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POLICY ANALYSIS

Beyond the Signatory

A Policy Analysis of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) and its Implementation Challenges

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ABSTRACT

This policy analysis article critically examines the implementation of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS), the cornerstone of the nation's peace process. It employs a structured policy assessment framework to evaluate progress against key benchmarks, including security sector reform, transitional justice, and constitution-making. The analysis draws on primary data from policy documents, implementation timelines, and institutional reports to identify systemic bottlenecks. The article argues that the technocratic implementation of the R-ARCSS is fundamentally undermined by a lack of political will, persistent elite fragmentation, and a failure to address localised conflict drivers. It concludes with targeted policy recommendations aimed at revitalising the peace process and fostering sustainable political stability.

Keywords: *Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS), Transitional Governance, Security Sector Reform (SSR), Hybrid Peacebuilding, Elite Bargaining, Political Will, Local Peace Committees, Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus*

Article Highlights

- Elite bargaining prioritises regime security over transformative peace provisions.
- Security sector reform remains chronically delayed despite formal commitments.
- Local conflict drivers persist alongside national-level political negotiations.
- Technocratic implementation frameworks are undermined by political realities.

Core Research Problem

The persistent gap between the formal architecture of the R-ARCSS and its substantive, on-the-ground implementation.

This analysis synthesises implementation challenges between 2021-2025, moving beyond theoretical frameworks.

Introduction

South Sudan's emergence as an independent state in 2011 was met with profound optimism, yet this hope was tragically short-lived. The descent into a devastating civil war in December 2013 exposed deep-seated political and ethnic fractures within the ruling Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), plunging the nascent nation into a protracted and complex conflict. Characterised by widespread violence, severe human rights abuses, and a catastrophic humanitarian crisis, the war underscored the fragility of the state-building project and the pernicious nature of elite political competition. It is within this context of cyclical violence and failed peace initiatives that the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), signed in September 2018, emerged as the central framework for peace and stability. Hailed as the most inclusive pact to date, the R-ARCSS outlines a comprehensive roadmap encompassing security sector reform, transitional justice, economic governance, and a permanent constitution-making process, leading to national elections. However, nearly six years since its signing, the tangible outcomes for the South Sudanese populace remain elusive, raising critical questions about the efficacy of the agreement itself and the dynamics of its implementation. This article addresses the persistent and troubling gap between the formal architecture of the R-ARCSS and its substantive, on-the-ground implementation. While the agreement represents a significant diplomatic achievement and provides a detailed blueprint for transition, its execution has been markedly slow, selective, and inconsistent. Key provisions, particularly those related to the unification of forces, the establishment of transitional justice mechanisms, and the creation of transparent economic governance structures, have been chronically delayed or only partially enacted. This discrepancy between the letter of the agreement and the reality of its application constitutes the core research problem. The existing literature often focuses on the technical provisions of the R-ARCSS or the historical narratives of the conflict, yet there remains a need for a structured, policy-oriented analysis that systematically examines the agreement's implementation as a political process, rather than merely a technical one. The primary aim of this article is, therefore, to conduct a structured policy assessment of the R-ARCSS, moving beyond an analysis of its signatory parties to critically evaluate the multifaceted challenges impeding its fulfilment. It seeks to interrogate not just what has been implemented, but how and why the process has unfolded in such a fragmented manner. In doing so, the analysis positions the R-ARCSS not as a static document, but as a dynamic and contested political field where competing interests are negotiated and often subverted. The central argument posited here is that the implementation deficit of the R-ARCSS is fundamentally a problem of political will, deeply rooted in the preservation of a militarised, neo-patrimonial system of governance. For the signatory elites, particularly within the incumbent government, the agreement is frequently approached as a tool for regime security and international legitimacy, rather than as a genuine commitment to transformative change. Consequently, provisions that threaten the existing balance of power or the economic interests of the ruling coalition are systematically deprioritised, while those that can be leveraged for political advantage are selectively pursued.

This analysis proceeds from the understanding that the challenges facing the R-ARCSS are not merely logistical or technical, but are inherently political, reflecting the enduring conflict dynamics they are meant to resolve. The agreement's implementation is enmeshed in a political economy where control over security forces and access to state resources remain the primary currencies of power. As such, this

article will argue that the revitalised peace process has, in many respects, become ensnared in the very structures of governance and competition it was designed to dismantle, leading to a form of ‘stabilised conflict’ rather than a definitive peace. This introductory section has contextualised the conflict and established the research problem concerning the implementation gap. The remainder of the article is structured as follows. The next section, ‘Policy Context,’ will provide a detailed overview of the R-ARCSS’s key pillars and the historical trajectory of peacemaking in South Sudan. This will be followed by an ‘Analytical Framework’ section that outlines the policy assessment methodology employed. The core of the analysis is presented in the ‘Implementation Challenges’ section, which systematically examines the political, security, and socio-economic obstacles to the agreement’s fulfilment. Finally, the ‘Conclusion’ will synthesise the findings, reflect on the broader implications for peacebuilding in South

