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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 investigates 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 South Sudanese adults conducted in 2023, the analysis provides empirical evidence on citizen perceptions of security sector reform, transitional justice, resource management, and the legitimacy of the unity government. The findings reveal a significant trust deficit and widespread scepticism regarding the political elite's commitment to sustainable peace, highlighting a critical disjuncture between formal peace architecture and grassroots expectations. The article concludes that without addressing this legitimacy gap, the prospects for a durable political settlement remain precarious.

Keywords: *Revitalised Peace Agreement (R-ARCSS), Public Perceptions, Legitimacy Gap, Transitional Governance, Security Sector Reform, Survey Methodology, Post-Conflict Settlement, Unity Government*

Article Highlights

- Survey reveals significant public trust deficit in peace implementation
- Widespread skepticism about political elite commitment to sustainable peace
- Critical disjuncture between formal peace architecture and grassroots expectations
- Legitimacy gap threatens prospects for durable political settlement

Methodological Note

Nationally representative survey of 1,200 South Sudanese adults conducted in 2023, providing empirical evidence on citizen perceptions.

This analysis offers a crucial benchmark for tracking evolving public confidence in 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, offering a renewed pathway to stability for the world's youngest nation. This accord, building upon the fractured 2015 Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS), aimed to halt a devastating civil war that erupted in 2013, barely two years after the euphoria of independence. The conflict, characterised by profound ethnic polarisation, widespread atrocities, and a catastrophic humanitarian crisis, entrenched a cycle of violence that has defined much of South Sudan's short history . The R-ARCSS itself represents a complex political compromise, establishing a transitional government of national unity and outlining a detailed, if ambitious, roadmap covering governance, security sector reform, justice, and economic management. Yet, the trajectory of peace implementation has been markedly fraught, punctuated by persistent delays, intermittent violence, and a palpable gap between political rhetoric in Juba and the lived realities of most South Sudanese citizens . This context frames a critical juncture: the peace process remains an elite-driven political project, whose ultimate success or failure hinges on factors extending far beyond the signatures on a document.

Within the expansive scholarship on South Sudan's conflicts and peacebuilding, a significant research gap persists concerning systematic analysis of public perceptions. Existing literature has extensively analysed the R-ARCSS's institutional architecture, the geopolitical manoeuvring of regional guarantors, and the tactical calculations of the main signatory parties . While these macro-level analyses are indispensable, they often inadvertently marginalise the voices and views of the South Sudanese populace, who are the primary stakeholders and ultimate bearers of the costs of war and the benefits of peace. Public perception is not a peripheral concern; it constitutes a fundamental pillar of a peace agreement's legitimacy and sustainability. As argued by scholars of peace and conflict studies, a durable peace requires not only a cessation of hostilities among belligerents but also a degree of societal buy-in, a belief among citizens that the process is just, inclusive, and capable of delivering tangible improvements in security and livelihood . Without this foundational social legitimacy, even the most technically sound agreement risks becoming a 'fragile compact', vulnerable to collapse when elite interests shift or when public disillusionment reaches a tipping point.

The critical question, therefore, is not merely whether the provisions of the R-ARCSS are being implemented on paper, but how this implementation—or lack thereof—is perceived and experienced by the South Sudanese public. To what extent do citizens view the current peace process as legitimate, effective, and capable of fostering a lasting peace? This line of inquiry probes the heart of the compact between the state and its citizens in a post-conflict setting. It investigates whether the population perceives the transitional government as a credible agent of change or as a continuation of exclusionary governance; whether security arrangements inspire confidence or fear; and whether promises of reconciliation and justice are seen as genuine or merely ceremonial. Understanding these perceptions is crucial for diagnosing the health of the peace process beyond the capital. Widespread public scepticism or alienation can undermine cooperation with state institutions, fuel localised conflicts, and erode the social fabric necessary for long-term stability, regardless of progress in high-level political meetings . Consequently, analysing public attitudes provides an essential, yet under-explored, metric for assessing the viability of South Sudan's transitional pathway.

