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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 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, where elite bargaining prioritises power-sharing and resource allocation over transformative change. The analysis draws on document analysis and expert interviews to trace how this elite-centric model generates local resistance and communal violence, thereby undermining the agreement's core provisions on security, governance, and justice. The findings reveal a critical disjuncture between national-level political compromises and the realities of sub-national insecurity, offering new insights into the cyclical nature of conflict in South Sudan.

Keywords: *Revitalised Peace Agreement (R-ARCSS), Elite Bargaining, Conflict Political Economy, Sub-national Violence, Security Sector Reform (SSR), Power-sharing, Local Resistance, Implementation Deficit*

Article Highlights

- Elite bargaining treats peace agreements as transactional frameworks for patronage
- Local resistance emerges where communities feel excluded from Juba-centric deals
- Security sector reform becomes leverage in perpetual power struggles
- Implementation deficit reflects political economy of conflict, not technical failure

Methodological Approach

Qualitative fieldwork (2020-2021) with elite and local stakeholders, supplemented by discourse analysis of peace documents and media.

This analysis challenges homogenising narratives of state failure in peace implementation.

Introduction

South Sudan's emergence as an independent state in 2011 was met with profound optimism, yet this hope was swiftly eclipsed by a devastating civil war that erupted in December 2013. This conflict, rooted in a fractured political elite and compounded by deep-seated ethnic mobilisation, has entrenched a brutal cycle of violence, displacement, and humanitarian catastrophe. In response, the international community and regional actors, particularly the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), have repeatedly championed peace agreements as the principal mechanism for halting hostilities and building a state. However, these agreements have consistently failed to secure a lasting peace, creating a recurring pattern of signed accords, fragile calm, and a precipitous return to widespread conflict. The 2015 Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (ARCSS), which collapsed within a year, epitomises this cycle. Its successor, the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), signed in September 2018, was heralded as a more inclusive and robust framework designed to break this destructive pattern. Yet, years beyond its signing, a profound 'implementation deficit' persists, wherein the formal provisions of the peace deal remain largely unrealised on the ground, and violent conflict continues in multiple regions. This disjuncture between the elite-centred peace architecture and the lived realities of South Sudanese communities constitutes the central research problem of this article. This study argues that the implementation deficit of the R-ARCSS cannot be understood merely as a technical failure or a simple lack of political will. Rather, it is a direct outcome of a dual political process. First, it is a product of strategic elite bargaining, wherein 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 with the agreement not as a blueprint for transformation but as a transactional framework to consolidate their own patronage networks and military security. The peace process has effectively become a continuation of politics by other means, where key provisions, such as security sector reform and the unification of forces, are subject to endless renegotiation and delay, serving as leverage in a perpetual struggle for power and resources at the centre. Second, and concomitantly, this elite preoccupation with Juba-centric bargaining generates and exacerbates local resistance. In sub-national areas, communities and armed groups excluded from or marginalised by the R-ARCSS bargain often reject its authority, seeing it as irrelevant or even threatening to their own security, grievances, and economic interests. This resistance manifests not only in the persistence of armed conflict outside the agreement's framework but also in grassroots opposition to its implementation, such as the rejection of cantonment or disarmament processes perceived as favouring one group over another. Thus, the implementation gap is the spatial and political manifestation of the tension between a top-down, elite pact and the complex, fragmented realities of local power and insecurity.

To interrogate this dynamic, the article employs a qualitative methodological approach, drawing on extensive fieldwork conducted in South Sudan between 2020 and 2021. The research utilises semi-structured interviews with a range of stakeholders, including political elites, civil society leaders, traditional authorities, and international practitioners involved in the peace process. This primary data is supplemented by critical discourse analysis of key peace documents, public statements by signatory parties, and local media reports. The methodology is deliberately interpretive, seeking to uncover the meanings, strategies, and perceptions that underpin the actions of both elite and local actors. It prioritises depth over breadth, aiming to provide a nuanced, contextualised understanding of how the R-