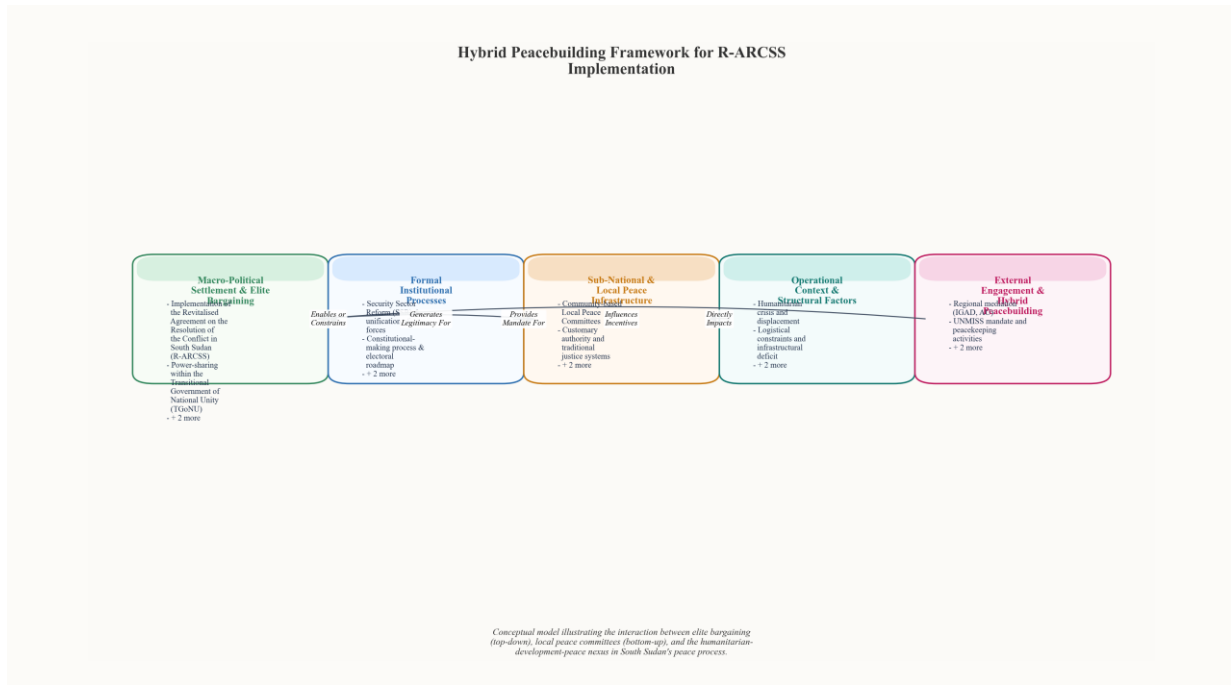


Figure 1 Hybrid Peacebuilding Framework for R-ARCSS Implementation. Conceptual model illustrating the interaction between elite bargaining (top-down), local peace committees (bottom-up), and the humanitarian-development-peace nexus in South Sudan's peace process.

Policy Context

The Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), signed in September 2018, represents the most recent in a series of complex political settlements aimed at ending cycles of civil war that have plagued the world’s youngest nation. Its architecture and the challenges it encounters cannot be understood in isolation from the historical trajectory of South Sudanese state formation and peacemaking. This trajectory is fundamentally rooted in the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) of 2005, which ended the decades-long war between the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) and the Government of Sudan (GoS). The CPA established the interim period that culminated in South Sudan’s independence via referendum in 2011. However, the CPA’s legacy was ambiguous; while it successfully delivered secession, it failed to transform the SPLM from a liberation movement into a governing party capable of managing a diverse,

