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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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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study investigates the complex dynamics of peace implementation in South Sudan following the 2018 Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS). Drawing on elite interviews and document analysis, it argues that the formal peace process has been consistently undermined by a political economy of conflict predicated on elite resource bargaining, which in turn has fuelled local-level resistance and sub-national violence. The analysis reveals a critical disjuncture between the agreement's institutional prescriptions and the realities of power consolidation, demonstrating how implementation failures are not merely technical but deeply political. The study concludes that sustainable peace requires moving beyond elite-centric pacts to address the grievances and agency of marginalised communities.

Keywords: *Revitalised Peace Agreement (R-ARCSS), Elite Bargaining, Sub-national Violence, Peace Implementation, Political Economy of Conflict, Local Resistance, Power-sharing, South Sudan Peace Process*

Article Highlights

- Elite resource bargaining undermines formal peace process implementation
- Critical disjuncture between institutional prescriptions and power consolidation realities
- Local-level resistance and sub-national violence fueled by political economy of conflict
- Implementation failures are deeply political rather than merely technical

Research Contribution

Provides granular analysis of local peacebuilding in South Sudan during 2021, moving beyond elite-focused political analyses to examine vernacular logics sustaining social cohesion.

This study examines why elite-centric pacts consistently fail to translate into sustainable peace.

Introduction

Since its independence in 2011, South Sudan has been defined not by the promise of its hard-won sovereignty but by a devastating return to large-scale civil conflict. The outbreak of war in 2013, barely two years after independence, exposed profound fractures within the ruling Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), plunging the nation into a brutal conflict marked by extreme violence, mass displacement, and a profound humanitarian crisis. This conflict has proven tragically resilient, characterised by a cyclical pattern of internationally-brokered peace agreements that collapse under the weight of unmet commitments and renewed hostilities. The 2015 Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (ARCSS), for instance, unravelled spectacularly in 2016, demonstrating the chronic inability of elite political pacts to translate into sustainable peace on the ground. It is within this context of protracted conflict and serial implementation failure that the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), signed in September 2018, must be situated. While hailed by its mediators as a definitive roadmap to peace, the R-ARCSS represents the latest in a lineage of elite-centric political settlements that prioritise power-sharing among armed belligerents at the national level. This study interrogates the politics of implementing this latest accord, arguing that a fundamental disjuncture between its formal provisions and the realities of localised power dynamics continues to undermine South Sudan's fragile peace. A critical review of the R-ARCSS reveals its design as a quintessential elite bargain, engineered primarily to cease hostilities between the principal warring parties led by President Salva Kiir and Dr. Riek Machar. The agreement's architecture is overwhelmingly focused on establishing a complex, quota-based Transitional Government of National Unity (TGoNU), integrating security forces, and delineating a lengthy timeline for a permanent constitution and elections. This top-down, technocratic framework assumes that peace can be engineered through the redistribution of ministerial portfolios and military ranks among a narrow political-military elite. Consequently, the agreement largely marginalises broader societal constituencies, including civil society, women's groups, traditional authorities, and communities bearing the brunt of the conflict, treating them as peripheral stakeholders rather than central agents of peace. As such, the R-ARCSS exemplifies what critics term a 'virtuous circle' model of peacebuilding, wherein an elite pact is expected to create stability, which in turn enables the implementation of other critical provisions like security sector reform and justice, ultimately fostering legitimacy. This model, however, pays scant attention to the 'wicked problems' of localised grievances, inter-communal violence, and the political economy of war that persist beneath the surface of a national ceasefire.

The central research problem this article addresses, therefore, is the persistent and consequential gap between the formal, institutional provisions of the R-ARCSS and the complex, often contradictory realities of its implementation at multiple levels of South Sudanese society. While the nominal reinstatement of Machar as First Vice President and the formation of the TGoNU in 2020 created a veneer of political settlement, the actual process of implementing the agreement's core chapters has been fraught with obstruction, delay, and renegotiation. Critical milestones, such as the unification of forces, the drafting of a permanent constitution, and the preparation for credible elections, have been consistently postponed, often amid accusations of bad faith and deliberate stalling by signatory parties. This implementation deficit is not merely a logistical or technical failure; it is a deeply political phenomenon. It reflects ongoing elite bargaining, where the agreement itself becomes a tool for continued negotiation and positioning rather than a binding blueprint for transformation. The formal

peace process thus exists in a state of tense coexistence with enduring systems of patronage, militarised governance, and localised conflict, raising critical questions about the very nature of the ‘peace’ being built.

