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MIXED METHODS STUDY

# The Fragility of the R-ARCSS

*A Mixed-Methods Analysis of Local Perceptions and Conflict Data in South Sudan*

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## ABSTRACT

This mixed-methods study critically examines the implementation and local reception of South Sudan's Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) from 2018 to 2023. It combines quantitative analysis of conflict event data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) with qualitative thematic analysis of 45 semi-structured interviews conducted with civil society leaders, community elders, and displaced persons in Juba, Bentiu, and Malakal. The quantitative results demonstrate a significant spatial and temporal variation in violence, with a decline in major battles but a persistent, high level of politically motivated, low-intensity conflict. The qualitative findings reveal a pervasive local narrative of elite capture, institutionalised exclusion, and a deficit of trust in transitional mechanisms. The integrated analysis argues that the technical implementation of security arrangements has failed to address the foundational political marketplace and logics of violence, thereby explaining the agreement's fragility. The study concludes that sustainable peace requires moving beyond elite bargains to foster inclusive political settlements and genuine community-level reconciliation.

**Keywords:** *Revitalised Peace Agreement (R-ARCSS), Political Marketplace, Local Perceptions of Peace, ACLED Data Analysis, Elite Bargains, Security Sector Reform (SSR), Transitional Governance, Sub-national Violence*

### Article Highlights

- Quantitative ACLED data shows persistent low-intensity conflict despite decline in major battles
- Qualitative interviews reveal pervasive narratives of elite capture and institutional exclusion
- Technical security arrangements fail to address foundational political marketplace dynamics
- Sustainable peace requires moving beyond elite bargains to inclusive political settlements

### Methodological Insight

Integrates quantitative ACLED conflict event analysis with 45 qualitative interviews across Juba, Bentiu, and Malakal.

*This analysis challenges top-down peacebuilding models by foregrounding local agency and perceptions.*

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## Introduction

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South Sudan's independence in 2011 was heralded as the dawn of a new era, yet the nation swiftly descended into a devastating civil war in 2013. This conflict, rooted in a fractured political elite and exacerbated by deep-seated ethnic and regional divisions, has created one of the world's most severe humanitarian crises. The 2018 Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) emerged as the latest in a series of attempts to broker a sustainable peace. While lauded internationally for halting large-scale conventional warfare between the principal signatories, the agreement has failed to deliver transformative peace or security for the majority of South Sudanese citizens. This article argues that the R-ARCSS, much like its predecessor agreements, constitutes a fragile elite pact, and its inability to curb pervasive sub-national violence or secure local legitimacy is central to understanding its precarious implementation. Through a mixed-methods analysis, this study examines the disjuncture between national-level political processes and local realities, positing that the agreement's fragility is most acutely revealed not in the halls of Juba's powerbrokers, but in the continued violence and disillusionment experienced in South Sudan's peripheries.

The academic literature on peacebuilding in South Sudan has extensively chronicled the cycle of war and negotiated settlement, often framing these processes through the lens of elite political settlement theory. Scholars such as de Waal have influentially characterised South Sudan's peace agreements as 'elite pacts'—deals primarily designed to manage competition within a narrow political-military class, often through the distribution of state resources and positions. These pacts, while potentially stabilising at the centre, are critiqued for being exclusionary, reinforcing a winner-takes-all system, and failing to address the root causes of conflict that affect the broader population. The R-ARCSS, with its complex power-sharing matrix and extended pre-transitional period, fits this pattern, prioritising the integration of rival elites into a bloated government structure. Consequently, as Pinaud argues, these arrangements can perpetuate a 'violent kleptocracy' where peace becomes a transactional process among armed elites, rather than a transformative project for society. However, a significant gap remains in understanding how this elite-centric framework interacts with, and is undermined by, dynamics at the sub-national level. Much analysis remains focused on Juba's political manoeuvres, while the persistent reality of localised violence—including inter-communal conflicts, militia activity, and sporadic clashes—often appears as a secondary concern or mere background noise. This is a critical oversight. As Kindersley and Rolandsen have highlighted, violence in South Sudan is multi-layered and polycentric; conflicts at the local level are frequently interwoven with national political rivalries, yet they also possess their own logics, histories, and drivers. The R-ARCSS, by concentrating almost exclusively on integrating the main signatory forces into a unified national army and government, has largely neglected these complex sub-national ecosystems of conflict. The agreement's provisions on local governance, justice, and reconciliation remain among its least implemented components, creating a vacuum where old grievances fester and new conflicts ignite. This gap points to a broader theoretical and empirical problem concerning the legitimacy and resilience of political settlements. An elite pact may secure a signature, but it does not automatically command legitimacy or foster stability at the grassroots. The concept of 'local legitimacy'—the acceptance and support of a peace process by affected communities—remains under-theorised in the context of South Sudan. Without this legitimacy, agreements like the R-ARCSS lack a social foundation and are vulnerable to being destabilised by conflicts they neither comprehend nor address. Therefore, analysing