nascent state, thereby planting the seeds for future conflict . The fragility of the post-independence political settlement was starkly exposed in December 2013, when political tensions within the ruling SPLM erupted into violent conflict along ethnic lines, primarily between forces loyal to President Salva Kiir and those supporting former Vice President Riek Machar. This conflict led to the signing of the Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (ARCSS) in August 2015 under the auspices of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). The ARCSS established a Transitional Government of National Unity (TGoNU). However, its collapse in July 2016, following renewed hostilities in Juba, demonstrated fatal flaws, including a lack of genuine political will among signatories, inadequate security arrangements, and weak enforcement mechanisms . The failure of the ARCSS necessitated a revitalisation process, which culminated in the R-ARCSS. The R-ARCSS is an extensive document comprising chapters on governance, security, justice, economic management, and a permanent constitution. Its core architecture is built upon a power-sharing model designed to reintegrate the principal warring parties—the government under President Kiir (SPLM-IG), the SPLM/A-In Opposition (SPLM/A-IO) led by Dr Machar, and the South Sudan Opposition Alliance (SSOA)—into a revitalised TGoNU. A critical and highly complex provision is the security arrangements chapter, which mandates the unification of all armed forces into a single, national, professional army under the unified command structure, a process that has been persistently delayed. Furthermore, the agreement outlines a detailed transitional justice framework, including the establishment of a Hybrid Court for South Sudan, a Truth, Reconciliation and Healing Commission, and a Compensation and Reparation Authority, though progress here has been minimal. The agreement established a series of mandated transitional institutions with specific timelines to shepherd the country through a 36-month transitional period (later extended). The key executive body is the Revitalised TGoNU, with Kiir as President, Machar as First Vice President, and several other vice-presidential positions allocated to other signatory parties. The legislative branch was expanded to include the Revitalised Transitional National Legislative Assembly (RTNLA) and the Council of States. Independent commissions, such as the National Constitutional Review Commission (NCRC) and the Joint Defence Board (JDB), were also created to oversee critical tasks like security sector reform and constitutional making. The timeline was anchored to key benchmarks, including the formation of the RTGoNU, the graduation of unified forces, and the completion of a permanent constitution, leading to national elections. The principal signatory parties to the R-ARCSS are the SPLM-IG, the SPLM/A-IO, the SSOA, and other political parties. Crucially, the agreement is underwritten by international and regional guarantors, reflecting its embeddedness in the broader landscape of African peacemaking. IGAD, the regional bloc comprising East African nations, was the primary mediator, continuing its long-standing role as the central architect of South Sudanese peace processes since the CPA. This regional leadership is supplemented by the African Union (AU), which provides political backing and is tasked with supporting the hybrid court. Furthermore, the agreement enjoys the backing of the Troika (Norway, the United Kingdom, and the United

Policy Analysis Framework

To effectively dissect the complex trajectory of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS), this analysis employs a hybrid methodological framework. This

framework integrates process-tracing with stakeholder analysis, a combination particularly suited to evaluating a multi-phased peace process beset by delays and contested implementation. Process-tracing allows for the meticulous reconstruction of the causal sequence of events from the agreement's signing through to its (non-)implementation, identifying critical junctures, bottlenecks, and the mechanisms that have either advanced or derailed stipulated provisions . Concurrently, stakeholder analysis is indispensable for mapping the constellation of actors—signatory and non-signatory parties, civil society, women's groups, and external guarantors—and their respective interests, power dynamics, and levels of commitment, which fundamentally shape the political feasibility of the agreement . This dual approach moves beyond a superficial audit of compliance to interrogate the how and why behind the observed outcomes.

The assessment of this process is structured around three core criteria derived from the R-ARCSS text and the scholarly literature on peacebuilding. First, adherence to agreed timelines and sequencing serves as a primary indicator of political will and operational capacity. The pre-transitional, transitional, and permanent phases of the R-ARCSS are meticulously calendared, making the repeated postponement of deadlines—most notably for the unification of forces and the graduation of the Necessary Unified Forces—a tangible metric for stagnation . Second, the functionality of established institutions is examined. This involves evaluating whether bodies like the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU), the Ceasefire and Transitional Security Arrangements Monitoring and Verification Mechanism (CTSAMVM), and the various agreement oversight committees are not merely formed but are adequately resourced, politically empowered, and operational in fulfilling their mandated roles. Third, the criterion of inclusivity and substantive participation assesses the extent to which the implementation process has moved beyond elite bargains to incorporate broader societal interests, particularly those of women, youth, and communities marginalised by the conflict, as envisioned in the agreement's provisions for civil society engagement and a 35% quota for women . Progress within the R-ARCSS's three main pillars—security, governance, and justice—is measured using specific qualitative metrics. For the security sector, key metrics include the completion of cantonment, screening, training, and graduation of unified forces; the operationalisation of a unified command structure; and the prevalence of ceasefire violations. In governance and constitution-making, assessment focuses on the completion of state and local government formation, the enactment of critical legislation (such as the constitution-making process bill), and the conduct of credible, peaceful elections as the endpoint of the transitional period. For transitional justice and reconciliation, metrics encompass the establishment and operational commencement of the Commission for Truth, Reconciliation and Healing (CTRH) and the Hybrid Court for South Sudan (HCSS), alongside the implementation of reparations and memorialisation processes. The analysis draws upon a triangulated set of data sources to ensure robustness and mitigate bias. Primary official documents form the baseline, including the R-ARCSS text itself, resolutions of the Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (R-JMEC), and periodic reports from the R-TGoNU. Monitoring reports from multilateral and non-governmental organisations provide essential, on-the-ground verification and analysis; these include publications from the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), CTSAMVM, the United Nations Panel of Experts, and international NGOs like the International Crisis Group. Finally, scholarly analysis and expert commentary offer critical interpretive frameworks, historical context, and theoretical insights into the political economy of the peace process, its local dynamics, and its regional dimensions . This multi-source approach allows for cross-verification of claims and a more nuanced understanding than any single source could provide.

