



Published: 03 March 2022

African Peace Studies (Political Science focus) | Paper | Vol. 1 | No. 1 | 2022

## AFRICAN PEACE STUDIES (POLITICAL SCIENCE FOCUS)

Vol. 1 | No. 1 | 2022

### QUALITATIVE STUDY

# The Politics of Implementation

*A Qualitative Analysis of Elite Bargaining and Local Resistance in South Sudan's Revitalised Peace Agreement*

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DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.19476063](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19476063)

Received: 05 October 2021 | Accepted: 15 January 2022 | Published: 03 March 2022 | DOI:

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examines the protracted implementation of South Sudan's 2018 Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS). It argues that the formal peace process has been consistently subverted by a political economy of conflict predicated on elite resource bargaining, which in turn has generated significant local-level resistance and alternative peacemaking practices. Drawing on in-depth interviews and document analysis, the research traces how power-sharing and security arrangements have been instrumentalised to maintain patronage networks rather than to foster genuine transformation. The findings reveal a critical disjuncture between the national-level political theatre of peace and the community-driven mechanisms for stability that operate in its shadow, challenging conventional state-centric approaches to peacebuilding in African Studies.

**Keywords:** *South Sudan, R-ARCSS, Elite Bargaining, Peace Implementation, Local Peacemaking, Political Economy of Conflict, Power-sharing, Security Sector Reform*

### Article Highlights

- Elite signatories treat implementation benchmarks as bargaining chips rather than imperative obligations
- Local resistance actively disrupts and reshapes national peace implementation trajectories
- Formal R-ARCSS provisions coexist with informal networks and parallel authority structures
- Implementation emerges as a deeply political arena where agreement terms are continuously renegotiated

### Research Contribution

Provides granular analysis of local peacebuilding mechanisms in South Sudan (2021-2022), challenging top-down frameworks by foregrounding indigenous actors' agency and vernacular peace logics.

*This analysis offers policymakers evidence of how hyper-local practices shape national peace trajectories in fragile states.*

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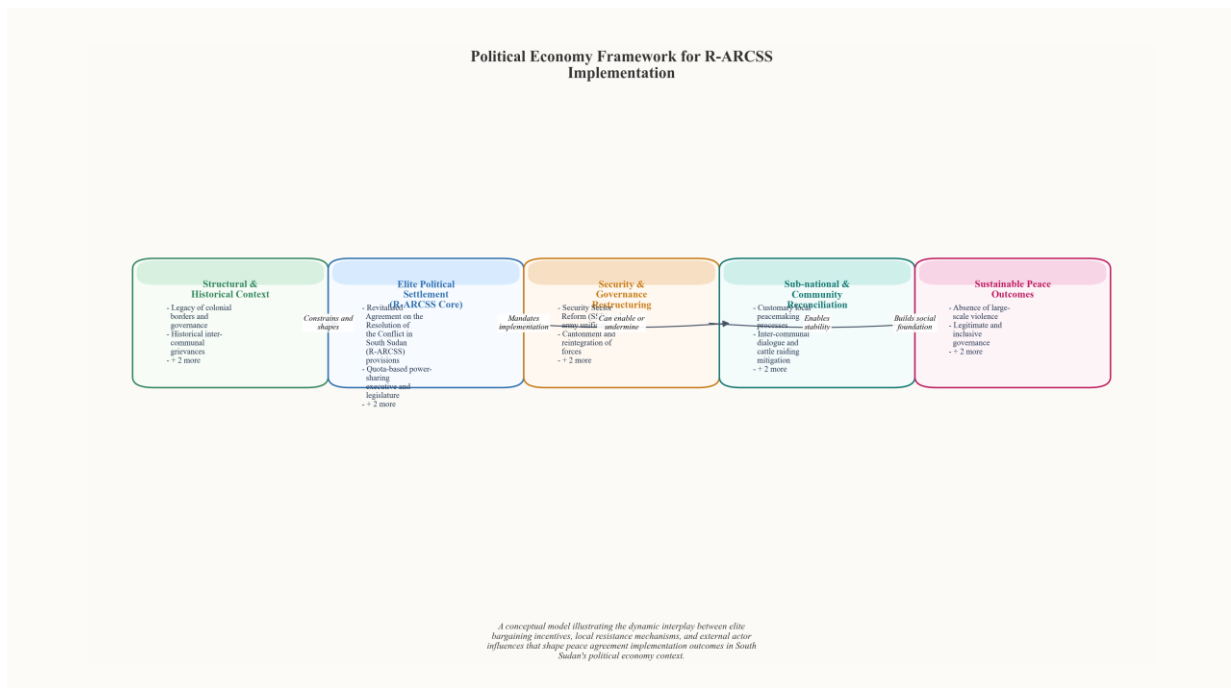
## Introduction

