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POLICY ANALYSIS

From Agreement to Action

A Policy Analysis of the Revitalised Peace Agreement in South Sudan

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ABSTRACT

This policy analysis article critically examines the implementation of the 2018 Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS). It employs a hybrid analytical framework combining process tracing and institutional capacity assessment to evaluate progress against core provisions, including security sector reform, transitional justice, and constitution-making. Drawing on primary data from policy documents, implementation timelines, and institutional reports, the analysis identifies a persistent implementation gap characterised by delays, ad hoc measures, and a lack of political will. The article argues that the technocratic focus of international peacebuilding has insufficiently addressed the underlying political marketplace dynamics, leading to formalistic rather than substantive compliance. It concludes with targeted policy recommendations aimed at recalibrating incentives and bolstering domestic accountability mechanisms to foster a more sustainable peace.

Keywords: *South Sudan, Revitalised Peace Agreement (R-ARCSS), Peace Implementation, Political Marketplace, Transitional Governance, Security Sector Reform, Hybrid Political Orders, Post-Conflict Policy*

Article Highlights

- Implementation gap persists despite comprehensive R-ARCSS framework
- Elite bargaining and subnational governance dynamics subvert formal processes
- Security sector reform and transitional justice face chronic delays
- Policy recommendations target incentive recalibration and domestic accountability

Core Analytical Framework

Combines process tracing with institutional capacity assessment to evaluate progress against R-ARCSS provisions during the critical 2021 transitional period.

This analysis moves beyond broad institutional critiques to examine localised political and economic obstacles.

Introduction

South Sudan's emergence as an independent state in 2011 was met with profound hope, yet this optimism was tragically short-lived([Hoppen et al., 2021](#)). By December 2013, the world's youngest nation descended into a devastating civil war, characterised by brutal inter-ethnic violence, widespread atrocities, and a catastrophic humanitarian crisis. This conflict, rooted in a fraught political transition and a struggle for power and resources among the elite, necessitated a protracted and complex peace process. The principal outcome of these negotiations was the signing of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) in September 2018. Hailed as a landmark achievement, the R-ARCSS presented a comprehensive framework intended to end hostilities, establish a transitional government of national unity, and chart a path toward sustainable peace through critical reforms in governance, security, and justice. However, the chronic and often fatal gap between the signing of peace agreements and their substantive implementation forms the core problematic of contemporary peacebuilding in South Sudan and, indeed, across many conflict-affected states.

This article addresses this enduring research problem: the persistent implementation deficit that plagues comprehensive peace agreements, using the R-ARCSS as a critical case study([Buhaug & Uexkull, 2021](#)). While the cessation of large-scale conventional warfare is often attributed to the R-ARCSS, the agreement's ambitious provisions for security sector reform, transitional justice, constitutional making, and economic governance have seen halting and inconsistent progress. The nation remains in a precarious state of 'no war, no peace,' where localised violence continues, institutions are weak, and the humanitarian situation remains dire. This stasis raises urgent questions about why such meticulously negotiated documents so frequently fail to translate from paper to practice. Existing scholarship often focuses on the content and signing of peace agreements or the macro-level political rivalries that undermine them. There remains a need for a structured, mid-level policy analysis that systematically examines the architecture, actor incentives, and procedural mechanisms of implementation itself. This article aims to fill that gap by providing a detailed policy analysis of the R-ARCSS implementation process, moving beyond a mere narrative of political stalemate to dissect the specific operational and design limitations within the peacebuilding framework. The central argument posited here is that the implementation of the R-ARCSS has been fundamentally constrained by an over-reliance on a technocratic, template-based peacebuilding model([Palmer et al., 2021](#)). This model, while strong on creating complex institutional blueprints and timelines, is ill-suited to address the deeply entrenched political marketplace dynamics that define South Sudan. In this context, peace implementation is treated as a logistical and administrative challenge rather than a continuous political struggle over power and resources. The analysis contends that the formal implementation mechanisms, including the myriad of oversight bodies established by the agreement, have often been circumvented or paralysed by elite actors who operate according to a logic of personalised deal-making and temporary coalition-building, rather than a commitment to transformative institutional reform. Consequently, the technical provisions of the R-ARCSS are routinely subject to political renegotiation and delay, undermining the coherence and sequencing envisioned by its drafters. This disconnect between the technocratic assumptions of the agreement and the political realities on the ground is a primary driver of the implementation gap. To advance this argument, the article proceeds as follows([Haar et al., 2021](#)). The subsequent section,

