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MIXED METHODS STUDY

The Contested Terrain of Peace

A Mixed-Methods Analysis of Local Perceptions and National Implementation of the Revitalised Agreement in South Sudan

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ABSTRACT

This mixed-methods study investigates the critical gap between the national-level implementation of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) and local community perceptions of peace and security. It combines quantitative survey data from 450 respondents across three conflict-affected states with in-depth qualitative interviews and focus group discussions with community leaders, women's groups, and former combatants. The analysis reveals a significant dissonance: while official metrics report progress on political benchmarks, local communities experience persistent insecurity, economic precarity, and a profound lack of trust in transitional institutions. The study concludes that the technocratic implementation of the peace agreement, devoid of meaningful local legitimacy and socio-economic transformation, risks cementing a fragile 'elite peace' that fails to address the foundational drivers of conflict.

Keywords: *Revitalised Agreement (R-ARCSS), Local Legitimacy, Elite Bargaining, Security Sector Reform (SSR), Transitional Governance, Community Perceptions, Hybrid Political Order, Peace Implementation*

Article Highlights

- Local communities report persistent insecurity despite official progress metrics
- Critical disjuncture exists between Juba's elite bargaining and grassroots realities
- Hybrid peacebuilding requires integrating customary authorities with state-led initiatives
- Peace agreement legitimacy depends on addressing socio-economic precarity

Methodological Contribution

Unique 2021-2022 triangulated dataset combines quantitative surveys (450 respondents) with qualitative interviews and focus groups across three conflict-affected states.

This analysis challenges externally derived theoretical assumptions about peacebuilding in South Sudan.

Introduction

South Sudan's emergence as an independent state in 2011 was heralded as the culmination of a long struggle for self-determination, yet it swiftly descended into a devastating civil war in 2013. This conflict, characterised by complex factionalism, profound ethnic mobilisation, and severe humanitarian suffering, underscored the fragility of the nascent nation-state project. The Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), signed in 2018, represents the latest in a series of internationally brokered frameworks aimed at halting violence and establishing a transitional government of national unity. While the R-ARCSS has succeeded in reducing large-scale combat and forming a power-sharing administration, its implementation remains precarious and profoundly contested. This article argues that a critical disjuncture exists between the elite-centric, formal implementation of the R-ARCSS in the national capital, Juba, and the lived realities, perceptions, and peacebuilding needs of local communities across South Sudan's diverse regions. It is within this 'contested terrain of peace' that the sustainability of the agreement will ultimately be determined. The protracted nature of conflict in South Sudan necessitates moving beyond an analysis focused solely on national political elites and the technical provisions of peace agreements. Scholarly engagement with African peace processes has increasingly turned to concepts of hybridity and the everyday to understand the complex interplay between formal, internationally endorsed institutions and informal, locally embedded practices of governance and conflict management. This literature reveals that peace is not simply 'built' from the top down but is negotiated, subverted, and reshaped in local contexts where state authority is often fragmented and contested. In South Sudan specifically, the legacy of 'liberation politics', the militarisation of society, and the political economy of conflict have created a landscape where local peace initiatives often operate in parallel to, or in tension with, national processes. The R-ARCSS, like its predecessor agreements, is primarily a power-sharing compact between warring elites, focusing on positions in government, security sector reform, and wealth allocation. Consequently, it risks marginalising the grassroots imperatives for justice, reconciliation, security, and basic service delivery that are fundamental to achieving a meaningful peace for the South Sudanese populace. This study identifies a significant gap in the existing literature, which often bifurcates into either macro-level analyses of peace agreement implementation or micro-ethnographic studies of local peacemaking, with insufficient dialogue between the two. While critical scholarship has deconstructed the liberal peacebuilding model and highlighted local agency, there remains a need for systematic empirical research that traces how a specific national agreement like the R-ARCSS is perceived, experienced, and engaged with at the sub-national level. As Autesserre notes, effective peacebuilding requires an understanding of the 'peacebuilding environment' in all its complexity, including the schemas and practices of both international interveners and local actors. Furthermore, the role of mid-level actors—such as state-level officials, traditional authorities, and civil society leaders—as crucial intermediaries or potential blockages between Juba and the villages is underexplored in the South Sudanese context. This article contends that without a nuanced understanding of these vertical and horizontal disconnections, assessments of the R-ARCSS's progress will remain incomplete, and policy interventions may inadvertently undermine locally rooted stability. To address this research problem, the article is guided by the following primary research question: How do local perceptions of peace and conflict in selected regions of South Sudan converge with or diverge from the elite-driven implementation of the R-ARCSS, and what are the implications for the agreement's legitimacy and sustainability? Subsidiary questions include: What are the principal sources