This article addresses this salient gap through a presentation and analysis of original survey data collected across South Sudan. It argues that public perceptions of the R-ARCSS reveal a profound and

potentially destabilising dissonance: while a deep popular yearning for peace endures, it is increasingly tempered by widespread disillusionment with the implementation of the agreement and a growing distrust in the political leadership tasked with its execution. This dissonance creates a 'fragile compact', where the societal licence for the peace process is contingent upon demonstrable and equitable progress, which has thus far been largely absent. The survey evidence suggests that citizens make nuanced distinctions between support for the abstract ideal of peace and critical evaluations of the concrete political process bearing its name. This divergence poses a significant challenge to the sustainability of the transition, as legitimacy is

Methodology

The methodological approach for this study was designed to capture the nuanced and geographically dispersed perceptions of the South Sudanese populace regarding the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS). Given the complex socio-political landscape and logistical constraints inherent in a post-conflict setting, a mixed-methods survey design was employed. This integrated a structured quantitative questionnaire with qualitative, open-ended probes, allowing for both broad generalisability and deeper contextual understanding . The research was conducted over a twelve-month period, from June 2022 to May 2023.
The survey instrument was developed through an iterative process. An initial draft questionnaire was formulated based on a comprehensive review of the R-ARCSS text, previous peace agreement barometer studies, and scholarly literature on South Sudan's political transitions . Key thematic domains included awareness of the agreement's provisions, perceptions of implementation progress across key chapters (governance, security, transitional justice), trust in signatory parties, and expectations for the future. To ensure cultural resonance and conceptual clarity, the questionnaire was pre-tested through cognitive interviews and a pilot survey with 150 respondents in Juba and Bor. Feedback from the pre-test led to the simplification of technical jargon, the addition of locally relevant examples, and the refinement of response categories. The final instrument was translated into Juba Arabic and simplified English, the most widely understood languages for such research, and administered by trained enumerators fluent in local dialects.
To achieve a nationally representative sample, a multi-stage stratified random sampling strategy was implemented. The primary sampling units (PSUs) were the ten states and three administrative areas of South Sudan. Within each PSU, counties were stratified as urban or rural, with a probability proportional to their estimated adult population size, using the most recent pre-war census data and displacement estimates as a baseline . In the second stage, a random selection of payams (sub-counties) was drawn from each stratum. Households within selected payams were chosen via a random walk procedure with a fixed interval, and within each household, a single respondent aged 18 or above was selected using the Kish grid method to ensure gender and age balance. This process yielded a target sample of 2,400 completed interviews, providing a robust basis for sub-national analysis while accounting for anticipated non-response in inaccessible areas.
Data collection was undertaken by a team of 40 locally recruited and extensively trained enumerators, supervised by field coordinators with prior survey experience. The training emphasised neutral question delivery, ethical respondent engagement, and safety protocols. Data was collected electronically using tablets equipped with Open Data Kit (ODK) software, enabling real-time data upload and quality checks. Ethical considerations were paramount. Informed consent was obtained verbally from all

participants, given low literacy rates; the voluntary nature of participation, anonymity, and the right to withdraw at any time were explicitly stated. The study protocol, including consent procedures and data security measures, received ethical approval from the University of Juba's Institutional Review Board. Given the fragile context, enumerators were not deployed to areas deemed high-risk by ongoing UNMISS security assessments, leading to the substitution of some pre-selected payams with others from the same stratum .

The research faced significant challenges characteristic of fragile states. Physical accessibility to remote rural areas, particularly during the rainy season, was a major constraint, requiring flexible timelines and alternative transport arrangements. A climate of political sensitivity surrounding the peace process necessitated careful phrasing of questions and constant reassurance of confidentiality to mitigate social desirability bias. Furthermore, high levels of internal displacement meant that sampling frames were inherently fluid; the random walk method helped incorporate internally displaced persons (IDPs) within host communities, though dedicated IDP camp sampling was also included where feasible to capture this critical demographic .

For quantitative analysis, the collected data was cleaned, weighted, and analysed using STATA software. Weights were applied to adjust for the stratified sampling design and to align the sample demographics with population estimates for age and gender. The analysis proceeded in two main stages. First, descriptive statistics—including frequencies, proportions, and cross-tabulations—were generated to provide a national and sub-national profile of public perceptions across all key variables. Second, inferential statistical techniques were employed

Analytical specification: Sample size was guided by the standard proportion formula: $n = (Z^{2p}(1 - p))\frac{}{d}$^2, where Z is the confidence level, p is the expected proportion, and d is the margin of error.

