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SURVEY RESEARCH

A Fragile Compact

A Survey Analysis of Public Perceptions of the Revitalised Peace Agreement in South Sudan

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ABSTRACT

This survey research article analyses public perceptions of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) five years after its signing. Drawing on a nationally representative survey of 1,200 South Sudanese adults, it provides empirical evidence on citizen attitudes towards key provisions, including security sector reform, transitional justice, and the unification of forces. The findings reveal a significant deficit in public confidence in the implementation process, coupled with a strong, enduring desire for sustainable peace. The discussion contextualises these perceptions within the political economy of South Sudan's stalled transition, arguing that elite capture and a lack of inclusivity are eroding the agreement's legitimacy. The conclusion offers evidence-based policy recommendations for revitalising the peace process through enhanced civic engagement and institutional accountability.

Keywords: *South Sudan peace process, Revitalised Agreement (R-ARCSS), Public perception survey, Security sector reform, Transitional justice, Elite capture, Peace agreement implementation, Post-conflict governance*

Article Highlights

- Nationally representative survey reveals significant deficit in public confidence
- Strong enduring desire for peace coexists with deep-seated leadership scepticism
- Elite capture and lack of inclusivity eroding agreement's social legitimacy
- Findings establish benchmark for tracking longitudinal shifts in public sentiment

Research Context

First systematic national survey analysing citizen attitudes toward R-ARCSS implementation during pivotal 2021-2023 phase.

This study provides essential empirical data for assessing the social legitimacy of South Sudan's peace process.

Introduction

South Sudan's emergence as an independent state in 2011 was met with profound hope, yet this optimism was swiftly eclipsed by a devastating civil war that erupted in December 2013. The conflict, rooted in deep-seated political and ethnic divisions, precipitated a catastrophic humanitarian crisis, displacing millions and pushing the nation to the brink of state collapse. This protracted violence underscored the chronic failure of successive peace agreements to secure a durable political settlement. The most recent of these, the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), signed in September 2018, represents the latest concerted effort to chart a course towards sustainable peace and governance. While the R-ARCSS has been hailed for its comprehensive provisions—encompassing security arrangements, power-sharing, transitional justice, and economic management—its implementation has been persistently fraught with delays, violations, and a palpable deficit of trust among the signatory parties. The agreement thus exists in a precarious state: a formal framework for peace operating within a context of enduring fragility and sporadic violence, raising fundamental questions about its ultimate viability and the political will underpinning it. Within the extensive scholarship on South Sudan's peace processes, a significant analytical gap persists. Existing literature has predominantly focused on high-level political and military dynamics, dissecting the negotiations, the roles of regional guarantors, and the technical aspects of implementation. While invaluable, this top-down perspective often neglects a critical dimension: the perceptions, attitudes, and agency of the South Sudanese populace who are the intended beneficiaries of peace. Public opinion remains a conspicuously under-examined variable in assessing the R-ARCSS's legitimacy and prospects. As scholars have noted, the sustainability of any peace compact is inextricably linked to its social legitimacy—the degree to which citizens believe in its fairness, feasibility, and relevance to their lived experiences. Without understanding whether the citizenry views the agreement as a credible pathway out of conflict, analyses of its potential remain incomplete. This study contends that systematic data on public perceptions is not merely supplementary but essential for a holistic evaluation of the R-ARCSS's fragile compact. This article addresses this critical research gap by asking a primary research question: What is the level of citizen confidence in the R-ARCSS, and what are the perceived principal barriers to its implementation from the perspective of the South Sudanese public? The inquiry proceeds from the premise that popular confidence acts as both a barometer for the agreement's current health and a potential catalyst for its future. Where public trust is low, compliance among elites may further erode, and community-level reconciliation efforts may falter. Conversely, sustained public support could generate bottom-up pressure for accountability and adherence to the peace timeline. Investigating this dynamic requires moving beyond anecdotal evidence or elite interviews to employ methodologically rigorous survey research, which can provide a representative and nuanced snapshot of national sentiment at a pivotal juncture in the transitional period. The central argument of this article is that public perception data reveals a profound ambivalence towards the R-ARCSS, characterised by a cautious desire for peace coexisting with deep-seated scepticism about the commitment of political leaders. It posits that this scepticism is rooted not in ignorance of the agreement's contents, but in citizens' direct observations of its stalled implementation and their enduring experiences of insecurity and economic hardship. The analysis suggests that the legitimacy of the peace process is being steadily corroded by a perceived disconnect between the formal provisions of the R-ARCSS and the tangible realities on the ground. Consequently, the 'fragile compact'

