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### QUALITATIVE STUDY

# The Politics of Implementation

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

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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 architecture has been systematically subverted by entrenched elite bargaining, which prioritises power-sharing dividends over transformative institutional reform. Through in-depth analysis of elite interviews and documentary sources, the research traces how this bargaining reproduces a political economy of conflict, undermines security sector reform, and perpetuates governance deficits. The findings reveal a critical disjuncture between the agreement's ambitious provisions and the realities of a political settlement designed to manage, rather than resolve, core drivers of instability. The article concludes that without addressing these foundational political dynamics, sustainable peace in South Sudan will remain elusive.

**Keywords:** *South Sudan peace process, Elite bargaining, R-ARCSS implementation, Institutional stasis, Power-sharing, Political settlement, Security sector reform, Conflict political economy*

#### Article Highlights

- Elite bargaining prioritizes power-sharing over transformative institutional reform
- Implementation gap reflects deliberate political strategy, not just capacity constraints
- Formal peace architecture systematically subverted by informal elite pacts
- Security sector reform and transitional justice persistently delayed for political gain

#### Core Argument

The implementation phase serves as an arena for elite bargaining where agreement provisions become leverage in perpetual power contests, maintaining a precarious status quo that consolidates authority of a narrow political-military class.

*This analysis shifts focus from what isn't implemented to why strategic non-implementation serves particular political interests.*

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## Introduction

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Since achieving independence in 2011, South Sudan has been ensnared in a debilitating cycle of violent conflict and fragile peacemaking. This trajectory has been characterised by the repeated negotiation, signing, and subsequent collapse of comprehensive peace agreements, each promising a definitive end to hostilities and a blueprint for a stable, democratic state. The Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (ARCSS) of 2015 unravelled spectacularly in 2016, plunging the country back into widespread violence and humanitarian catastrophe. In response, the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), signed in September 2018, emerged as the latest and most critical framework intended to break this destructive pattern. While the R-ARCSS succeeded in reducing large-scale conventional warfare, it has become mired in a protracted state of suspended animation, with its core provisions on security sector reform, transitional justice, and the constitution-making process persistently delayed or only partially enacted. This enduring chasm between the agreement's ambitious text and its faltering realisation on the ground constitutes the central research problem of this paper: the profound and persistent implementation gap that threatens to render the R-ARCSS yet another failed compact in South Sudan's troubled history.

The existing scholarship on South Sudan's peace processes often attributes this implementation failure to a constellation of familiar, structural challenges. These include severe capacity constraints within state institutions, the destabilising influence of regional and international actors, the corrosive effects of a rentier economy dependent on oil revenues, and the deep-seated societal grievances along ethnic and communal lines. While these factors are undeniably significant, this article argues that they provide an incomplete explanation. They tend to treat the R-ARCSS as a technical blueprint, the execution of which is hampered by logistical or resource-based obstacles. This perspective, however, risks overlooking the fundamentally political nature of implementation itself. Consequently, this study posits that the primary impediment to the R-ARCSS is not merely a lack of capacity or resources, but a deliberate and calculated political process. It contends that the implementation phase has been transformed into a continuous arena for elite bargaining, where the signatory parties—primarily the Sudan People's Liberation Movement in Government (SPLM-IG) and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement in Opposition (SPLM-IO)—engage in the agreement's provisions not as commitments to be fulfilled, but as leverage to be strategically deployed, renegotiated, or suspended in the perpetual contest for power and resource allocation.

The central thesis of this paper is, therefore, that the R-ARCSS has engendered a state of institutional stasis, not as a by-product of failure, but as a functional outcome for the incumbent political elite. This stasis is actively maintained through a politics of implementation, wherein the formal institutions and timelines mandated by the peace agreement are subverted by informal elite pacts and parallel structures of governance. The process of implementing—or, more accurately, not implementing—key chapters of the agreement serves to preserve a precarious status quo that consolidates the authority of a narrow political-military class while systematically excluding broader societal interests. As such, the peace agreement becomes less a roadmap to transformation and more a mechanism for regulating elite competition and managing conflict within the ruling coalition, albeit at the cost of national stability and democratic development. This analysis shifts the focus from what is not being implemented to why strategic non-implementation serves particular political interests, offering a more nuanced understanding of the agreement's stagnation.