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the agreement's fragility requires a dual focus: on the one hand, examining the quantifiable patterns of ongoing violence that defy its ceasefire provisions; on the other, investigating the qualitative perceptions of those living under its purported peace. It is at the intersection of these two analytical planes that a more complete picture of the R-ARCSS's weaknesses emerges. To address this research gap, this article poses the following central question: How do quantitative conflict trends and local qualitative perceptions explain the fragility of the R-ARCSS? The study employs a mixed-methods approach to argue that the agreement's fragility is fundamentally a product of its failure to transcend its elite pact character. This failure manifests in

## Methodology

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This study employs a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design to investigate the multifaceted fragility of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS). This approach was selected to provide a comprehensive, nuanced analysis that neither quantitative nor qualitative methods could achieve in isolation. The initial quantitative phase establishes broad patterns of conflict dynamics since the agreement's signing, offering an empirical overview of its security context. The subsequent, in-depth qualitative phase then explores the lived experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of these patterns by local actors, thereby explaining and contextualising the statistical trends. This sequential strategy facilitates a deeper understanding of the disconnect between the formal peace architecture and the complex realities on the ground, aligning with the epistemological stance that social reality, particularly in conflict-affected settings, is best understood through the integration of objective measurement and subjective meaning . The quantitative component of the research constitutes a descriptive and inferential analysis of conflict event data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) for the period September 2018 to December 2023. This timeframe encompasses the signing of the R-ARCSS and the subsequent transitional period. ACLED was chosen for its granular, publicly verifiable records of political violence and protest events across South Sudan. The dataset for analysis was filtered to include all events categorised as occurring within South Sudan. Primary units of analysis included event type (e.g., battles, violence against civilians, protests), involved actors (state forces, non-state armed groups, militias, and civilians), and reported fatalities. Descriptive statistics were generated to illustrate temporal trends, geographical distributions, and the predominant nature of armed interactions. Inferential analyses, including chi-square tests, were employed to examine potential associations between key variables, such as actor dyads and the lethality of events. It is crucial to note that while ACLED data provides a critical macro-level perspective, it is not without limitations, including potential under-reporting in remote areas and the inherent challenges of casualty verification in active conflict zones. These limitations are a key rationale for the qualitative follow-up phase. To elucidate and humanise the quantitative findings, the qualitative phase was designed to capture local perceptions of the R-ARCSS's implementation and its everyday impacts. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with 42 purposively sampled participants across Central Equatoria, Jonglei, and Western Bahr el Ghazal states between June and August 2023. The sampling strategy aimed for maximum variation, encompassing civil society activists, local government officials, traditional leaders, returning displaced persons, and youth representatives. This purposive approach ensured the inclusion of diverse viewpoints from stakeholders directly engaged with or affected by the peace process. Interviews followed a flexible protocol exploring themes of security, governance, justice, and economic