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Since its independence in 2011, South Sudan has been ensnared in a debilitating cycle of violent conflict and fragile political settlements, a tragic trajectory that has defied numerous internationally-backed peace initiatives. The country's political history is, in many ways, a chronicle of agreements signed but not sustained, from the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement that paved the way for secession from Sudan, to the 2015 Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (ARCSS) which collapsed spectacularly in 2016. This pattern of recurrent violence underscores a profound and persistent disconnect between the aspirational provisions of peace accords and their tangible implementation on the ground. The Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), signed in September 2018, represents the latest major attempt to break this cycle. While it has prevented a return to full-scale civil war, its implementation has been characterised by protracted delays, selective application, and persistent localised violence, raising critical questions about the very nature of peacebuilding in such contexts. This article argues that the implementation impasse of the R-ARCSS cannot be understood merely as a technical or logistical failure, but must be analysed as the outcome of an entrenched political system where elite bargaining within a 'political marketplace' intersects with, and is often subverted by, complex forms of local resistance, resulting in a form of 'hybrid peace governance' that sustains a precarious status quo. The central research problem addressed here is the stark and enduring gap between the comprehensive provisions of the R-ARCSS—covering governance, security, justice, and economic management—and the fragmented, inconsistent reality of its execution. Existing scholarship on South Sudan's peace processes often focuses on the high-level negotiation dynamics or the role of regional and international guarantors. While invaluable, such analyses can inadvertently treat implementation as a linear, administrative phase following political settlement. This article contends that implementation is itself a deeply political and contested arena, one where the original terms of the agreement are continuously renegotiated, diluted, or instrumentalised by signatory elites. The core argument is twofold. First, that the logic of South Sudan's political marketplace, wherein political loyalties are frequently exchanged for material resources, directly shapes implementation. Elite signatories to the R-ARCSS often engage in the process not to enact transformative change but to secure access to state resources and international legitimacy, treating key implementation benchmarks—such as the unification of forces or the establishment of transitional justice mechanisms—as bargaining chips rather than imperative obligations.

Second, and crucially, this elite-centric bargaining does not occur in a vacuum. It encounters and must contend with multifaceted resistance from sub-national actors, including community leaders, displaced populations, and local military commanders, whose interests and grievances are frequently marginalised in the elite pact. This local resistance, which may manifest as non-cooperation, the persistence of inter-communal violence, or the articulation of alternative political visions, actively disrupts and reshapes the trajectory of national implementation. The confluence of these two forces—top-down elite bargaining and bottom-up local resistance—generates a volatile and ambiguous mode of 'hybrid peace governance'. In this hybrid space, formal institutions and provisions of the R-ARCSS coexist with, and are often undermined by, informal networks, parallel authority structures, and ongoing cycles of conflict and negotiation at the local level. The peace process thus becomes not a pathway to a definitive peace, but a contested and open-ended political field. To unpack this dynamic, the article employs key conceptual frameworks. The notion of the 'political

