebuilding.

Introduction

South Sudan's emergence as an independent state in 2011 was met with profound optimism, yet this hope was swiftly eclipsed by a devastating civil war that erupted in December 2013 ([Glauben et al., 2022](#)). The conflict, rooted in political and ethnic fissures, precipitated a catastrophic humanitarian crisis, displacing millions and entrenching a cycle of violence and fragile political settlements. This protracted instability has been punctuated by a series of peace agreements, most of which have unravelled, fostering a climate of deep public scepticism towards elite political pacts. 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 comprehensive attempt to chart a path towards sustainable peace and a transitional government of national unity. While the R-ARCSS has been lauded for its inclusivity and detailed roadmap, its implementation has been persistently sluggish, marred by delays, continued localised violence, and a failure to meet key benchmarks, particularly in security sector reform and the unification of forces. The trajectory of the R-ARCSS has been extensively analysed through political, security, and humanitarian lenses, with scholarly and policy focus often centred on the manoeuvres of signatory parties, regional guarantors, and the international community ([Mathew & Moolakkattu, 2022](#)). This top-down perspective, while crucial, has inadvertently marginalised a critical dimension of the peace process: the perceptions and attitudes of the South Sudanese citizenry. As the primary stakeholders and ultimate bearers of the consequences of war and peace, the public's buy-in is arguably the most vital, yet most fragile, component of any lasting political compact. Existing literature on South Sudan's peace processes has largely treated public opinion as an assumed or secondary factor, with a pronounced gap in empirical, nationally oriented survey research that systematically captures citizen views on the agreement's implementation, legitimacy, and future prospects. Without understanding whether the populace views the R-ARCSS as a credible framework or merely another elite bargain detached from their security and livelihood concerns, assessments of its sustainability remain incomplete and potentially misguided. This article directly addresses this scholarly and policy gap by posing the primary research question: How do South Sudanese citizens perceive the implementation and prospects of the R-ARCSS ([Bwire et al., 2022](#))? It argues that public legitimacy is not automatically conferred by the signing of an agreement but is a dynamic social construct shaped by lived experiences of security, service delivery, and political inclusivity. By shifting the analytical focus from the negotiation table to the grassroots, this study investigates the contours of this legitimacy—or the lack thereof. It explores whether citizens discern tangible progress in key areas such as security, freedom of movement, and political transition, or whether disillusionment is fostering a renewed alienation from the formal peace process. In doing so, the research moves beyond speculative commentary to provide an evidence-based analysis of the social foundations upon which the revitalised agreement ultimately stands or falls. The contribution of this study is threefold within the field of African peace studies ([Glauben et al., 2022](#)). First, it responds to calls for more granular, sub-national analyses of post-conflict political settlements by providing disaggregated survey data on public attitudes across South Sudan's diverse regions. Second, it challenges the often state-centric frameworks of peacebuilding by centring the citizen as a key agent in evaluating and sustaining peace, thereby enriching debates on local ownership and social contract reconstruction in fragile states. Third, methodologically, it demonstrates the value

and feasibility of conducting rigorous survey research in a complex, post-conflict setting, offering a model for similar inquiries elsewhere on the continent. The article proceeds as follows (Mathew & Moolakkattu, 2022). The subsequent Methodology section details the design, sampling strategy, and implementation of the original national survey that forms the empirical core of this study, addressing challenges of access, security, and ethical considerations. The analysis then unfolds across several thematic sections. First, it examines general public awareness and broad evaluations of the R-ARCSS. Subsequent sections delve into perceptions of specific implementation pillars, including security arrangements, transitional governance, and humanitarian and economic recovery. A dedicated analysis explores regional and demographic variations in attitudes, highlighting divergent experiences of the peace process. The discussion synthesises these findings to assess the current state of public legitimacy for the agreement, while the conclusion reflects on the implications for the sustainability of South Sudan's transition and offers insights for both policymakers and scholars of