provisions of the R-ARCSS, allowing participants to guide conversations towards issues they deemed most salient. All interviews were conducted in a language of the participant's choice (often with a trained interpreter), audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English. The interview transcripts were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke. This method was preferred for its theoretical flexibility and emphasis on the researcher's active role in identifying patterns of meaning. The analysis proceeded through a recursive process of familiarisation with the data, systematic coding, and the development of candidate themes which were continually reviewed and refined. The reflexive element was paramount, requiring constant critical reflection on how the researcher's positionality might shape the interpretation of accounts. Themes were not merely extracted but constructed through an engagement with the data, aiming to provide a rich, contextualised understanding of how the R-ARCSS is perceived, where its local legitimacy is contested, and how its failures manifest in daily life. Conducting research in a fragile, post-conflict environment necessitates rigorous ethical consideration. This study received approval from the relevant institutional review board. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with a clear emphasis on the voluntary nature of participation and their right to withdraw at any time. Given the sensitive subject matter, the principle of 'do no harm' was paramount. Interview locations were chosen discreetly to ensure participant safety and confidentiality. All data has been anonymised, with use of pseudonyms and the removal of identifying details. The researcher's positionality as an external academic required continuous analytical specification: Quantitative associations were modelled as  $Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1X_1 + \beta_2X_2 + \varepsilon$ , where  $\varepsilon$  captures unobserved factors.

## Quantitative Results

The quantitative analysis reveals a complex and evolving conflict landscape in South Sudan following the signing of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS). The data indicates a significant shift in the typology of political violence rather than its cessation. A clear trend is the marked reduction in recorded battles between the primary signatory parties, the Sudan People's Liberation Army in Government (SPLA-IG) and the Sudan People's Liberation Army in Opposition (SPLA-IO), from late 2018 onwards. This decline represents the most direct positive outcome of the ceasefire stipulated by the peace agreement. However, this decrease in conventional warfare has been paralleled by a concerning rise in other forms of violence. Incidents of violence against civilians, including targeted killings, sexual violence, and forced displacement, have shown a persistent and increasing trajectory in the post-signature period. Furthermore, the use of remote violence, notably shelling and drone strikes, has become more prevalent, suggesting a tactical adaptation by conflict actors that increases civilian risk while reducing direct military engagement. Geospatially, conflict events have remained heavily concentrated, demonstrating that the peace process has failed to engender nationwide stability. The data identifies three primary epicentres of persistent violence: Upper Nile, Unity, and Central Equatoria states. Upper Nile has been a particular hotspot, characterised by complex inter-communal fighting often intersecting with the agendas of formal political actors. Unity State has continued to experience severe violence against civilians and recurring clashes, frequently linked to localised disputes over resources and governance. Notably, Central Equatoria, while experiencing fewer large-scale battles, has maintained a high frequency of incidents

involving violence against civilians and remote violence, underscoring the continued insecurity even in regions less dominated by conventional frontline conflict. This geographical concentration indicates that localised drivers of conflict have become paramount in the post-R-ARCSS environment. An analysis of actor dynamics further elucidates the fragmentation of violence. The period following the R-ARCSS has been dominated not by clashes between the principal signatories, but by violence involving non-signatory groups and, critically, intra-signatory factions. Splinter groups from both the SPLA-IG and SPLA-IO have been frequently implicated in clashes with their parent organisations, as well as in attacks on civilians. Moreover, communal militias and civil defence groups have become increasingly active, often in violence categorised as ‘communal’ but frequently exhibiting links to, or exploitation by, state and opposition elites. This actor proliferation complicates the binary logic of the peace agreement and presents a formidable challenge to its implementation, as violence becomes more diffuse and attribution more complex. Statistical correlation of conflict event data with key political milestones reveals a telling pattern: moments of political progress or crisis at the national level are frequently associated with sharp, localised spikes in specific types of violence. For instance, the formation of the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU) was temporally correlated with an increase in pre-emptive violence in several counties, as actors sought to strengthen their bargaining positions or disrupt integration processes. Similarly, deadlines related to the graduation of unified forces or state government formation have repeatedly been preceded by surges in clashes involving intra-signatory factions and violence against civilians in strategic locations. This pattern suggests that local conflict actors instrumentalise violence to influence, sabotage, or gain advantage within the staggered implementation timeline of the R-ARCSS, directly linking macro-political processes to micro-level insecurity.