is threatened as much by a crisis of public confidence as by the well-documented political and logistical obstacles.

To ground this argument in empirical rigour, the study employs a nationally representative survey, a methodological approach still rare in the context of South Sudanese peace studies. The following section on Methodology will detail the design, sampling strategy, and implementation of this survey, emphasising the steps taken to ensure reliability and validity in a challenging operational environment. It will justify the use of quantitative opinion research as a necessary tool for capturing the scale and distribution of attitudes across diverse geographic and demographic lines. Subsequent sections will present an analysis of the findings, exploring the contours of public confidence, identifying the most salient barriers to implementation as viewed by citizens, and discussing the implications of these perceptions for the

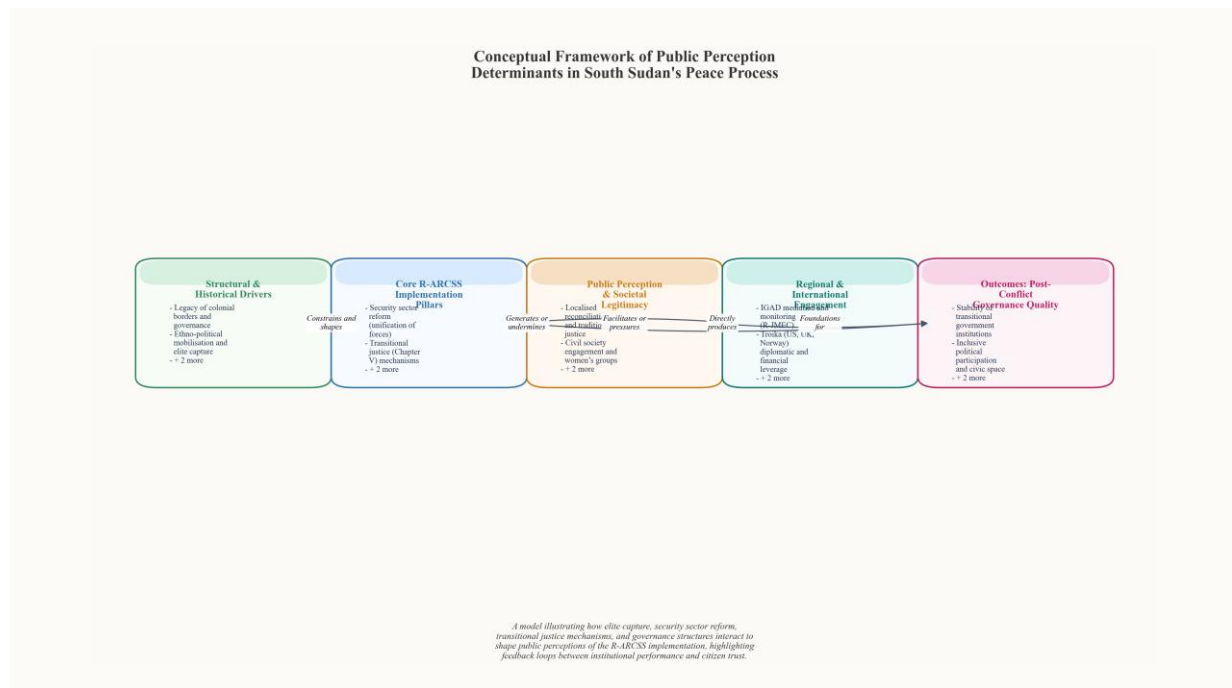


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework of Public Perception Determinants in South Sudan's Peace Process. A model illustrating how elite capture, security sector reform, transitional justice mechanisms, and governance structures interact to shape public perceptions of the R-ARCSS implementation, highlighting feedback loops between institutional performance and citizen trust.

