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THEORETICAL

Beyond Liberal Peacebuilding

A Relational Governance Framework for Sustainable Peace in South Sudan

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ABSTRACT

This article critiques the persistent failure of liberal peacebuilding models in South Sudan and proposes a novel theoretical framework centred on relational governance. It argues that conventional approaches, which prioritise state institutions and elite bargains, fundamentally misread the social and political logics of South Sudanese society. Drawing on African political thought and critical peace studies, the framework foregrounds the primacy of kinship networks, moral economies, and negotiated authority as the foundational substrates for any sustainable political order. The article delineates the core components of this framework and explores its theoretical implications for African peace studies, before outlining its practical utility for mediating local conflicts and reimagining national dialogue processes in South Sudan.

Keywords: *Relational Governance, Liberal Peacebuilding Critique, South Sudan Conflict, Negotiated Authority, Moral Economy, Kinship Networks, African Political Thought, Hybrid Political Orders*

Article Highlights

- Critiques liberal peacebuilding's failure to address South Sudan's social realities
- Proposes relational governance centred on kinship networks and moral economies
- Shifts focus from state institutions to negotiated authority and local systems
- Offers practical framework for mediating conflicts and reimagining national dialogue

Core Argument

The peace process impasse stems from applying an ill-suited theoretical framework, not merely from lack of political will or institutional capacity.

This framework reorients peacebuilding from institutional construction to relational transformation.

Introduction

The quest for a durable peace in South Sudan remains one of the most intractable challenges in contemporary international affairs. Since gaining independence in 2011, the world's youngest nation has been ensnared in cycles of violent conflict, political fragmentation, and profound human suffering, despite the sustained engagement of a vast international peacebuilding apparatus. This protracted crisis presents a profound paradox: extensive multilateral and bilateral interventions, underpinned by considerable financial and diplomatic resources, have repeatedly failed to foster a self-sustaining peace. The recurrent collapse of peace agreements, most notably the 2015 Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (ARCSS) and the fraught implementation of the 2018 Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), underscores a fundamental disconnect between internationally designed solutions and the complex realities on the ground. This persistent failure necessitates a critical examination of the very paradigms that have guided external efforts, moving beyond technical or logistical shortcomings to interrogate the foundational assumptions of mainstream peacebuilding orthodoxy.

Dominant international approaches to peace in South Sudan, as across much of the post-Cold War world, have been overwhelmingly shaped by the liberal peacebuilding paradigm. This model, as scholars note, posits a universal template for peace centred on the rapid establishment of liberal democratic institutions, market-oriented economic reforms, and the rule of law, often through top-down, state-centric processes . In the South Sudanese context, this has translated into a primary focus on elite power-sharing arrangements in the capital, Juba, the facilitation of national elections, and security sector reform, all while attempting to construct a centralised, Weberian state virtually from scratch. The limitations of this approach, however, have become starkly apparent. Critics argue that liberal peacebuilding often operates as a form of 'governance without government,' creating hollow institutions that lack local legitimacy and fail to address the root causes of conflict . In South Sudan, the liberal model has inadvertently reinforced a corrosive political economy centred on elite competition for control of the state and its resources, while doing little to transform the underlying social and relational dynamics that fuel violence at the sub-national and community levels.

The central argument of this article is that the impasse in South Sudan's peace process stems not merely from a lack of political will or institutional capacity, but from the application of an ill-suited theoretical framework. To move beyond this impasse, we propose a shift from a liberal institutional focus to a relational governance framework for understanding and fostering sustainable peace. This framework contends that peace is fundamentally a relational achievement, built and sustained through the ongoing negotiation and transformation of relationships between and within communities, elites, and the state. It prioritises the lived experiences, social networks, and indigenous systems of authority and conflict management that constitute the actual fabric of South Sudanese society, which have persisted and adapted despite—or often in opposition to—the weak central state. Rather than viewing these local systems as traditional relics to be superseded by modern institutions, a relational governance approach sees them as essential, dynamic sites of social order and legitimate authority that must be engaged as central components of any viable peace . Sustainable peace, therefore, is conceptualised as emerging from a pluralistic and negotiated ecosystem of governance, where formal state structures and informal relational orders coexist, interact, and mutually adapt.