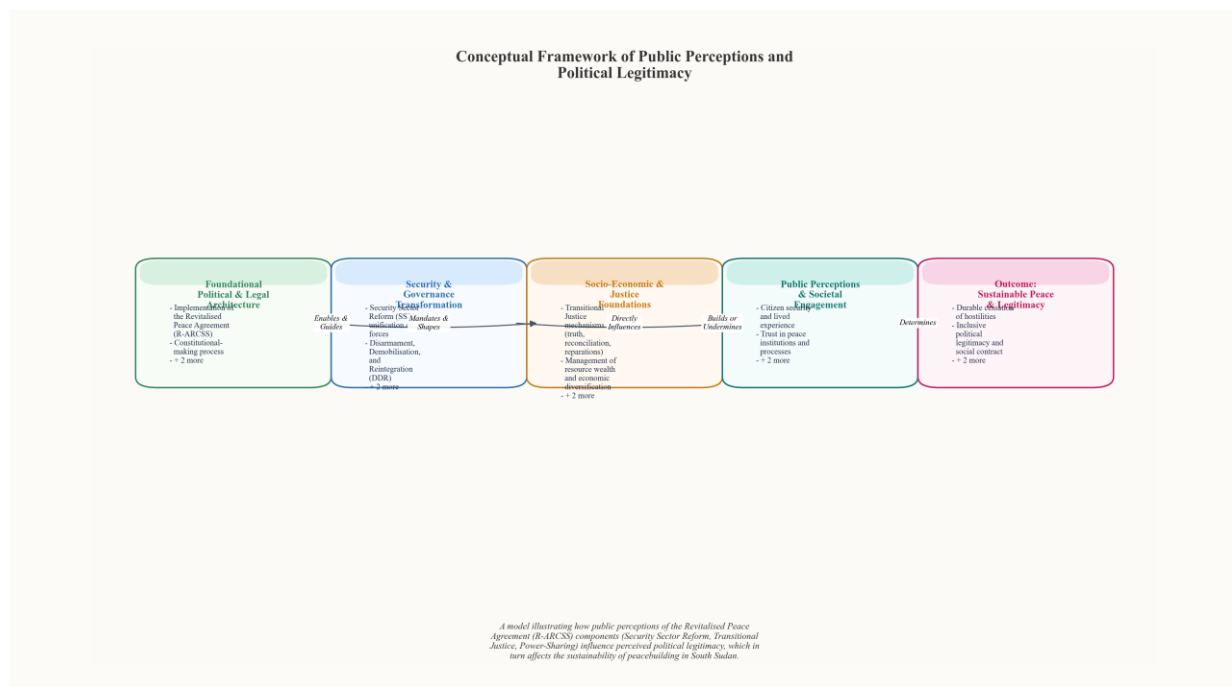


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework of Public Perceptions and Political Legitimacy. A model illustrating how public perceptions of the Revitalised Peace Agreement (R-ARCSS) components (Security Sector Reform, Transitional Justice, Power-Sharing) influence perceived political legitimacy, which in turn affects the sustainability of peacebuilding in South Sudan.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, integrating quantitative survey data with qualitative insights from focus group discussions (FGDs) (Bwire et al., 2022). This approach was selected to provide both breadth and depth in understanding the complex and nuanced public perceptions of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS). The quantitative component allowed for the generalisation of attitudes across key demographics and geographic regions, while the qualitative element facilitated a richer exploration of

