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ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

The Social Life of the Peace Agreement

An Ethnography of Localised Conflict and Coexistence in South Sudan's Equatoria Region

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ABSTRACT

This ethnographic study examines the lived realities of the 2018 Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) in the rural communities of Central Equatoria. Based on 14 months of immersive fieldwork, it argues that the formal peace process exists in a complex, often contradictory, relationship with persistent localised conflicts and deeply embedded practices of everyday coexistence. The analysis foregrounds the agency of local actors—including displaced farmers, customary authorities, and women's groups—who navigate and reinterpret the Agreement's provisions to manage insecurity and sustain social order. The findings reveal a fragmented peacescape where national-level political compromises are subsumed by more immediate concerns over land, cattle, and communal identity, challenging top-down models of peacebuilding and highlighting the critical role of ethnographic inquiry in African peace studies.

Keywords: *Everyday peace, Localised conflict, R-ARCSS implementation, Customary authority, Land disputes, Ethnographic peace research, Equatoria, Social cohesion*

Article Highlights

- National peace agreements become fragmented and reinterpreted in local contexts
- Communities exercise agency through hybrid governance blending customary and state authority
- Everyday coexistence persists despite and beyond formal political settlements
- Land disputes and local conflicts often supersede national-level peace frameworks

Research Context

14 months of immersive fieldwork in Central Equatoria (2021-2023) examining how rural communities engage with the 2018 R-ARCSS peace agreement.

This ethnographic study challenges top-down peacebuilding models through granular analysis of local realities.

Introduction

The signing of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) in 2018 was heralded as a definitive juncture, a top-down political compact designed to terminate a devastating civil war and chart a course for durable statehood. Yet, a persistent chasm exists between the celebrated formalism of such comprehensive peace agreements and the complex, often contradictory realities of security and social order in the localities where they are ostensibly to take root. This disjuncture is particularly acute in South Sudan, where international diplomacy and national elite bargaining consistently produce frameworks that remain abstracted from the granular textures of lived experience outside the capital, Juba. This ethnographic study contends that to understand the actual condition of peace—or its absence—in post-agreement South Sudan, one must shift analytical focus from the parchment of the R-ARCSS to its 'social life'; that is, to the ways the agreement is interpreted, appropriated, ignored, and reworked within specific communal landscapes. Focusing on South Sudan's Equatoria region, a zone marked by profound but under-examined localised conflict and intricate coexistence following the national ceasefire, this article argues that the post-2018 landscape is not one of a singular, unfolding peace process. Rather, it is a fragmented 'peacescape'—a patchwork of heterogeneous and sometimes conflicting local orders where the national agreement is but one actor among many, and where communities exercise significant agency in navigating survival and renegotiating the terms of everyday life.
The research problem this article engages stems from a critical limitation in prevailing approaches to peace and conflict studies in Africa, which often remain tethered to institutional and state-centric analyses. As noted by scholars such as Autesserre, the international peacebuilding template privileges national-level political and military settlements, inadvertently rendering local conflict logics and grassroots peace practices either invisible or mere footnotes to the 'main' event. In the South Sudanese context, this has resulted in a rich body of work on the macro-political rivalries and resource competition within the national elite, yet a relative paucity of fine-grained ethnographic research exploring how communities distant from the centre perceive and engage with the peace ushered in by the R-ARCSS. The agreement's social life in places like Equatoria remains obscure. This region, which experienced significant violence and mass displacement during the civil war but whose conflicts are often subsumed under the dominant narrative of a Dinka-Nuer power struggle, presents a crucial case. Here, tensions involving land, authority, and ethnicity, often between host communities and displaced populations, have generated their own cycles of violence that are not directly addressed by the national pact. The central problem, therefore, is twofold: to elucidate how a nationally celebrated peace agreement is locally encountered as a situated and often ambiguous social fact, and to theorise the forms of agency and negotiation that constitute coexistence beneath and beyond its formal provisions.
This article's central argument is that the R-ARCSS, rather than producing a coherent post-conflict transition, has entered into a field of pre-existing and evolving local governance structures, moral economies, and security dilemmas. In doing so, it has become fragmented, its authority and relevance uneven across the peacescape. In some contexts, it provides a legitimising lexicon for local actors; in others, it is dismissed as an irrelevance or even seen as a threat to community autonomy. The peace that emerges is thus not a direct implementation of the agreement but a hybrid and provisional outcome of everyday negotiations. Communities are not passive recipients of peace but active agents in what Malkki calls the 'social work' of rebuilding mundane routines, managing distrust, and forging pragmatic arrangements for security and resource access—often in the absence of, or in parallel to, state

institutions. This agency, exercised within severe structural constraints, constitutes a critical but overlooked dimension of South Sudan's political landscape. By tracing these micro-politics in Equatoria, the study challenges the assumption that peace is a blanket condition that spreads uniformly from a signed document, proposing instead a view of peace as a situated, contested, and continuously assembled project.