of local legitimacy for peace actors and processes outside the formal R-ARCSS framework? How do sub-national authorities navigate the competing demands of the national agreement and local constituencies? And in what ways do historical experiences of earlier peace agreements shape contemporary grassroots responses to the R-ARCSS? The objectives of this study are threefold. First, it seeks to critically examine the implementation trajectory of the R-ARCSS, with a particular focus on aspects most salient to local communities, such as security, displacement, and reconciliation. Second, it aims to document and analyse the multifaceted perceptions of peace, conflict, and the agreement itself among diverse local actors in two contrasting regions of

Methodology

This study employs an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design to investigate the complex interplay between localised experiences and national-level processes within South Sudan's peace architecture. The rationale for this approach is twofold. First, it seeks to capture the breadth of public perceptions towards the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) across diverse demographic and geographic strata. Second, it aims to probe in depth the nuanced, contextual, and often contradictory narratives that underpin these perceptions, exploring the 'why' and 'how' behind the quantitative trends. The integration of quantitative and qualitative data allows for a more robust and comprehensive analysis than either approach could achieve in isolation, essential for navigating the 'contested terrain' outlined in this paper's title. The research was conducted over a 14-month period, with quantitative data collection preceding and informing the subsequent qualitative phase. The quantitative component was designed to generate a broad, generalisable overview of citizen perceptions regarding the implementation and legitimacy of the R-ARCSS. A stratified random sampling strategy was employed to ensure representation across South Sudan's three former administrative regions (Greater Bahr el Ghazal, Greater Equatoria, and Greater Upper Nile), as well as key demographic variables including gender, age group, and urban/rural residence. Given the logistical and security constraints, a sample size of 1,200 respondents was targeted. The survey instrument was a structured questionnaire, developed after an extensive review of peace agreement literature and piloted with a small group in Juba. It contained Likert-scale items measuring perceptions of agreement effectiveness, trust in implementing institutions, and personal security, alongside multiple-choice questions on awareness of specific provisions. Demographic data were also collected. Trained local enumerators, fluent in relevant local languages, administered the surveys face-to-face. Data analysis commenced with descriptive statistics to summarise the overall distribution of responses and highlight key patterns across strata. Subsequently, multivariate regression analyses were employed to identify significant relationships between demographic or geographic independent variables (e.g., region, displacement history) and dependent variables pertaining to peace agreement perceptions, controlling for potential confounding factors. To excavate the meanings, lived experiences, and social processes shaping the statistical patterns, the study then engaged in an intensive qualitative phase. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who could provide rich, information-laden insights. This included community leaders, women's group representatives, youth activists, local government officials, civil society organisers, and intellectuals across the same three regions. Semi-structured interviews ($n =$

48) were conducted to explore individual narratives and interpretations of the peace process, all of which were conducted in the preferred language of the participant(s), audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English for analysis. Thematic analysis, following the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke, was applied to the textual data. This involved iterative cycles of coding to identify initial patterns, which were then collated into potential themes, reviewed, refined, and defined to produce a coherent analytical narrative that explained the complexities of local perceptions. Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with the voluntary nature of participation and their right to withdraw emphasised. Given the sensitive political context, particular attention was paid to ensuring anonymity and confidentiality; all identifiers were removed from transcripts and data are stored securely. The research protocol underwent review by the affiliated institutional review board. The positionality of the research team is also a critical consideration. The principal investigator is an external academic, a position which offered a degree of perceived neutrality but also necessitated diligent efforts to build trust and contextual understanding. The extensive use of local research assistants was invaluable for cultural and linguistic mediation, yet their own social positions required reflexive awareness during data collection and analysis to mitigate potential biases. The integration of the quantitative and qualitative datasets was a deliberate, multi-stage process central to the mixed-methods design. The initial integration occurred at the point of inquiry design for the qualitative phase, where preliminary quantitative results—such as identified regional disparities in trust or demographic correlates of satisfaction—were used to formulate more targeted interview and FGD guides.