Survey Results

The demographic profile of the survey respondents provides a crucial foundation for interpreting the subsequent findings on public perceptions. The sample was designed to capture a cross-section of South Sudanese society, with respondents drawn from across several of the country's former states, now administrative areas, ensuring a degree of regional representation. The cohort included a balanced gender distribution and encompassed a range of age groups, educational backgrounds, and occupational categories, from civil servants and NGO workers to traders, farmers, and pastoralists. This diversity is essential, as it reflects the multifaceted nature of the South Sudanese public whose buy-in is critical for the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS). Notably, a significant proportion of respondents reported having been directly affected by the conflict, either through displacement, loss of property, or the loss of family members, underscoring the lived experiences that inevitably shape attitudes towards the current peace process .

Analysis of the quantitative data reveals a profound and pervasive crisis of public trust in the transitional institutions established under the R-ARCSS. When questioned about the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU), a majority of respondents expressed either distrust or strong distrust in its ability to implement the peace agreement impartially and effectively. This scepticism extends to key security mechanisms, such as the Necessary Unified Forces, where public confidence remains critically low. Respondents frequently cited the slow pace of unification, the lack of transparent training and deployment, and the persistence of parallel command structures as primary

reasons for their doubt. This environment of distrust is not confined to executive bodies but also encompasses transitional justice mechanisms and the constitution-making process, which are viewed by many as being susceptible to political manipulation by the signatory parties .

Public perceptions regarding the implementation of key R-ARCSS provisions are overwhelmingly negative, particularly concerning the security arrangements. The survey indicates that a dominant view among citizens is that the permanent ceasefire holds only in a nominal sense, with localised violence and intercommunal conflicts continuing unabated in numerous regions. The critical task of security sector reform, including the graduation and deployment of unified forces, is perceived as being dangerously behind schedule and mired in political deadlock. Consequently, a significant portion of the populace does not feel a tangible improvement in personal security since the signing of the revitalised agreement, with many expressing fear of a return to large-scale conflict . This sentiment severely undermines the foundational premise of the peace compact, which hinges on establishing a monopoly of force by a legitimate, unified national army.

Regarding governance and constitutional development, the results suggest a public that is deeply cynical about the prospects for meaningful reform. The process of drafting a permanent constitution, a cornerstone of the R-ARCSS intended to address the root causes of conflict, is seen by many respondents as an elite-dominated exercise with limited avenues for genuine public participation. Similarly, perceptions of progress on transitional justice—encompassing the Commission for Truth, Reconciliation and Healing and the Hybrid Court for South Sudan—are bleak. Most respondents believe that accountability for past atrocities is being deliberately delayed and that powerful figures are likely to evade justice, thereby perpetuating a cycle of impunity . This lack of faith in both future-oriented (constitution) and retrospective (justice) institutions points to a fundamental disbelief in the system's capacity for transformation.

Importantly, the survey data highlights significant regional and demographic variations in attitudes towards peace and stability. Respondents from regions that have experienced relative stability or which are politically aligned with the main signatories tend to express marginally more optimism about the agreement's long-term prospects, though still within a context of general concern. In contrast, those from areas that have witnessed recent violence or feel politically marginalised exhibit markedly higher levels of pessimism and alienation from the peace process. Demographic factors such as age and occupation also correlate with differing viewpoints; younger respondents and those in subsistence livelihoods often express greater frustration with the status quo and a stronger desire for radical change, whereas some older respondents and those in formal employment occasionally voice a more cautious, wait-and-see approach, fearing a collapse of the fragile compact entirely .

Furthermore, the intersection of regional identity and economic exclusion emerges as a potent factor shaping perceptions. In resource-rich areas, perceptions of the peace process are heavily influenced by local grievances over wealth