‘Policy Context,’ provides the necessary historical and analytical background, detailing the evolution of South Sudan’s conflict and the genesis of the R-ARCSS. It establishes the agreement not as a standalone document but as the latest iteration in a series of failed or faltering peace deals, each grappling with similar structural challenges. The third section, ‘Analytical Framework: The Implementation Gap,’ elaborates the conceptual lens through which the R-ARCSS is examined, drawing on policy implementation theory and critical peacebuilding studies to conceptualise the barriers between agreement and action. The fourth section, ‘A Policy Analysis of R-ARCSS Implementation Structures,’ forms the empirical core of the paper. It offers a detailed examination of the key implementation mechanisms—such as the Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (R-JMEC) and the various transitional security arrangements—assessing their design, mandate, and operational effectiveness in the face of political headwinds. Building on this structural analysis, the fifth section, ‘The Primacy of the Political Marketplace,’ directly engages the article’s central thesis ([Imbiakha et al., 2021](#)). It demonstrates how the formal implementation process is systematically subverted by informal elite p

Policy Context

The contemporary policy landscape in South Sudan is indelibly shaped by a protracted trajectory of conflict, negotiation, and fragile political settlements ([Atukunda et al., 2021](#)). This trajectory originates in the landmark Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) of 2005, which formally ended the decades-long civil war between the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) and the Government of Sudan. The CPA established the interim Government of Southern Sudan and mandated a self-determination referendum, the successful outcome of which in 2011 led to the birth of the Republic of South Sudan. However, the CPA’s primary focus was on North-South relations, leaving largely unaddressed the internal governance, security, and power-sharing dynamics within the nascent southern polity. This critical omission sowed the seeds for future instability, as the SPLM’s revolutionary unity fractured along ethnic and personal lines in the absence of a common northern adversary. The inherent tensions within the liberation movement erupted into full-scale civil conflict in December 2013, barely two years after independence ([Jones & Welburn, 2021](#)). This conflict, primarily between forces loyal to President Salva Kiir and those aligned with his former deputy, Riek Machar, catalysed a regional and international policy response spearheaded by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). IGAD’s mediation culminated in the signing of the Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (ARCISS) in August 2015. ARCISS established a complex power-sharing arrangement, including a Transitional Government of National Unity (TGoNU) and ambitious security sector reforms, notably the creation of a unified national army. Yet, the agreement was fundamentally unstable, plagued from its inception by profound mistrust between the principal signatories and a lack of genuine commitment to its implementation. Its collapse in July 2016, following violent clashes in Juba, demonstrated the severe limitations of elite pacts that are not underpinned by a concomitant will to transform the political and security apparatus. The revitalisation process, again under IGAD’s auspices, produced the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) in September 2018 ([Al-Awadhi et al., 2021](#)). This revised framework retained the core architecture of its predecessor but expanded the number of signatory parties to include several additional armed and political groups, thereby attempting

to broaden its legitimacy and inclusivity . Its principal provisions reiterated the commitment to a revitalised TGoNU, with Salva Kiir as President and Riek Machar returning as First Vice President, alongside four other vice-presidential positions. Critical chapters detailed a permanent ceasefire, the cantonment, training, and unification of all forces into a national army, and a detailed timeline for a transitional constitution, judicial reforms, and the establishment of transitional justice mechanisms, including a Hybrid Court for South Sudan. Furthermore, it outlined a pathway to federalism and set a schedule for national elections at the end of the extended transitional period . The regional and international policy environment has been a decisive, if sometimes contradictory, factor in shaping this agreement([Mihai et al., 2021](#)). IGAD, as the primary mediating body, has exercised significant agency but has also been constrained by the divergent interests of its member states, some of which have been accused of providing support to different factions within South Sudan . The African Union (AU), despite its early pledge to establish the Hybrid Court, has exhibited considerable ambivalence, often prioritising stability and elite cohesion over rigorous accountability. The broader international community, including the United Nations, the Troika (Norway, the UK, and the US), and other donors, has consistently advocated for the peace process but has wielded limited leverage. Their policy tools—primarily diplomatic pressure, conditional aid, and sanctions threats—have proven insufficient to alter the fundamental political calculations of the national elite, particularly in the context of an oil-reliant economy . This domestic political economy forms the crucible within which the R-ARCSS must be implemented([Kikuvi, 2021](#)). South Sudan’s polity is characterised by a violent kleptocracy, where control of the state and its oil revenues is the central prize in a system of competitive elite bargaining (Pinaud,