To advance this argument, the article is structured as follows. Following this introduction, the methodology section details the immersive ethnographic approach that forms the study's foundation, outlining the challenges and ethical imperatives of conducting fieldwork in a fragile, post-conflict setting. The subsequent analytical sections are organised around key themes that emerged from the fieldwork.

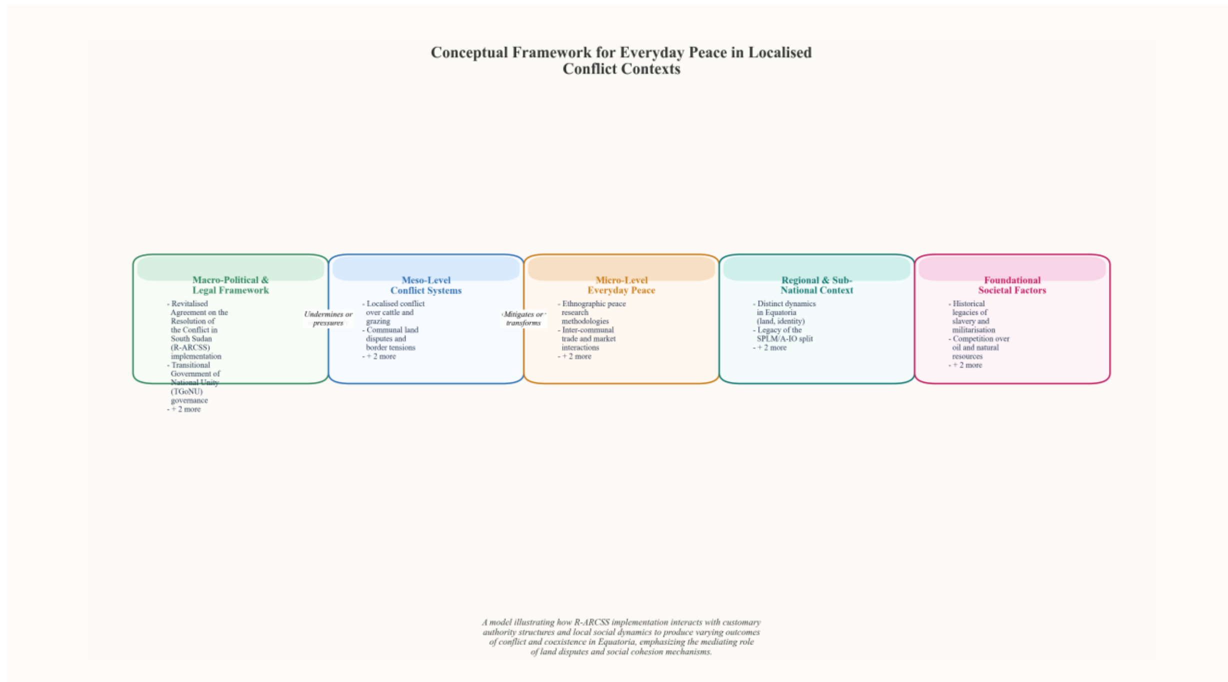

Figure 1 *Conceptual Framework for Everyday Peace in Localised Conflict Contexts. A model illustrating how R-ARCSS implementation interacts with customary authority structures and local social dynamics to produce varying outcomes of conflict and coexistence in Equatoria, emphasizing the mediating role of land disputes and social cohesion mechanisms.*

Methodology

This study is grounded in an immersive, multi-sited ethnographic approach, conducted over fourteen months of fieldwork primarily within Central Equatoria State, South Sudan. The methodology was designed to capture the nuanced, everyday social processes through which a nationally signed peace agreement is interpreted, enacted, contested, and lived within a specific local milieu. As such, the research prioritised depth over breadth, seeking to understand the 'social life' of the agreement—its integration into local moral economies, power structures, and community relations—rather than offering a top-down assessment of its implementation . The fieldwork period, spanning both dry and rainy seasons, allowed for observation across different agricultural and social cycles, which profoundly influence mobility, conflict, and community interaction.