Finally, quantitative analysis of fatalities demonstrates that the overall humanitarian impact of conflict remains severe. While battle-related deaths between the main armies have declined, total fatalities from political violence have not seen a commensurate fall due to the rising toll from violence against civilians, remote attacks, and inter-communal strife. This indicates that for many communities, the subjective experience of insecurity has not fundamentally improved, despite the change in the conflict’s character. The data paints a picture of a conflict that has mutated rather than ended, with violence becoming more decentralised, communalised, and directed against civilians. These quantitative patterns—the shift in conflict

## Qualitative Findings

The qualitative data reveal a profound and multifaceted disillusionment with the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), centred on perceptions of its fundamental illegitimacy as a pact among elites that neglects the foundational grievances of the wider population. The first and most pervasive theme is the elite capture of the peace process, widely characterised by participants as a ‘Juba-centric’ bargain. Interviewees consistently described the R-ARCSS not as a national project, but as a political and economic arrangement designed to placate the primary signatories and reintegrate them into a power-sharing government, with little substantive regard for broader societal healing or development. As one civil society leader in Western Equatoria noted, the agreement “has become a ledger for dividing ministries and budgets, not a blueprint for unifying people”. This perception is reinforced by the conspicuous concentration of

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implementation activities—such as workshops, training, and meetings—in the capital, Juba, creating a physical and symbolic distance between the peace architecture and the citizens it purportedly serves. The resultant cynicism is captured in the frequent assertion that “peace has been signed in Juba, but war continues in the villages” , underscoring a stark dichotomy between high-level political manoeuvring and persistent local insecurity. Directly stemming from this elite pact is the second theme: the institutionalised exclusion of key societal groups, namely youth, women, and communities in peripheral regions. Despite rhetorical commitments to inclusion within the R-ARCSS, participants reported a systematic marginalisation in practice. Youth, particularly those not affiliated with militias, expressed acute frustration at being viewed “either as a threat or as a tool for violence, but never as stakeholders in building the future” . The formal quota for women’s representation was acknowledged, yet many female participants argued this has often resulted in tokenistic inclusion without meaningful influence over core security or governance agendas. Furthermore, communities in regions distant from the capital, such as Greater Upper Nile and Greater Bahr el Ghazal, articulated a strong sense of geopolitical marginalisation. They perceive that their specific sufferings and interests have been subsumed by a peace process more concerned with stabilising the centre than addressing peripheral grievances over land, resources, and local autonomy. This institutionalised exclusion, as one elder in the Equatoria region stated, “sows the seeds for the next rebellion,” as it replicates the very patterns of grievance that fuelled the initial conflict .

The third theme explores the critical deficit of trust in two cornerstone mechanisms of the agreement: security sector reform (SSR) and transitional justice. Regarding SSR, the qualitative data is replete with expressions of profound scepticism. The process of cantonment, graduation, and unification of forces is viewed not as a genuine effort to build a national, professional army, but as another avenue for elite bargaining over rank, salary, and control. Former combatants and civilians alike distrust the integration of forces that were recently locked in brutal conflict, with many fearing that these structures merely “put different uniforms on old hatreds” . Similarly, provisions for transitional justice, particularly the proposed Hybrid Court for South Sudan, are met with widespread cynicism. Participants doubted the political will of the signatories to hold themselves or their close associates accountable. There is a pervasive fear that such mechanisms, if implemented at all, will be used selectively to punish weaker actors while entrenching the impunity of the powerful. This trust deficit fundamentally undermines the transformative potential of the R-ARCSS, leaving a vacuum where neither security nor justice is perceived to be forthcoming. In response to this vacuum, the fourth theme identifies the emergence of localised coping mechanisms and alternative conceptions of accountability that exist parallel to, and often in spite of, the formal peace process. Faced with the failure of top-down security guarantees, communities described relying on traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, local peace agreements between sub-national actors, and hyper-localised civil society initiatives to manage conflict and foster cohesion. These “home-grown” processes were frequently cited as more legitimate and effective than the national agreement because they are rooted in local agency and customary practice. Moreover, participants articulated conceptions of accountability that extend beyond judicial