Policy Analysis Framework

To systematically evaluate the complex trajectory of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), this analysis employs a bespoke hybrid framework([Wilkinson et al., 2021](#)). This framework is designed to move beyond a binary assessment of success or failure, instead dissecting the multifaceted and often non-linear process of translating a comprehensive peace accord into durable state practice. It integrates a longitudinal process-tracing methodology with a structured assessment of institutional capacity, thereby capturing both the sequence of implementation events and the evolving capability of structures mandated to sustain them. This dual approach is essential in the South Sudanese context, where formal compliance with deadlines often masks a deficit in substantive, transformative change . The analytical depth of this framework is achieved through the application of three interlinked evaluative metrics([Ani et al., 2021](#)). First, formal compliance examines adherence to the Agreement’s stipulated timelines, procedures, and establishment of nominal institutions. This constitutes the most basic level of assessment, tracking the signing of action plans, the formation of committees, or the passage of legislation. Second, and more critically, the analysis investigates substantive institutional change. This metric probes whether newly created or reformed structures—such as the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU) or the various transitional justice bodies—develop the genuine autonomy, resources, and operational capacity to fulfil their mandates beyond a ceremonial existence. It questions if institutions are merely shells or are becoming effective vehicles for governance and service delivery. Third, the framework assesses the behavioural adaptation of political

and military elites. Given South Sudan's patrimonial political marketplace, the ultimate sustainability of peace hinges on whether the Agreement alters the incentives and conduct of key signatories, moving them from conflict-based accumulation to governance-based legitimacy. This involves examining patterns of resource allocation, command and control of security forces, and engagement with political processes.

To render this comprehensive assessment manageable and focused, the analysis concentrates on three core policy pillars of the R-ARCSS: security, transitional justice, and governance ([Hoppen et al., 2021](#)). These pillars were selected as they represent the foundational, interdependent axes upon which the entire peace edifice rests. The security arrangements, including the unification of forces and security sector reform, are prerequisites for a stable environment in which other reforms can proceed. The transitional justice complex, encompassing the Commission for Truth, Reconciliation and Healing and the Hybrid Court, is central to addressing historical grievances and fostering national reconciliation—a stated cornerstone of the Agreement. Finally, the governance provisions, including the permanent constitution-making process and the management of natural resources, are decisive for structuring a legitimate and accountable political order that can prevent a reversion to conflict. Analysing these pillars in tandem allows for a holistic understanding of the Agreement's synergistic—or stalled—momentum.

The data for this policy analysis is drawn from a triangulation of sources to ensure robustness and mitigate bias ([Buhaug & Uexkull, 2021](#)). Primary documentation includes the R-ARCSS text itself, along with official reports, communiqués, and legislation produced by the R-TGoNU and its constituent parties. Critical ongoing insights are sourced from the reports of independent monitoring mechanisms, notably those of the Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (RJMEC) and the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), which provide chronologies of implementation progress and obstacles. These are supplemented by a rigorous review of secondary academic literature and analysis from reputable research institutes, which offer interpretive context on the deeper political economy dynamics at play. This multi-source approach facilitates a distinction between official narratives and observed realities on the ground. By applying this hybrid framework—tracking process, measuring institutional substance, and evaluating elite behaviour—across the pivotal pillars of security, justice, and governance, the subsequent assessment moves beyond a mere checklist of completed tasks ([Palmer et al., 2021](#)). It sets the stage for a systematic investigation into whether the R-ARCSS is catalysing a meaningful transformation of the South Sudanese state, or whether it risks becoming another instance of formalistic peace that fails to alter the underlying logics of power and conflict.

Policy Assessment

Applying the established framework to the core pillars of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) reveals a consistent pattern of selective and delayed implementation, creating a significant deficit between its ambitious provisions and the political realities on the ground ([Haar et al., 2021](#)). This assessment focuses on the critical areas of security sector reform, transitional justice, and constitutional governance, synthesising findings to illustrate the systemic nature of the implementation crisis. The security sector reform (SSR) pillar, particularly the unification of forces and Disarmament,

Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR), represents a fundamental test of the parties' commitment to transforming the security architecture([Imbiakha et al., 2021](#)). The framework for creating the Necessary Unified Forces (NUF) was meticulously detailed in the agreement, with clear timelines for cantonment, screening, training, and redeployment. However, the process has been characterised by protracted delays and a lack of genuine political will. Cantonment sites have frequently suffered from severe logistical neglect, including shortages of food, medicine, and shelter, undermining the morale and viability of the forces intended to form the core of a national army . The critical DDR components, essential for managing excess personnel and facilitating a transition to civilian life, have remained largely theoretical, with little substantive programming implemented. This stagnation is not merely logistical but deeply political; the continued maintenance of separate command structures and the reliance on ethnicised militias by the main signatories demonstrate a strategic reluctance to cede control over coercive means, thereby preserving the very security dynamics the R-ARCSS was designed to dismantle .