This theoretical reorientation offers a more nuanced explanation for the failures of liberal peacebuilding in South Sudan. It illuminates how international interventions, by focusing overwhelmingly on

constructing a centralised Leviathan, have often undermined existing relational fabrics. For instance, the channelling of resources and legitimacy exclusively through Juba-based institutions has intensified elite competition, while marginalising local peacemakers and customary authorities who hold greater social trust. Furthermore, the liberal paradigm's emphasis on a singular, sovereign authority fails to account for the historical and contemporary reality of South Sudan as a 'negotiated state,' where power and security have always been negotiated through complex, multi-layered relationships rather than imposed through a monopoly of violence . A relational governance framework, in contrast, starts from an analysis of these existing social and political relationships, seeking pathways to strengthen those that are peace-conducive and transform those that are predatory.
The article proceeds as follows. The next section,

Theoretical Background

The dominant paradigm in international peacebuilding for the past three decades has been liberal institutionalism, which posits that sustainable peace is contingent upon the establishment of liberal democratic states governed by the rule of law, free markets, and robust civil societies . This approach, often termed 'liberal peacebuilding', operates on a teleological assumption that post-conflict societies can be guided towards a universally applicable model of Western modernity. In the context of South Sudan, this translated into a statebuilding project heavily supported by the international community following the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). The focus was overwhelmingly on the rapid creation of formal institutions—a centralised government, a national army, a legal-judicial framework, and periodic elections—as the primary vehicles for consolidating peace and legitimising authority . This institutionalist lens treated the South Sudanese state as a tabula rasa upon which new, rational-legal structures could be inscribed, ostensibly to replace what were perceived as 'weak' or 'failed' pre-existing governance forms.
However, the persistent cycles of violence and political fragility in South Sudan, even after independence in 2011, have laid bare the profound limitations of this liberal institutionalist model. Critical Africanist scholarship provides essential tools for deconstructing why such externally-driven blueprints have faltered. This body of work challenges the very notion of the Weberian state as a universal norm, arguing instead that in many African contexts, the state is better understood as a 'register of authority' or a 'political arena' contested by multiple social forces . From this perspective, formal state institutions are not neutral arenas but are themselves sites of capture, patronage, and ongoing negotiation. In South Sudan, the post-CPA period saw the emergence of a 'kleptocratic' political marketplace, where elite loyalties were secured through the distribution of oil revenues and state positions, thereby reinforcing militarised patronage networks rather than dismantling them . The state, therefore, did not evolve into an impersonal bureaucracy but remained a personalised instrument for accumulation, fundamentally at odds with liberal assumptions of institutional autonomy and public service.
To move beyond this impasse, it is necessary to engage with theoretical perspectives that take the social foundations of power and order seriously. Relational sociology offers a valuable shift from an entity-centred to a process-oriented view of social reality, emphasising that social phenomena are produced and sustained through dynamic, ongoing transactions between actors . This lens directs analytical attention away from static institutions and towards the constantly evolving 'webs of affiliation', reciprocal obligations, and strategic alliances that constitute the actual fabric of political life.