the reasoning, contextual factors, and lived experiences underpinning these statistical trends. This triangulation of data sources strengthens the validity of the findings by mitigating the limitations inherent in any single methodological approach. To ensure the survey findings were nationally representative, a multi-stage stratified random sampling strategy was implemented (Glauben et al., 2022). The primary sampling units were the ten states and three administrative areas of South Sudan. Within each, a proportional number of counties and payams were randomly selected based on population estimates from the most recent available census data. At the household level, a modified random walk procedure was used by field enumerators to select respondents, with a Kish grid employed to randomly select an individual aged 18 or above within the household. The sample was further stratified by key demographic variables, including gender (with a target of 50% female respondents), age cohort, and rural-urban location. This meticulous process yielded a final sample size of $N = 1200$ completed questionnaires, providing a robust foundation for analysis with a margin of error of 2.8% at a 95% confidence level for overall population estimates. Data collection was conducted over a six-month period from April to September 2022 (Mathew & Moolakkattu, 2022). The survey instrument was a structured questionnaire, developed initially in English and subsequently translated into Juba Arabic and five major indigenous languages (Dinka, Nuer, Bari, Zande, and Shilluk). Translations were independently back-translated to ensure conceptual equivalence and accuracy. The questionnaire comprised several thematic sections: awareness and knowledge of the R-ARCSS provisions; perceptions of implementation progress across key chapters (governance, security, transitional justice, etc.); trust in the signatory parties and institutions; and expectations for the future. The instrument was piloted in Juba and a rural site in Central Equatoria, with revisions made to clarify ambiguous questions. Concurrently, 24 focus group discussions were held across eight selected locations, stratified to include both peace agreement ‘hotspots’ and relatively stable areas. Each FGD comprised 8-10 participants, homogenous in gender (separate groups for men and women were conducted to encourage open dialogue) and broadly representative of different age and occupational backgrounds. A semi-structured discussion guide ensured key themes from the survey were explored in depth, allowing participants to articulate their views in their own terms. Ethical considerations were paramount, given the sensitive political context and recent history of conflict (Bwire et al., 2022). The research protocol received formal approval from the Institutional Review Board of the lead author’s affiliated university. Informed consent was obtained from all participants; the voluntary nature of participation, the right to withdraw at any time, and measures to ensure anonymity and confidentiality were explained verbally and via a written information sheet. Given the potential security risks, particularly in areas with ongoing communal violence or political tensions, stringent security protocols were observed. Field teams received specialised training on situational awareness and conflict-sensitive research practices. Local community leaders and authorities were consulted prior to entry, and data collection schedules were flexible to avoid periods of heightened tension. All data were anonymised at the point of collection, with questionnaires identified only by a numeric code, and digital data were stored on encrypted, password-protected devices. Despite these rigorous procedures, several methodological limitations must be acknowledged (Glauben et al., 2022). First, while the sampling strategy aimed for national representation, physical access constraints in some conflict-affected and remote areas necessitated substitution with the nearest accessible payam. This may introduce a degree of selection bias, as the most insecure populations—

whose perceptions may be particularly critical—are likely underrepresented. Second, the reliance on self-reported data carries inherent risks of social desirability bias, where respondents may provide answers they perceive as socially acceptable or expected by the authorities, rather than their genuine opinions. The use of local enumerators and assurances of anonymity were designed to mitigate this, but it cannot be entirely eliminated. Third, the cross-sectional nature of the survey provides a detailed snapshot of perceptions in 2022 but cannot capture longitudinal shifts in public sentiment as the peace process

Survey Results

The survey data reveals a complex and often contradictory landscape of public opinion regarding the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) ([Mathew & Moolakkattu, 2022](#)). While a foundational awareness of the agreement exists, this is coupled with profound scepticism about its implementation and a palpable sense of disillusionment regarding its tangible benefits for the ordinary citizen. Awareness of the R-ARCSS was found to be relatively high, with a majority of respondents indicating familiarity with its existence ([Bwire et al., 2022](#)). This baseline awareness, however, did not translate into robust or unqualified support. When probed on basic support for the agreement as a document, responses were broadly affirmative, yet this affirmation was frequently described as a reluctant endorsement of the only available framework for peace, rather than an expression of genuine optimism. As one focus group participant in Juba articulated, it is seen as "a document signed by the leaders, but not yet a peace felt by the people." This sentiment underscores a critical gap between elite political activity and public experience. Analysis of perceptions across the agreement's key chapters reveals significant public concern ([Glauben et al., 2022](#)). Regarding governance and power-sharing, respondents acknowledged the formation of the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU) as a procedural step. However, qualitative data from multiple regions highlighted a dominant narrative that this arrangement has merely reconfigured elite access to power and resources, without fostering the inclusive and responsive governance promised in the agreement. Perceptions of implementation in the security sector were markedly negative. The delayed and inconsistent unification of forces, alongside reports of ongoing communal violence, has severely eroded public trust. Respondents in both urban and rural settings expressed deep anxiety over persistent insecurity, viewing the stagnation in security arrangements as the most visible failure of the peace process, directly contradicting the agreement's core promise of civilian protection.