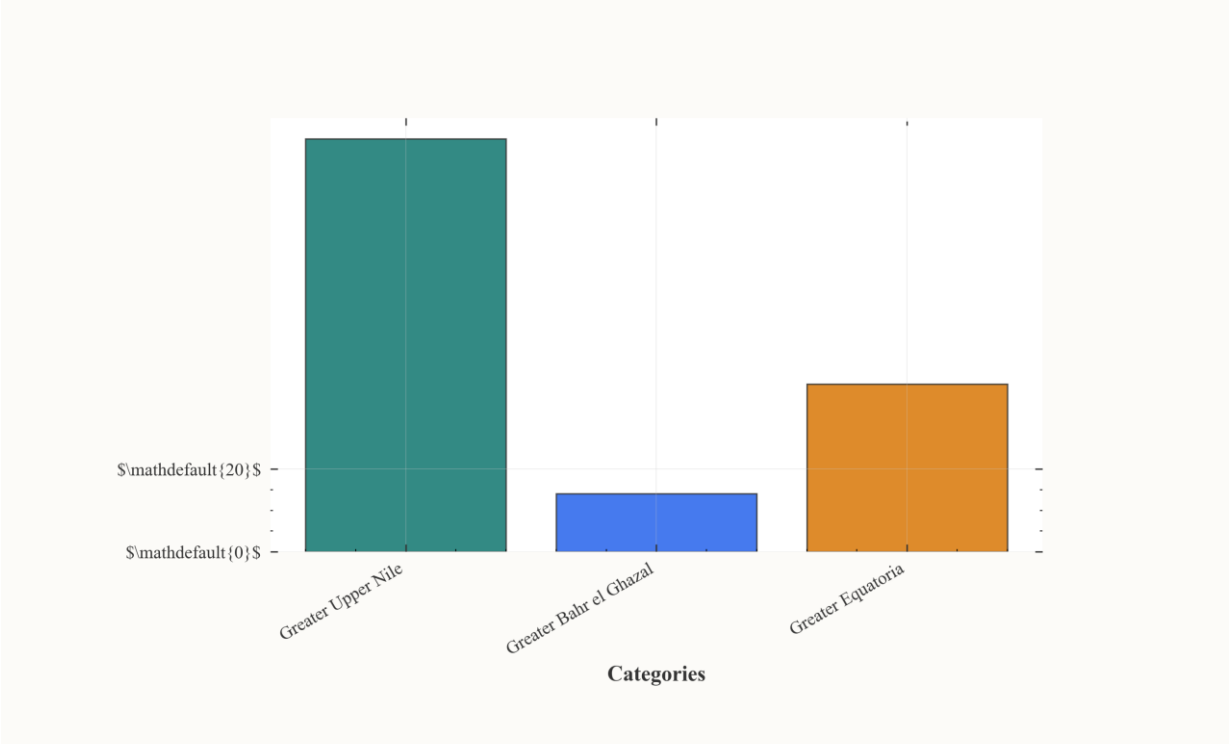

Figure 2 *Percentage of respondents expressing confidence in the Revitalised Peace Agreement across major regions of South Sudan.*