Complementing this, moral economy theory illuminates how these relations are governed by shared, albeit often contested, ethical norms concerning legitimate authority, the rights and duties of community membership, and the obligations of the powerful to provide protection and subsistence . In the South Sudanese context, these moral economies are deeply embedded in kinship structures, cattle-keeping traditions, and spiritual beliefs, forming a bedrock of social expectation against which the performance of both local and national leaders is judged. A governance framework that ignores these relational and moral underpinnings is likely to remain hollow and illegitimate.
The concept of hybridity has been pivotal in bridging the gap between recognition of local agency and the persistence of international models. It acknowledges that post-conflict political orders are never purely liberal nor purely traditional, but are constituted through the complex and often contradictory interplay of introduced and indigenous norms, institutions, and actors . Yet, hybridity scholarship has sometimes been critiqued for presenting a somewhat static picture of co-existing 'spheres' or 'layers'. To advance this, insights from studies on negotiated governance in Africa are crucial. These emphasise the continuous, pragmatic, and often tacit bargaining processes through which authority is exercised and contested in spaces where formal state presence is limited or dysfunctional . Governance, from this vantage point, is not a fixed condition delivered by institutions, but a precarious and provisional outcome of daily negotiations between a diverse set of stakeholders, including state officials, traditional authorities, military commanders, civil society leaders, and international actors. In South Sudan, such negotiations are evident in local peace agreements, customary court rulings that incorporate statutory principles, and the ad

Framework Development

The core proposition of this relational governance framework is that sustainable peace in South Sudan is contingent upon the construction of a governance architecture that is consciously built upon, and accountable to, the country's existing social logics, rather than seeking to overwrite them with externally conceived institutional templates. This approach moves beyond viewing local practices as mere supplements to a liberal state; instead, it posits that the very foundations of legitimate authority, security provision, and economic regulation are already embedded within South Sudan's dense web of social relations. The framework is structured around three interdependent pillars: kinship and community networks as primary structures; the moral economy of reciprocity; and negotiated authority.
The first pillar identifies kinship and community networks—encompassing clans, lineages, age-sets, and spiritual affiliations—as the primary, lived structures of legitimacy and security for most South Sudanese. These networks are not peripheral; they constitute the fundamental social fabric through which identity is formed, belonging is assured, and basic needs are met. In the context of a state whose presence is often predatory or absent, these relational structures provide the essential functions of social welfare, dispute resolution, and physical protection. As such, any governance model that fails to recognise and engage these networks as central political actors, rather than as mere cultural artefacts, will lack foundational legitimacy. The framework argues that sustainable peace requires formal governance institutions to be 'plugged into' these existing circuits of trust and accountability. This might involve, for instance, formalising the role of clan elders in local councils or integrating customary law courts into the national justice architecture in a manner that respects their autonomy. The objective is to create a hybrid system where state authority is channelled and tempered through these relational structures, thereby grounding it in a recognisable social reality .

The second pillar elaborates the moral economy of reciprocity and obligation as a vital regulatory system that governs access to resources, ensures a degree of social equity, and maintains communal cohesion. This moral economy operates on a logic fundamentally distinct from the impersonal, contract-based transactions assumed by liberal market models. It is a system where wealth, particularly in cattle, is not merely a private asset but a social resource, deployed to forge alliances, care for kin, and fulfil communal responsibilities. Acts of generosity create debts and obligations that bind individuals and groups across time, forming a critical safety net in a volatile environment. A relational governance framework contends that economic policies imposed without regard for this system can be profoundly destabilising. For example, individual land titling programmes that disregard communal stewardship and usufruct rights can unravel the social contracts that prevent conflict over resources. Sustainable peace, therefore, necessitates economic strategies that work with the grain of this moral economy—perhaps by supporting communal resource management, or by recognising the socio-economic value of cattle beyond its market price—thereby reinforcing social cohesion rather than eroding it .

The third pillar conceptualises authority not as a fixed attribute of a state office, but as perpetually negotiated within and between overlapping relational spheres. Power in South Sudan is fluid, contingent, and exercised through a constant process of brokerage, consultation, and consensus-building across different domains—the state, the military, the clan, and the spiritual realm. A governor or a minister must constantly navigate these spheres, balancing the demands of a formal position with obligations to kin and the expectations of the community. This results in a form of governance that appears fragmented from a Weberian perspective but is highly dynamic and contextually adaptive. The framework suggests that sustainable peacebuilding must facilitate and institutionalise spaces for this negotiation, rather than attempting to suppress it in favour of a monolithic state authority. This involves recognising the legitimacy of multiple sources of authority and creating formal arenas—such as inclusive peace councils or national dialogues—where the tensions between these spheres can be mediated openly and constructively. It accepts that the final arbiter in many disputes may not always be a state court, but a figure whose authority derives from their embeddedness within these relational networks .