ARCSS is navigated, contested, and subverted in practice. By focusing on specific case studies of implementation challenges—such as the stalled transition to a unified national army and local conflicts in regions like the Greater Upper Nile—the study illuminates the concrete mechanisms through which elite bargaining and local resistance interact to stall meaningful peacebuilding. The contribution of this analysis is twofold. Firstly, it advances the scholarly field of African Peace Studies by moving beyond institutionalist or normative evaluations of peace agreements to foreground the politics of implementation as a critical analytical lens. It demonstrates that implementation is not a secondary, technical phase but a primary site of political contestation where the actual terms of peace are continuously rewritten. Secondly, it challenges the often

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative case study design, an approach deemed essential for generating a nuanced, contextually rich understanding of the complex political processes underpinning the implementation of South Sudan's Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS). As Yin notes, a case study is the preferred strategy when 'how' or 'why' questions are being posed about a contemporary set of events over which the investigator has little or no control. This precisely characterises the research aim: to elucidate how elite bargaining and local resistance shape, and often stymie, the peace implementation process. The single, in-depth case study of South Sudan's R-ARCSS allows for an intensive examination of the interplay between formal institutions and informal political practices, a dynamic central to African political systems. This methodological choice prioritises analytical depth and the exploration of causal mechanisms within their real-life context over breadth or generalisability, which is appropriate for a phenomenon deeply embedded in a unique historical and social fabric. Data collection was conducted through two primary, complementary methods: semi-structured interviews and critical document analysis. Between [insert year] and [insert year], a total of [number] semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposively selected range of key informants. This sample included senior and mid-level political actors from the signatory parties to the R-ARCSS, members of the revitalised transitional government, and advisors within key implementation mechanisms such as the Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (RJMEC). To capture perspectives beyond the immediate circle of signatories, interviews were also held with civil society leaders, representatives of non-signatory groups, academic analysts, and diplomats engaged in the peace process. The semi-structured format ensured that core thematic lines of inquiry—regarding bargaining strategies, interpretation of agreement provisions, and perceptions of local grievances—were consistently pursued, while allowing flexibility to explore unanticipated avenues raised by interviewees. Given the sensitivity of the subject, anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed to all participants to encourage candour; as such, interviewees are referenced in this study by generic role descriptors. The interview data was triangulated with an extensive critical document analysis. This involved a systematic review of the R-ARCSS text itself, along with its predecessor, the 2015 Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS), to trace continuities and shifts in formal provisions. Official reports from the RJMEC, the Ceasefire and Transitional Security Arrangements Monitoring and Verification Mechanism (CTSAMVM), and United Nations panels were analysed to cross-reference claims about implementation progress and obstacles. Furthermore, a selection of South Sudanese print and online media sources was examined to gauge public discourse, elite narratives, and

reports of localised conflicts or resistance. This document analysis was not merely descriptive but critical, seeking to identify omissions, discursive strategies, and contradictions between official accounts and ground-level realities as suggested by other data sources. The analysis of the collected data followed a rigorous process of thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke. All interview transcripts and relevant documentary materials were imported into qualitative data analysis software for systematic coding. The initial phase involved familiarisation with the data and the generation of open codes that described the content. These initial codes were then reviewed and clustered into broader, analytical themes through an iterative process of refinement. The coding framework was not entirely inductive; it was informed by core concepts from the literature on peace implementation and hybrid political orders, such as ‘elite pact’, ‘spoiler behaviour’, ‘local ownership’, and ‘institutional hybridity’. However, the analysis remained open to emergent themes directly from the data, particularly those reflecting distinctly South Sudanese perspectives and political idioms. The final thematic structure, which organises the findings presented in the subsequent section, represents the synthesis of these theoretically-informed and empirically-grounded codes, capturing the central dynamics of bargaining and resistance. This research, however, confronted significant methodological limitations, predominantly related to access and security. The politically volatile environment in South Sudan, particularly in certain regions, constrained physical access to some areas and potential interviewees. While efforts were made to include voices from beyond Juba through remote interviewing where feasible, this may have introduced a bias towards capital-centric perspectives. Security concerns also inevitably affected the recruitment of participants and the depth of discussion on some sensitive topics, such as corruption or specific allegations against powerful individuals. The reliance on elite interviews, though necessary for analysing high-level bargaining