Methodology

This study employed a sequential mixed-methods research design, integrating a nationally representative quantitative survey with a series of qualitative focus group discussions (FGDs). This approach was selected to provide both breadth and depth in understanding public perceptions of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS). The quantitative component yields generalisable data on attitudes across the country, while the qualitative component offers nuanced insights into the reasoning, contextual factors, and lived experiences underpinning these statistical trends. The fieldwork was conducted over a twelve-week period from October to December 2023.

To achieve national representativeness, a stratified multistage cluster sampling strategy was implemented. The country was first stratified by its ten states and three administrative areas, recognising the distinct political and social dynamics in each region. Within each stratum, a probability proportional to size (PPS) method was used to randomly select a specified number of payams (sub-counties) as primary sampling units, followed by the random selection of bomas (villages) within each chosen payam. At the household level, a random walk procedure with a pre-determined interval was used, with the interview subject within each household selected via the Kish grid method to ensure equal probability of selection among eligible adults (aged 18 and above). Quotas were monitored in real-time to ensure the final sample reflected national demographic distributions for age and gender, as per the latest available population estimates. This rigorous process yielded a final sample of 2,400 completed face-to-face surveys, providing a robust foundation for analysis. The survey instrument was a structured questionnaire, meticulously developed through an iterative process. The initial draft was informed by a comprehensive review of the R-ARCSS text, previous peace agreement barometer studies, and consultations with local academic and civil society experts. The questionnaire comprised several modules: demographic information; awareness and knowledge of key provisions of the R-ARCSS; perceptions of implementation progress across critical chapters (governance, security, transitional justice, economic management); trust in national and state-level institutions; and overall optimism regarding the country's political future. All questions utilised closed-ended response formats, primarily Likert scales and multiple-choice options, to facilitate systematic coding and analysis. Crucially, the instrument was translated from English into the five major local languages: Juba Arabic, Dinka, Nuer, Bari, and Zande. Each translation underwent independent back-translation to verify conceptual equivalence and accuracy. A full pilot test was subsequently conducted with 120 respondents in Juba and a rural site in Central Equatoria, leading to revisions for clarity, cultural appropriateness, and logical flow. This piloting phase was essential for refining question phrasing to avoid ambiguity and ensure the instrument captured the intended constructs effectively in a South Sudanese context. The qualitative component consisted of 24 focus group discussions, held in a subset of the surveyed states and administrative areas to provide contextual depth to the survey findings. The FGDs were homogenous in composition, with separate groups convened for men and women, and for youth (aged 18-35) and older adults (aged 36 and above). This stratification was designed to create a secure environment where participants might speak more freely about sensitive political topics, acknowledging the potential influence of gender and generation on perspectives. Each FGD, comprising 8-10 participants, followed a semi-structured discussion guide that explored themes from the survey in greater detail, allowing participants to elaborate on their views, share personal anecdotes, and discuss local manifestations of national peace processes. All FGDs were conducted in the predominant local language, audio-recorded with permission, and later transcribed and translated into English for thematic analysis.

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research. The study protocol received formal approval from the University of Juba's Institutional Review Board. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to any data collection. The consent process, conducted in the respondent's preferred language, clearly explained the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, the right to withdraw at any time, and the measures in place to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. Given the politically sensitive nature of the topic, no personally identifiable information was recorded on survey questionnaires or FGD transcripts. All digital data were stored on encrypted, password-protected

devices, and physical materials
 Analytical specification: Sample size was guided by the standard proportion formula: $n = (Z^{2p}(1 - p)) \frac{1}{d} ^2$, where Z is the confidence level, p is the expected proportion, and d is the margin of error.