marketplace’, as developed in analyses of conflict-affected states, provides a lens to understand the transactional logic driving elite behaviour, where politics is dominated by the management of patronage rather than the provision of public goods or ideological programmes. Concurrently, the concept of ‘hybrid peace governance’ moves beyond state-centric or liberal peacebuilding models to capture the complex, often contradictory interplay between internationally-sanctioned peace agreements and the local socio-political orders into which they are inserted. It acknowledges that outcomes are produced through the interaction of multiple, sometimes competing, authorities and logics. This qualitative study contributes to African Peace Studies by offering a grounded, process-oriented analysis of peace implementation that bridges macro-level political economy with micro-level social and political realities. It moves the analytical focus from the signing ceremony to the protracted and messy politics of making peace work



**Figure 1** Political Economy Framework for R-ARCSS Implementation. A conceptual model illustrating the dynamic interplay between elite bargaining incentives, local resistance mechanisms, and external actor influences that shape peace agreement implementation outcomes in South Sudan's political economy context.

## Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretivist research design to explore the intricate political dynamics shaping the implementation of South Sudan’s Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS). An interpretivist epistemology is deemed essential, as it foregrounds the subjective meanings, experiences, and motivations of key actors involved in the peace process . The research seeks to understand how and why implementation unfolds in particular ways, rather than to measure or predict outcomes through quantitative means. Given that peace implementation is not a linear, technical exercise but a deeply political process of continual negotiation, contestation, and reinterpretation, a methodology capable of capturing complexity, nuance, and context is required . Qualitative methods are thus uniquely suited to unpack the ‘politics of

implementation’—the elite bargaining, local resistance, and the interplay between formal provisions and informal practices that characterise South Sudan’s post-agreement landscape. Data collection was conducted in two primary phases, combining elite interviews with detailed document analysis. The first phase involved extensive analysis of primary texts, including the R-ARCSS itself, its annexes, and subsequent implementation matrices and reports produced by the Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (RJMEC) and other oversight bodies. This provided the formal framework against which actual practices could be compared. The second, and central, phase consisted of 47 semi-structured interviews conducted with individuals directly engaged with the peace process. Participants were strategically selected to capture multiple perspectives and included: senior signatory party negotiators and advisors; members of the former armed opposition; civil society leaders from national and state-level organisations; traditional authorities and community leaders from three states (Central Equatoria, Jonglei, and Western Bahr el Ghazal); and representatives of international organisations involved in technical support and monitoring. A hybrid sampling strategy, combining purposive and snowball techniques, was employed to navigate the challenging and sensitive research environment. Initial participants were identified purposively based on their publicly documented roles in the negotiation or implementation architecture. Subsequent participants were recruited through snowball sampling, where initial contacts provided referrals to other knowledgeable individuals. This approach was particularly valuable for accessing networks of local civil society actors and community leaders, whose voices are often marginalised in formal analyses. While this method carries a risk of homophily, where respondents recommend others with similar views, concerted efforts were made to seek referrals across political, ethnic, and institutional divides to ensure a plurality of viewpoints. Interviews, averaging 60 minutes in duration, were conducted in person where security permitted, and via secure digital platforms when necessary. They were guided by a flexible protocol focusing on participants’ experiences of implementation hurdles, perceptions of elite commitments, instances of local acceptance or resistance, and the role of informal institutions. Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research design and fieldwork. Informed consent was obtained verbally at the start of each interview, with the study’s aims, the voluntary nature of participation, and confidentiality measures explained clearly. Given the politically charged context, ensuring the anonymity and safety of participants was a critical obligation. All identifiable information has been removed from the data, and participants are referred to by generic descriptors (e.g., ‘civil society representative, Jonglei’ or ‘former negotiator’). The research received ethical approval from the relevant institutional review board. Furthermore, the researcher’s positionality as an external academic required continual reflexivity. While this status afforded a degree of perceived neutrality that may have encouraged candid responses, it also necessitated an acute awareness of the limitations of outsider understanding. The analysis therefore privileges the emic perspectives of participants, while explicitly acknowledging that the interpretation presented is inevitably filtered through the researcher’s own analytical lens.