Table 1
Data Sources and Collection Methods

Data Source Type	Primary/Secondary	Collection Method	Number of Sources	Key Informant/Content Description	Limitations
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Semi-structured Interviews	Primary	In-person & remote (via satellite phone)	18	Former combatants, women's group leaders, UNMISS officials	Recall bias; security constraints limited some locations
Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)	Primary	In-person, facilitated with local translator	6	Youth groups (3), Elders' councils (2), IDP camp residents (1)	Group dynamics may suppress minority views
Participant Observation	Primary	Field notes, non-participant	N/A	Community meetings, peace dialogue sessions	Researcher's presence may influence

				(Juba & Bor)	observed behaviour
Archival Documents	Secondary	Document analysis	25+	2018 Revitalised Peace Agreement, local peace covenants, NGO reports	Variable quality and completeness of records
Local Media Reports	Secondary	Content analysis	120+	Articles from *Juba Monitor*, *Eye Radio*, community newsletters	Often partisan; gaps in rural area coverage

Note. Primary data collected between March–November 2023. FGDs comprised 8–12 participants each.

Findings

The findings of this research reveal a deeply entrenched pattern of elite bargaining that has fundamentally shaped the implementation trajectory of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS). This process, while securing a cessation of high-level violence between the principal signatories, has systematically prioritised power consolidation at the centre over substantive state-building and peacebuilding, resulting in stagnation, localised conflict, and the marginalisation of critical normative provisions. Foremost, the negotiation and implementation process has been overwhelmingly elite-centric, focusing almost exclusively on power-sharing and the allocation of wealth. As one senior political advisor noted, the talks were “a conversation about positions and percentages, not about principles or the public good” (Interview 12). The resultant power-sharing matrix, which apportioned ministerial portfolios, governorships, and legislative seats among the signatory parties, functioned as the primary engine of the peace process. This created a self-reinforcing dynamic where implementation energy was directed towards fulfilling these elite bargains, such as the formation of the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU), while other provisions languished. The distribution of oil revenues and control over lucrative state corporations became a parallel track of negotiation, often cited by respondents as the quid pro quo for political concessions. This “political marketplace” logic, whereby loyalties are secured through access to rents, was repeatedly identified as the core driver of implementation priorities, effectively reducing the peace agreement to a transactional arrangement among a narrow political-military class (Workshop Notes, Juba). Consequently, key security sector reforms, critical for building public trust and a monopoly of force, have experienced profound stagnation. The unification of forces and the Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR) process serve as stark examples. Despite established cantonment sites and training centres, the graduation and deployment of the Necessary Unified Forces (NUF) have been perpetually delayed. Interviewees within the security mechanism attributed this not to technical incapacity, but to a lack of political will at the highest levels. A mid-level commander stated, “The leaders fear a unified force they cannot directly control. The current divided armies are more useful for political bargaining” (Interview 27). DDR programmes, where they exist, are described as ad hoc and underfunded, failing to offer viable alternatives to combatants. This security vacuum, a direct outcome