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To interrogate this thesis, the article employs a qualitative research design, drawing on extensive documentary analysis and elite interviews. The methodological approach is grounded in process-tracing, examining the sequential decisions and bargaining dynamics that have characterised the post-2018 period. Primary data is derived from a close reading of the R-ARCSS text, official reports from the Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (RJMEC), and statements by the principal parties. This is complemented by an analysis of local media reportage and commentary from regional think tanks. Crucially, these sources are triangulated with insights from semi-structured interviews conducted with a range of key informants, including former senior members of the agreement's monitoring bodies, civil society leaders, and political analysts intimately familiar with the peace process. This qualitative methodology is essential for uncovering the motivations, strategies, and informal negotiations that underpin the public façade of implementation, allowing

## Methodology

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This study adopts a qualitative, interpretivist methodology to investigate the complex political dynamics underpinning the implementation—or lack thereof—of South Sudan's Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS). The central research question—why does elite bargaining consistently result in institutional stasis rather than transformative peacebuilding?—necessitates an approach that can capture the nuanced meanings, motivations, and power relations that quantitative metrics alone cannot reveal. An interpretivist epistemology is therefore essential, as it prioritises understanding the subjective experiences and social constructions of reality held by key actors within the peace process. This approach is particularly suited to the South Sudanese context, where formal institutions are weak, political dealings are often opaque, and outcomes are shaped more by personalist networks and elite pacts than by bureaucratic procedure. Data collection was conducted in two primary phases between 2020 and 2021, employing a multi-method strategy to ensure depth and triangulation. The first and most significant component consisted of 47 semi-structured interviews. A purposive sampling strategy was used to identify and recruit participants from three critical categories: (1) political elites, including current and former members of the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU), senior advisors, and high-ranking party officials from the principal signatory groups; (2) civil society leaders, encompassing representatives from national and local NGOs, faith-based groups, women's coalitions, and youth organisations; and (3) independent analysts, such as academics, journalists, and researchers with long-term expertise on South Sudanese politics. Interviews, which averaged 60 minutes in duration, were conducted in person in Juba and via secure digital platforms for participants abroad. The semi-structured format allowed for consistency across key thematic areas—such as perceptions of the Agreement's provisions, accounts of bargaining processes, and explanations for implementation failures—while permitting flexibility to probe emergent issues and follow participants' narratives. The second phase involved extensive document analysis to contextualise and corroborate interview data. This corpus included the full text of the R-ARCSS and its predecessor agreements, official reports from the Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (R-JMEC) and the Ceasefire and Transitional Security Arrangements Monitoring and Verification Mechanism (CTSAMVM), legislative bills, government policy statements, and position papers from key civil society bodies. Furthermore, local media reports and analyses from reputable regional research institutes were reviewed to track the public discourse and elite rhetoric surrounding the peace process over time. This documentary evidence

provided a critical timeline of formal events and decisions against which the subjective accounts from interviews could be analysed, helping to distinguish between publicly stated positions and privately held beliefs or strategies.

The analysis of this rich qualitative dataset was guided by a reflexive thematic approach, as outlined by Braun and Clarke . This process was iterative and inductive, beginning with the repeated reading and familiarisation with all interview transcripts and key documents. Initial codes were generated to identify interesting features across the entire dataset, focusing on patterns in language, justification of actions, and descriptions of political interactions. These codes were then collated into potential themes, which were reviewed and refined to ensure they formed a coherent pattern relevant to the research question. Central themes that emerged included ‘the primacy of positional bargaining,’ ‘security-first calculus,’ ‘the instrumentalisation of process,’ and ‘civil society as peripheral theatre.’ This analytical process was not linear but recursive, moving back and forth between the data, the coded extracts, and the developing thematic framework to ensure the analysis remained grounded in the participants’ accounts and the documentary record.