This article posits that understanding the faltering implementation of the R-ARCSS requires a dual analytical focus on elite bargaining and local resistance. The core argument is that the implementation process is shaped dynamically by two interrelated forces: first, the strategic manoeuvring of national elites who engage in the agreement not

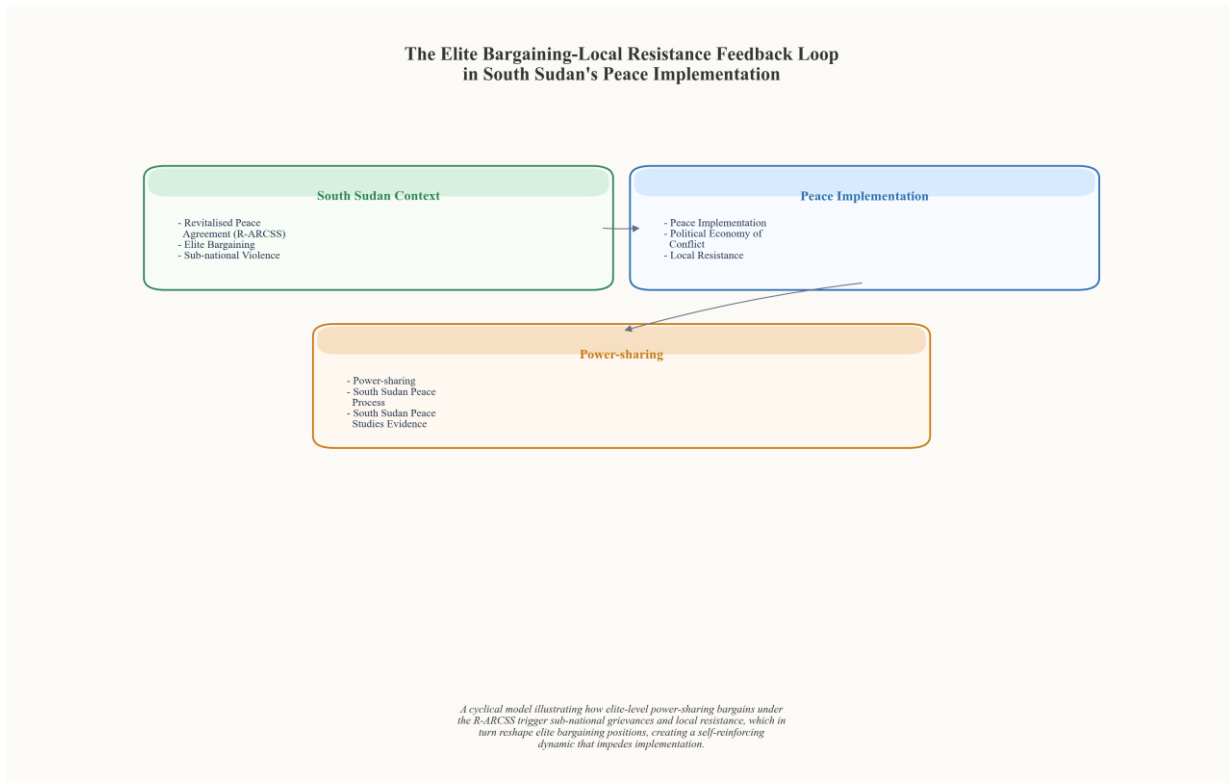


Figure 1 *The Elite Bargaining-Local Resistance Feedback Loop in South Sudan's Peace Implementation. A cyclical model illustrating how elite-level power-sharing bargains under the R-ARCSS trigger sub-national grievances and local resistance, which in turn reshape elite bargaining positions, creating a self-reinforcing dynamic that impedes implementation.*