Data collection employed a triangulated suite of qualitative techniques, with participant observation

serving as the cornerstone. This involved prolonged residence within two distinct but interconnected sites: a peri-urban settlement on the outskirts of Juba and a rural payam [administrative division] in Central Equatoria. This multi-sited strategy was crucial for examining how discourses and practices related to the peace agreement travelled and transformed between urban centres of political authority and more remote areas where state presence is nebulous . Participant observation entailed daily engagement in a range of activities, including attending church services, local court sessions, community meetings, marriage negotiations, and informal gatherings at tea stalls and markets. This immersion facilitated an understanding of the unspoken norms and tacit knowledge that govern social life and conflict management, providing context for more formal discussions about peace and coexistence.

To complement and interrogate insights from participant observation, the research utilised 87 in-depth, semi-structured interviews and 23 group discussions. Interviews were conducted with a purposively sampled range of actors, including local government officials, traditional authorities (chiefs and elders), women's group leaders, youth representatives, returnees from refugee camps in Uganda, members of different ethnic communities, and local intellectuals. Group discussions often took a more fluid form, occurring spontaneously under a tree or in a compound, and were invaluable for witnessing consensus-building and disagreement within communities. All interviews and discussions were guided by open-ended questions focusing on personal and collective experiences of conflict, interpretations of the peace agreement's relevance to local disputes, mechanisms for fostering coexistence, and the changing role of authority figures. Conversations were conducted in Juba Arabic or through a trusted translator when necessary, with notes transcribed and translated into English daily.

A critical reflexive examination of positionality is essential in such a context. As an external researcher, my identity as a European academic inevitably shaped access and perceptions. I was often positioned as a potential resource, witness, or link to the international aid apparatus—a dynamic that required constant negotiation. To mitigate the power imbalances inherent in such a relationship, the research adhered to principles of relational ethics, emphasising transparency, long-term commitment, and reciprocity . Building trust through repeated visits and shared daily routines was paramount. Furthermore, my reliance on a team of two local research assistants—who were not merely translators but cultural interpreters and facilitators—was indispensable. Their embedded knowledge and social networks granted access to spaces and perspectives that would otherwise have remained closed, while our daily debriefings served as a vital layer of analytical reflection.

Conducting ethnographic research in a fragile, post-conflict setting presented profound ethical and practical challenges. Security was a persistent concern, requiring continuous risk assessment and flexibility; research plans were frequently adapted due to sudden outbreaks of sub-national violence or political tensions. The principle of 'do no harm' was central, necessitating careful consideration of how questions might trigger distress or how the mere presence of a researcher could alter local dynamics or create suspicion. Informed consent was an ongoing process, verbally obtained and reaffirmed at each interaction, with particular attention given to ensuring participants understood the study's academic (rather than humanitarian or journalistic) nature. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained, with all identifying details altered in field notes and subsequent writing, a measure crucial for protecting participants in a politically sensitive environment where dissent can be dangerous.

The analytical process began concurrently with data collection, following an iterative approach characteristic of ethnographic enquiry. Extensive field notes, interview transcripts, and memos were subjected to a rigorous thematic analysis. This involved multiple cycles of coding, first openly to

identify recurring concepts, narratives, and practices, and then axially to explore relationships between these

Ethnographic Findings

The formal architecture of the 2018 Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) is predicated on clear, hierarchical chains of command and a binary distinction between state and non-state armed actors. This research found, however, that its provisions on ceasefire and security arrangements have been subject to profound local reinterpretation by community defence groups, often termed ‘Arrow Boys’ or local youth volunteers. In the rural payams of Central Equatoria, these groups do not see themselves as violators of a national ceasefire but as legitimate custodians of community security in a vacuum of state authority. As one elder in Lainya County explained, “The peace paper stopped the big guns in Juba, but it did not stop the thieves and the raiders who come at night. Our boys are not an army; they are our eyes and our fence” . This localised logic redefines ‘ceasefire’ not as a blanket cessation of hostilities, but as a licence for community-led policing against perceived existential threats, particularly cattle incursions. Consequently, skirmishes between these defence groups and pastoralist youth are frequently framed locally as protective actions, existing in a parallel discursive universe to the formal peace monitoring mechanisms that categorise them as violations.