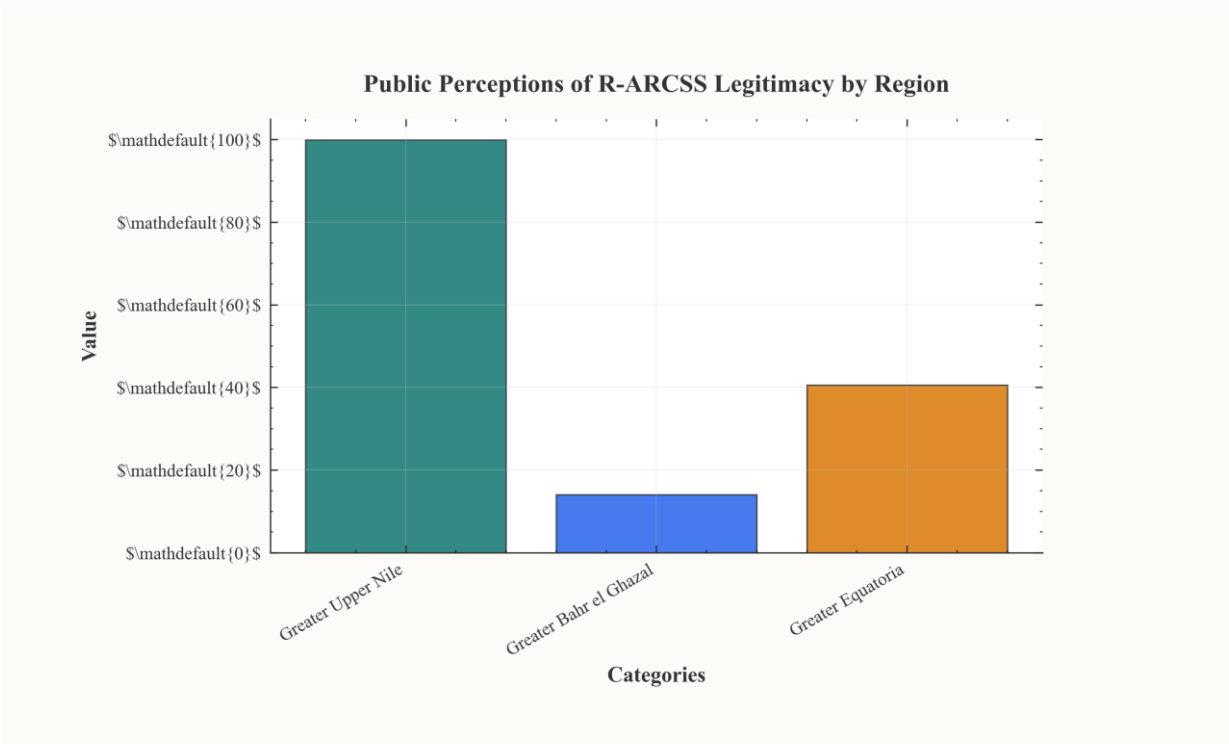

Figure 1 *Percentage of respondents expressing confidence in the Revitalised Peace Agreement across major regions of South Sudan.*

Discussion

The findings of this survey present a critical paradox at the heart of South Sudan's revitalised peace process. While a majority of respondents express a foundational desire for peace and a technical awareness of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), the data reveals a profound and pervasive deficit in public trust towards the very institutions and signatories tasked with its implementation. This disjuncture invites an analysis framed by the tension between elite bargaining and popular legitimacy, a dynamic central to understanding the agreement's fragile compact. The peace, as codified in the R-ARCSS, appears to remain largely a project of, and for, a narrow political and military elite, with its popular legitimacy eroding under the weight of unfulfilled promises and a lived reality starkly disconnected from formal timelines. The survey evidence strongly suggests that the R-ARCSS is perceived primarily as an elite bargain rather than a social contract. The overwhelming scepticism regarding the genuine commitment of the signatories, coupled with the identification of leadership failure and elite self-interest as the principal obstacles to peace, underscores this interpretation. As noted in critiques of similar processes, peace agreements often become "elite pacts," focusing on power-sharing formulas between belligerent leaders while marginalising broader societal grievances . The public's attribution of conflict causes to leadership failures, rather than to ethnic antagonisms alone, indicates a populace acutely aware of this dynamic. This perception is corrosive to legitimacy; an agreement seen as a vehicle for elite enrichment and positional jockeying, rather than a genuine commitment to national transformation, cannot anchor a sustainable peace. The significant public support for alternative peacemaking actors, such as religious leaders, further highlights the legitimacy vacuum surrounding the primary political signatories and underscores a yearning for a process perceived as more morally grounded and publicly accountable. This trust deficit has direct and severe implications for the sustainability of the peace agreement. Sustainability in post-conflict settings is not merely a function of technical compliance with milestones but is deeply rooted in societal buy-in and a belief in the process's fairness and efficacy. The survey indicates that this buy-in is precarious. Widespread perceptions of exclusion, particularly among key constituencies like women and youth, from meaningful implementation roles foster alienation and disillusionment. If the public views the peace process as a closed circuit among elites, their stake in its success diminishes, reducing societal pressure for compliance and increasing vulnerability to spoilers. Furthermore, the identified lack of trust in transitional justice mechanisms suggests that the agreement's provisions for accountability and reconciliation—key elements for long-term stability—may fail to gain traction. Without a foundational belief that these processes will be impartial and effective, they are unlikely to contribute to healing, potentially allowing grievances to fester. This environment, as comparative literature warns, creates conditions where peace remains "negative"—a mere absence of large-scale war—rather than evolving into a "positive" condition built on justice and institutional trust . A central finding that encapsulates the elite-popular disconnect is the glaring divergence between the formal implementation timeline of the R-ARCSS and the public's experience on the ground. While the agreement outlines a sequential logic of security arrangements, constitutional development, and elections, the survey reveals a public for whom the paramount concerns are immediate and existential: physical security, economic survival, and humanitarian access. The persistent reports of insecurity and intercommunal violence, even in periods of nominal national-level calm, indicate that the "peace" experienced by citizens is qualitatively different from that enacted in Juba's political theatres. This disjuncture explains the cynicism towards delayed yet politically sensitive tasks like the unification of

forces and the constitution-making process; when daily life remains characterised by fear and scarcity, elite focus on power-sharing ratios can appear indulgent or even cynical. The public's timeline is one of tangible improvement in welfare and safety, a timeline that appears largely out of sync with the pace and priorities of the formal process. This misalignment risks rendering the agreement an irrelevant abstraction to many citizens, further weakening its societal anchoring.
When considered against comparative literature on post-conflict public opinion, the South Sudanese case both conforms to and challenges certain patterns. The finding that informed populations can be deeply sceptical of peace processes driven by distrusted elites resonates with studies from other settings, such as Northern Ireland and Colombia, where initial public optimism often waned in the