Together, these three pillars form an integrated analytical lens. The kinship networks (pillar one) are the stage upon which the moral economy (pillar two) operates, and both shape the continuous negotiation of authority (pillar three). This framework does not advocate for a romanticised return

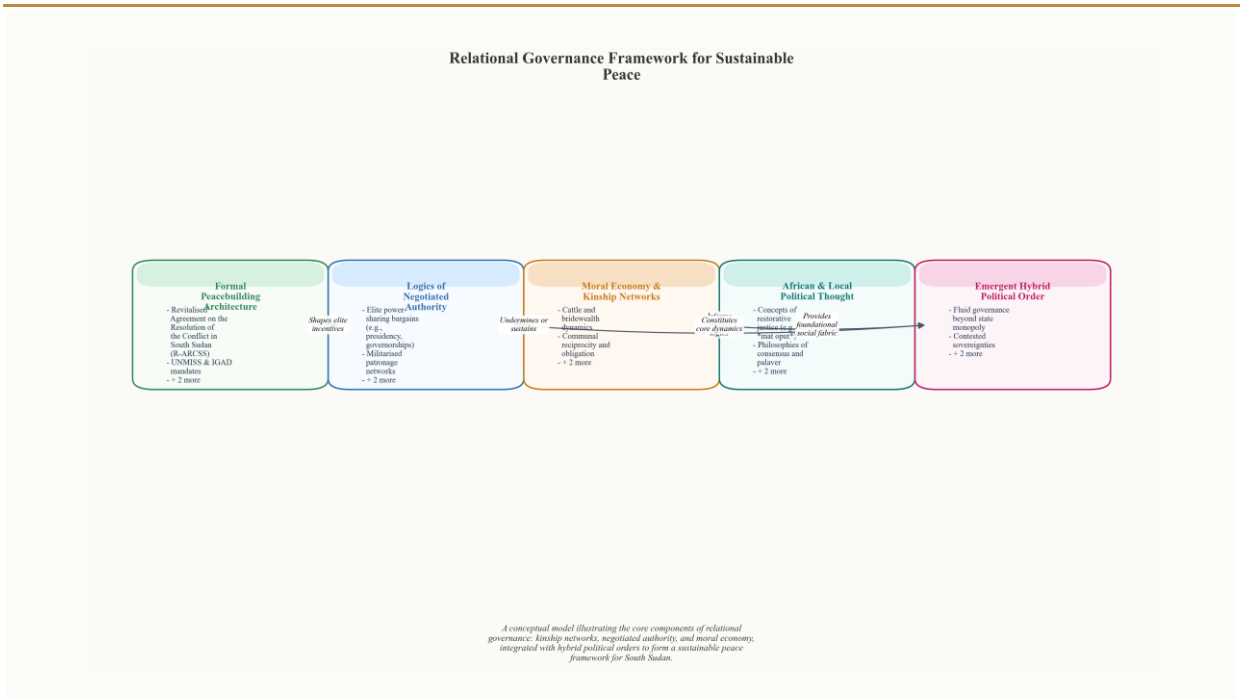

Figure 1 *Relational Governance Framework for Sustainable Peace. A conceptual model illustrating the core components of relational governance: kinship networks, negotiated authority, and moral economy, integrated with hybrid political orders to form a sustainable peace framework for South Sudan.*