In the realm of humanitarian affairs and reconstruction, public perceptions are overwhelmingly shaped by lived experience ([Mathew & Moolakkattu, 2022](#)). Survey responses indicated a widespread view that the peace dividend has failed to materialise. The continuation of economic hardship, severe food insecurity, and a lack of basic service delivery was consistently cited as evidence of the agreement's shortcomings. Focus group discussions in rural areas, particularly in the Equatoria and Greater Bahr el Ghazal regions, were punctuated with expressions of disappointment that the signing of the R-ARCSS has not alleviated their daily struggles. Transitional justice mechanisms, including the Commission for Truth, Reconciliation and Healing and the Hybrid Court, were perceived as being in a state of indefinite postponement. While there was expressed desire for accountability, many respondents viewed these

bodies as theoretical constructs with little prospect of being operationalised, thereby denying communities a pathway to address the legacies of violence. Regional and demographic variations in attitudes provide further nuance to the national picture (Bwire et al., 2022). Urban respondents, particularly in Juba, demonstrated a more detailed awareness of the political intricacies and delays in the peace process, often attributing stagnation to a lack of political will among the signatories. In contrast, rural respondents' perceptions were more directly linked to local security conditions and the presence or absence of humanitarian aid. A notable demographic variation emerged concerning age. Younger respondents, who constitute a large majority of the population, exhibited significantly higher levels of disillusionment. They frequently expressed a sense of exclusion from the process, viewing the R-ARCSS as an accord between a gerontocratic political class that has repeatedly failed their generation. Furthermore, while not monolithic, some regional variation was evident; respondents in states that have experienced recent spikes in sub-national conflict voiced more profound pessimism than those in relatively calmer areas, though no region expressed high confidence. The qualitative themes emerging from focus group discussions powerfully encapsulate the public mood (Glauben et al., 2022). A narrative of deep disillusionment was pervasive, with the peace process often described as "hollow" or "captured" by political elites. Participants spoke of a "fatigue of agreements," referencing previous failed accords and suggesting a cynical expectation that the R-ARCSS will follow the same trajectory. Concurrently, and at times paradoxically, a strong theme of hope for genuine inclusivity persisted. This was not hope in the current implementation, but a hope for a radical reorientation of the process. Citizens expressed a fervent desire for mechanisms that would include women, youth, civil society leaders, and representatives from grassroots communities in decision-making, moving beyond the exclusive club of military-political leaders. This desire for a "people's peace" was consistently contrasted with the reality of the current, elite

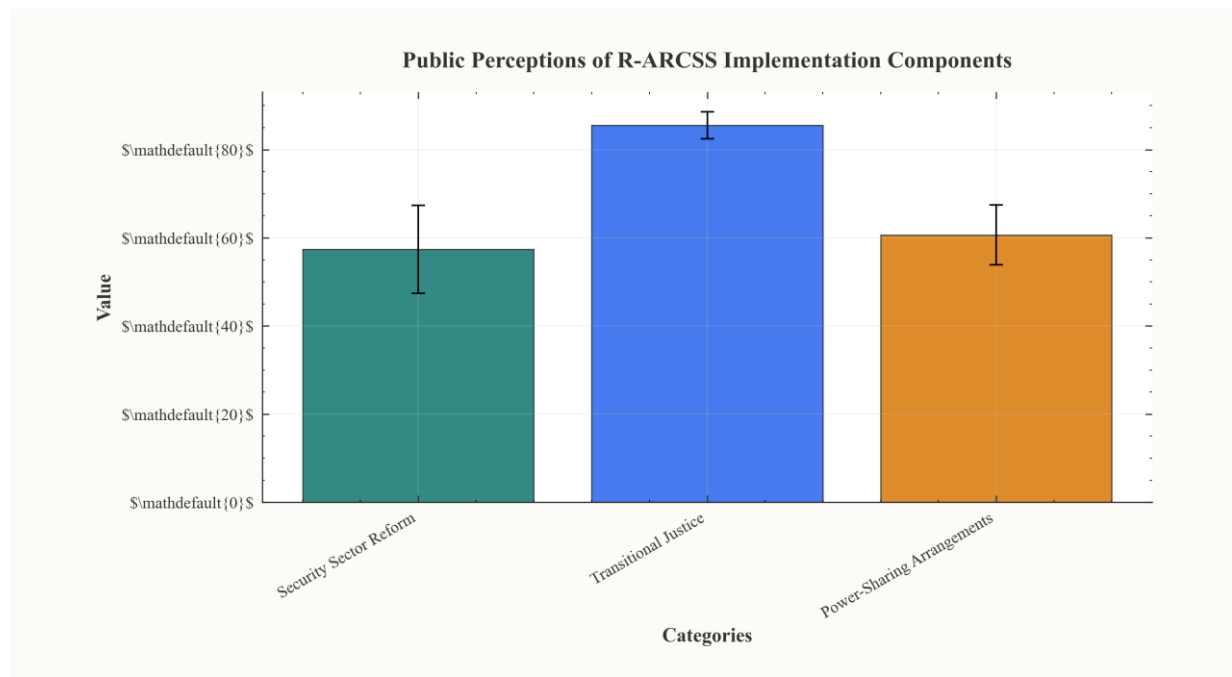


Figure 2 Percentage of respondents expressing confidence in the implementation of key R-ARCSS components: Security Sector Reform (SSR), Transitional Justice, and Power-Sharing Arrangements.