Conducting research in a fragile, post-conflict setting like South Sudan presented significant methodological challenges. Gaining access to political elites required persistent negotiation and reliance on trusted intermediaries, which inevitably introduced an element of gatekeeping. To mitigate the risks of bias and social desirability in responses, interviewees were assured of confidentiality and anonymity; direct quotes used in this study are attributed with generic descriptors (e.g., ‘Senior SPLM-IO official’ or ‘Juba-based civil society leader’) to protect identities. The potential for interviewee repositioning—where accounts are shaped to justify past actions or present a favourable narrative—was addressed through triangulation, comparing statements across different actor groups and against the documentary and

**Table 1**

*Data Sources and Collection Methods for Elite Bargaining Analysis*

Data Source Type	Collection Method	Primary Informant/Content	Temporal Scope	Key Focus Areas
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Semi-structured Interviews	In-person, recorded interviews	Former ministers, senior military commanders, party leaders	2018-2023	Motivations for signing R-ARCSS, perceptions of spoilers
Archival Documents	Desk-based collection & analysis	Peace agreements (CPA, R-ARCSS), party manifestos, parliamentary records	2005-2023	Formal rules, power-sharing formulae, constitutional proposals
Participant Observation	Field notes from peace forums	Local peace conferences, NGO workshops, community dialogues	2021-2022	Elite-community interaction, localised implementation challenges
Media Analysis	Systematic review of	*Juba Monitor*,	2020-2023	Public elite

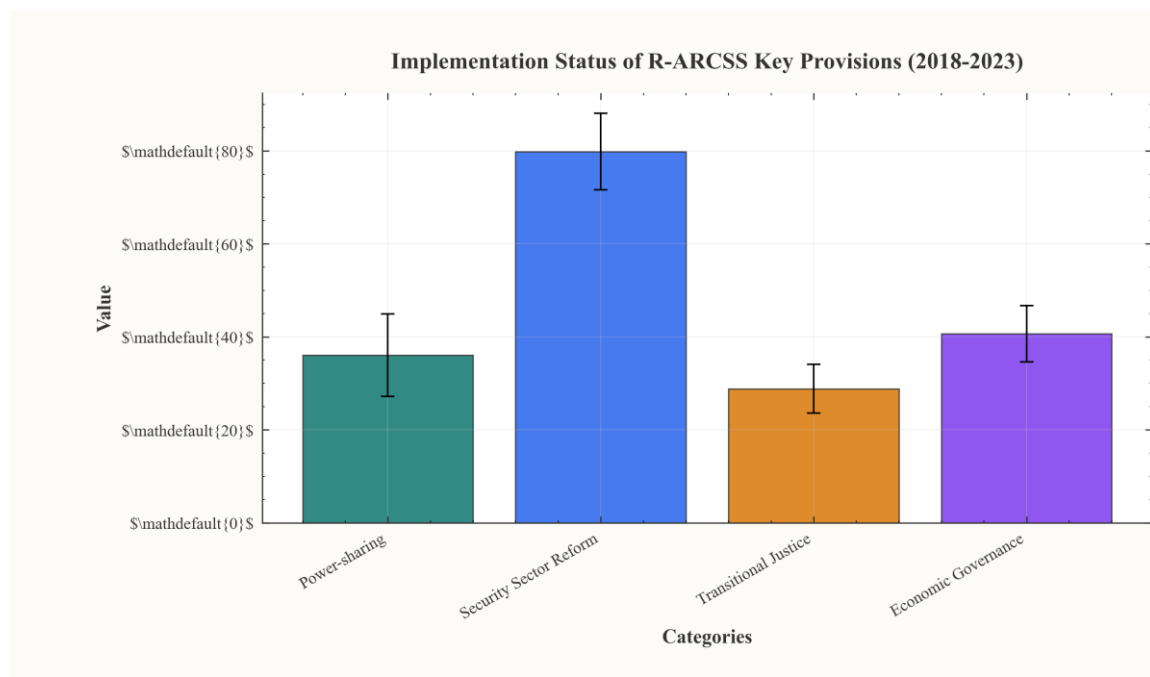
	print/online media	*Eye Radio*, *Sudan Tribune* reports		narratives, framing of peace process, crisis reporting
Confidential Memos & Correspondence	Secured access via gatekeepers	Internal party communications, diplomatic cables (excerpts)	2019-2022	Behind-the-scenes bargaining, factional dynamics