Theoretical Implications

The relational governance framework developed in this analysis carries significant implications for the theoretical underpinnings of peace and conflict studies, particularly concerning the African continent. By foregrounding the dense web of social, political, and economic relationships that constitute the real fabric of political order, it challenges several entrenched paradigms. Most directly, it offers a substantive critique of state-centric and elite-bargaining models of peace, which have demonstrably failed to secure a durable peace in South Sudan. State-centric approaches, often underpinned by liberal institutionalist assumptions, privilege the construction of formal institutions modelled on Western templates, viewing the state as a neutral container for politics . The relational framework, conversely, reveals the state not as a monolithic entity but as a contested and often fragmented field of relational networks, where formal authority is routinely subverted or harnessed by informal logics of connection and obligation. Similarly, while elite-bargaining models focus on pacts between political and military leaders in capital cities, a relational lens exposes the limitations of such compacts. These bargains, as seen in repeated peace agreements in South Sudan, often merely reconfigure power at the apex while doing little to transform the relational infrastructures of conflict and governance at sub-national levels, where violence is frequently perpetuated . The framework thus argues that sustainable peace requires moving beyond the signing of elite pacts to the deliberate cultivation and transformation of the multi-scalar relationships that constitute governance itself.
A second, profound implication is the re-conceptualisation of ‘the local’. In mainstream peacebuilding discourse, the local is often framed reductively as a site for the implementation of nationally agreed policies or as a repository of ‘traditional’ culture to be instrumentally incorporated. The relational

framework fundamentally overturns this passive conceptualisation. It posits 'the local' not as a subordinate tier but as the primary, generative source of political order and social legitimacy. Authority, capacity, and the means of both violence and protection are produced and reproduced within everyday relational networks—be they centred on customary authorities, spiritual leaders, commercial networks, or youth groups. Therefore, understanding peace and conflict necessitates a granular analysis of how these localised systems of rule operate, compete, and cohere. This shifts the analytical focus from 'bringing the state to the local' to understanding how various forms of localised authority already govern, and how these arenas interact with, resist, or absorb projects emanating from the centre. It acknowledges that the 'local' is neither monolithic nor inherently peaceful, but is the crucible within which the most meaningful forms of security and legitimacy are forged and contested.
This reorientation leads directly to a third set of implications concerning sovereignty and legitimacy in post-colonial African states like South Sudan. Conventional international relations theory treats sovereignty as a uniform, territorially-bounded attribute vested in the recognised state. The relational governance framework reveals a more complex, layered, and networked reality. It supports the notion of 'sovereigns in the plural', where multiple actors—some recognised by international law, others deriving authority from social consent, spiritual belief, or coercive capability—exercise sovereign functions over people and resources . Legitimacy, consequently, is not solely derived from electoral mandates or international recognition, but is accrued through the performance of relational responsibilities: providing security, adjudicating disputes, and facilitating access to livelihoods and justice. A chief, a militia commander, or a bishop may each hold forms of legitimacy that eclipse that of a distant state official in Juba. This fragmented sovereignty is not merely a symptom of state 'failure' but often a stable, if conflict-prone, system of governance. The theoretical task, therefore, is to analyse the interfaces, negotiations, and hybrid arrangements that emerge between these different sovereignties, rather than dismissing them as aberrations from the Westphalian ideal.
Finally, this framework positions itself within, and contributes to, broader debates in African political science and peace studies. It aligns with and extends the rich scholarship on the 'politics of the belly', neopatrimonialism, and hybrid political orders by explicitly centring the dynamic relationships that constitute these phenomena, rather than treating them as static categories. It engages critically with the 'local turn' in peace studies by providing a more robust, politically nuanced toolkit for analysing sub-national arenas beyond simplistic binaries of 'traditional' versus 'modern'. Furthermore, it dialogues