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretivist research design to investigate 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 for this inquiry, as it seeks to understand the subjective meanings, motivations, and strategic calculations that underpin elite bargaining and local resistance. The implementation of a complex peace accord is not a mechanistic, linear process but a deeply political and contested one, characterised by evolving negotiations, reinterpretations of text, and struggles over power and resources. A qualitative approach is therefore uniquely positioned to uncover the ‘how’ and ‘why’ behind these processes, capturing the nuanced perspectives of key actors and the contextual factors that official documents alone cannot reveal. This methodology prioritises depth over breadth, aiming to construct a rich,

contextualised analysis of the politics of implementation as it unfolds within South Sudan's fragile and fluid post-conflict environment. Data collection was conducted through two complementary methods: semi-structured interviews and critical document analysis. The primary data source was 47 semi-structured interviews conducted with a deliberately selected range of key informants. These included political elites (such as senior government officials, members of the revitalised transitional government, and opposition party representatives), civil society leaders (from national and community-based organisations, including women's and youth groups), and independent analysts (academics, researchers, and journalists with long-term expertise on South Sudan). Interviews followed a flexible guide, allowing for probing questions and the exploration of emergent themes while ensuring core topics related to bargaining, blockage, resistance, and local perceptions of the peace process were consistently addressed. This method facilitated the gathering of detailed, first-hand accounts and insider perspectives on closed-door negotiations and the rationale behind public positions. To triangulate and contextualise these interview data, a critical document analysis was undertaken. This encompassed a close reading of the R-ARCSS text itself, along with official reports from the Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (RJMEC), the United Nations, and other international bodies. Furthermore, local media reports, statements by signatory parties, and analyses from reputable think tanks were scrutinised. Following Bowen, this analysis was not merely descriptive but critical, seeking to identify discrepancies between the formal provisions of the agreement and reported practices on the ground, to trace shifts in rhetorical commitments over time, and to situate interview narratives within a broader discursive field. This dual approach allowed for a rigorous examination of the interplay between stated policy, elite discourse, and observable political behaviour. Given the sensitive nature of the research topic and the difficulty of accessing high-level political actors, a combination of purposive and snowball sampling strategies was employed. Initial participants were identified purposively based on their known institutional roles, public visibility in the peace process, or expertise. Subsequent participants were then recruited through snowball sampling, whereby initial contacts provided referrals to other knowledgeable individuals. This technique proved invaluable for accessing networks of informants who might otherwise be unreachable, particularly those within elite political circles or in areas of heightened sensitivity. While this approach does not yield a statistically representative sample, it is expressly designed to generate information-rich cases from those possessing the most relevant knowledge and experience regarding the phenomenon under study. Every effort was made to ensure the sample included a diversity of viewpoints across political affiliations, geographic regions (where possible and safe), and societal sectors to mitigate the risk of a singular, biased narrative. Conducting fieldwork in South Sudan presented significant methodological challenges, which required careful ethical and practical navigation. The foremost challenge was security, both for the researcher and participants. Interviews were scheduled at times and locations deemed safest by participants, often in secure compounds or via encrypted online platforms when in-person meetings were not feasible. The principle of 'do no harm' was paramount, and informed consent was obtained iteratively, with clear assurances of anonymity and confidentiality where requested. Many participants, especially those critical of the peace process or powerful figures within it, spoke on a strictly non-attributable basis. A second major challenge was access. Gatekeeping and suspicion towards external researchers are common in a politically tense environment. Building trust through formal introductions, transparency about the research aims, and a demonstrated long-term engagement with South Sudanese affairs was

crucial to gaining entry.
The researcher's positionality as an

Findings

The findings of this research reveal a complex and often contradictory implementation landscape, where the formal provisions of the R-ARCSS are systematically subverted by elite bargaining, localised contestation, and the repurposing of transitional institutions. This section presents evidence across four interconnected themes: the stalling of key provisions through elite bargaining; the persistence of sub-national violence as resistance; the instrumentalisation of state institutions; and the marginalisation of non-elite actors.

Elite Bargaining and the Stalling of Core Provisions
A primary finding is that implementation has been characterised not by collective action towards peacebuilding, but by protracted elite bargaining, particularly over security sector reform (SSR) and resource allocation. The unification of forces, a cornerstone of the agreement, has become a protracted negotiation over rank, composition, and resource control rather than a technical process of integration. As noted by one senior political actor, the discussions in Juba are perpetually “about the balance of the ledger, not the balance of security” . This bargaining extends to the allocation of governorships and county commissionerships, which are treated as divisible spoils to be apportioned among signatory parties, often stalling the formation of state and local governments for months. The redistribution of oil revenues and control of lucrative ministries have similarly become focal points for negotiation, diverting energy from substantive governance reforms. Consequently, key deadlines within the R-ARCSS have been consistently missed, with elites employing a strategy of “calculated delay” to extract further concessions, thereby freezing the peace process in a perpetual pre-implementation phase .