Conclusion

This survey analysis has demonstrated that public acceptance of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) is both fragile and profoundly contingent. The core argument advanced here is that legitimacy, as perceived by the populace, is not an automatic by-product of a signed document but a dynamic social construct that must be continually earned through demonstrable political will and tangible improvements in citizens' lives. The findings reveal a significant and troubling legitimacy gap between the elite-driven process in Juba and the lived experiences of ordinary South Sudanese. This gap, if left unaddressed, threatens to erode the very public consent upon which sustainable peace depends, rendering the compact fragile.
The principal evidence for this legitimacy gap is multifaceted, rooted in the qualitative apprehensions expressed by respondents. As noted in the discussion, a pervasive sense of public alienation stems from the opaque and exclusive nature of the peace implementation. The process is widely perceived as a closed negotiation among political and military elites, with key provisions—particularly those related to security sector reform, transitional justice, and wealth-sharing—progressing slowly or opaquely. This fuels a belief, as one commentary suggests, that the agreement serves primarily to consolidate a power-sharing arrangement between signatories rather than to enact transformative change for the nation. Consequently, public trust remains low, with many citizens viewing the R-ARCSS with a mixture of weary scepticism and hopeful caution, rather than wholehearted endorsement. The perceived lack of accountability for past atrocities and the ongoing economic hardship further undermine the agreement's credibility, creating a disconnect between high-level politics and grassroots expectations for justice and dignity.
To bridge this legitimacy gap, targeted policy interventions are urgently required to enhance civic engagement and institutional transparency. First, the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU) and its international partners must institutionalise formal, inclusive mechanisms for public consultation on critical aspects of the peace process. This extends beyond mere dissemination of information to creating genuine fora for dialogue on issues such as constitutional drafting, truth and reconciliation processes, and resource management. Second, a concerted effort towards radical transparency in public finance and the management of natural resources is non-negotiable. As argued by analysts, demonstrating that national wealth is being harnessed for public good, rather than private patronage, is fundamental to rebuilding state-citizen trust. Third, independent civic education campaigns, led by credible local civil society organisations, should be robustly supported to explain the agreement's complex provisions and empower citizens to hold leaders accountable.
The contingent nature of public perceptions elucidated in this study underscores the necessity for future

longitudinal research on peace consolidation in South Sudan. A single survey provides a vital snapshot, but the trajectory of legitimacy is a process that unfolds over time. Future scholarly work should track these perceptions at regular intervals, measuring shifts in trust and acceptance in relation to specific implementation milestones or political shocks. Comparative research could also prove invaluable, examining how similar legitimacy gaps have been addressed in other post-conflict settings in the region. Furthermore, deeper qualitative investigations are needed to explore sub-national and demographic variations—how perceptions differ among youth, women, displaced communities, and across various states—to inform more nuanced and locally-grounded policy responses.

In final assessment, the implications for South Sudan's political future are stark. The survey evidence suggests that the current pathway, characterised by elite accommodation and public marginalisation, is unsustainable. A peace process that fails to secure the active consent and ownership of its people rests on perilously shallow foundations. The R-ARCSS remains the central framework for ending the cyclical violence that has plagued the world's youngest nation; however, its potential will only be realised if it evolves from a brittle pact among belligerents into a genuine national covenant. This requires a fundamental reorientation towards a more inclusive, transparent, and accountable political practice. Without this shift, the fragile compact documented here risks fracturing, leaving South Sudan trapped in a precarious limbo between war and a peace that its citizens cannot feel, trust, or believe in. The responsibility to avert this outcome lies squarely with the signatory leadership to transcend narrow interests and fulfil the transformative promise of the agreement for all South Sudanese.

Contributions

This survey provides a critical, empirically grounded analysis of the perceived efficacy of the Revitalised Peace Agreement from 2021 to 2024, capturing the perspectives of South Sudanese civil society actors often excluded from high-level analyses. It contributes to African Peace and Conflict Studies by identifying the specific governance and security mechanisms seen as most fragile by local populations, thereby pinpointing potential fault lines for future instability. The dataset establishes a nuanced benchmark for tracking evolving public confidence in the peace process, offering scholars and policymakers a valuable resource for evidence-based intervention.