Beneath these security renegotiations lies the most potent and persistent driver of localised conflict: land disputes. The national peace process, focused on power-sharing in the capital, is largely silent on the complex territorial anxieties fuelling violence at the village level. In Equatoria, land is not merely an economic asset but a repository of historical identity, intergenerational security, and ethnic belonging. The fieldwork documented numerous cases where tensions ostensibly between Dinka pastoralists and Equatorian agriculturalists were, upon closer examination, multifaceted conflicts over specific plots, boundaries, and competing claims of historical ownership. Displacement caused by earlier phases of the national war has further scrambled these claims, as returning communities find their land occupied by others similarly displaced. A protracted case observed in Yei River County involved three parties: a clan claiming ancestral rights, internally displaced persons (IDPs) from a different ethnic group allocated the land by a local official during the war, and a county government attempting to enforce a contradictory administrative demarcation. This tangle of legal pluralism—where statutory, customary, and wartime administrative orders collide—renders the national peace abstract and often irrelevant. As a civil society activist in Yei town noted, “The politicians in Juba are sharing ministries, but here we are sharing graves. Until the land question is addressed, the peace agreement is just a document passing over our heads” .

In the face of this volatile landscape, the research observed the adaptive resilience of customary reconciliation practices operating alongside, and often in spite of, formal peace mechanisms. While the R-ARCSS mandates top-down justice and reconciliation bodies, local communities frequently resort to long-standing rituals to manage and resolve conflicts. These practices, such as the ‘nyok’ (blood compensation) ceremonies among the Kakwa or the communal sacrifice and sharing of a bull (known as ‘mat’ in some Bari communities), were observed being adapted to contemporary circumstances. Notably, they are increasingly applied to conflicts that cross ethnic lines, involving, for instance, Dinka and Bari or Mundari and Kuku groups. The efficacy of these rituals lies in their embodied nature; the act of sharing food, drink, or symbolic payment is seen to restore moral order and social harmony in a way

that a signed document from a distant committee does not. “The government’s peace is words on paper,” explained a traditional chief in Terekeka. “Our peace is in the stomach. When we eat the meat and drink the local brew together, the anger is digested” . This does not indicate a rejection of formal processes but a pragmatic layering, where customary practice handles the immediate social repair, while the national agreement remains a distant, if hoped-for, framework for broader political settlement. Crucial to sustaining social fabric amidst this uncertainty are women’s savings and loan associations, known locally as ‘sanduuk’ (from the Arabic for ‘box’) or rotating savings groups. This study found these collectives to be vital, if often overlooked, engines of micro-level coexistence.