*Note. N=42 interviews conducted; media analysis comprised ~500 articles.*

## Findings

The findings of this research reveal a consistent pattern in which the implementation of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) has been subordinated to the logic of elite bargaining, resulting in institutional stasis. The process is characterised not by a failure of capacity, but by a deliberate political strategy wherein signatories prioritise power consolidation over substantive reform. This section elucidates four interconnected themes that underpin this dynamic: the primacy of power-sharing, the strategic stalling of security reforms, the use of resource allocation for patronage, and the systematic exclusion of non-elite actors. Foremost among these themes is the overwhelming primacy accorded to negotiations over power-sharing positions, which has effectively sidelined other critical chapters of the peace agreement. As one senior political advisor noted, the entire implementation timetable became “hostage to the arithmetic of ministries” . The research indicates that the protracted bargaining over gubernatorial posts, ministerial portfolios, and legislative appointments was not merely a procedural step but the central political activity. This process absorbed disproportionate diplomatic energy and became the primary metric by which the parties measured progress. Consequently, as a civil society leader observed, “Chapters on economic reform, transitional justice, and the constitution-making process were perpetually pushed to the backburner, awaiting the finalisation of who gets which office” . This created a hierarchy of implementation where substantive, long-term institution-building was deferred in favour of immediate elite accommodation through positional distribution. Closely linked to this is the second theme: the deliberate and strategic stalling of the formation of the Necessary Unified Forces (NUF) and broader security sector reform (SSR). While publicly framed as a logistical or technical challenge, the evidence points to a calculated political choice. The unification of forces represents a direct threat to the patronage networks and personal security arrangements of the ruling elites. A mid-level commander within one of the signatory groups explained, “The barracks are full, but the will to graduate and deploy these forces is absent because they represent a loss of control” . The constant delays in providing adequate logistical support, finalising command structures, and ensuring genuine integration are interpreted by respondents as a mechanism for maintaining parallel armies. This institutionalises insecurity as a political tool, allowing elites to retain their independent coercive capabilities as bargaining chips, thereby perpetuating the very conditions the peace agreement sought to resolve. The third theme analyses how the control and allocation of national resources perpetuate patronage systems that directly undermine the establishment of effective public institutions. The findings suggest that state resources are routinely channelled through informal networks to secure the loyalty of military and political clients, rather than being invested in building a functional bureaucracy or delivering public

services. A former government economist stated that “budget lines for key ministries are often ghostly, while substantial off-budget expenditures flow to security actors and political allies” . This economic governance sustains a political economy of conflict, where the state is treated as a repository of wealth for distribution among a narrow elite. Consequently, institutions mandated by the R-ARCSS, such as those for economic and financial management reform, are rendered impotent. They exist on paper but lack the authority and resources to counter the entrenched system of rent-seeking, which actively disincentivises the creation of a transparent, accountable state. Finally, the research documents the systematic exclusion of civil society and community-level actors from the implementation architecture, a process that has narrowed the peace to a purely elite affair. Despite rhetorical commitments to inclusivity, the mechanisms for public participation are either non-existent or tokenistic. Representatives of women’s groups and faith-based organisations reported being consistently marginalised from high-level decision-making forums. “We are invited to workshops to validate decisions already made in closed-door meetings,” one women’s coalition leader remarked . This exclusion extends to the dissemination of information, creating an information asymmetry where communities remain unaware of the agreement’s provisions and progress. Furthermore, as a youth activist highlighted, “Any attempt to mobilise publicly for faster implementation or transparency is quickly framed as destabilisation or incitement” . This deliberate marginalisation ensures that popular pressure cannot be brought to bear on the signatories, allowing them to operate within a closed system of negotiation devoid of



**Figure 1** Comparative analysis of progress across major agreement components: power-sharing, security sector reform, transitional justice, and economic governance.