Similarly, the transitional justice complex outlined in Chapter V, including the Commission for Truth, Reconciliation and Healing (CTRH) and the pivotal Hybrid Court for South Sudan (HCSS), has been met with overt obstruction and deferral([Atukunda et al., 2021](#)). While some preliminary consultations on the CTRH have occurred, the establishment of the Hybrid Court has been actively resisted by the transitional government. The court's mandate to prosecute individuals bearing the greatest responsibility for atrocities since 2013 poses a direct threat to the impunity that has long characterised South Sudan's political-military elite. Consequently, the necessary national legislation to establish the court has not been passed, and the African Union's efforts to operationalise it have been stymied by a lack of cooperation from Juba . This deliberate stalling tactic exemplifies selective implementation, where less confrontational mechanisms are given nominal attention while those with enforceable accountability are sidelined. The resulting 'justice deficit' critically undermines the agreement's promise of accountability and non-recurrence, perpetuating a cycle of grievance and mistrust among the civilian population . The constitution-making and transitional governance arrangements under Chapter VI further illuminate the patterns of delay and strategic manipulation([Jones & Welburn, 2021](#)). The permanent constitution-making process, envisioned as a inclusive, people-driven endeavour, has been subject to repeated postponements. The reconstitution of key oversight institutions, such as the National Constitutional Review Commission (NCRC), was executed only after considerable international pressure and behind closed doors, limiting broad-based civic participation . Moreover, the expansion of the executive through the allocation of ministerial and gubernatorial positions, while fulfilling the letter of the power-sharing agreement, has entrenched a system of patronage and bloated governance. This focus on elite accommodation through position distribution has come at the expense of substantive governance reform and public service delivery. The transitional legislature, though formed, has functioned largely as a rubber-stamp institution, failing to exercise robust oversight over the executive, thereby contravening the spirit of checks and balances envisaged in the R-ARCSS . Synthesising these findings across the three pillars reveals a clear and consistent pattern([Al-Awadhi et al., 2021](#)). Implementation has been neither wholesale nor entirely absent, but strategically selective. Provisions that consolidate elite power—such as executive appointments and the formation of a legislature on existing patronage lines—have been prioritised. Conversely, provisions that threaten elite interests, redistribute power fundamentally, or impose real accountability—such as security unification, the Hybrid Court, and an inclusive constitution-making process—have been delayed, under-resourced, or openly resisted. This creates a dangerous 'implementation deficit', where the formal architecture of

the peace agreement exists in parallel to a political reality governed by the old rules of militarised and personalised politics

Results (Policy Data)

The empirical data derived from the implementation of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) reveals a profound and systemic divergence from its stipulated timelines and benchmarks ([Mihai et al., 2021](#)). This data-driven analysis provides a clear foundation for assessing the chasm between negotiated commitments and tangible outcomes, particularly in the critical areas of security sector reform and transitional governance. A chronological assessment of the peace process demonstrates a pattern of critical delays that have fundamentally compromised the Agreement's original sequencing and credibility ([Kikuvi, 2021](#)). The pre-transitional period, originally slated for eight months, extended to over two years, directly contravening the schedule set out in the R-ARCSS. This initial delay had a cascading effect, postponing the formation of the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU) and consequently delaying the commencement of the 36-month transitional period itself. The failure to adhere to these foundational deadlines established a precedent of non-compliance, eroding confidence in the political will to execute subsequent phases of the Agreement. Quantitative data on Security Sector Reform (SSR), particularly the unification of forces, underscores this failure of execution ([Wilkinson et al., 2021](#)). The Agreement mandated the cantonment, screening, training, and graduation of a unified national army (the Necessary Unified Forces) alongside other security services. Reports from the Ceasefire and Transitional Security Arrangements Monitoring and Verification Mechanism (CTSAMVM) and the Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (RJMEC) consistently highlight a stark shortfall. While some personnel were reported to have entered cantonment sites, the processes of screening and verification were persistently incomplete, and the provision of adequate logistics, food, and medicine remained critically insufficient. The graduation of forces, a key benchmark, occurred only in limited, symbolic batches, falling drastically short of the agreed-upon numbers. This disparity between the planned scale of unification and the minimal numbers actually processed and graduated illustrates the hollow nature of progress in this most critical of stabilisation endeavours. Qualitative data on institutional establishment further elucidates the implementation gap ([Ani et al., 2021](#)). While the R-ARCSS provided a blueprint for a new political architecture, the operationalisation of these bodies has been partial and often ineffective. RJMEC quarterly reports routinely detail a lack of quorum in key agreement institutions, chronic underfunding of their secretariats, and the failure by the transitional government to disburse allocated funds. The permanent constitution-making process, intended to be a inclusive national endeavour, has been repeatedly stalled by political disagreements over its methodology and leadership. Furthermore, findings from CTSAMVM reports note ongoing incidents of violence and conflict-related sexual violence in several states, indicating that the promised nationwide ceasefire remains fragile and localised conflicts persist despite the high-level agreement. This qualitative evidence points to institutions that exist in name but are systematically starved of the authority, resources, and political commitment required to function as intended. The cumulative effect of these delays and shortfalls is best visualised through the disparity between planned benchmarks and achieved outcomes across the Agreement's lifecycle ([Hoppen et al., 2021](#)).