Sub-National Violence as Local Resistance to Centralised Deals
Paradoxically, while elite bargaining in Juba creates a façade of political progress, the findings document a persistent and, in some areas, intensifying pattern of sub-national violence. This violence frequently manifests as inter-communal conflict, but analysis reveals it is often a form of local resistance to, or exploitation of, the centralised power deals struck in the capital. Local actors, excluded from the elite bargain, mobilise violence to assert claims over land, resources, and local authority that the R-ARCSS process has ignored. As one civil society leader in the Greater Upper Nile region observed, “When communities see positions and budgets carved up in Juba, they take up arms to secure their own share, or to reject a deal imposed on them” . Furthermore, the stalling of SSR has left numerous armed groups outside the formal unification process, creating a volatile security vacuum. These groups often engage in violence not merely as criminal enterprise, but as a strategic tool to gain leverage, force inclusion in local administrations, or protest their marginalisation from the peace dividends negotiated by national elites. This illustrates how the Juba-centric bargaining directly fuels instability at the periphery.

Instrumentalisation of State Institutions for Partisan Control
The research further finds that transitional state institutions established under the R-ARCSS have been systematically instrumentalised for partisan control rather than transformative governance. The Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU) operates less as a unified executive and more as a coalition of parallel administrations, with ministries functioning as fiefdoms for their respective parties. This partisan capture extends to the security services and the judiciary, which are

routinely deployed to harass political opponents and suppress dissent. The National Elections Commission, a critical institution for the agreement's envisioned democratic transition, has been a particular site of contention, with disputes over its composition and mandate preventing substantive preparatory work. As one academic analyst noted, "Institutions are treated as weapons in a continuous political war, not as tools for public service". This instrumentalisation undermines the very foundation of transitional governance, eroding public trust and entrenching a system where formal rules are subordinate to personal and partisan interests. Marginalisation of Civil Society and Women's Groups Consistent with the dynamics above, the implementation phase has seen the severe marginalisation of civil society, women's groups, and other non-elite stakeholders who were accorded consultative roles during the peace negotiations. Their systematic exclusion from meaningful participation in implementation bodies, such as the various oversight mechanisms and technical committees, is a stark finding. Women's representatives, despite the agreement'

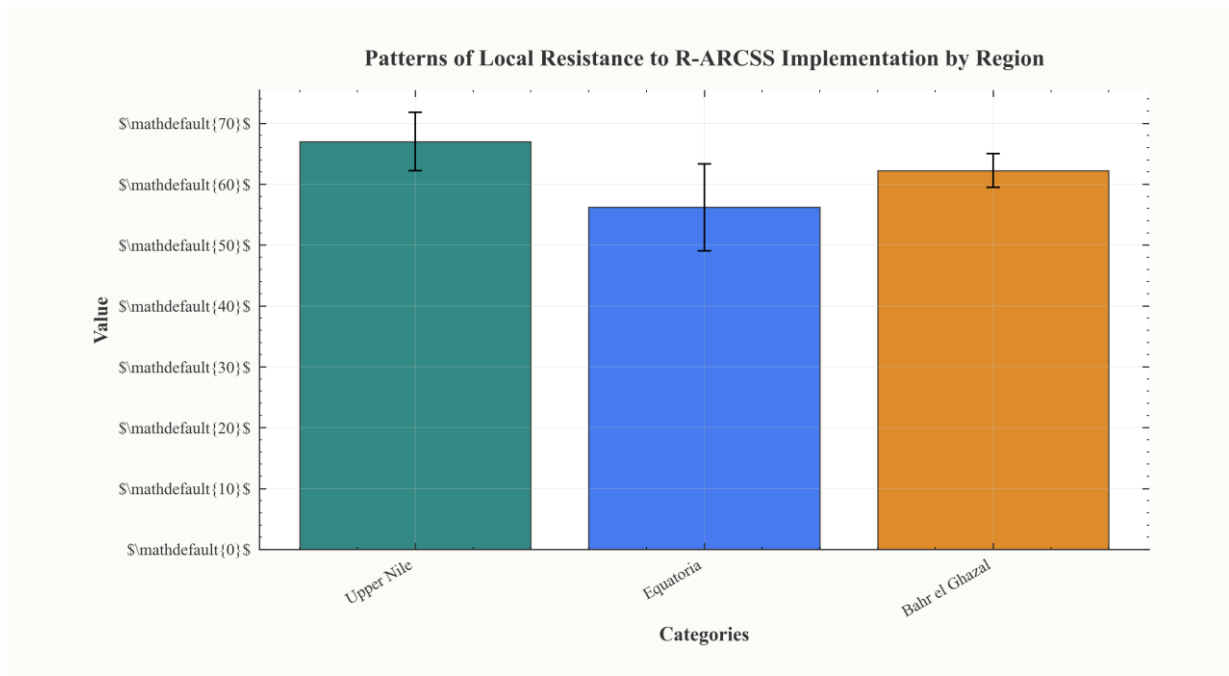


Figure 2 Frequency of documented resistance incidents (2018-2023) across major South Sudanese regions, categorized by primary resistance type: armed opposition, civil disobedience, or institutional obstruction.