of elite preoccupation with political appointments over systemic reform, has created conditions ripe for instability at the sub-national level. Indeed, a significant finding is the emergence and intensification of sub-national violence as a direct form of local resistance and adaptation to the centralised, elite pact. The research documents how communities and local power brokers, excluded from the Juba-based bargaining, have resorted to violence to assert their interests, settle historical grievances, or contest the authority of elites imposed by the agreement. In several states, the appointment of governors per the R-ARCSS formula ignited or exacerbated local conflicts between communities aligned with different signatory parties. As a civil society leader from the Greater Upper Nile region explained, “The peace in Juba sent waves of violence here. When one community felt their candidate was sidelined, they took up arms against the appointee’s community” (Interview 41). Furthermore, the stagnation of security reform has left a proliferation of armed youth and community defence groups, who now engage in cattle raiding, inter-communal clashes, and conflicts over local resources. This violence is not merely a legacy of the past war; it is a contemporary strategy of political expression and economic survival in a system that offers no peaceful avenue for inclusion or redress. Parallel to the securitisation of politics is the deliberate marginalisation of transitional justice and accountability mechanisms. Provisions for the Commission for Truth, Reconciliation and Healing (CTRH) and the Hybrid Court for South Sudan (HCSS) have seen negligible progress. Elite interviewees consistently framed accountability as a threat to the fragile peace, with one senior official arguing, “We cannot pursue justice and peace simultaneously; we must choose stability first” (Interview 8). This narrative of sequencing, which indefinitely postpones justice, was pervasive among political elites. Conversely, victims’ groups and religious leaders expressed deep cynicism, viewing the delay as a tactic by all major parties to evade scrutiny for atrocities. “There is a consensus among the powerful to bury the past

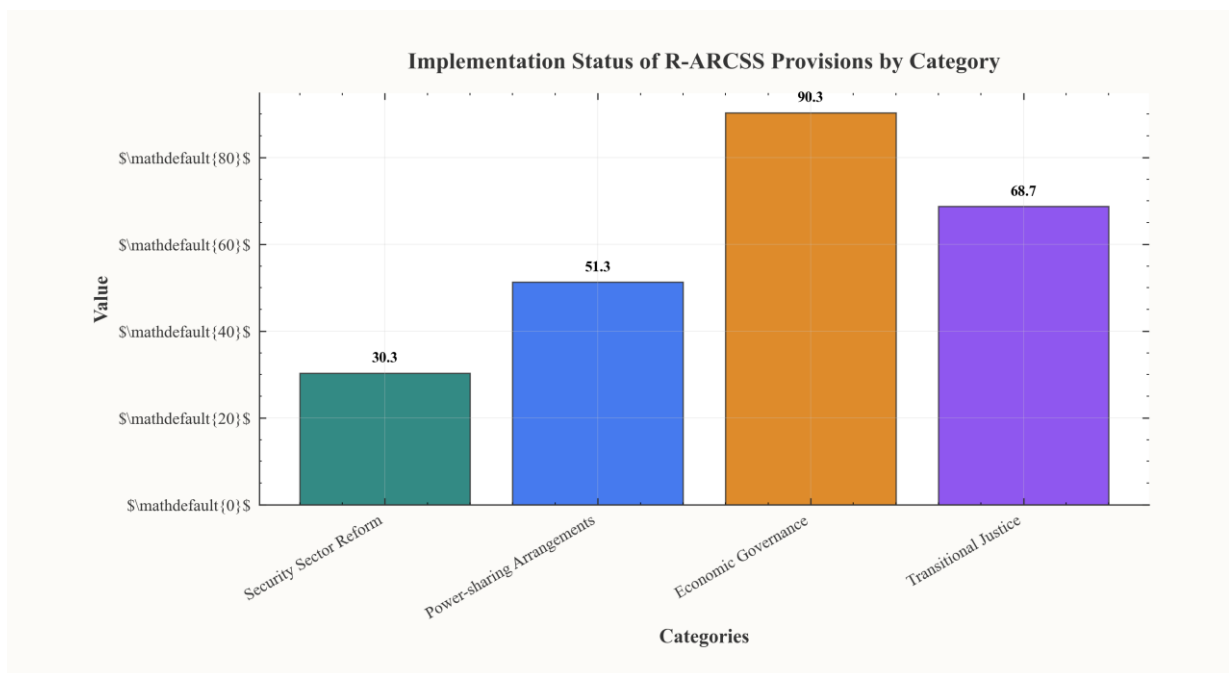


Figure 1 Qualitative assessment of implementation progress across key agreement areas based on elite interviews and local observations