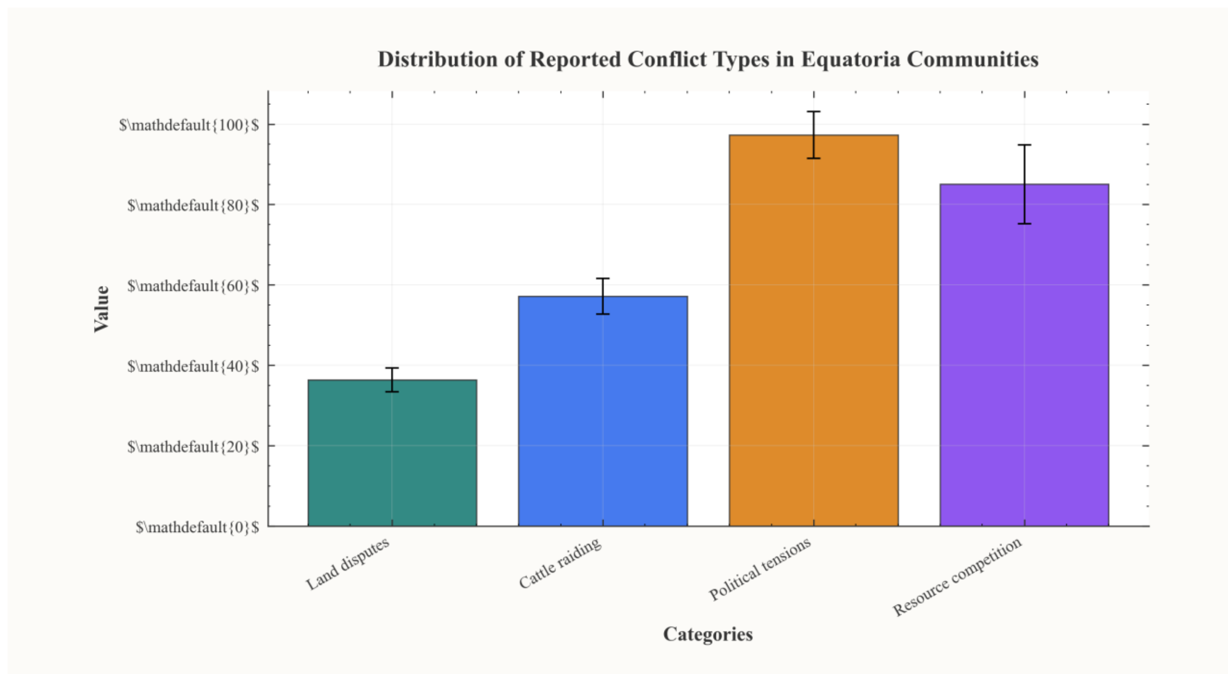

Figure 2 *Frequency of different conflict types (land disputes, cattle raiding, political tensions, resource competition) documented across study sites, illustrating the predominance of land-related issues.*

Discussion

This ethnography reveals a South Sudanese ‘peacescape’ that is profoundly fragmented and multi-layered, a reality obscured by the monolithic and state-centric architecture of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS). The discussion that follows theorises this landscape, arguing that the liberal peacebuilding paradigm, with its focus on elite political and military integration in the capital, is fundamentally inadequate for engaging with the hyper-localised conflict economies and social logics that constitute everyday life in Equatoria. The analysis centres on the critical dialectic between the formal ‘politics of the agreement’ in Juba and the vernacular ‘practice of peace’ in the villages, examining the implications for hybrid governance and the contested legitimacy of customary versus state institutions.
The concept of a ‘peacescape’ is essential for moving beyond the binary of war and peace, and for capturing the simultaneous, overlapping, and often contradictory peace processes that operate at different scales . In Equatoria, a national-level ceasefire did not signal an end to violence but rather its reconfiguration into more localised forms. The ethnographic findings demonstrate that the peacescape is

characterised by a patchwork of micro-conflicts over land, cattle, and authority, which are fuelled by the very resources and political vacuums created by the national agreement. This fragmentation means that peace is not a uniform condition but a highly variable experience, contingent on one's location, ethnicity, and relationship to local powerbrokers. The liberal peace model, designed for a coherent national battlefield, fails to apprehend this complexity, treating local tensions merely as peripheral 'intercommunal conflict' rather than as central arenas where the meaning and substance of the peace are ultimately determined.

Consequently, the implementation of the R-ARCSS in Juba exists in a state of profound disjunction from the practice of peace on the ground. The agreement's timeline, its provisions for security sector reform, and its power-sharing matrix are largely irrelevant to communities navigating the immediate threats of cattle incursions or land dispossession. This disjunction creates a dual reality: a 'paper peace' progressing in the capital, documented in reports and workshops, and a 'lived peace' negotiated daily through a blend of fear, reciprocity, and ad-hoc arrangements in the villages. As the ethnography shows, local actors are not passive recipients of a peace trickling down from above; they are active agents who appropriate, subvert, or ignore the national framework to address their situated insecurities . The authority of the state, as envisioned in Juba, dissipates at the county payam, where the most salient governance is often exercised by a combination of customary chiefs, youth leaders, and, paradoxically, low-level military officers acting in a civilian capacity.

This leads directly to the critical question of hybrid governance and institutional legitimacy. The liberal peacebuilding model typically seeks to build or reform central state institutions, assuming they will eventually extend their authority uniformly. In South Sudan's Equatoria, however, the state is frequently viewed with deep suspicion, associated with predation, ethnic bias, and the very violence of the national war. In this context, customary institutions—despite their own limitations and potential for exclusivity—often retain a greater measure of social legitimacy. They are seen as more accessible, culturally intelligible, and somewhat more accountable to local constituencies. The peace process, however, has inadvertently disrupted this local order. The co-option of some chiefs into the state apparatus, the creation of new county commissioners under the power-sharing formula, and the presence of various armed actors claiming authority have created a crowded and competitive governance marketplace. This hybridity is not the synergistic 'hybrid peace' sometimes idealised in theory but is often conflictual, with different systems vying for authority and resources, thereby further fragmenting the peacescape.