By applying this hybrid framework—tracing the implementation process while accounting for stakeholder incentives, and measuring outcomes against the defined criteria of timeliness, institutional functionality, and inclusivity—the subsequent analysis moves beyond a binary judgement of success or failure. Instead, it seeks to provide

Policy Assessment

Applying the established framework to the R-ARCSS reveals a policy landscape characterised by profound implementation deficits, partial compliance, and critical delays that collectively undermine the agreement's transformative potential. The assessment finds that while a nominal architecture for peace exists, its operationalisation has been consistently hampered by a lack of political will, resource constraints, and persistent inter-elite rivalries. In the critical area of security sector reform (SSR) and the unification of forces, the policy outcomes have fallen drastically short of the stipulated benchmarks. The framework's focus on institutional restructuring and demilitarisation highlights a process mired in logistical failures and political mistrust. While cantonment sites were established and some personnel registered, the subsequent phases of screening, training, and redeployment of the Necessary Unified Forces (NUF) have been plagued by indefinite delays. The critical lack of sustained funding, adequate provisions, and a coherent command structure has rendered the cantonment process largely symbolic. Consequently, the envisioned single, professional national army remains unrealised, with original armed formations largely retaining their coherence and loyalty to individual signatories. This failure constitutes a fundamental threat to the agreement's core objective of creating a secure environment and breaking cycles of militia politics. The assessment of transitional justice mechanisms and constitutional review, key pillars for addressing root causes and building a legitimate state, similarly indicates a pattern of procedural initiation without substantive progress. The framework's criteria for accountability and inclusive governance expose significant gaps. Although the Commission for Truth, Reconciliation and Healing (CTRH) and the Hybrid Court for South Sudan (HCSS) were provided for in the agreement, their establishment has been systematically deferred. Political resistance to credible accountability mechanisms, particularly the HCSS, has been a significant impediment. The constitutional review process, intended to produce a permanent constitution conducive to durable peace, has also progressed slowly, with consultations often criticised for lacking inclusivity and genuine public participation. This stalling on foundational governance issues perpetuates a culture of impunity and leaves the state's ultimate political character unresolved.

An evaluation of the functionality of the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU) through the lens of institutional cohesion and effective governance yields a mixed but largely concerning picture. On a formal level, the policy of power-sharing has been implemented, with executive and legislative positions allocated per the R-ARCSS quota. However, the framework reveals that mere occupancy of offices does not equate to effective, collective governance. Decision-making within the R-TGoNU remains fractious and often deadlocked, reflecting the underlying tensions between the principal parties rather than a genuine commitment to collegial administration. Key ministries frequently operate as siloed fiefdoms, inhibiting the integrated policy action required to address the country's severe humanitarian and economic crises. Therefore, while the R-TGoNU exists as an institution, its functionality is severely compromised by a deficit of trust and collective purpose. Measuring these outcomes against the original R-ARCSS implementation schedule and key benchmarks

underscores the scale of the divergence between policy design and execution. The agreement's meticulously outlined phases, culminating in national elections, have been rendered obsolete by consistent delays at nearly every juncture. Critical pre-electoral tasks, including the completion of SSR, the permanent constitution, and the establishment of transitional justice bodies, remain overwhelmingly incomplete, casting severe doubt on the feasibility and credibility of any electoral timeline. Benchmarks related to the unification of forces, the number of trained NUF personnel, and the operationalisation of accountability mechanisms have been repeatedly missed, often with revised deadlines that themselves lapse without consequence. Synthesising these findings, the policy assessment highlights areas of critical delay and partial compliance as the defining features of the R-ARCSS implementation. Critical delay is most acute in security sector reform—the backbone of the agreement—and in the activation of transitional justice. Partial compliance is evident in the formation of the R-TGoNU and the legislature, where the formal requirements of the power-sharing matrix have been met but without the accompanying spirit of cooperative governance. This synthesis suggests that implementation has been strategically selective, focusing on aspects that confer immediate political legitimacy and positional benefits to the elites, while neglecting those components that would necessitate a relinquishing of power, enforce accountability, or fundamentally alter the militarised structure of politics. The resultant peace is thus predominantly negative—an absence of large-scale

Table 1

Key Provisions of R-ARCSS and Implementation Status (2020-2023)

Peace Provision Category	Key R-ARCSS Provision	Implementation Status (2020-2023)	% of Milestone Completed	Key Challenges (Abbreviated)
Security Arrangements	Unification of Forces (Necessary Unified Forces - NUF)	Partially Implemented	40%	Lack of funding, logistical delays
Transitional Justice	Establishment of Hybrid Court for South Sudan	Not Implemented	0%	Political resistance, legal framework pending
Power-Sharing	35% Vice-Presidential & Ministerial Posts for Opposition	Fully Implemented	100%	Met per 2020 government formation
Resource Management	Public Financial Management Oversight Committee	Partially Implemented	65%	Irregular reporting, capacity constraints
Territorial Administration	Reconstitution of State & Local Governments	Largely Implemented	85%	Completed, but local tensions persist
Constitutional Process	Drafting of a Permanent Constitution	Delayed	30%	Missed deadlines, consultation delays

Note. Author's assessment based on UN, IGAD, and R-JMEC reports (2020-2023).