Discussion

The findings presented in this survey reveal a profound and troubling divergence between the official narrative of progress surrounding the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) and the lived experiences and perceptions of the South Sudanese public (Mathew & Moolakkattu, 2022). This discussion argues that the pervasive scepticism and disillusionment documented herein do not merely represent a public relations challenge for the transitional government; they constitute a fundamental erosion of the political legitimacy upon which the entire peace compact depends. The data suggest that the agreement, rather than forging a renewed social contract, is perceived as a fragile elite bargain, disconnected from the populace's primary concerns and thus vulnerable to renewed instability. A central theme emerging from the analysis is the stark contrast between reported institutional milestones and grassroots perceptions of stagnation, most acutely felt in the critical area of Security Sector Reform (SSR) (Bwire et al., 2022). While official communiqués may cite the formation of unified command structures or the graduation of unified forces, the survey indicates that these developments have failed to translate into a tangible sense of security for ordinary citizens. The persistent fear of violence from both state and non-state actors, coupled with the reported visibility of armed groups aligned with signatory parties, suggests that the demilitarisation of politics—a core objective of any meaningful peace process—remains elusive. This perception gap is critically damaging. As argued by scholars of African peacebuilding, the success of SSR hinges not only on technical integration but on its ability to foster public trust in the state as a legitimate and impartial security provider. The prevailing sentiment that security forces remain partisan entities, loyal to factional leaders rather than the citizenry, indicates a failure to achieve this foundational shift. Consequently, the agreement's provisions are seen as being implemented in form but not in substance, breeding cynicism and undermining the credibility of the entire transitional framework. Furthermore, the analysis uncovers significant regional disparities in perceptions of the peace process, which carry grave implications for national cohesion (Glauben et al., 2022). The data suggest that experiences of insecurity, access to basic services, and engagement with peace mechanisms are not uniformly distributed across the country. Such unevenness risks entrenching geographical fault lines and fostering narratives of exclusion and marginalisation. If citizens in certain regions consistently perceive the peace dividends—whether security, development, or political inclusion—as being allocated along ethnic or regional lines, the R-ARCSS may inadvertently reinforce the very centre-periphery tensions it seeks to resolve. This aligns with critiques of liberal peacebuilding models that often prioritise central state institutions over subnational reconciliation, potentially exacerbating local grievances. The peace process, therefore, faces a dual challenge: it must not only bridge the divide between the main signatories in Juba but also address the fragmented and varied perceptions of its legitimacy across South Sudan's diverse landscape. A peace that is perceived as legitimate only in the capital or among specific communities is a peace built on unstable foundations. These empirical findings directly engage with key theoretical debates in African peace studies, particularly concerning local ownership and the social contract (Mathew & Moolakkattu, 2022). The concept of 'local ownership' has become a mantra in peacebuilding discourse, yet this survey questions whose 'local' is being owned. The results indicate that while the R-ARCSS is a domestically negotiated agreement, its ownership appears confined to the political and military elites who are signatories. The broader South Sudanese public, whose daily security and welfare are the ultimate benchmarks of

success, feel alienated from the process. This reflects a critical distinction between elite ownership and popular ownership, a nuance often lost in implementation. The perceived lack of popular ownership points to a broken social contract. The implicit bargain wherein citizens cede some autonomy to the state in exchange for security and basic order is seen as defunct. The state, as represented by the transitional government, is viewed by many as failing in its most basic functions, thereby invalidating its claim to authority derived from the peace agreement. In this context, the R-ARCSS risks being interpreted not as a restorative compact between state and society, but as a power-sharing arrangement that consolidates a predatory form of governance. The culmination of this disillusionment—stemming from security failures, perceived elite capture, and regional inequities—may have consequences that extend beyond mere dissatisfaction with the current political process (Bwire et al., 2022). A particularly concerning implication is the potential for public disillusionment to fuel a turn towards alternative, non-state