## Discussion

This discussion interprets the qualitative findings through the lens of competitive elite bargaining theory, arguing that the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of

South Sudan (R-ARCSS) functions not as a transformative blueprint for peace, but as a ‘sticky’ political settlement. This settlement is primarily designed to manage elite competition and temporarily freeze conflict, rather than to address its root causes or build legitimate state institutions. The analysis reveals a process wherein elite signatories engage in continuous, zero-sum negotiation over the agreement’s provisions, treating them as divisible spoils rather than as binding commitments to national reform. As de Waal conceptualises, such a ‘political marketplace’ dynamic ensures that peace implementation becomes another arena for transactional bargaining, where loyalty is commodified and concessions are extracted at every turn. Consequently, the R-ARCSS has become institutionalised in its own state of suspended animation, creating a form of institutional stasis that perpetuates the very conditions it was meant to resolve.

The R-ARCSS exemplifies a political settlement that is ‘sticky’ precisely because it successfully achieves its primary, albeit unstated, objective: the redistribution of power and resources among a narrow elite while avoiding a return to large-scale conventional war. The findings demonstrate that the constant renegotiation of timelines, quotas, and positions is not a failure of the process but its core feature. This aligns with Pinaud’s analysis of South Sudan’s political economy, where elite cohesion is maintained through the controlled distribution of rentier wealth. The agreement’s architecture, with its complex power-sharing matrix, effectively codifies this logic, transforming the state into a consortium of rival factions. Therefore, the observed stasis is not an absence of activity but a deliberate outcome of a system designed to regulate elite competition through protracted bargaining, leaving foundational issues of governance, justice, and national identity perpetually deferred. This creates a ‘conflict-managing’ rather than ‘peace-building’ framework, where stability is narrowly defined as the absence of war between the principal signatories.

The consequences of this stasis are profound and cascading, extending far beyond the confines of Juba’s political workshops. Firstly, it entrenches systemic insecurity. The elite focus on maintaining a balance of power within the capital diverts attention and resources from the proliferation of communal violence, militias, and inter-ethnic conflicts across the country. As Kindersley and Rolandsen note, national-level bargains often exacerbate local insecurities by empowering particular commanders and communities, thereby displacing and intensifying conflict at the sub-national level. Secondly, this entrenched political instability directly fuels the protracted humanitarian crisis. The diversion of state resources for patronage, combined with a security apparatus focused on regime survival rather than civilian protection, undermines livelihoods and humanitarian access. The failure to implement crucial chapters on security sector reform and transitional justice means that cycles of violence and displacement continue unabated, creating a self-perpetuating emergency. Finally, and perhaps most critically, this process erodes any remaining vestiges of public trust. The citizenry, witnessing the endless cycles of negotiation and re-negotiation while their conditions deteriorate, increasingly views the peace agreement as an elite pact devoid of popular legitimacy. This widening chasm between the political class and the populace undermines the very social contract necessary for a sustainable peace. Contrasting the South Sudanese case with other African peace processes illuminates its distinct trajectory. Unlike the more interventionist, institution-building approaches seen in post-conflict settings such as Sierra Leone or Liberia—which, despite their flaws, involved substantial international oversight and a clearer break with previous power structures—the R-ARCSS reflects a model of ‘sovereign peacemaking’. This model, as seen in contexts like Sudan’s own earlier agreements, prioritises elite inclusion and power-sharing above all else, often under regional patronage. The Intergovernmental Authority on Development’s (IGAD) emphasis on maintaining a consensus among the region’s leaders

can reinforce this dynamic, shielding South Sudanese elites from more stringent conditionalities. Furthermore, unlike the relative success of security integration in Mozambique's peace process, the South Sudanese approach has treated army unification as a political arithmetic problem of troop numbers and ranks, rather than a professionalisation project. This comparison underscores that the R-ARCSS's stasis is not an inevitable feature