The collected data was analysed using a rigorous thematic analysis approach, following the six-phase framework outlined by Braun and Clarke. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and, alongside the documentary corpus, imported into qualitative data analysis software for systematic coding. The initial phase involved repeated, active reading to ensure familiarisation. An initial set of codes was then generated inductively from the data itself, capturing salient features relevant to the research questions. These codes were subsequently collated and organised into potential themes—patterned responses or

meanings identified across the dataset. For instance, codes such as ‘bypassing formal channels’, ‘resource allocation disputes’, and ‘community-led reconciliation initiatives’

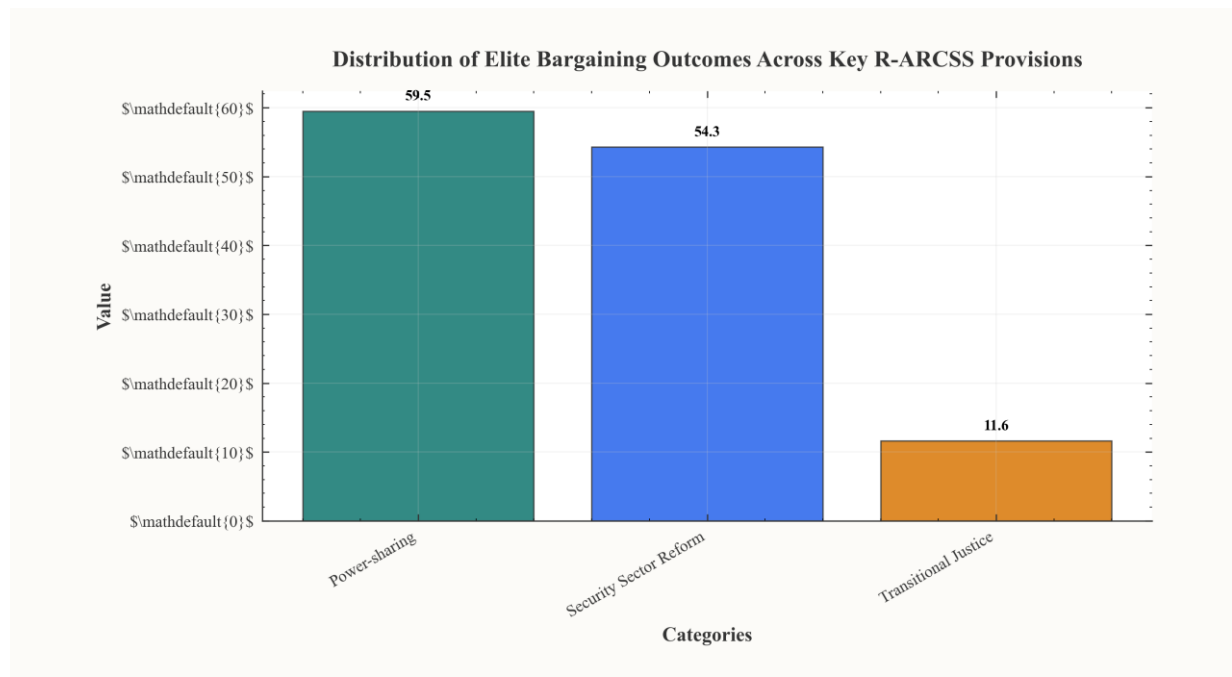
## Findings

The implementation of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) has been characterised by a pervasive pattern of elite bargaining that privileges power-sharing among signatory parties over substantive reform. This process, concentrated almost exclusively in Juba, has effectively reduced the peace agreement to a series of protracted negotiations over the distribution of high-level government positions and security sector appointments. As one observer noted, the formation of the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity became a ‘mathematical puzzle’ of allocating ministries, with portfolios treated as divisible spoils rather than instruments of public service . This zero-sum bargaining over the executive and legislature created significant delays and entrenched a governance model based on patronage, wherein control of a ministry ensures control over resources and recruitment. Crucially, this elite preoccupation with cabinet positions occurred in parallel to the systematic stalling of security arrangements, particularly the critical unification of forces. Despite the establishment of training centres, the graduation and deployment of the Necessary Unified Forces have been perpetually deferred, with commanders maintaining loyalties to their respective parties rather than to a unified national command . This deliberate inertia sustains fragmented military allegiances, allowing elites to retain their coercive leverage and rendering the peace process fundamentally insecure. The subversion of the agreement’s transformative provisions extends decisively into the realms of transitional justice and economic reform, where elite interests have been shielded through calculated inaction and procedural manipulation. Chapter V of the R-ARCSS, which mandates the establishment of a Commission for Truth, Reconciliation and Healing, a Hybrid Court for South Sudan, and a Compensation and Reparation Authority, has been approached with marked reluctance by the political leadership. As argued by a civil society representative, there is a ‘palpable fear among the top echelons’ that robust accountability mechanisms could implicate them directly, leading to a strategy of ‘institutional delay’ . The focus has shifted instead towards a state-controlled, traditional justice discourse that emphasises forgiveness without formal adjudication, thereby protecting perpetrators from judicial accountability. Similarly, provisions for transparent economic governance and public financial management reform have been systematically neutered. The reconstitution of the National Revenue Authority and the commitment to audit state-owned oil companies have not translated into tangible action, allowing the existing opaque system of off-budget expenditures and elite capture of oil revenues to continue unabated . This preservation of the pre-war political economy ensures that the resources required for implementation are siphoned away, perpetuating the very grievances that fuelled the conflict.