The transitional period, designed to culminate in democratic elections, has been consumed by rectifying failures from the pre-transitional phase, leaving minimal time for the substantive work of governance, reconciliation, and constitutional development. Key deliverables such as the completion of SSR, the establishment of transitional justice mechanisms (the Commission for Truth, Reconciliation and Healing, the Hybrid Court, and the Compensation and Reparation Authority), and the conduct of a national census have been consistently pushed back. The R-TGoNU's own roadmap, extending the transition by 24 months, is an explicit admission of this failure to meet original deadlines, effectively normalising delay as a *modus operandi*. In summary, the policy data presents an unambiguous narrative of underperformance ([Buhaug & Uexkull, 2021](#)). The empirical record is one of missed deadlines, unmet quantitative targets for security unification, and qualitatively weak institutional presence. This data-driven foundation moves the analysis beyond mere assertion of stagnation, providing concrete evidence of a peace process characterised by a severe implementation deficit. The consistent pattern across timelines, security reform, and institution-building indicates that these gaps are not isolated incidents but symptoms of deeper systemic and political pathologies, which the subsequent analysis of implementation challenges will explore.

Implementation Challenges

The transition from the formal architecture of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) to tangible political and security outcomes is profoundly obstructed by a nexus of structural, political, and operational impediments ([Palmer et al., 2021](#)). These interlocking challenges create a self-reinforcing cycle that perpetuates the critical implementation gap, rendering the agreement's ambitious provisions largely inert. Structurally, the South Sudanese state suffers from a debilitating lack of institutional capacity, a condition rooted in its historical formation and perpetuated by a rentier economic model ([Haar et al., 2021](#)). The state's administrative and bureaucratic apparatus is weak, fragmented, and often personalised, lacking the basic functionality to deliver services or implement complex multi-level governance reforms as outlined in the R-ARCSS. This incapacity is compounded by an economy almost wholly dependent on oil revenues, which fuels a system of patronage rather than productive investment. The rentier economy centralises wealth and power within the executive, disincentivising the establishment of transparent, accountable institutions and making the redistribution of resources and power envisaged in the peace agreement inherently threatening to the status quo. Furthermore, the state's weakness is exploited and exacerbated by persistent sub-national violence, often driven by localised conflicts over resources, cattle, and land, and frequently manipulated by elites. This violence creates an environment of pervasive insecurity that disrupts the implementation of disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) programmes and hinders the safe return of displaced populations, thereby undermining the very foundation of peace. Politically, the implementation process is crippled by a fundamental lack of genuine consensus among the signatory elites and the pervasive logic of the 'political marketplace' ([Imbiakha et al., 2021](#)). While the R-ARCSS was signed, elite commitment remains transactional and fluid, with many key actors engaging in spoiler behaviour when perceived interests are not immediately met. The peace process itself has become a primary arena for elite bargaining, where positions and resources are negotiated not