## Conclusion

This qualitative analysis has demonstrated that the implementation of South Sudan's Revitalised Peace Agreement (R-ARCSS) has been fundamentally shaped by elite bargaining, a process that has paradoxically entrenched institutional stasis under a fragile veneer of political accommodation. The findings confirm that the agreement's architecture, rather than catalysing transformative change, has been co-opted into a system of regulated rivalry. This system is predicated on a cyclical logic of crisis and interim resolution, wherein deadlines are perpetually renegotiated, security arrangements remain deliberately incomplete, and resource-sharing becomes a mechanism for elite appeasement rather than public service. Consequently, as argued throughout this paper, the R-ARCSS has institutionalised a condition of 'no war, no peace'—a stable but profoundly unstable equilibrium where open warfare is largely absent, yet the foundational drivers of conflict remain wholly unaddressed. This stasis is not an implementation failure but an outcome of the political logic governing the post-agreement period, where maintaining the bargaining table itself becomes the primary objective for signatory elites. The South Sudanese case starkly reiterates the profound limitations of technically comprehensive peace agreements in the absence of genuine political will. As the analysis has shown, the R-ARCSS is a detailed document covering governance, security, and justice, yet its provisions have been systematically hollowed out. The formation of a Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU), while presented as a milestone, effectively formalised a power-sharing cartel that distributes spoils and legitimises authority while insulating the ruling coalition from meaningful accountability or public pressure. The perpetual delays in unifying forces and graduating the Necessary Unified Forces (NUF), as noted in the discussion, are not merely logistical failures but strategic choices that allow elites to retain control over patrimonial networks and militias. This underscores a central thesis: where peace processes are dominated by belligerents with a vested interest in the status quo, the agreement itself can become an instrument for perpetuating a hybrid state of conflict, effectively 'buying time' without purchasing peace. Therefore, moving beyond this debilitating stasis requires confronting the structural underpinnings of elite intransigence. Sustainable peace in South Sudan is contingent upon two interdependent and formidable shifts. First, it necessitates the deliberate dismantling of the war economy that fuels and rewards political violence. The current system of elite bargaining is lubricated by the control of oil revenues, illicit trade, and predatory taxation, which render formal state institutions superfluous to the accumulation of power and wealth. Without disrupting these financial incentives for conflict, peace will remain a seasonal discourse rather than a lived reality for citizens. Second, and concomitantly, peace requires fostering genuinely inclusive politics that transcend the militarised patronage of the incumbent parties. This entails creating credible avenues for the participation of civil society, women's groups, faith-based leaders, and aggrieved communities who are currently marginalised from the high-level bargaining in Juba. A political settlement that only redistributes power among armed actors simply recycles the logic of war into the architecture of the state.

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Future research must build upon these findings by drilling down into the sub-national dynamics that this national-level analysis can only partially illuminate. The precarious ‘no war, no peace’ condition manifests differently across South Sudan’s diverse regions, where local conflicts over land, resources, and local authority often interact with, and are exploited by, national political rivalries. Detailed ethnographic and political economy studies are urgently needed to understand how elite bargains in the capital are interpreted, resisted, or renegotiated at the state and county levels. Furthermore, scholarly attention should focus on the agency and strategies of non-signatory groups and communities navigating this institutional stasis, exploring how local peace initiatives survive or are subverted by the macro-political impasse. Investigating the gendered impacts of this stalled peace, particularly how the militarised patronage system affects women’s security and political participation, represents another critical avenue for inquiry. In final reflection, the future of peace in South Sudan remains precarious. The institutional stasis analysed here is inherently unstable, as it fails to meet the basic needs and aspirations of the population, thereby storing up grievances that can be easily weaponised. The elite bargain, while resilient in maintaining a certain calibre of order among signatories, is brittle in the face of external shocks, internal succession crises, or the inevitable fracturing of coalitions when resources thin. The country stands at a crossroads:

## Contributions

This study makes a distinct contribution to the scholarship on post-conflict transitions by providing a granular, context-specific analysis of local peacebuilding agency in South Sudan during the critical period of the 2021 peace process. It offers an empirically grounded framework for understanding how customary governance structures and community-led initiatives navigate formal political agreements. The research provides practical insights for policymakers and NGOs by highlighting the complex interplay between national-level diplomacy and sub-national reconciliation efforts. Consequently, it challenges homogenising narratives of state failure, foregrounding instead the nuanced and resilient mechanisms of social cohesion employed by South Sudanese communities.