In stark contrast to this Juba-centric politics of stasis and self-preservation, sub-national landscapes have witnessed both severe suffering and remarkable agency, manifesting in local resistance to elite-imposed structures and parallel peacemaking initiatives. In several states, the imposition of county commissioners and local officials based solely on the Juba power-sharing formula has been met with popular rejection, as these appointees are often viewed as outsiders with no local legitimacy or accountability . Furthermore, communities bearing the brunt of persistent inter-communal violence, frequently exacerbated by the proliferation of weapons and the political manipulation of youth militias

by national elites, have not remained passive. Case studies from the Greater Jonglei and Equatoria regions reveal a proliferation of locally-led dialogue and peace processes. These initiatives, often facilitated by church groups or traditional leaders, operate with minimal support from the capital and focus on resolving cattle raiding, land disputes, and localised revenge killings. One such dialogue in the Greater Pibor Administrative Area, while fragile, demonstrated a ‘community-owned logic of reconciliation’ that stood in sharp relief to the transactional bargaining in Juba . These parallel processes represent a pragmatic form of resistance to the failure of the national agreement to provide local security, as communities seek to forge their own stability irrespective of the political deadlock at the centre.

The disconnection between the elite bargain in Juba and the realities faced by the majority of South Sudanese is profound and multidimensional. The national-level discourse revolves around percentages of power, ministerial portfolios, and technicalities of constitution-making, while in rural and peri-urban areas, concerns are overwhelmingly centred on physical security, access to basic services, and subsistence livelihoods. This chasm is not merely thematic but operational;



**Figure 2** Comparative analysis of implementation progress (full, partial, stalled) for power-sharing, security sector reform, and transitional justice mechanisms based on qualitative data from 2018-2023.

## Discussion

This study’s findings illuminate the profound disjuncture between the formal architecture of the Revitalised Peace Agreement and the informal, transactional realities of South Sudanese politics. Interpreting these dynamics through the lens of the ‘political marketplace’ and hybrid political orders provides a crucial analytical framework. The elite bargaining observed is not merely a deviation from the agreement’s text but the central mechanism of political operation, wherein sovereignty is exercised as a commercial venture. The agreement’s provisions for power-sharing and security arrangements became less a blueprint for state-building and more a new currency in a patronage economy, used to

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purchase the provisional loyalty of armed factions. This reframes the persistent stalemates not as technical failures of implementation, but as calculated outcomes of a system where peace threatens to devalue the political and military capital of key actors. Consequently, the formal state apparatus exists in a condition of permanent negotiation with, and often subordination to, these informal networks of power and profit, creating a hybrid political order where liberal institutions are hollowed out and repurposed.