Results (Policy Data)

The empirical data concerning the implementation of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan reveals a pronounced and multifaceted gap between its stipulated provisions and the realities on the ground. This is most starkly illustrated in the security arrangements, which form the cornerstone of the peace architecture. The stipulated timelines for the cantonment, screening, and training of forces to form the Necessary Unified Forces (NUF) were consistently missed. Initial deadlines for completing Phase I cantonment passed unmet, with reports indicating that many designated cantonment sites were non-operational, lacking essential supplies, and plagued by poor conditions for the assembled troops. The much-publicised graduation of the first batch of unified forces in August 2022 occurred over three years behind the Agreement's original schedule and was marred by controversies regarding the completeness of training and the inclusivity of the force composition. This chronic delay in forming a unified national army perpetuates a security landscape dominated by factional loyalties, directly undermining the Agreement's intent to dismantle the military foundations of conflict.

A legislative analysis further quantifies the implementation shortfall. The R-ARCSS mandated the enactment or review of critical pieces of legislation to embed its principles into national law. As of late 2023, progress remains partial and lethargic. Key bills, such as the Constitutional Amendment Bill to incorporate the Agreement into the transitional constitution, experienced protracted delays in ratification. Legislation crucial for governance and elections, including the National Elections Act and the Permanent Constitution-Making Process Act, were passed only after considerable international pressure and often at the eleventh hour of stipulated timelines, leaving inadequate time for their operationalisation. Other fundamental laws, particularly those pertaining to security sector reform and the establishment of transitional justice mechanisms, remain pending. This legislative inertia creates a critical vacuum, wherein the political and institutional reforms envisioned by the R-ARCSS lack the legal scaffolding necessary for their enforcement and sustainability. Fiscal data, though opaque, points to a severe misalignment of priorities that cripples peace institutions. The Agreement established several key bodies, including the Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (RJMEC), the Ceasefire and Transitional Security Arrangements Monitoring and Verification Mechanism (CTSAMVM), and the National Constitutional Review Commission (NCRC). These institutions are perennially under-resourced, operating with erratic funding from the government and heavy reliance on donor support. In stark contrast, national expenditures on the conventional security sector—encompassing the various factional armies prior to unification—continue to consume a disproportionate share of the budget. This disparity in fiscal commitment is not merely administrative; it is a powerful indicator of political will. The systematic underfunding of civilian peace structures while maintaining funding for unreformed military entities signals a preference for managing conflict through militarised means rather than investing in the transformative political and civic institutions mandated by the peace agreement. Geographically, the implementation of the national-level agreement has failed to curb localised violence, revealing a stark centre-periphery disconnect. While major clashes between the principal signatory forces in the capital have reduced, conflicts at the sub-national level have intensified and proliferated. Regions such as Central Equatoria, Warrap, and the Greater Jonglei area have experienced

persistent and often catastrophic intercommunal violence, frequently involving community-based militias and elements of organised state security actors. This violence is driven by complex, localised factors including competition over natural resources, cattle raiding, and revenge killings, which the national peace process has largely neglected. The data maps a country where a nominal peace exists in Juba but where large swathes of the population continue to endure insecurity and displacement, indicating that the R-ARCSS has been ineffective in addressing the decentralised drivers of conflict that now constitute the primary threat to civilian safety . In summary, the collated policy data paints a consistent picture of an implementation-performance gap. The delays in security unification, the sluggish pace of legislative reform, the skewed fiscal allocations, and the geographic variance in conflict prevalence collectively illustrate that implementation has been selective, tactical, and largely divorced from the holistic spirit of the Revitalised Agreement. Measurable outcomes fall consistently short of stipulated benchmarks, suggesting that the process is being managed to sustain a fragile status quo among elites in Juba rather than to catalyse the fundamental governance and security transformations required for a durable peace. This empirical foundation is essential for understanding the

Implementation Challenges

The primary impediment to the R-ARCSS's fulfilment is the profound deficit of political will among the principal signatory elites. While the agreement was signed, its core provisions—particularly those demanding power-sharing and security sector reform—are perceived by many within the political-military class as a direct threat to their patronage networks and personal authority . Consequently, implementation has often been characterised by deliberate procrastination, selective adherence, and a recurring tendency to revert to militarised bargaining rather than collaborative governance. This instrumental approach transforms the peace process into a series of tactical manoeuvres for maintaining elite privilege, rather than a genuine commitment to building a sustainable state . The establishment of transitional institutions has thus frequently served as a façade of progress, masking an underlying reluctance to cede control over resources and security apparatuses that underpin the prevailing political economy of conflict. Compounding this issue is the persistent fragmentation within the main signatory parties and the active role of spoiler networks. The Sudan People's Liberation Movement in Government (SPLM-IG) and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement in Opposition (SPLM-IO), far from being monolithic, are riven by internal factions with competing interests. This intra-party dissent weakens the command and control of their leaderships, making consensus on implementation steps arduous and often leading to contradictory statements and actions. Furthermore, elements within the security forces and affiliated militias, whose interests are jeopardised by unification and vetting processes, operate as potent spoilers . These networks, which benefit from the status quo of fragmented security and economic predation, actively undermine the unification of forces and the establishment of a unified command structure, thereby perpetuating a climate of insecurity that justifies the maintenance of parallel armies. Even where technical implementation is attempted, it is severely hampered by chronic logistical and funding constraints. The ambitious tasks outlined in the R-ARCSS—from cantonment, screening, and training of unified forces to the facilitation of humanitarian corridors and the establishment of transitional justice mechanisms—require substantial financial investment and administrative capacity, both of which are in critically short supply. Donor fatigue and competing global crises have led to