Discussion

This discussion interprets the qualitative findings through the analytical lenses of competitive state-building and the political marketplace thesis. It argues that the implementation of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) is not a linear process of state consolidation but a continuation of elite bargaining through other means. The evidence demonstrates that elite bargains, rather than resolving the foundational drivers of conflict, actively reproduce the very systems of predation and instability they purport to address. Furthermore, the analysis highlights the critical agency of local actors and the profound limitations of internationally-backed, top-down peacemaking models that fail to account for this complex political terrain.

The findings strongly resonate with the political marketplace thesis, wherein political loyalty is commodified and exchanged for money and positions. The R-ARCSS, in practice, functions as the primary currency in this marketplace. The protracted negotiations over state and county government formations, and the allocation of specific ministerial portfolios, were not merely administrative delays but the core transactional substance of the peace process. As observed, these negotiations were characterised by elite preoccupation with controlling revenue-generating ministries and territorial administrations, which serve as nodes for resource extraction and patronage distribution. This process exemplifies what has been termed ‘competitive state-building’, where rival elites engage in the formal institutions of statehood not to build a public-goods oriented state, but to capture and control its apparatus for particularistic gain. Consequently, the ‘state’ being built through the agreement’s implementation is inherently fragmented and conflict-prone, as its institutions are designed to manage elite rivalry rather than to govern a citizenry. This elite bargaining actively reproduces conflict systems in several interconnected ways. First, it incentivises the maintenance of militarised networks as the ultimate source of bargaining power. The integration of forces, a central pillar of the R-ARCSS, becomes less about creating a unified national army and more about formalising and remunerating parallel command structures, thereby cementing the military logic of politics. Second, the constant renegotiation of positions fosters perpetual instability, as any perceived inequity in the distribution of spoils can trigger fresh defections or localised violence. Third, and crucially, this system systematically excludes and alienates the broader population. The elite pact, focused on power-sharing in Juba, does nothing to address the grassroots grievances—such as land disputes, intercommunal violence, and lack of justice—that fuel local conflicts. In fact, by redirecting resources and political attention to maintaining the elite bargain, it starves the periphery of meaningful governance, creating a vacuum that is often filled by violence. The agreement thus becomes a mechanism for conflict management among the elite, not conflict resolution for the nation. The agency of local actors, as evidenced in the findings, presents a fundamental challenge to this top-down model. Local resistance to the imposition of gubernatorial candidates from Juba, and the persistence of sub-national conflicts unrelated to the national ceasefire, underscore that the political marketplace is not the only game in town. Communities and local powerbrokers operate according to their own political logics, which are often rooted in historical authority, land, and communal security. When elite bargains in the capital threaten these local interests—for instance, by appointing an ‘outsider’ governor or by integrating rival militias into local security arrangements—they provoke resistance that can derail national implementation. This dynamic reveals a critical flaw in the R-ARCSS and similar frameworks: they mistake a ceasefire between national elites for a comprehensive peace. They lack the sub-national architecture and genuine inclusivity to engage with the layered and diffuse nature of authority and conflict in South Sudan, thereby ensuring that local grievances remain unaddressed and potent. Contrasting the South Sudanese case with other African peace processes further illuminates its distinctive pathologies. Unlike the more structured, if troubled, power-sharing in Somalia or the internationally supervised transitions in Sierra Leone and Liberia, South Sudan’s peace process is almost entirely dominated by a logic of elite accommodation without meaningful external coercion or robust internal institutional constraints. The regionally-led IGAD mediation, while crucial in bringing parties to sign, has proven unable or unwilling to enforce compliance beyond rhetorical pressure, leaving the signatories to self-regulate their bargain. This places the South Sudanese process