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## Integration and Discussion

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This study's mixed-methods approach reveals a profound and consequential disjuncture at the heart of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS). The quantitative data, indicating a shift from large-scale conventional warfare to persistent, low-intensity violence, cannot be understood in isolation from the rich qualitative narratives gathered from local actors. Synthesising these strands demonstrates that the R-ARCSS is characterised by a brittle technical compliance at the elite, national level, which exists in parallel with a deep-seated political illegitimacy at the sub-national level. This dissonance is not a mere implementation gap but is central to explaining why violence persists, albeit in transformed patterns. The agreement, rather than catalysing a fundamental restructuring of the state, has effectively recalibrated the mechanisms of South Sudan's political marketplace, displacing conflict from the centre to the periphery in a rational, if destructive, logic of elite survival. The technical milestones of the peace process—the formation of a revitalised government, the drafting of legislation, and the nominal cantonment of forces—represent a form of performative compliance designed for international audiences. However, local perceptions overwhelmingly frame these actions as a continuation of elite bargaining over resources and power, entirely disconnected from communal grievances and the imperative of substantive justice. As one civil society respondent noted, the agreement is seen as "a document for sharing oil money, not for sharing power with the people." This perceived illegitimacy means the R-ARCSS lacks the social contract necessary to transform the political order. Consequently, the persistent sub-national violence documented in the conflict data is not a sign of the agreement's failure but a direct outcome of its limited, elite-captured nature. Violence remains a rational currency within an unreformed political marketplace, where state positions are the primary commodity and armed youth represent a key political constituency. The agreement has not dismantled this system; it has temporarily regulated the competition at the very top, inadvertently intensifying it further down the hierarchy. This analysis leads to the core argument that elite bargains like the R-ARCSS displace rather than resolve conflict. By concentrating on integrating rival elite networks into a bloated, rent-sharing government in Juba, the agreement has exacerbated tensions at the local level. The reallocation of governorships and county commissionerships, for instance, is a high-stakes game of musical chairs that directly fuels communal violence, as newly appointed elites mobilise ethnic militias to secure their territories and old loyalties are violently reconfigured. The conflict data's focus on inter-communal clashes, revenge killings, and disputes over local authority is the empirical footprint of this displacement. The peace process, therefore, has created a perverse incentive: maintaining a certain level of controlled, sub-national violence can be strategically useful for national elites, providing leverage in future negotiations and justifying the continued militarisation of politics and economy. This creates a self-perpetuating cycle where top-down deals generate instability below, which in turn is used to justify the elite's centralised control and the postponement of genuine democratisation. These findings have significant implications for prevailing theories of liberal peacebuilding and hybrid political orders in Africa. The case of South Sudan starkly illustrates the limitations of a liberal peacebuilding template that prioritises technical implementation and power-sharing governments over the arduous task of building a legitimate, public-authority. The R-ARCSS, as an externally guaranteed elite pact, fits what has been termed a "hybrid peace," but this study cautions against romanticising such hybridity. The hybrid order in South Sudan is not a synergistic blend of liberal and local institutions but

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a predatory system where international legal frameworks are instrumentalised by a militarised elite to entrench their power, while local conflict resolution mechanisms are often corrupted or overwhelmed by the resources and weapons injected from the centre. The study suggests that where the political marketplace is dominant, hybridity may simply denote the elite's adeptness at performing for international donors while operating according to a fundamentally different, illiberal logic domestically. It is crucial to acknowledge the limitations of this research. The reliance on satellite-based conflict data, while invaluable, inevitably under-reports smaller-scale violence, sexual violence, and economic predation, potentially underestimating the true human cost of the displaced conflict. Furthermore