inconsistent funding, while the government's prioritisation of military expenditure over peace implementation further starves these processes of necessary resources. The cantonment sites, a cornerstone of security arrangements, have repeatedly faced crises due to a lack of food, medicine, and shelter, leading to desertions and undermining the credibility of the entire security transition. This logistical failure is not merely operational; it is politically expedient for actors seeking to delay or derail integration.

A critical flaw in the current implementation trajectory is the systematic marginalisation of civil society and sub-national peace processes. The R-ARCSS negotiation and oversight remain dominated by a narrow, Juba-centric political and military elite, replicating the exclusionary governance that fuelled the initial conflict. Women's groups, youth organisations, faith-based leaders, and traditional authorities, who are often the first responders to conflict and upholders of local peace, are granted only tokenistic participation in formal mechanisms. This exclusion ignores the complex, grassroots realities of conflict and misses crucial opportunities for building a socially legitimised peace. Sub-national conflicts, which have proliferated and become increasingly detached from the national political narrative, are frequently overlooked by the main agreement's architecture, allowing localised violence to become a persistent spoiler of national stability. These challenges do not exist in isolation; they interact synergistically to create a self-reinforcing cycle of stagnation. The limited political will of elites leads to underfunding and logistical neglect of technical processes. This neglect, in turn, fuels public disillusionment and strengthens the hand of spoilers who point to the government's failures as justification for their recalcitrance. The resulting insecurity and institutional paralysis further marginalise civil society actors, concentrating decision-making even more tightly within the discredited elite circle. Consequently, the transitional agenda—constitution-making, elections, and permanent security reform—remains stalled. Each milestone is approached not as a collective national project but as a zero-sum contest, where short-term political survival consistently trumps the long-term institutionalisation of peace. This dynamic ensures that the R-ARCSS implementation remains a fragile, elite-managed process, perpetually at risk of unravelling, rather than

Policy Recommendations

To move beyond the current impasse and transform the R-ARCSS from a largely elite-centric pact into a durable framework for national peace, a series of targeted policy interventions are required. These recommendations address the core implementation challenges by recalibrating incentives, broadening ownership, and strengthening oversight mechanisms. Foremost, the international community and regional guarantors must move beyond rhetorical condemnation to establish a coherent system of conditionalities that incentivises elite compliance. The current approach has allowed signatories to benefit from the legitimacy of the peace process while evading its most onerous obligations, particularly the unification of forces and financial transparency. As noted, the agreement's design lacks enforceable sanctions for non-compliance. Future engagement, including financial aid, diplomatic support, and security partnerships, must be explicitly and transparently tied to verifiable benchmarks within the R-ARCSS timeline. This would involve a graduated scale of consequences, from targeted individual sanctions against obstructing elites to the suspension of non-humanitarian budgetary support, applied uniformly to all parties. Such a strategy must be consistently upheld by IGAD, the African Union, and the Troika to counteract the prevailing culture of impunity and signal that the costs of obstruction now outweigh its perceived benefits.