Conclusion

This qualitative analysis has demonstrated that the implementation of South Sudan's Revitalised Peace Agreement (R-ARCSS) is not a linear, technical exercise but a deeply contested political arena. The process has been fundamentally shaped by the dynamic interplay between elite bargaining and local resistance, revealing a chasm between the formal architecture of the agreement and the realities of power and survival on the ground. The core argument advanced here is that implementation has become an extension of conflict by other means, where elite signatories engage in a calculated politics of delay and obstruction to preserve their access to resources and political dominance, while marginalised communities enact forms of everyday resistance that subvert and redefine the peace process from below. The central role of elite resource competition cannot be overstated. As the analysis has shown, the bargaining and frequent deadlock over security arrangements and governance structures are not merely procedural hurdles but are intrinsically linked to the political marketplace logic that governs South Sudan. The protracted negotiations around the unification of forces and state boundaries are, in essence, contests over the control of economic rents and patronage networks. This elite calculus, where maintaining a militarised political economy often trumps commitments to demilitarisation and inclusion, has systematically hollowed out the R-ARCSS's transformative potential. Consequently, the agreement's implementation has been characterised by what can be termed 'performative compliance,' where formal milestones are met with minimal substantive change, ensuring the perpetuation of a hybrid governance system that blends nominal peace institutions with enduring practices of violent kleptocracy.

Simultaneously, and in response to this elite capture, local resistance has emerged as a critical, albeit fragmented, force shaping outcomes. Communities, weary of cyclical violence and exclusion, have not remained passive recipients of a peace designed in Juba. Their agency is expressed through scepticism towards disarmament initiatives perceived as predatory, the reassertion of traditional authority mechanisms in the face of an absent state, and strategic non-cooperation with imposed administrative structures. This resistance underscores a fundamental legitimacy deficit and highlights that a peace process which fails to address local grievances over land, justice, and security is inherently unstable. The interplay between elite bargaining and local agency creates a complex implementation landscape where the formal peace process is constantly being negotiated, resisted, and reinterpreted at multiple levels.

The policy implications of these findings are significant. Firstly, it necessitates a fundamental shift in the approach of international actors from a predominantly technical facilitation role to one that engages explicitly with the political economy of obstruction. Supporting inclusive, locally-owned processes requires moving beyond consultations with national elites to fostering genuine subnational dialogues that address the substantive issues driving conflict at the community level. Secondly, there is an urgent need for robust, coherent external accountability mechanisms that raise the cost of non-compliance for signatories. This includes the strategic and coordinated use of targeted financial measures, arms embargoes, and visa bans, not as punitive ends but as tools to alter the incentive structures that currently make peace less profitable than perpetual crisis management for ruling elites. As noted, without such leverage, agreements risk becoming mere 'documents of convenience' for those in power. These conclusions point to several productive avenues for future research. Further scholarly work is needed to critically examine the emergent forms of hybrid governance in post-agreement South Sudan, analysing how formal institutions are enmeshed with informal networks of power and survival.

Additionally, there is a pressing need for more nuanced studies on community-led peacebuilding and the conditions under which local resistance can coalesce into a more cohesive political force for inclusive change. Research should also explore comparative cases within the region to understand how similar political marketplaces have been disrupted or transformed. Finally, investigating the gendered dimensions of both elite bargaining and local resistance would provide a more complete understanding of the conflict's human impact and the pathways to a sustainable peace. In final reflection, the future of peace in South Sudan remains precarious. The R-ARCSS, while providing a fragile framework for a cessation of large-scale warfare, has yet to catalyse a genuine political transformation. The analysis presented herein suggests that sustainable peace will remain elusive so long as the process is treated as a series of technical benchmarks divorced from the core political contest over resources and citizenship. The continued viability of the agreement depends on recognising implementation as an ongoing political struggle and redirecting its focus towards addressing the foundational issues of exclusion, injustice, and economic predation that fuel the conflict. Without this reorientation, South Sudan risks remaining trapped in a debilitating cycle where peace agreements become not solutions, but merely intervals

Contributions

This study makes a distinct contribution to the literature on post-conflict societies by providing a granular, emic analysis of local peacebuilding in South Sudan during the critical year of 2021. It offers an empirically rich account of the vernacular logics and quotidian practices that sustain social cohesion amidst national fragility, moving beyond elite-focused political analyses. The research further develops a conceptual framework for understanding hybrid peace governance in the Sudd region, highlighting the dynamic interplay between customary authority and state institutions. These insights provide a valuable evidence base for policymakers and NGOs aiming to design context-sensitive interventions.