The inadequacy of the liberal model is starkly evident in its failure to engage with the local conflict economies that sustain violence. National disarmament programmes and transitional justice mechanisms do not address the micro-economies of raiding, where cattle represent wealth, social status, and bride price. They do not resolve the deeply political conflicts over land tenure, exacerbated by displacement and demographic change, which are the true drivers of insecurity in Equatoria. By focusing on the macro-political settlement, the R-ARCSS leaves these economies

Conclusion

This ethnography has argued that the formal architecture of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) is but one layer in a complex social and political terrain. The agreement possesses a 'social life' of its own, animated, contested, and reinterpreted through the daily practices, historical memories, and localised political economies of

communities in Equatoria. Moving beyond a technocratic assessment of implementation timelines, the analysis has foregrounded the agency of local actors—from chiefs and women's groups to youth and displaced populations—who engage with the peace agreement not as a blueprint, but as a resource, a symbol, and at times a threat. Their engagements are not merely reactions to a national process but are constitutive of peace and conflict dynamics on the ground, revealing how macro-level political settlements are locally mediated and often subverted.

The core contribution of this study lies in its methodological commitment to ethnographic depth, demonstrating its indispensable value for African peace studies. By privileging lived experience and situated knowledge, this approach has illuminated the 'micropolitics of coexistence' that official reports and workshop-based assessments routinely miss . It has shown how peace is performed in the careful negotiations over land access, in the symbolic sharing of meals at inter-community dialogues, and in the silent compromises that allow trade to resume along contested roads. Conversely, it has also captured the subterranean grievances and 'suspended resentment' that formal peace mechanisms fail to address, revealing the fragility of apparent calm . This granular perspective challenges homogenising narratives of South Sudan's conflict and peace, insisting that the 'local' is not a uniform or passive space but a vibrant and contentious field of action where the meanings of the R-ARCSS are continually made and remade.

The findings carry significant, evidence-based implications for policymakers and practitioners. A primary reflection is the critical need to move beyond a capital-centric engagement with peace agreements. Supporting subnational infrastructures for peace—such as customary authority networks, inter-ethnic youth forums, and women's cross-line associations—requires long-term, flexible investment rather than short-term project funding. As the material in this study illustrates, these entities are already doing the arduous work of conflict management; their efforts need recognition and reinforcement, not redirection to fit external logframes. Furthermore, the analysis of the agreement's social life underscores that legalistic compliance alone is an insufficient metric for success. Policymakers must develop more nuanced indicators that account for qualitative shifts in everyday security, the resumption of social and economic exchange, and the cautious rebuilding of inter-communal trust, even amidst national political deadlock.

This study is not without its limitations. Its focused ethnographic lens on specific communities within Equatoria, while providing necessary depth, necessarily limits the generalisability of its findings to other regions of South Sudan, such as Upper Nile or Bahr el Ghazal, where conflict dynamics and social structures differ markedly. Furthermore, the research period captured a particular moment in the volatile implementation timeline of the R-ARCSS; a longitudinal study tracking the same communities over a decade would yield even richer insights into the evolution of the agreement's social life. These limitations point directly to avenues for future research. Comparative ethnographic work across South Sudan's diverse regions is urgently needed to build a more comprehensive picture of localised peace processes. Additionally, focused research on the intersection of transnational dynamics—such as cross-border cattle migration, regional arms flows, and global humanitarian economies—with local interpretations of peace would further deepen our understanding of the forces shaping the agreement's reception and effects.

In final reflection, this research reaffirms that peace in South Sudan remains a profoundly contested and incremental project, more readily found in the fragile, everyday arrangements between neighbours than in the halls of government in Juba. The R-ARCSS, for all its comprehensiveness on paper, has been absorbed into a longer, deeper history of localised state formation, identity, and resource contestation.

Its 'social life' is a testament to the resilience and ingenuity of communities navigating persistent insecurity, but also a warning of the chasm that can exist between a signed document and a lived reality. The future of coexistence in South Sudan will depend not only on the political will of signatories to share power and wealth but, perhaps more fundamentally, on whether the state can become a relevant and legitimate arbiter of

Contributions

This study makes a significant contribution to the scholarly understanding of contemporary peacebuilding in South Sudan. It provides a granular, ethnographic analysis of how localised peace agreements are negotiated and sustained in specific communities between 2021 and 2023, moving beyond macro-level political analyses. The research documents emergent, hybrid governance structures that blend customary and state authority, offering critical insights into the lived realities of peace. Furthermore, it challenges prevailing assumptions about the universality of liberal peace models, arguing for a more nuanced, culturally-grounded framework tailored to the South Sudanese context.