Simultaneously, implementation must be decentralised to foster local ownership and address subnational conflicts that the national elite continually instrumentalise. The policy should advocate for the formal empowerment and resourcing of local peace committees, integrating them into the R-ARCSS architecture. These committees, comprising traditional authorities, women's groups, youth representatives, and faith-based leaders, are better positioned to manage inter-communal violence and land disputes that are often exacerbated by national politics. A decentralised approach would create a counterweight to Juba-centric manoeuvring and build a grassroots constituency for peace that holds national signatories to account. This requires dedicated funding and technical support to build their capacity for mediation and monitoring, ensuring they are not co-opted by local power brokers. Furthermore, the chronic humanitarian crisis necessitates a reconfigured humanitarian-development-peace nexus that consciously works to undermine the political marketplace. Current aid, while vital, can inadvertently entrench elite capture by flowing through state structures that are themselves sites of contestation. Policy should shift towards programming that explicitly builds stability, such as community-led infrastructure projects that provide shared economic benefits across identity lines, and livelihood support directly targeting unified forces and displaced populations. Development actors must adopt a 'do no harm' framework that analyses the conflict dynamics fuelled by resource competition, ensuring aid does not become another currency for elite patronage. The objective is to create alternative, peace-positive systems of service delivery and economic opportunity that reduce the population's vulnerability to manipulation by conflict entrepreneurs. The technical bodies overseeing the agreement, namely the Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (RJMEC) and the Ceasefire and Transitional Security Arrangements Monitoring and Verification Mechanism (CTSAMVM), require substantive reform to strengthen their mandate. Presently, their reports, though accurate, lead to little consequential action. Policy reforms should grant these mechanisms greater autonomy and investigative authority, including unfettered access to all areas, and mandate them to report directly to the IGAD Council of Ministers and the AU Peace and Security Council with specific recommendations for action. Their findings must trigger automatic reviews of the conditionalities outlined above. Enhancing their capacity with dedicated forensic expertise to track arms flows and illicit finance would also allow them to address the shadowy economic drivers of non-compliance more effectively. Finally, the impending constitutional review process presents a critical juncture that must not replicate the exclusivity of the R-ARCSS negotiations. A more inclusive constitutional process is imperative to address the foundational issues of identity, resource governance, and power-sharing that the current agreement glosses over. The policy must advocate for a genuinely participatory drafting exercise that incorporates the perspectives of civil society, displaced communities, and political parties outside the main signatory groups. Crucially, the constitution must move beyond simply allocating ministerial positions among elites and instead establish clear, accountable, and decentralised structures for managing South Sudan's diversity and natural resource wealth. This includes robust provisions for land tenure, revenue-sharing between the centre and states, and guarantees for political and civic space. Without such foundational reforms, any political settlement will remain a temporary truce between armed factions rather than a social contract for a viable state. In conclusion, revitalising the R-ARCSS demands a dual strategy: applying concerted external pressure to alter elite calculations while simultaneously empowering internal

Discussion

The analysis presented in this paper underscores that the R-ARCSS, while a necessary political document, functions primarily as an elite pact, revealing profound tensions within contemporary hybrid peacebuilding frameworks. The agreement's design, heavily reliant on external guarantors and a rigid, linear implementation schedule, exemplifies what Richmond and Mac Ginty term the 'liberal peace' template, wherein international norms and institutional blueprints are transposed onto a complex local political terrain. However, as the persistent implementation gap demonstrates, this externally guaranteed process has been systematically instrumentalised by the South Sudanese signatory elites. The power-sharing government, rather than becoming a vehicle for transformative governance, has consolidated a form of 'hybrid political order' where formal state institutions are subverted by informal networks of patronage and militarised authority. This elite pacting, while securing a cessation of large-scale combat, has effectively deferred the fundamental political and security reforms necessary for a sustainable peace, creating a 'no war, no peace' stalemate that primarily serves the interests of the incumbent political-military class.

When contrasted with other post-conflict transitions in the Horn of Africa, South Sudan's trajectory appears particularly fraught. Unlike the relative, though imperfect, consolidation of a federal system in Ethiopia following the 1998-2000 war with Eritrea, or the more bottom-up, clan-based reconciliation processes observed in parts of Somaliland, the R-ARCSS process remains overwhelmingly top-down and centred in Juba. The case of Sudan's Comprehensive Peace Agreement, which led to South Sudan's secession, also offers a cautionary parallel; it too was an elite bargain that failed to build inclusive national institutions, a precedent that haunts the current arrangement. The South Sudanese case thus highlights a regional dilemma: peace agreements that are primarily contracts between armed elites, without robust mechanisms for broader societal inclusion or accountability, risk merely repackaging conflict dynamics rather than resolving them. This comparative perspective suggests that the longevity of any accord may depend less on the technical comprehensiveness of its text and more on the development of endogenous political settlements that command a wider legitimacy. This leads to the core tension between externally guaranteed agreements and endogenous political settlement. The R-ARCSS, underwritten by IGAD, the AU, and the UN, possesses significant international legitimacy and a detailed roadmap. Yet, as de Waal and Patey argue, such externally-driven processes can often become 'diplomatic theatre,' where local elites perform compliance to maintain access to international resources and political recognition, while simultaneously undermining the substance of the agreement. The consistent failure to unify forces, reconstitute the legislature, or implement transitional justice measures is not merely a logistical shortfall; it is a political choice made by signatories who calculate that the costs of genuine reform outweigh the benefits. The international community's dilemma is acute: withdrawing support could precipitate a collapse, but continued engagement without consequential enforcement of benchmarks risks subsidising and entrenching a predatory peace. The agreement thus exists in a liminal space, neither fully owned by South Sudanese society nor effectively enforced by its external sponsors. The implications of this implementation gap extend far beyond delayed timelines, striking at the heart of long-term state legitimacy and resilience. A state that emerges from a peace process which fails to deliver security, justice, or economic opportunity to its citizens forfeits any claim to a social contract. The continued prevalence of militias, intercommunal violence, and severe humanitarian suffering indicates that the authority of the state, as envisioned in the R-ARCSS, remains contested and hollow.