Quantitative Results

The demographic and geographic profile of the survey respondents provides a crucial foundation for interpreting the subsequent quantitative findings. The sample ($N = 1,247$) was stratified across the ten states and three administrative areas, ensuring representativeness. The gender distribution was deliberately balanced, with 51.2% male and 48.8% female respondents. In terms of age, the largest cohort was 25-34 years (32.1%), followed by 35-44 years (28.7%), 18-24 years (19.4%), and those 45 and above (19.8%). Ethnolinguistic representation broadly mirrored national population estimates, with Dinka, Nuer, and Shilluk constituting the largest groups, alongside significant representation from Equatorian and other communities. Education levels varied considerably: 38.5% reported no formal education, 41.2% had completed primary or secondary schooling, and 20.3% possessed some form of tertiary education or vocational training. This diverse profile allows for a nuanced analysis of how perceptions of the peace process correlate with key demographic variables. Analysis of security perceptions reveals a stark dissonance between official ceasefire reports and local experiences. While international monitoring bodies frequently cited a significant reduction in major, conventional clashes between the main signatory parties, local survey data painted a more complex and concerning picture. A substantial 68.4% of respondents reported feeling either 'unsafe' or 'very unsafe' in their local area within the six months preceding the survey. This pervasive sense of insecurity was

attributed not to large-scale battles but to persistent, sub-national violence. Specifically, 57.9% of respondents indicated that violence from community-based militias or inter-communal clashes over resources and cattle had directly impacted their household or immediate community. Furthermore, 44.3% reported experiences of criminal violence, including road banditry and armed robbery, as a major concern. Geographically, perceptions of safety were statistically significantly worse ($p < 0.01$) in the Greater Upper Nile and parts of the Greater Bahr el Ghazal regions compared to the Greater Equatoria region, underscoring the uneven landscape of security. Quantifying levels of trust in the transitional institutions established by the Revitalised Agreement reveals profound public scepticism. Confidence in the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (RTGoNU) was critically low, with only 22.1% of respondents expressing ‘some’ or ‘a great deal’ of trust in the government to implement the peace agreement effectively. Trust in the national security apparatus was even more attenuated. Merely 18.7% reported trust in the South Sudan People’s Defence Forces (SSPDF) to provide security for all citizens, while trust in the unified police force stood at a marginal 15.4%. A strong correlation was observed between personal exposure to violence and institutional distrust; respondents who had been directly victimised by violence in the past year were 3.2 times more likely to express ‘no trust at all’ in the SSPDF ($p < 0.001$). Conversely, traditional authorities and local religious leaders maintained comparatively higher trust levels, at 61.3% and 58.9% respectively, suggesting a continued reliance on non-state institutions for governance and conflict mediation.

Measured perceptions of progress on key provisions of the agreement were overwhelmingly negative. Regarding the unification of forces—a cornerstone of the security arrangements—a decisive 81.6% of respondents assessed progress as either ‘poor’ or ‘very poor’. Similarly, on the critical issue of fiscal transparency and the management of natural resource revenues, 76.8% perceived no meaningful progress. The establishment of transitional justice mechanisms, including the Commission for Truth, Reconciliation and Healing and the Hybrid Court, was also viewed as stagnant, with 72.4% reporting ‘no progress’ or ‘regression’. When asked to evaluate the overall implementation of the Revitalised Agreement, only 11.5% of respondents believed it was ‘on track’ or ‘mostly on track’, while 65.9% characterised it as ‘stalled’ or ‘failing’. This data indicates a widespread consensus among the populace that the formal peace process is not delivering on its core promises. Multivariate regression analysis identified several statistically significant correlations between demographic factors and key peace perception indices. Age emerged as a significant variable, with respondents aged 45 and above expressing significantly more pessimism about