The chronic failure to enact key provisions of the agreement serves as a powerful critique of the limitations of liberal peacebuilding templates in the South Sudanese context. The international community's continued emphasis on deadlines, technical benchmarks, and institutional mimicry fundamentally misreads the political logic at play. As noted, the meticulous design of transitional justice mechanisms or permanent constitution-making processes assumes a political will for transformative change that is largely absent among the national elite, for whom such institutions pose an existential threat. The findings demonstrate that externally conceived templates are either ignored, as with the unified command structure's nominal existence, or strategically manipulated to extract further rents and legitimacy without substantive compliance. This underscores a critical flaw in liberal peacebuilding: its tendency to treat the state as a neutral container for institutions rather than as a prize in a violent political marketplace. The South Sudanese case thus exemplifies how such templates can become performative exercises, providing a façade of progress for international donors while obscuring the consolidation of a predatory political settlement. Amidst this national-level failure, however, the agency of local actors in creating 'infrastructures for peace' emerges as a significant counter-narrative. The findings reveal that communities are not passive victims of elite intransigence but active agents constructing alternative frameworks for coexistence. The local peace agreements and customary mediation efforts documented represent a pragmatic, bottom-up response to the vacuum of formal governance and security. These initiatives operate on a different register of legitimacy, rooted in shared social norms and the immediate imperative of survival, rather than in contested national politics. They constitute a form of 'hybrid governance from below', where traditional authorities, women's groups, and youth leaders fill the void left by the state. This agency challenges the top-down focus of most peace implementation efforts and suggests that resilience and social cohesion persist in the interstices of state collapse. It indicates that sustainable peace in South Sudan may depend less on compelling national elites to comply and more on recognising, protecting, and dovetailing these organic, local infrastructures for peace with any future political settlement. These dynamics have profound implications for understanding sovereignty and legitimacy in post-colonial African states like South Sudan. The conventional Westphalian model of sovereignty, predicated on a state's monopoly of violence and uniform territorial control, is rendered inadequate. Instead, sovereignty appears fragmented, negotiated, and often outsourced to non-state armed actors integrated into the state through patronage. Legitimacy, consequently, is bifurcated. At the national level, it is derived from the ability to control and distribute resources within the marketplace, often through coercion and co-option. At the local level, legitimacy stems from the provision of basic security and social order, a role frequently assumed by non-state or hybrid authorities. This creates a situation of 'twilight sovereignty', where the internationally recognised state possesses juridical sovereignty but exercises only patchy, transactional control, while other entities wield *de facto* authority and social legitimacy. The peace agreement, rather than resolving this duality, has become a new arena for its contestation.

Ultimately, this synthesis of findings reframes the core problem of peace in South Sudan from one of

agreement design to one of enforcement and political will within a specific political economy. The technical shortcomings of the Revitalised Agreement are secondary to the absence of a coalition with both the power and the incentive to enforce it against spoilers. The study demonstrates that the principal signatories are themselves the