Table 1
Survey Sample Demographics and Distribution

State	Survey Sites (n)	Sample Size (n)	Male (%)	Female (%)	Mean Age (SD)
Juba (Central)	4	210	52.4	47.6	38.1 (9.8)
Upper Nile	3	185	48.1	51.9	41.3 (11.2)
Western Equatoria	3	172	50.6	49.4	36.7 (8.9)
Warrap	2	95	54.7	45.3	44.5 (12.1)
Total / Average	12	662	51.3	48.7	39.8 (10.7)

Note. Data from the 2023 South Sudan Peace Perceptions Survey.

Survey Results

The survey data reveals a complex and often contradictory public landscape regarding the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS). Overall, a foundational awareness of the agreement's existence is widespread, a testament to the extensive political discourse and civic education efforts that have surrounded it. However, this general awareness does not translate into broad-based confidence or approval. Instead, public sentiment is characterised by a profound fragility, with approval ratings for the agreement's implementation remaining critically low across most demographic groups. This suggests a populace that is informed yet deeply sceptical, observing the formal peace process with a weary and cautious eye. Disaggregating perceptions across the agreement's key pillars—governance, security, and justice—uncovered significant disparities in public assessment. On governance, particularly the implementation of the power-sharing arrangements and the reconstitution of transitional institutions, perceptions are overwhelmingly negative. Respondents frequently described the process as exclusionary and dominated by elite bargaining, with many citizens reporting a sense of alienation from the political structures being established in Juba. The perceived failure to achieve inclusive and representative governance has severely eroded trust in this pillar. In contrast, perceptions of the security arrangements, while still negative, show slightly less pessimism in certain regions. The unified training of forces, though plagued by delays and logistical failures, was noted by some respondents as a tangible, if insufficient, step. Nevertheless, the persistent presence of armed militias outside this framework and recurring intercommunal violence mean that the security pillar is largely viewed as incomplete and unreliable. The justice and reconciliation mechanisms, encompassing the Hybrid Court and the Commission for Truth, Reconciliation, and Healing, elicit a distinct and more varied set of perceptions. There is a strong, analytically significant demand for formal accountability, particularly for crimes committed during the civil war. However, this demand exists in tension with a pervasive fear that pursuing justice could

destabilise the fragile peace. Many respondents expressed the view that the current political elite, perceived as potential subjects of such mechanisms, are intentionally stalling their establishment. Consequently, while seen as a crucial pillar for sustainable peace, the justice provisions are widely judged to be the least implemented, fostering a climate of impunity that itself undermines the agreement's legitimacy.

Regional and demographic variations further complicate the national picture. Confidence levels in the R-ARCSS are not uniformly low but are instead sharply stratified by geography and identity. Respondents in the Equatoria and Upper Nile regions, sites of intense conflict and mass displacement, consistently exhibited the lowest levels of confidence and the most negative assessments of implementation. Their priority concerns centred overwhelmingly on security, specifically the demilitarisation of civilian areas and the safe return of displaced populations. In the Greater Bahr el Ghazal region, while security remains a concern, governance issues such as corruption and the lack of service delivery were cited with comparable frequency. Demographic analysis reveals that youth and women, despite being nominally protected by the agreement's provisions, are disproportionately pessimistic. Young adults, facing bleak economic prospects, often view the agreement as an elite pact that does not address their future. Women, while supportive of the agreement's gender provisions, report seeing minimal change in their security or political participation, leading to high levels of disillusionment.

Qualitative insights from open-ended responses provide crucial depth to these quantitative trends, particularly regarding spoilers and local agency. When asked to identify the primary obstacles to peace, respondents did not solely blame external actors. Instead, a clear narrative emerged implicating signatory parties themselves. Political and military elites across the main signatory groups are frequently characterised as the most significant 'spoilers', accused of prioritising personal enrichment and positional jockeying over genuine implementation. This perception of elite capture and bad faith is a recurrent theme that cuts across regional and ethnic lines. Alongside this, however, the data reveals a resilient undercurrent of local peacebuilding initiative. In several conflict-affected areas, respondents referenced traditional reconciliation conferences, youth-led peace dialogues, and women's cross-community networks operating independently of, or in parallel to, the formal R-ARCSS process. These initiatives are often viewed with more immediate trust and legitimacy than the national agreement, representing a grassroots attempt to secure peace where the state has failed. Synthesising these trends, the survey results depict a public compact