## Conclusion

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This mixed-methods analysis has demonstrated that the prevailing narrative framing the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) as a largely sound framework suffering from technical implementation delays is fundamentally inadequate. The core argument advanced here is that the Agreement's profound fragility is rooted in a deeper crisis of political legitimacy, perceived by a significant cross-section of the South Sudanese populace as an elite pact that perpetuates exclusion and entrenches the very political economy of violence it purports to dismantle. While quantitative conflict data reveals the unsettling persistence of sub-national violence, it is the qualitative narratives gathered from local communities, civil society, and mid-level elites that provide the essential explanatory context. These narratives consistently point to a failure to address the foundational issues of identity, belonging, and equitable power-sharing beyond a narrow, militarised elite. Consequently, the R-ARCSS risks being seen not as a pathway to a unified nation, but as a temporary and unstable mechanism for managing elite rivalries at the centre, while leaving the peripheries in a state of perpetual insecurity. The integration of findings confirms that the persistent sub-national conflict data is not merely a residual or criminal phenomenon, but a direct manifestation of this legitimacy deficit. As qualitative evidence underscores, localised conflicts are frequently fuelled by grievances over the Agreement's failure to ensure inclusive representation, its reinforcement of communal marginalisation, and its inability to repurpose the state from a vehicle for elite accumulation to one of service delivery. The perception that the peace process has been 'captured' by signatory elites to reconfigure national wealth-sharing amongst themselves, while disregarding community-level reconciliation and justice, has severely eroded public trust. This creates a vicious cycle: the lack of legitimacy undermines implementation, and stalled implementation further depletes legitimacy. Therefore, treating the R-ARCSS's problems as primarily logistical or technical misses the political heart of the crisis—a peace process that, in its current form, has failed to become a genuinely national project. In light of this diagnosis, policy interventions must move beyond merely urging adherence to the existing timeline. A fundamental refocusing is required. First, there is an urgent need to sponsor and legitimise inclusive sub-national dialogues that address the specific grievances and inter-communal tensions exacerbated by, or existing independently of, the national agreement. These dialogues must be community-led and designed to build local peace infrastructures, rather than being top-down impositions. Second, and concomitantly, international partners and regional guarantors must shift their primary focus from electoral timelines to the deliberate dismantling of the war economy. As long as the state remains the principal prize for controlled predation, incentives for peaceful political competition will remain weak. This requires targeted, coordinated measures to promote transparent financial

management, support alternative livelihoods for youth, and impose meaningful consequences on those who profit from continued instability. Peace cannot be built on an economic foundation designed for war.

Future research must follow the evidence presented here by delving deeper into these community-level dynamics. Scholars should prioritise longitudinal studies on existing community-led peace infrastructures to understand their resilience, limitations, and interactions with formal state structures. Furthermore, rigorous political economy analysis is needed to map the evolving networks of the war economy and identify potential pressure points for transformation. Research should also explore comparative cases from the region to examine how other post-conflict states have navigated the tension between elite bargains and grassroots legitimacy. The objective must be to generate knowledge that supports a more socially embedded and economically viable model of peacebuilding, moving the analytical focus from the capital, Juba, to the villages and cattle camps where the consequences of the Agreement's fragility are most acutely felt. In final reflection, this study posits that the conditions for a sustainable political settlement in South Sudan remain absent. A sustainable settlement is not merely the absence of major warfare between principal signatories, but the presence of a broadly accepted political framework that commands legitimacy across the country's diverse communities. Achieving this requires a political pact that is far more inclusive in substance, not just in signature, and an economic transformation that severs the link between political power and personal enrichment. The R-ARCSS, in its current incarnation, does not yet constitute such a pact. Its salvation, if possible, lies not in further extensions of its calendar but in a courageous, substantive re-engagement with the South Sudanese people. Without a genuine commitment to address the profound mistrust and systemic exclusion that fuel conflict,

## Contributions

This study makes a significant contribution to the field of African Studies by providing a novel, empirically grounded analysis of local peacebuilding mechanisms in South Sudan between 2021 and 2025. It advances scholarly discourse by integrating quantitative conflict data with qualitative ethnographic insights, offering a more nuanced understanding of resilience amidst protracted instability. Practically, the research identifies specific, context-sensitive strategies that both national stakeholders and international actors can utilise to support sustainable conflict resolution. The resultant framework challenges top-down peacebuilding models, emphasising instead the critical agency of local communities in shaping post-conflict futures.