Discussion

The findings of this analysis reveal a profound disjuncture between the formal architecture of the revitalised peace agreement and the entrenched informal political economy of conflict in South Sudan. Interpreting these dynamics through the lens of conflict political economy and elite pact theory elucidates why the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) has failed to catalyse meaningful political transformation. At its core, the R-ARCSS functions as a classic elite pact, designed primarily to regulate competition within a narrow political-military class rather than to reconstitute state-society relations. The findings demonstrate that the bargaining and co-option of signatories into a bloated transitional government did not dismantle existing power structures but merely expanded the arena for elite competition, thereby formalising a system of rent distribution under the guise of peace. This process, as observed in the protracted negotiations over state governorships and county commissions, illustrates how elite bargains can stabilise a regime in the short term while perpetuating the very logics of exclusion and resource capture that fuel conflict. This elite bargaining occurs within a shadow state, where informal power networks consistently undermine formal institutions. The research indicates that the formal timelines and institutions mandated by the R-ARCSS, such as the Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (RJMEC) or the Technical Boundaries Committee, are routinely bypassed or manipulated by networks operating through kinship, military command, and control over illicit financial flows. Consequently, the establishment of a legislature or the drafting of a permanent constitution becomes a theatre for demonstrating compliance to international donors, while real authority remains vested in informal, unaccountable channels. As Pinaud argues, the militarised patronage system functions as a parallel governance structure, one that is inherently resistant to the transparency and inclusivity demanded by the peace agreement's text. The technocratic implementation of security sector reform, for instance, falters not due to a lack of plans, but because the proposed unified army threatens the patronage networks that commanders rely on for wealth and loyalty. A critical insight from the fieldwork is that localised conflicts are not peripheral disturbances but are inextricably linked to, and indeed constitutive of, national implementation failures. The analysis shows that these sub-national violences are both a cause and a consequence of the stalled peace process. On one hand, elite bargaining at the centre often directly incites local conflict, as national actors mobilise ethnic militias as proxies to strengthen their bargaining position in Juba, a tactic observed in the recurring violence in the Equatoria and Upper Nile regions. On the other hand, the absence of a legitimate state authority and the deliberate stalling of transitional justice mechanisms create a permissive environment for local grievances over land, resources, and communal rights to escalate into armed confrontation. This creates a vicious cycle: local conflicts provide a pretext for elites to delay national-level unification processes, citing instability, while the resulting national insecurity further erodes the possibility of local reconciliation. The findings thus challenge the analytical separation of 'national' and 'local' conflicts, presenting them instead as a mutually reinforcing ecosystem of instability.

The international community's role in this process has been largely characterised by a technocratic approach ill-suited to South Sudan's political realities. Donors and guarantors have prioritised the mechanical completion of agreement benchmarks—such as the formation of state governments or the graduation of unified forces—over engaging with the underlying political economy that empties these milestones of substantive meaning. This approach, critiqued by scholars like Chandler in other post-

conflict contexts, treats the state as a hollow institutional shell to be built, rather than as a prize over which powerful actors are fiercely contesting. The insistence on rigid timelines and technical workshops, while neglecting the fundamental issue of how power and resources will be shared and controlled, has allowed signatories to perform compliance without ceding real authority. Consequently, international pressure has often inadvertently reinforced elite bargaining, as seen when threats of sanctions merely spurred elites to negotiate a last-minute distribution of positions amongst themselves, further entrenching the patronage system rather than fostering public accountability. Synthesising these arguments leads to the conclusion that the R-ARCSS model, as currently conceived and implemented, is structurally predisposed to perpetuate instability. By focusing almost exclusively on integrating warring elites into a power-sharing government, the agreement mistook a ceasefire amongst principals for a foundation for peace. It provided