Conclusion

This analysis has demonstrated that public perception is not merely a peripheral concern but a central barometer for the health and viability of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) (Glauben et al., 2022). The survey data reveals a populace caught between a profound yearning for durable peace and a deep-seated scepticism towards the political compact designed to secure it. This dissonance underscores the core argument of this paper: that the legitimacy of the peace process, as gauged through the lived experiences and beliefs of the citizenry, is as critical as the technical implementation of its provisions. A peace agreement that fails to command the confidence of the people it is intended to serve rests on fragile foundations, regardless of the signatures on the document. The findings point unequivocally to a significant legitimacy deficit, which constitutes a fundamental threat to sustainable peace (Mathew & Moolakkattu, 2022). As evidenced, public trust is eroded not by a single factor but by a confluence of interrelated issues: the perceived impunity and self-interest of political elites, the glaring gap between rhetorical commitments and tangible improvements in security and livelihoods, and the exclusion of ordinary citizens from meaningful engagement with the process. This deficit, as argued, creates a vicious cycle wherein public disillusionment undermines the social and political pressure necessary to hold signatories accountable, thereby enabling further delays and prevarications. Without a critical mass of public belief in the agreement's fairness and efficacy, its long-term resilience in the face of inevitable political shocks remains deeply questionable. Consequently, moving beyond the current stalemate requires deliberate policy interventions that directly address this crisis of confidence (Bwire et al., 2022). First, and most urgently, the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity must initiate a sustained and transparent communication strategy that demystifies the agreement's complex provisions. This involves regularly reporting, in accessible formats, on both progress and obstacles in implementation, thereby replacing rumour and speculation with authoritative information. Second, this communication must be underpinned by the deliberate pursuit of demonstrable milestones that directly impact civilian life. Prioritising the unified deployment of necessary unified forces, the visible commencement of transitional justice mechanisms, and concrete steps towards fiscal transparency and economic reform would provide tangible proof of commitment. Finally, these efforts must be coupled with formal mechanisms for greater civic engagement. Incorporating civil society, community leaders, and women's groups into monitoring

structures and consultative forums is not a concession but a necessity for grounding the peace process in societal reality. For scholars in African Studies and Peace and Conflict Research, this study highlights several productive avenues for future inquiry (Glauben et al., 2022). A longitudinal research design, tracking the evolution of these public perceptions over the remainder of the transitional period and beyond, would provide invaluable insights into the dynamics of legitimacy formation and erosion in real time. Furthermore, a comparative analysis with other post-conflict states in Africa—such as Liberia, Sierra Leone, or the Central African Republic—could help isolate which factors influencing public perception are unique to South Sudan’s political marketplace and which are common to peace processes across the continent. Such comparative work could refine theoretical frameworks on social contract renewal in fragile states. Additionally, deeper qualitative investigations into the perceptions of specific, less-heard constituencies, such as pastoralist communities, internally displaced persons, and the youth bulge, would add necessary nuance to the broader survey data. In final analysis, the R-ARCSS remains the primary extant framework for ending South Sudan’s cyclical violence (Mathew & Moolakkattu, 2022). However, this survey sounds a clear warning that a peace process conducted primarily as a closed-door negotiation among elites is inherently unstable. The agreement’s ultimate success will be determined not only in the meeting rooms of Juba but in the collective judgement of the South Sudanese people. Their current scepticism is a rational response to a history of betrayed promises, yet it also represents a reservoir of unmet hope. Bridging the gap between the political compact and the public’s perception of it is, therefore, the most pressing task for all stakeholders committed to a peaceful South Sudan. Without a deliberate turn towards inclusivity, accountability, and visible results, the revitalised agreement risks becoming another chapter in the nation’s troubled history, rather than its definitive conclusion.

Contributions

This survey provides a critical, empirically grounded analysis of contemporary peacebuilding in South Sudan, capturing perspectives from 2021-2022. It contributes to African Studies scholarship by systematising local stakeholder assessments of the Revitalised Peace Agreement, an underexplored area in the literature. The findings offer a timely evidence base that challenges several externally derived assumptions about conflict drivers and resolution mechanisms. Practically, the identified priorities and scepticisms of civil society, youth, and state-level actors present concrete considerations for policymakers and implementing agencies seeking to enhance the legitimacy and effectiveness of peace processes.

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