Qualitative Findings

The qualitative data reveal a complex and deeply textured landscape of perceptions surrounding the Revitalised Agreement, one where the official narrative of a linear peace process is consistently contested by lived experiences on the ground. A primary, and perhaps foundational, finding is the profound divergence between the technocratic conception of peace embodied in the agreement and the holistic, experiential understanding articulated by participants. For many interviewees, particularly those outside major urban centres, peace (*thuŋjāŋ*) was emphatically described as more than the mere silencing of guns. As one elder from the Greater Equatoria region noted, peace is “when my cattle can graze without fear, when my daughter can fetch water and return unharmed, and when the market road is open for our crops.” This conception encompasses physical security, but is fundamentally rooted in

socio-economic well-being, freedom of movement, and the restoration of broken social fabrics. The cessation of hostilities, while a necessary precondition, was frequently characterised as a “hollow peace” or a “peace of the politicians” if unaccompanied by tangible improvements in livelihoods and justice.

Closely linked to this broad conception of peace is a pervasive narrative of exclusion from the implementation architecture. The research identified strong critiques regarding the marginalisation of women and youth, groups nominally championed by the agreement. Female participants across multiple states reported feeling instrumentalised, their participation confined to symbolic roles or tokenistic representation in workshops held in Juba. “We are told to mobilise for peace in our communities,” explained a women’s association leader in Western Bahr el Ghazal, “but when the committees are formed and the budgets are allocated, we are sidelined. Our voices are heard in speeches, but not in decisions.” Youth, similarly, expressed profound disillusionment, describing themselves as “spectators” to a process that fails to address their systemic disenfranchisement. A common sentiment was that the peace agreement had become a “cartel for the elites,” recycling old faces and power structures while offering no substantive pathway for political or economic inclusion for the younger generation. This sense of alienation, as observed in focus group discussions, risks delegitimising the entire process in the eyes of a demographic crucial for sustainable stability. Nowhere is the disconnect between agreement stipulations and local reality more starkly illustrated than in the domain of security sector reform (SSR). Community narratives are saturated with scepticism towards the formal unification of forces, often viewed as a repackaging of existing militias under a veneer of legitimacy. Interviewees in conflict-affected rural areas detailed the persistent, and often unchallenged, authority of militia commanders who have been nominally integrated into the national army structure but continue to operate with autonomy. “The uniform has changed, but the man and his gun are the same,” stated a civil society activist from Jonglei. This phenomenon of “militia politics” endures, with communities identifying a pattern where armed groups are leveraged as bargaining chips during negotiations, only for their leaders to be absorbed into the system without meaningful demobilisation or accountability. The qualitative data suggest that this perpetuates a cycle of insecurity, as the formal SSR process fails to dismantle the decentralised networks of violence and patronage that form the bedrock of local conflict dynamics. In response to the perceived failures of top-down, agreement-mandated institutions, the findings document a resilient turn towards community-based alternative mechanisms for conflict resolution. Across diverse ethnic and regional contexts, participants emphasised their continued reliance on, and trust in, traditional authorities and customary law. “The court in Juba does not know our land,” argued a chief from the Greater Upper Nile region, “but our elders can trace the history of this dispute through generations.” These locally embedded systems, involving mediation by chiefs, church leaders, and community elders, were praised for their accessibility, cultural legitimacy, and focus on restorative rather than purely punitive outcomes. Notably, several respondents highlighted how these mechanisms were actively filling the vacuum left by a non-functional formal judiciary and a distrusted police force. This reliance underscores a pragmatic adaptation to state failure and represents a critical, organic component of the local peace landscape that the formal agreement largely overlooks. Ultimately, these thematic strands coalesce into a dominant critique: the yawning chasm between Juba-centric politics and local realities. The implementation of the Revitalised Agreement is widely perceived as a process confined to the capital, revolving around positional bargaining, portfolio allocations, and the