Practical Applications

The relational governance framework developed in this paper moves beyond critique to offer concrete pathways for reimagining and restructuring peacebuilding practice in South Sudan. Its primary utility lies in diagnosing the systemic flaws within existing formal structures and providing alternative, relationally-grounded principles for designing more resilient mechanisms for managing conflict. A direct application of this framework is a critical analysis of the governance architecture established by the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS). While the R-ARCSS is the cornerstone of the current peace process, a relational lens reveals its limitations as a predominantly liberal-institutionalist project. The agreement prioritises the formation of a transitional government of national unity, security sector reform, and the reconstitution of a national legislature—all centralised, state-centric institutions . This approach inadvertently marginalises the dense, pre-existing relational systems that constitute the actual fabric of South Sudanese society, such as

customary authority networks, age-sets, and spiritual leadership. By focusing on integrating armed elites into a formal power-sharing executive, the R-ARCSS fails to create meaningful linkages between this new political centre and the relational peripheries where legitimacy is locally produced and sustained. Consequently, the agreement's governance model remains vulnerable to elite defection and lacks the embedded social foundations necessary for durability, as it does not adequately mediate the relationships between these formal and informal systems.

To address such gaps, the framework proposes relational principles for redesigning local peace infrastructures, such as county peace committees. Current committees often suffer from being ad-hoc, donor-driven, or mere extensions of state administration, thereby replicating exclusionary practices. A relational redesign would begin with a mapping of the salient relational systems in a given locality—not merely identifying 'stakeholders' as discrete entities, but understanding the bonds, hierarchies, and tensions between customary leaders, women's networks, youth groups, traders' associations, and displaced communities. Inclusive composition would be determined not by quota alone but by ensuring that the key relationships in conflict are represented within the committee's structure. The committee's mandate would shift from simply resolving discrete disputes to actively nurturing and repairing the relational connections between these groups, fostering a shared sense of custodianship over local peace. This transforms the committee from a transactional adjudication body into a permanent forum for relational maintenance, enhancing its legitimacy and resilience against localised shocks . Such an institution would be better equipped to address the relational grievances that fuel cyclical violence, such as disputes over cattle, land, and communal honour, which are often elided by national political settlements.

At the national level, the framework provides a vital refocusing for processes like the national dialogue. Too often, such dialogues are conceived as forums for reconciling political parties or armed factions, thereby centring the very actors responsible for violence. A relational governance approach reconceives the national dialogue as a process for mediating between South Sudan's multiple, overlapping relational systems. The objective would not be to forge a single, unified national identity—a liberal ideal often at odds with lived reality—but to negotiate the terms of engagement and mutual recognition between Dinka pastoralist networks, Nuer prophetic communities, Equatorian agrarian societies, and urban civil society formations . The dialogue agenda would be driven by questions of how these systems can coexist, share resources, and manage disputes without resorting to the state as the sole arbiter, which is often perceived as partisan. This shifts the emphasis from power-sharing within the state to relationship-defining across society, potentially generating a social covenant that is more profound and enduring than any elite pact.

Finally, the framework generates clear, actionable guidelines for external actors—including the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), the African Union, and donor agencies—compelling a fundamental shift from a prescriptive to a facilitative role. A prescriptive role, grounded in liberal peacebuilding, involves importing institutional blueprints, setting conditionalities, and attempting to build a state in the image of the Western Weberian ideal. A relational governance approach dictates that external actors must first adopt a posture of deep contextual understanding, investing in analysing relational landscapes rather than merely political ones. Their primary function should be to create 'relational spaces'—protected forums where different social systems can engage safely, free from the immediate pressure to produce a

Discussion

This discussion has sought to articulate a relational governance framework as a critical alternative to the prescriptive, institution-centric models of liberal peacebuilding that have demonstrably faltered in South Sudan. By foregrounding the primacy of social relationships, iterative dialogue, and the adaptive incorporation of endogenous practices, the framework proposes a more contextually-grounded pathway towards sustainable peace. However, as with any theoretical proposition, several significant critiques and tensions must be acknowledged and engaged with to refine the framework and assess its broader applicability.