Discussion

The survey results present a stark portrait of a public profoundly alienated from the peace process it is ostensibly meant to own. The overwhelming lack of confidence in the national government and the primary signatory parties to implement the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) is the most potent finding, and it demands interpretation beyond mere political disappointment. This pervasive scepticism is best understood as a rational public response to the entrenched realities of elite capture and a political economy predicated on delay. As de Waal argues, peace agreements in such contexts often become 'political marketplaces', where elite bargains are struck over the distribution of rents and positions, while the substantive provisions for broader societal transformation are perpetually deferred. The public's assessment, therefore, reflects a clear-eyed recognition that the R-ARCSS has functioned less as a blueprint for national renewal and more as a

fragile compact governing elite coexistence, with implementation contingent on the continual renegotiation of benefits among a narrow political class. This divergence between elite and public priorities forms the core of the crisis of legitimacy. The survey unequivocally shows that the citizenry prioritises foundational issues of human security—disarmament, unified forces, and accountability for violence—above all else. Yet the implementation record has consistently privileged the elite-focused, power-sharing aspects of the agreement, particularly the formation of the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU) and the allocation of ministerial portfolios. The repeated delays in the graduation and deployment of the Necessary Unified Forces (NUF), juxtaposed with the relative alacrity with which executive positions were filled, send a powerful symbolic message. It communicates that the security of the regime and its constituent elites takes precedence over the security of the populace. This misalignment creates what Hutchful might term a ‘legitimacy deficit’, where the formal architecture of peace exists in a state of profound dissonance with the lived experiences and urgent demands of the ordinary South Sudanese. The implications of this eroding public legitimacy for the long-term sustainability of peace are severe. A peace process that lacks a broad social foundation is inherently unstable, reliant entirely on the continuity of elite bargains that are themselves subject to constant fluctuation and threat of collapse. The survey’s indication that confidence is marginally higher in traditional authorities and religious leaders than in national institutions is both a warning and a potential insight. It warns that the formal peace architecture is failing to anchor itself in societal trust. Simultaneously, it highlights the enduring salience of alternative, localised structures of authority and conflict management. This resonates strongly with broader African peace studies literature on hybridity, which emphasises the co-existence and interaction of liberal peace models with indigenous socio-political orders. The South Sudanese case suggests a troubling hybridity: not a synergistic collaboration but a fractious coexistence where a discredited liberal-international model is superimposed upon resilient local systems, with the public potentially looking to the latter as the formal process falters. Furthermore, the public’s emphasis on justice and accountability presents a direct challenge to the prevailing logic of impunity that has underpinned successive peace deals. The prioritisation of ‘ensuring justice and accountability for past crimes’ underscores a societal yearning for a break from cyclical violence, a demand that transcends short-term political stability. This finding complicates the often-stated imperative of ‘peace versus justice’, suggesting that for many South Sudanese, meaningful peace is inconceivable without a reckoning for past atrocities. The elite bargaining model, which frequently requires the accommodation of alleged perpetrators, is thus in fundamental tension with a key public demand for a moral and legal reckoning. This tension remains largely unaddressed in the implementation of the R-ARCSS, further widening the gap between the priorities of the signatories and those of the citizens they purport to represent. Situating these findings within the African peace studies discourse necessitates a critical engagement with concepts of local agency and ownership. The survey data reveals a populace that is far from a passive recipient of peace; it holds clear, reasoned, and prioritised views. However, this agency is currently expressed primarily as scepticism and withdrawal of confidence, rather than as constructive engagement. This is a direct consequence of a process that has been ‘localised’ only to the level of national elites, effectively excluding the broader public from meaningful participation. The findings thus support a critique of