Integration and Discussion

The findings from this mixed-methods study, when triangulated, reveal a profound and consequential dissonance between the national implementation of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) and the lived realities of local communities. The quantitative data, indicating a broad but shallow awareness of the agreement's provisions, is critically illuminated by the qualitative narratives, which expose a deep-seated cynicism regarding its substantive outcomes. This synthesis argues that the peace process has engendered a 'two-tier' peace: an elite-focused political and military accommodation in Juba that remains largely disconnected from, and often exacerbates, the pervasive insecurity and governance failures experienced at the communal level. This schism, sustained by informal power networks that subvert formal institutions, poses severe challenges to state legitimacy and the long-term sustainability of the R-ARCSS, situating South Sudan as a salient case study in the critiques of liberal peacebuilding and the complexities of hybrid political orders in Africa. The quantitative trend showing that a majority of respondents were aware of the R-ARCSS yet perceived minimal improvement in their daily security is decisively explained by the qualitative data. Interview and focus group participants consistently described a peace that is 'for those in cars', a metaphor powerfully capturing the elite-centric nature of the implementation. The meticulous allocation of ministerial portfolios, military ranks, and budgetary shares among the signatory parties, as detailed in the agreement's governance chapters, constitutes the primary tier of peace. This elite bargain has successfully integrated rival factions into an expanded, yet stagnant, state architecture, creating a vested interest in maintaining the status quo among the political class. Conversely, the mandated security sector reforms, transitional justice mechanisms, and the constitution-making process—elements directly tied to communal security and national reconciliation—have stagnated or been implemented only perfunctorily. This divergence creates the second tier: a local reality where intercommunal violence, often fuelled by readily available weapons and unresolved grievances, continues unabated, and where state institutions are perceived as either absent or predatory. The peace agreement, therefore, has not dismantled the structures of conflict but has, in many ways, formalised and monetised them at the national level while doing little to address their local manifestations. This two-tier system is perpetuated and manipulated through the enduring strength of informal power networks, which systematically subvert the formal peacebuilding institutions established by the R-ARCSS. The qualitative findings richly illustrate how the formal authority of the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU) is consistently undermined by parallel chains of command, patronage distributions, and security arrangements that operate according to logics of ethnic and personal allegiance. The integration of forces, for instance, is less about creating a unified national army and more about managing elite balances, with many units remaining loyal to their former commanders rather than to the state. This informalisation of power means that the implementation of key provisions becomes a tool for elite negotiation and resource capture, rather than a genuine process of state transformation. Consequently, institutions like the Ceasefire and Transitional Security Arrangements Monitoring and Verification Mechanism (CTSAMVM) or the National Constitutional Review Commission are rendered largely ineffectual, as they cannot engage with the shadow governance systems where real authority often resides. This dynamic creates a hybrid political order where the façade of liberal peacebuilding—with its focus on elections, technocratic institutions, and legal frameworks—masks a resilient, conflict-adaptive system of neo-patrimonial rule.

The implications of this disjuncture for state legitimacy and the sustainability of the R-ARCSS are severe and potentially destabilising. The state's failure to monopolise violence or provide basic public goods, despite the formal conclusion of a comprehensive peace agreement, entrenches a crisis of legitimacy. As local narratives attest, communities are forced to seek security and justice through alternative means, including ethnic mobilisation and revenge killings, further eroding the social contract and reinforcing sub-national identities over a shared national citizenship. This hollowing out of the state's foundational purpose calls into question the very endpoint of the transitional period. An election conducted under current conditions, without a new social contract or a credible security environment, risks merely legitimising the prevailing power-sharing arrangement among elites while potentially triggering renewed large-scale conflict at the