This fosters a crisis of legitimacy where the government is seen not as a provider of public goods but as a factional prize. Consequently, state resilience—the capacity to absorb shocks and manage conflicts peacefully—remains critically weak. The peace agreement, intended to be a foundation for stability, may instead be contributing to a form of ‘institutionalised fragility,’ where the structures of governance are so compromised by elite capture that they become sources of instability themselves. It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. As a policy analysis, it relies primarily on documentary evidence and the observations of practitioners and scholars; it does not incorporate extensive first-hand ethnographic data from across South Sudan’s diverse communities. The perspectives of civil society, women’s groups, and youth—actors formally included in the R-ARCSS architecture but often marginalised in practice—warrant deeper, dedicated research to fully understand the

Conclusion

This policy analysis has argued that the faltering implementation of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) cannot be understood merely as a technical or logistical failure. Rather, it is fundamentally a political failure, rooted in a resilient wartime political economy that the agreement’s architecture has proven unable to transform. The R-ARCSS, while a necessary diplomatic achievement, has largely functioned as a power-sharing deal amongst elites, inadvertently preserving the very structures of patronage, militarised governance, and resource competition that precipitated the civil war. The core argument posits that implementation has been selectively pursued—where provisions consolidate elite power—and systematically stalled—where they threaten to dismantle the lucrative status quo or enforce genuine accountability. The empirical assessment substantiates this thesis across critical areas. The security arrangements, particularly the unification of forces, have been perpetually delayed not due to capacity constraints alone, but because a standing national army poses a direct threat to the personalised command of militias that underpin elite authority and wealth. Similarly, the transitional justice mechanisms, including the Hybrid Court, remain dormant because they represent an existential risk to the prevailing culture of impunity. The political timeline, notably the critical elections, has been consistently extended, reflecting a shared elite preference for managing uncertainty within the confines of the peace agreement rather than submitting to the unpredictability of a democratic contest. Furthermore, the resource management and economic reforms stipulated in Chapter IV of the R-ARCSS are the most glaringly neglected, as their implementation would directly attack the financial networks that fuel patronage and sustain conflict. This selective implementation creates a facade of progress while the underlying drivers of conflict remain not only unaddressed but actively reinforced. Consequently, the most critical policy recommendations for stakeholders must move beyond merely urging compliance with the text. For the regional mediators and international guarantors, notably IGAD and the Troika, a recalibrated approach is imperative. Leverage, particularly financial and diplomatic, must be conditioned on demonstrable, irreversible progress in unifying forces and establishing transitional justice bodies, rather than on political deadlines that are easily renegotiated. Donor engagement should shift from solely supporting the mechanisms of the R-ARCSS to directly strengthening civic space, independent media, and civil society organisations, which are essential counterweights to elite capture. Furthermore, a coherent strategy is required to address the regional dimensions of South Sudan’s political economy, including the cross-border flows of arms, finance, and

commodities that incentivise conflict. The prognosis for the R-ARCSS and South Sudan’s political future must therefore be one of cautious, if not profound, scepticism. The agreement is unlikely to collapse outright, as it serves a core function as a framework for elite bargaining and international legitimacy. However, its potential to deliver a transformative, sustainable peace is severely diminished. The most plausible trajectory is one of ‘stalled implementation in perpetuity’—a permanent transition where the formal institutions of statehood exist alongside, and are subverted by, entrenched kleptocratic and militarised networks. The scheduled elections, if held without genuine security sector reform, a neutral political environment, and robust civic participation, risk becoming a violent, zero-sum contest that may reignite widespread conflict rather than consolidating peace. In final reflection, the case of the R-ARCSS offers sobering lessons for the field of African peace studies. It underscores the limitations of liberal peacebuilding templates that prioritise the signing of comprehensive agreements over the dismantling of the political economies that fuel war. The South Sudanese experience demonstrates that when a peace process is captured by the beneficiaries of a violent status quo, it can become an instrument for perpetuating conflict through other means. It challenges scholars and practitioners to look ‘beyond the signatory’ to analyse the subversive logics of adaptation employed by political elites. Ultimately, sustainable peace in South Sudan, and in similar contexts, will not emerge from another revised deadline or reconfigured power-sharing formula. It will require a far more confrontational, and internationally supported, project of fundamentally transforming the state from a resource into a resource for its citizens—a task for which the R-ARCSS, in its current trajectory, appears increasingly inadequate.

Contributions

This analysis makes a distinct contribution by synthesising the implementation challenges of the 2018 Revitalised Peace Agreement between 2021 and 2025, moving beyond theoretical frameworks to examine on-the-ground political realities. It provides a timely, evidence-based assessment of how elite bargaining and subnational conflicts have perpetuated cycles of violence despite the formal peace architecture. The study offers a critical scholarly intervention by integrating local governance dynamics with national-level analysis, thereby proposing more nuanced indicators for measuring sustainable peace. Its findings are intended to inform both academic debates in African peace and conflict studies and the strategic planning of regional and international actors engaged in the peace process.