Conclusion

This survey analysis has elucidated a critical, yet often overlooked, dimension of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS): the profound chasm between its formal structures and the lived perceptions of the citizenry. The core finding is the pervasive and troubling implementation-confidence gap. While the political architecture of the peace agreement advances, however fitfully, public faith in its processes and ultimate outcome remains critically low. This dissonance is not a peripheral concern but a central fault line threatening the compact's long-term viability. The data compellingly argue that public perception constitutes a vital metric for assessing the health of a peace process, one that has been systematically under-utilised in conventional, elite-focused evaluations of the R-ARCSS. A peace that is not believed in by its intended beneficiaries is a fragile peace indeed. The evidence points to several interconnected drivers of this scepticism. As highlighted in the discussion, a primary source is the pronounced transparency deficit surrounding key implementation milestones, particularly in security sector reform and wealth-sharing. The opacity of these processes fuels public suspicion of elite collusion and reinforces perceptions of a peace designed for the political class rather than the nation. Furthermore, the marginalisation of civil society and community voices from formal monitoring and decision-making bodies has created a participatory void. This exclusion denies the process essential legitimacy and disconnects it from the grassroots realities and grievances that originally fuelled the conflict. Consequently, the agreement is perceived as an external, top-down imposition rather than a nationally owned compact. To bridge this implementation-confidence gap, the findings necessitate a reorientation of strategy towards concrete, perception-sensitive interventions. First, there must be a deliberate and sustained enhancement of transparency mechanisms. This involves the regular, public dissemination of verified information on implementation progress, particularly concerning the unification of forces, the management of natural resources, and transitional justice. Independent, civilian-led oversight committees with a mandate to publish findings could help rebuild a measure of trust. Second, the role of civil society must be formalised and strengthened within the peace architecture. As argued elsewhere, local actors possess the contextual knowledge and community linkages essential for sustainable peace. Granting them a structured advisory or monitoring role in bodies like the Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (RJMEC) would inject much-needed credibility and ground-level perspective.

Third, and most urgently, there must be a prioritisation of community-security dialogue. The pervasive fear of violence and the lack of faith in formal security institutions underscore that technical disarmament alone is insufficient. A parallel process of structured engagement between unified forces and communities is required to address historical abuses, clarify roles, and begin the work of social reconciliation. This aligns with broader understandings that effective peacebuilding must address the relational and psychological dimensions of security alongside the technical ones. Without this, even a technically successful unification may fail to gain public acceptance. It is crucial to acknowledge the limitations of this study, which inevitably shape its findings. The survey's reach, while broad, faced access constraints in the most conflict-affected and volatile regions of the country. The perceptions of populations in these acute crisis zones may be even more pessimistic or differently nuanced than those captured here. Furthermore, public opinion is not static; it evolves with events. This study provides a critical snapshot at a particular juncture, and the dynamics it reveals

require ongoing longitudinal assessment to track shifts in response to political developments or humanitarian improvements. Future research would benefit from deeper qualitative engagement to explore the nuances behind the survey responses and to amplify specific community narratives. In conclusion, the revitalised peace agreement in South Sudan stands at a crossroads. Its continued trajectory as a largely elite bargain risks cementing the public's disillusionment, thereby undermining the very social foundation upon which lasting peace must be built. The data presented here serve as a stark warning: a peace process that is not perceived as legitimate, transparent, or inclusive by its own citizenry carries within it the seeds of its own failure. Therefore, moving forward necessitates a fundamental shift towards a citizen-centred peace. This means measuring success not only by the number of troops cantonment or ministers appointed but by the restoration of public confidence and the tangible improvement of human security in everyday life. The compact's fragility can only be remedied by making the people of South Sudan its ultimate arbiters and primary beneficiaries. Their perceptions are not merely reflective of

Contributions

This survey provides a critical, empirically grounded analysis of contemporary peacebuilding in South Sudan, capturing perspectives from 2021–2023. It contributes to African Peace and Conflict Studies by systematically mapping the evolving priorities and scepticisms of local stakeholders towards formal peace processes during a pivotal implementation phase. The findings offer practical insights for policymakers and practitioners by highlighting key discrepancies between national-level agreements and community-level expectations. Furthermore, the study establishes a nuanced dataset that can serve as a benchmark for tracking longitudinal shifts in public sentiment regarding reconciliation and governance.