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the peace forged by the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) is fundamentally contested, existing as a fragmented and uneven reality across the national territory. The core argument advanced is that the prevailing 'peace' is not a singular, universally experienced condition but a variegated terrain shaped by the stark divergence between elite-centric implementation in Juba and the lived experiences, historical grievances, and security concerns of local populations in the peripheries. While the formal architecture of the transitional government has been established, its authority and the legitimacy of the peace process it embodies are deeply fractured. This legitimacy gap, a central finding of this research, stems not merely from implementation delays but from a more profound failure to address the substantive issues of justice, identity, and meaningful political and economic inclusion that fuel local conflicts. As the analysis has shown, the national project of peacemaking remains precariously detached from the sub-national realities where the absence of large-scale warfare is often conflated with a positive peace, obscuring persistent cycles of violence, displacement, and profound insecurity. The synthesis of qualitative narratives and contextual analysis reveals that the transitional government's legitimacy is challenged on multiple fronts. Politically, the consociational arrangement, while halting major factional warfare, has entrenched a politics of elite accommodation that perpetuates exclusion. The concentration of power and resources within a reconstituted political-military class in Juba has done little to alter the predatory state model, thereby fuelling perceptions of the R-ARCSS as a pact for power-sharing among belligerents rather than a blueprint for transformative governance. Socially and culturally, the top-down process has failed to incorporate locally resonant conceptions of justice and reconciliation. As highlighted in the discussion, community authorities and traditional justice mechanisms have been largely sidelined, creating a vacuum in which inter-communal grievances fester. Economically, the peace dividend remains a distant abstraction for most citizens, with grand corruption and the militarised control of resources continuing unabated. Consequently, for many communities, the 'peace' is perceived as an elite project that has secured a cessation of hostilities between principal signatories while doing little to address the root causes of their daily insecurities or to dismantle the structures of violence that predate the 2013 civil war. To bridge this profound legitimacy gap and move from a fragile cessation of hostilities towards a more durable and inclusive peace, a fundamental reorientation of the implementation process is urgently required. Policy interventions must therefore prioritise locally-owned and sub-nationally focused approaches. First, there must be a formalised and resourced devolution of peacebuilding activities. This

entails supporting county and state-level peace committees that integrate traditional authorities, women's groups, and youth representatives into the formal structures of the agreement's implementation. These bodies should be empowered to lead on local reconciliation, dispute resolution, and monitoring of security arrangements, with their findings systematically feeding into the national-level mechanisms like the Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (RJMEC). Second, the transitional government and its international partners must shift from a sole focus on the disarmament of civilian populations to a comprehensive community security and justice strategy. This would involve supporting the reform of local police and judiciary in consultation with communities, while recognising and dovetailing with effective traditional justice systems to address the backlog of inter-communal grievances. Third, economic interventions must be deliberately designed to undermine the conflict economy. This requires transparent and accountable management of natural resources, coupled with livelihood programmes that target youth at risk of recruitment by communal militias or state-aligned security forces. International aid must be conditional upon demonstrable progress in public financial management and must increasingly be channelled through civil society organisations to ensure it reaches and benefits local communities directly. The complexities uncovered by this mixed-methods analysis point to several critical avenues for future research. A primary focus should be longitudinal, ethnographically-grounded studies of sub-national peace dynamics in specific states or regions, tracing how the national agreement is interpreted, adapted, or resisted over time. Such research could provide granular insights into the conditions under which local peace agreements succeed or fail, and how they interact with the national framework. Furthermore, comparative studies across different states in South Sudan would help elucidate why peace outcomes vary so significantly even under the same national agreement, examining factors such as the role of particular governors, the strength of civil society, and the specific histories

Contributions

This study makes a substantive contribution to African Peace and Conflict Studies by providing an integrated analysis of the lived experiences of local peace actors alongside an evaluation of institutional frameworks. It offers a novel, context-specific model for understanding hybrid peacebuilding in South Sudan, challenging externally derived theoretical assumptions. The research produced a unique, triangulated dataset from 2021-2022, capturing grassroots perspectives often absent from high-level analyses. Practically, the findings provide evidence-based recommendations for refining the coordination between customary authorities and state-led initiatives, thereby supporting more sustainable conflict resolution mechanisms.