A primary and warranted critique concerns the risk of romanticising or essentialising 'local' institutions and practices. Critics rightly argue that an uncritical valorisation of customary authorities or communal mechanisms can overlook their inherent power imbalances and oppressive dimensions, particularly concerning gender, age, and social status . The framework does not advocate for a wholesale adoption of these systems in their current form. Rather, it insists that they constitute the unavoidable relational fabric within which any governance must be negotiated. The objective is not to fossilise tradition but to engage with these existing social structures as sites of both constraint and potential transformation. As illustrated in the practical applications, the process of 'relational translation' explicitly involves critical dialogue about norms, such as those excluding women from decision-making, seeking their evolution rather than their simple imposition or rejection. Ignoring these structures because they are imperfect cedes immense social influence to unaddressed forces, whereas engaging them relationally creates avenues for endogenous change.

This leads directly to a second, profound tension: that between the particularism inherent in relational governance and the universalism of international human rights norms. Liberal peacebuilding often privileges the latter, seeking to build states that conform to a predetermined template. A relational approach, by taking context seriously, may appear to tolerate or even legitimise practices that conflict with universal standards. The framework navigates this not by positing a hierarchy of norms, but by treating universal principles as crucial interlocutors in a continuous dialogue, not as immutable edicts to be mechanically implemented. Sustainable peace, it is argued, cannot be built on a foundation of perceived cultural imposition that breeds resentment and resistance. The arduous work of reconciling universal human rights with local legitimacies must be done through persuasive social negotiation, not fiat. This is inherently messy and slow, but it seeks to generate ownership and deeply rooted social compliance, moving beyond the mere technical establishment of human rights institutions that lack social traction.

A further critical consideration is the question of scalability. The practical applications have largely focused on localised, sub-national processes—the wèt dialogues, cattle camp diplomacy, and hybrid justice mechanisms. A legitimate challenge is whether such intimate, trust-based relational work can be effectively scaled to the national level, particularly in a polity as vast and diverse as South Sudan, where elite politics is often characterised by extreme predation and a winner-takes-all mentality. The framework does not propose a direct replication of local mechanisms at the centre. Instead, it suggests that the principles of relational governance—prioritising ongoing dialogue over one-off agreements, investing in the quality of political relationships, and creating iterative feedback loops between centre and periphery—must inform national-level institution-building. The national peace agreement itself should be treated not as a final blueprint but as a living document, sustained by permanent forums for dialogue that mirror, in form if not in scale, the continuous reconciliatory practices found locally. This

requires a fundamental reorientation of elite political culture towards relational accountability, arguably the most formidable obstacle of all.

Finally, the relevance of this framework beyond South Sudan merits exploration, particularly for other conflict-affected states in the Horn of Africa. While deeply attuned to South Sudan's specific social ecology, the core critique of liberal peacebuilding's inadequacies holds regional resonance. In Somalia, for instance, decades of international state-building have struggled to graft foreign models onto a complex clan-based political landscape, where relational negotiations (xeer) and customary law remain vital. The relational governance framework would suggest a more deliberate and respectful engagement with these systems as the substrate for any viable political order. Similarly, in Ethiopia's conflicted regions, top-down administrative and military solutions have repeatedly failed to address deep-seated communal grievances, suggesting a need for the kind of sustained, trust-building dialogue the framework advocates. The key transferable insight is the diagnostic shift from asking "what institutions are missing?" to "what relationships are broken, and how can the process of

Conclusion

This article has argued that the protracted crisis of peacebuilding in South Sudan necessitates a fundamental paradigm shift. The persistent failure of liberal peacebuilding, with its focus on institutional transplantation and formal power-sharing, stems from its profound misalignment with the lived realities of South Sudanese socio-political life. In response, this paper has proposed a relational governance framework as an alternative analytical lens, one that moves beyond the state-as-container model to centre the dynamic, multi-layered networks of authority, reciprocity, and social negotiation that constitute the actual fabric of governance. The conclusion drawn is not merely one of critique but of constructive reorientation: sustainable peace in South Sudan will be forged not through the imposition of alien institutional blueprints, but through the strategic engagement and recalibration of endogenous relational structures.