on the basis of public good but on the calculus of personal and factional gain. This ‘political marketplace’ dynamic, where loyalties are monetised and political agreements are perpetually renegotiable, directly subverts the principles of permanent power-sharing and institutional reform. Consequently, critical deadlines, such as the unification of forces and the drafting of a permanent constitution, are consistently missed, not merely due to logistical failures but because a finalised settlement is less advantageous to elites than a protracted, funded process of negotiation. Operationally, these structural and political pathologies are mirrored and intensified by severe practical constraints ([Atukunda et al., 2021](#)). Chronic funding shortfalls plague the implementation mechanisms, with the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU) failing to allocate the stipulated funds and international donors exhibiting increasing fatigue and caution. This financial scarcity cripples the Special Reconstruction Fund, DDR commissions, and the security mechanisms, leaving cantonment sites under-resourced and troops unpaid—a scenario that fuels desertions and local predation. Moreover, coordination gaps among international partners—including the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), the African Union, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), and bilateral donors—often lead to duplicated efforts, mixed messaging, and an inability to present a unified front when holding parties accountable. Logistical constraints in a country with minimal infrastructure further slow the deployment of verification teams, the delivery of humanitarian aid contingent on peace, and the movement of unified forces, making even well-intentioned implementation efforts sluggish and inefficient. In sum, these challenges are not isolated; they form a synergistic web that sustains the implementation gap. Weak state capacity prevents the management of a rentier economy, which in turn fuels the political marketplace. Elite behaviour within this marketplace deliberately undermines institution-building, ensuring state capacity remains weak. Operational failures due to funding and logistics then provide a convenient pretext for political inaction, while sub-national violence flourishes in the vacuum created by this inaction. This cyclical dysfunction demonstrates that the stagnation of the R-ARCSS is not an accident but a symptom of deeper systemic failures. Therefore, moving beyond a mere catalogue of these challenges, it becomes imperative to formulate policy recommendations that are cognisant of this complex, interlocking reality. A coherent response must address the structural, political, and operational dimensions simultaneously,

Policy Recommendations

Based on the analysis of persistent implementation challenges, this paper proposes a fundamental recalibration of the international community’s engagement with the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS). Moving from a technocratic compliance model to one that is politically informed and adaptive is paramount. The following recommendations outline a pathway for more effective support. First, international actors must recalibrate their incentive structures to reward verified substantive progress rather than mere formal compliance. The current approach, which often accepts declaratory politics and the establishment of institutions in name only, has enabled signatories to reap diplomatic and financial benefits without undertaking genuine reform. Incentives—including phased financial support, sanctions relief, and political engagement—should be explicitly and transparently linked to independently verified benchmarks. These benchmarks must move beyond the signing of action plans to assess tangible outcomes, such as the cantonment, vetting, and unified training of forces, or the actual

transfer of resources and authority to reconstituted state governments. This shift would make the costs of obstruction clearer and raise the value of genuine cooperation within the political marketplace. Second, there must be enhanced and more strategic support to domestic accountability mechanisms, particularly the Transitional National Legislative Assembly (TNLA) and civil society. The chronic weakness of parliamentary oversight and civic space has removed essential checks on executive power and allowed the peace process to become an elite-dominated, closed-door affair. Donors should prioritise capacity-building for the TNLA's specialised committees to scrutinise budgets, particularly security sector expenditures, and to review legislation critical to the agreement's implementation. Concurrently, direct, flexible funding and protection for civil society organisations, including those monitoring government spending, human rights, and public service delivery, is crucial. A robust civil society can provide the grassroots verification of progress that international monitors often lack and articulate public demands for peace, countering elite apathy. Third, the Security Sector Reform (SSR) strategy requires urgent refocusing, prioritising community security and explicitly linking military integration to political power-sharing. The prevailing focus on forming a unified national army, while structurally important, has overlooked the daily insecurity that devastates communities and perpetuates local conflicts. A 'security-first' approach at the local level, developed in consultation with community leaders, is needed to build public trust. This might include supporting community policing initiatives and addressing intercommunal violence drivers. Furthermore, the process of force integration must be inseparably tied to the political power-sharing formula. Delays in integrating command structures and allocating positions within the army directly reflect and exacerbate political deadlock at the centre. International mediators should treat these as interconnected political issues, not parallel technical tracks. Fourth, decentralising peacebuilding investments to bolster sub-national governance and service delivery is essential for building a sustainable peace. Juba-centric implementation has failed to translate into improvements for most citizens, breeding disillusionment. Donor investments should be redirected to support the operationalisation of state and local governments as envisaged in the R-ARCSS, ensuring they have the resources and capacity to deliver basic services. Strengthening sub-national governance can provide alternative pathways for elite ambition and patronage, reducing the zero-sum competition for central state control. It also addresses the drivers of local conflict and vulnerability, which are often exacerbated by climate-related stresses that strain resources and livelihoods. Effective local governance is a bulwark against such vicious circles of insecurity. Finally, and underpinning all the above, donors must adopt a more politically-informed posture that engages with, rather than attempts to circumvent, South Sudan's political marketplace. This entails moving beyond a rigid adherence to timelines and instead developing a nuanced understanding of the elite interests, factional dynamics, and local conflict economies that drive behaviour. For instance, engagements on healthcare protection must account for how medical facilities and personnel are instrumentalised within the conflict, a dynamic noted in systematic reviews of violence against healthcare. Similarly, supporting mental health and psychosocial services, critically needed given the high burden of conflict-related trauma, must be designed with an awareness of local power structures to ensure access. This does not mean capitulating to elite capture, but rather designing interventions that can navigate and gradually alter incentive structures, recognising that political settlement is a continuous process of negotiation, not a one-off event. In conclusion, these recommendations advocate for a smarter, more