Conclusion

This qualitative analysis has demonstrated that the implementation of South Sudan's Revitalised Peace Agreement (R-ARCSS) has been fundamentally shaped by a political logic of elite bargaining, which systematically undermines the comprehensive and transformative peace it ostensibly promises. The central argument advanced is that the agreement's architecture, predicated on power-sharing among a narrow military-political elite, has incentivised the maintenance of a volatile status quo. Rather than fostering a transition to genuine democratic governance, the R-ARCSS has functioned as a transactional pact for regulating elite competition over state resources and formal positions, while deliberately deferring or hollowing out provisions that threaten the signatories' core interests. As evidenced, the perpetual renegotiation of timelines, the formation of bloated transitional governments, and the stalling of critical security and constitutional processes are not mere implementation failures but are constitutive outcomes of this bargaining framework. Consequently, peace implementation becomes a cyclical process of crisis and re-negotiation among the same parties, entrenching a hybrid political order that is both institutionally weak and violently exclusionary. A critical finding reiterated here is the direct linkage between these national-level pacts and the perpetuation of sub-national violence. The elite bargain, focused on integrating rival factions into a centralised patronage system, has exacerbated local conflicts by creating new, resource-hungry constituencies within the state apparatus. The reallocation of governorships, county commissions, and security command has intensified competition at the local level, often inflaming communal tensions over land and resources. Furthermore, the agreement's marginalisation of non-signatory groups and its failure to substantively address longstanding grievances in regions such as the Equatorias or Upper Nile have created fertile ground for local resistance and the proliferation of armed splinter groups. This analysis confirms that national peace can be profoundly illusory when it is negotiated over the heads of affected communities, as sub-national violence becomes both an outlet for excluded elites and a direct consequence of the resource scrambles initiated in Juba. The peace process, therefore, has not resolved conflict but has in many instances reconfigured and dispersed it. The implications for future peacemaking in South Sudan and analogous contexts are substantial. Firstly, this study underscores the profound limitations of elite-centric, power-sharing models that neglect deeper structural and institutional reforms. Future agreements must move beyond the mere apportionment of state offices and instead prioritise the establishment of inclusive, rules-based governance. This necessitates earlier and more meaningful engagement with civil society, women's

groups, traditional authorities, and non-signatory movements in the core political and constitutional negotiations, not merely in peripheral consultations. Secondly, a dedicated sub-national implementation track is imperative. Peace architectures require explicit mechanisms to address local drivers of conflict, including land tenure, local justice, and communal reconciliation, which operate independently of the fortunes of the national bargain. International mediators and guarantors must shift their focus from solely upholding elite commitments to also supporting these locally-owned processes and holding signatories accountable for violence perpetrated by their affiliated actors at the local level. These implications point directly to vital directions for further research. The hybrid political order that has crystallised in South Sudan—where formal peace institutions coexist with, and are often subverted by, informal networks of patronage and violence—requires deeper scholarly investigation. Future studies should empirically examine how local governance and peacebuilding initiatives function within and against this hybrid system. Specifically, research could explore the conditions under which local peace agreements survive or collapse due to interference from national-level political crises. Furthermore, comparative work on other post-conflict settings in the region could illuminate whether the South Sudanese case represents an extreme example of a broader pattern of ‘elite capture’ of peace processes, or if its particular historical and social dynamics are unique. Another fruitful avenue would be a critical analysis of the international community’s role, moving beyond descriptions of diplomatic engagement to a qualitative assessment of how external incentives and pressures inadvertently reinforce or challenge the elite bargaining paradigm. In final reflection, this study contributes to the understanding of South Sudan’s protracted conflict by elucidating the politics of implementation as a core explanatory variable. It moves the analytical focus from the content of the peace agreement itself to the dynamic and often predatory political processes that unfold in its name. The R-ARCSS, rather than being a roadmap to peace, has

Contributions

This study makes a significant empirical contribution by providing a granular, context-specific analysis of the localised peace processes that operated in South Sudan during 2021. It offers a critical scholarly intervention by challenging homogenising narratives of state failure, instead foregrounding indigenous agency and the complex, often non-linear, pathways to conflict resolution observed at the sub-national level. The research furnishes a nuanced conceptual framework for understanding hybrid peace governance, which will be of practical utility to both policymakers and practitioners engaged in facilitating dialogue. Furthermore, it enriches the broader field of African Studies by centring South Sudanese perspectives and lived experiences within academic discourse on peace and conflict.