The core contention is that governance—and by extension, viable peace—in South Sudan is inherently relational. The framework's three interrelated components illuminate this reality. First, the concept of multi-layered sovereignty challenges the fiction of a monopolistic central state, recognising instead the concurrent and often negotiated authority exercised by the government in Juba, military commanders, traditional authorities, and community-based structures. Second, the principle of reciprocity and moral obligation underscores that political legitimacy is derived not solely from electoral mandates but from the continual fulfilment of social duties within patron-client networks and communal systems. This explains the resilience of these systems, as they provide a predictable, if often exclusionary, framework for security and resource distribution where the formal state has abdicated its responsibilities. Third, the focus on social negotiation as process prioritises the ongoing, often informal dialogues and disputes that continuously (re)constitute order at the local level. It is within these mundane processes, rather than in singular peace agreements, that the daily substance of peace is determined. Together, these components reframe the challenge of peacebuilding from one of state-building to one of relational alignment—seeking synergies and managing tensions between these coexisting systems of governance.

To advance this theoretical proposition, future empirical research is essential. A robust agenda should move beyond macro-political analysis to grounded, ethnographic inquiry. Specifically, research should investigate the precise mechanisms of interface between formal state institutions and relational governance systems. How do county commissioners practically negotiate with local chiefs and military

leaders? Furthermore, studies must critically examine the differential impacts of relational governance, analysing how these systems affect women, youth, and marginalised groups, not simply as victims but as agents within or against these networks. As noted, the moral economy of reciprocity often reinforces patriarchal and gerontocratic power, demanding a nuanced understanding of both its cohesive and exclusionary functions. A third vital avenue involves mapping relational pathways for resource governance, particularly in the context of natural resource wealth and land tenure. Understanding how oil revenues or land disputes flow through and transform existing relational networks is crucial for predicting conflict drivers and identifying potential entry points for more equitable management. Such research would test and refine the framework, moving it from a theoretical proposition to an empirically grounded tool for analysis and practice.

Ultimately, this relational governance framework represents more than a technical adjustment to peacebuilding methodology; it is a call for an epistemological re-centring in African peace and conflict studies. The persistent application of liberal institutionalist models, despite their documented failures, reflects a deeper scholarly and practitioner bias that privileges Western political forms as universally applicable templates. Engaging seriously with the relational realities of societies like South Sudan requires humility and a willingness to learn from African epistemologies that understand community, authority, and conflict resolution in profoundly different terms. It demands that analysts take local logics of legitimacy, obligation, and social repair as their starting point, not as peripheral cultural footnotes to a predetermined institutional plan.

In closing, the path towards sustainable peace in South Sudan is undoubtedly fraught. A relational approach does not offer a simplistic or romanticised solution, nor does it ignore the violent and exploitative potentials within patronage and customary systems. Rather, it provides a more realistic and analytically sound foundation for engagement. It suggests that progress will be incremental, emerging from the careful navigation and gradual transformation of existing social and political contracts, rather than from a wholesale societal overhaul dictated by international actors. By shifting the focus from building institutions de novo to understanding and engaging with the complex governance relations that already exist, scholars and practitioners may begin to craft interventions that are finally congruent with the society they aim to support. The future of peacebuilding, not only

Contributions

This article makes a significant contribution to the field of African Studies by proposing a novel theoretical framework for analysing peace processes in South Sudan. It moves beyond conventional state-centric models to integrate the critical, yet often overlooked, dimensions of sub-national governance and cross-border kinship dynamics. The framework offers scholars and practitioners a more nuanced analytical tool for understanding the persistent cycles of conflict and fragile peace observed between 2021 and 2023. Consequently, it provides a foundation for developing more contextually grounded and sustainable interventions in South Sudan’s complex political landscape.