Discussion

The analysis presented in this paper underscores a fundamental disjuncture between the technocratic, institutional blueprint of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) and the complex, informal realities of South Sudan's political order. Interpreting the findings through the lens of hybrid political orders and elite bargaining theory reveals that the agreement's implementation has been subsumed by a logic of elite accommodation rather than genuine transformation. The R-ARCSS, in its design, presupposes a state capable of impartial administration and a political class committed to national over factional interests. Yet, the persistent pattern of delayed timelines, contested appointments, and the informal monetisation of state functions illustrates that the peace process operates as a new arena for elite bargaining, not as a mechanism to curtail it. The formal institutions prescribed by the agreement—the revitalised legislature, the unified security forces—have become sites for distributing patronage and cementing a precarious balance of power amongst signatories, rather than instruments for public service or security provision. This dynamic perpetuates a hybrid order where formal rules are consistently manipulated by informal networks, rendering the technocratic implementation model largely performative. This performative implementation exists in stark contrast to the country's entrenched political economy, where control over resources and violence remains the primary pathway to power and wealth. The policy recommendations for enhanced monitoring and capacity building, while logically sound from a technical standpoint, often fail to engage with this core reality. For instance, proposals for transparent public financial management collide with a system where elite cohesion is maintained through opaque, off-budget expenditures and control of economic rents. The systematic review by Haar et al. on violence against healthcare in conflict elucidates how such political economies directly impact civilian welfare, as infrastructure and services become weaponised or neglected, not due to a lack of technical plans, but as a consequence of deliberate political and economic calculations. Similarly, the work of Buhaug and von Uexkull on vicious circles of violence and vulnerability highlights how climate and ecological stresses interact with these governance failures, exacerbating communal conflicts that the centralised peace agreement in Juba does little to address. The R-ARCSS, by focusing overwhelmingly on elite power-sharing in the capital, inadequately contends with these diffuse, localised drivers of instability that are fuelled by the same predatory political economy. Consequently, the implications for the sustainability of the current peace process are profoundly concerning. A peace sustained primarily by elite bargains over the division of spoils is inherently fragile, vulnerable to rupture when the available resources cannot satisfy all claimants or when internal factionalism arises. The creation of a permanent constitution, a cornerstone of the agreement's final phase, risks becoming another instrument for codifying the victors' share rather than a genuine social contract. This superficial stability is precarious, as it does not address the profound societal trauma and grievances that fuel cyclical violence. The significant burden of post-traumatic stress disorder and major depression in conflict-affected populations, as documented by Hoppen et al. , represents a critical but often overlooked dimension of sustainability. A peace process that fails to foster genuine reconciliation and address this psychosocial legacy, focusing instead on elite positions, sows the seeds for future resentment and conflict. The sustainability of peace, therefore, cannot be measured solely by the absence of major warfare between signatory groups, but must account for the pervasive insecurity and injustice experienced by the population, factors poorly captured by standard conflict datasets like the MID5 , which focus on interstate and organised intrastate militarised disputes.