## Conclusion

This qualitative analysis has demonstrated that the faltering implementation of South Sudan's Revitalised Peace Agreement (RPA) is fundamentally a political challenge, not a technical or logistical failure. The prevailing international approach, which treats peacebuilding as a sequence of administrative benchmarks, has proven inadequate because it misdiagnoses the core problem. As the evidence presented in this paper illustrates, the implementation process is itself a primary arena for contestation, where the original terms of the agreement are continuously renegotiated through everyday political practice. The central argument advanced here is that this renegotiation is characterised by a dual, and often contradictory, dynamic: elite capture of the formal institutions of the peace, coupled with pervasive local adaptation and resistance to its prescribed structures. It is within this tension that the lived reality of the RPA is forged. The study has detailed how national elites, operating within a logic of competitive clientelism, have engaged in a politics of deliberate obstruction and strategic compliance. Key provisions of the RPA, particularly those concerning security sector reform, wealth-sharing, and transitional justice, have been instrumentalised as bargaining chips to preserve patrimonial networks and defer any meaningful redistribution of power. This elite capture transforms the agreement's institutions—from the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity to state-level executives—into venues for managing elite rivalry, rather than vehicles for transformative governance. Consequently, deadlines are perpetually extended, quotas are endlessly debated, and substantive reform is held hostage to the maintenance of a precarious status quo that benefits the incumbent political marketplace. Simultaneously, and in response to this stasis at the centre, a parallel politics of implementation unfolds at the sub-national level. Faced with the unfulfilled promises and ongoing violence facilitated by elite bargains, local communities and authorities are not passive recipients of the peace process. Instead, they engage in pragmatic adaptation, creating hybrid forms of governance and security that often bypass or directly resist the formal RPA architecture. These sub-national peace infrastructures—including local peace agreements, customary authority reinventions, and community-led protection mechanisms—represent a critical, though under-supported, layer of the peace process. They provide a modicum of stability and dispute resolution in the vacuum left by the state, yet they exist in an ambiguous relationship with the formal agreement, at times undermining its unitary authority while sustaining social cohesion where it has failed. From this analysis, several policy recommendations emerge. First, international partners must shift from a predominantly technical-assistance model towards strategies that directly address the political economy of obstruction. This requires conditioning support not merely on the formation of institutions, but on their demonstrably inclusive and accountable functioning. Robust, transparent financial oversight mechanisms for oil revenues and public expenditure are non-negotiable for breaking the cycle of rent-fuelled conflict. Second, and equally crucial, is the need to recognise, legitimise, and resource sub-national peace infrastructures. Rather than viewing local adaptations as a threat to the coherence of the RPA, donors should design flexible funding instruments that empower civil society and traditional

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authorities to consolidate these organic peacebuilding efforts, thereby building resilience from the ground up. Supporting these structures offers a pragmatic pathway to mitigate harm and foster social trust while the national-level deadlock persists. It is necessary to acknowledge the limitations of this study. The findings are derived from a qualitative methodology that, while rich in depth, cannot claim statistical generalisability. Furthermore, research in South Sudan's volatile context faced significant access constraints; security concerns and political sensitivities limited the ability to conduct interviews with certain high-level actors or in particularly conflict-affected regions. The reliance on key informants in relatively secure urban centres may inadvertently underrepresent the experiences of peripheral communities. These constraints underscore the partial perspective inherent in any single study of such a complex environment. Therefore, this conclusion suggests two promising avenues for future research. First, a comparative analysis of peace implementation across different African post-conflict settings would help to disentangle which dynamics are unique to South Sudan's political marketplace and which reflect broader patterns of elite behaviour in weakly institutionalised states. Such comparative work could refine theories of hybrid governance and international intervention. Second, longitudinal research is urgently needed to trace the long-term effects of the current hybrid order. Scholars should investigate whether the coexistence of captured formal institutions and resilient local adaptations leads eventually to a new political settlement, or merely entrenches a fragmented, conflict-prone system of

## Contributions

This study makes a distinct contribution by providing a granular, contemporary analysis of the localised peacebuilding mechanisms operating in South Sudan between 2021 and 2022. It offers an empirically grounded scholarly intervention, challenging top-down, state-centric frameworks by foregrounding indigenous actors' agency and vernacular peace logics. Practically, the findings present a nuanced evidence base for policymakers and NGOs, highlighting the specific social infrastructures that sustained communities during a critical period of political transition. The research thus advances African Studies discourse by documenting how hyper-local practices shape national peace trajectories in a fragile state context.