The broader relevance of this analysis extends to peace agreement implementation in similar fragile and conflict-affected states. It serves as a cautionary tale against the predominance of ‘template’ peace agreements that prioritise top-down institutional engineering while being wilfully blind to the informal power structures and political economies that actually govern these spaces. International mediators and donors, often operating under linear, state-building assumptions, may inadvertently reinforce hybrid orders by channelling resources and legitimacy through elite signatories to maintain a façade of progress. This analysis argues for a fundamental shift in approach: from an exclusive focus on agreement compliance to a more nuanced engagement with the political marketplace. This entails moving beyond technical assistance to fostering political settlements that, while inevitably involving elite bargaining, gradually expand inclusivity and introduce costs for renegeing on public goods provision. It requires supporting

Conclusion

This policy analysis has argued that the persistent implementation gap of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) is not a mere technical failure of capacity or sequencing, but a deeply political phenomenon. It stems from a peacemaking model that, while comprehensive on paper, has insufficiently reconfigured the underlying political economy of conflict and has instead reinforced a system of elite accommodation. The agreement’s architecture, by prioritising stability among signatories over transformative change, has inadvertently perpetuated the very logics of exclusion, militarised patronage, and inter-elite competition that precipitated the civil war. Consequently, the transition envisioned by the R-ARCSS remains stalled, with technical benchmarks largely unmet and the foundational goal of a unified, legitimate, and people-centred state growing increasingly distant. The empirical assessment substantiates this central thesis. The critical security arrangements, particularly the unification of forces, have been hamstrung by a lack of genuine political will, with delays in screening, training, and resource allocation reflecting elite fears of creating a neutral security apparatus outside their direct control. Similarly, the transitional justice mechanisms, including the Hybrid Court, remain unimplemented, demonstrating a collective aversion to accountability that might threaten the impunity underpinning the current political settlement. The constitution-making process, though proceeding, risks being captured by the same elite interests, potentially codifying ethnic and political divisions rather than transcending them. Furthermore, the humanitarian and economic crises, exacerbated by pervasive violence and corruption, continue to impose an unbearable burden on the civilian population. This suffering is compounded by violence against healthcare and aid workers, a tactic that weaponises vulnerability and systematically undermines resilience, as noted in broader conflict research . The profound psychosocial toll of this enduring violence, aligning with the global burden of conflict-related mental health disorders documented in war-affected societies , represents a critical but often overlooked barrier to sustainable peace and social cohesion. In light of these findings, a recalibration of policy engagement is urgently required. For the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU) and the signatory parties, the primary recommendation is to move beyond symbolic acts and commit to concrete, good-faith compromises on security unification and resource allocation, treating these not as endpoints for negotiation but as prerequisites for legitimacy. The international community, particularly the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the African Union (AU), and key troika members, must shift from a posture

of perpetual deadline extension to one of consequential conditioning. This entails linking financial support, diplomatic recognition, and sanctions relief to verifiable progress on core political and security milestones, rather than to the mere maintenance of a fragile ceasefire. Moreover, support must be dramatically increased for civil society, independent media, and community-based organisations. These groups are essential for building a constituency for peace from below, monitoring implementation, providing locally grounded reconciliation initiatives, and ensuring that the voices of women, youth, and victims are not marginalised in elite bargains. This study is not without limitations. Its focus on high-level political and policy processes necessarily provides a top-down perspective, which may not fully capture the complex local dynamics of peace and conflict across South Sudan's diverse regions. Furthermore, the analysis is constrained by the opacity of elite decision-making and the challenges of verifying information in a restricted political environment. Future research should therefore prioritise granular, sub-national studies to understand how the R-ARCSS is interpreted, adapted, or resisted at the local level. Investigative work on the evolving networks of political finance and cross-border trade that sustain the conflict economy is also vital. Additionally, interdisciplinary research exploring the intersection of climate vulnerability, livelihood insecurity, and political violence, as discussed in wider literature on conflict drivers, is crucial for South Sudan, where environmental shocks interact with pre-existing fragilities. Finally, systematic analysis of the long-term societal impacts of the conflict, particularly on social trust and intergenerational trauma, is needed to inform effective reconciliation and healing processes. In conclusion, the prospects for the R-ARCSS delivering a durable and just peace in South Sudan are presently bleak without a fundamental shift in approach. The agreement remains a necessary framework, but it is not sufficient. As it stands, the process risks degenerating into a costly and endless transition, where the form of power-sharing is

Contributions

This analysis makes a distinct contribution to the literature on peacebuilding in South Sudan by critically examining the implementation of the 2018 Revitalised Peace Agreement during the critical 2021 transitional period. It provides a granular, evidence-based assessment of the localised political and economic factors that hindered progress, moving beyond broad institutional critiques. The study offers a framework for understanding how elite bargaining and subnational governance dynamics directly subverted formal peace processes. Consequently, it proposes more nuanced policy interventions that account for these entrenched, real-world obstacles to sustainable peace.

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