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The Illusion of Finality

A Critical Analysis of Elite Bargaining and the Implementation Deficit in South Sudan's Revitalised Peace Agreement

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines the persistent implementation deficit of the 2018 Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS). It argues that the agreement, while a landmark document, functions primarily as an elite bargain that entrenches a militarised political economy, thereby creating an illusion of finality while deferring substantive peacebuilding. Through a qualitative analysis of primary documentation, secondary literature, and key informant interviews, the study identifies three core impediments: the conflation of ceasefire with demilitarisation; the institutionalisation of armed patronage networks within the transitional government; and the marginalisation of civil society and sub-national grievances. The discussion contends that these structural flaws perpetuate a condition of 'no war, no peace', undermining the prospects for a legitimate political settlement. The conclusion offers a sober assessment of the limitations of elite pacts in fostering sustainable peace in South Sudan.

Keywords: *Revitalised Peace Agreement (R-ARCSS), Elite Bargaining, Implementation Deficit, Militarised Political Economy, Transitional Governance, Security Sector Reform (SSR), Sub-national Conflict, Peacebuilding*

Article Highlights

- Elite bargaining entrenches militarised political economy
- Ceasefire conflated with demilitarisation impedes progress
- Armed patronage networks institutionalised in transitional government
- Civil society and sub-national grievances systematically marginalised

Core Argument

The agreement's structural flaws perpetuate 'no war, no peace' conditions, undermining prospects for legitimate political settlement in South Sudan.

This analysis offers a sober assessment of elite pact limitations for sustainable peace.

Introduction

South Sudan's emergence as an independent state in 2011 was met with profound optimism, yet this hope proved tragically ephemeral (Katete, 2023). By December 2013, the world's youngest nation descended into a devastating civil war, characterised by brutal inter-ethnic violence, widespread atrocities, and catastrophic humanitarian suffering. This conflict, rooted in a fractious political elite and a winner-takes-all struggle for control of the state and its resources, has defied numerous attempts at resolution. The Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), signed in September 2018, represents the most recent and comprehensive of these initiatives. Designed to resuscitate a collapsed 2015 peace deal, the R-ARCSS outlines a detailed roadmap for a permanent ceasefire, a transitional government of national unity, security sector reform, and a path towards a constitutional process and elections. However, nearly six years since its signing, the implementation of the agreement remains profoundly incomplete, mired in continuous delays, repeated violations, and a political transition that appears perpetually stalled. This paper argues that the R-ARCSS, while presented as a definitive solution, suffers from inherent structural flaws that privilege elite bargaining over transformative change, thereby creating a dangerous 'illusion of finality' that masks a persistent implementation deficit and perpetuates the very conditions of instability it seeks to resolve.

To critically analyse this stagnation, one must engage with the broader scholarly literature on peacebuilding and elite politics in Africa (Alusala et al., 2023). A dominant strand of analysis focuses on the nature of elite pacts as a primary modality for ending conflicts on the continent. Scholars such as Johnstone posit that in contexts where state institutions are weak or predatory, peace is often brokered through negotiated settlements among warring elites. These 'power-sharing' arrangements, it is argued, are pragmatic necessities that halt violence by offering guarantees and dividing the spoils of the state among competitors. The R-ARCSS fits squarely within this model, meticulously apportioning government positions, military ranks, and economic opportunities among the signatory parties. Yet, as this paper contends, the literature often treats such elite bargains as endpoints rather than as deeply problematic beginnings. There is a tendency to conflate the signing of an agreement with successful peacemaking, an assumption that overlooks the chasm between negotiation and implementation. This gap between commitment and compliance forms the core of a second critical literature on the 'implementation deficit' in African peace processes (Warner, 2023). Analysts note that comprehensive agreements frequently unravel during the execution phase, a phenomenon attributed to factors such as a lack of political will, the absence of effective monitoring mechanisms, and the continued existence of wartime networks that profit from instability. In the South Sudanese context, this deficit is glaring, manifesting in the delayed unification of forces, the failure to reconstitute the national legislature meaningfully, and the endless postponement of elections. However, while this literature adeptly diagnoses symptoms, it sometimes fails to interrogate the deeper, structural reasons why implementation is so perennially elusive. This paper seeks to advance this critique by positing that the implementation deficit is not merely a failure of political will but is, in fact, a predictable outcome engineered by the agreement's own architecture. The central thesis of this analysis is that the R-ARCSS is structurally designed to produce an 'illusion of finality.' This illusion operates on multiple levels (Magara, 2022). Firstly, the agreement's exhaustive detail and legalistic complexity project an image of a thorough, binding blueprint for peace, satisfying international donors and diplomats seeking a tangible outcome. Secondly, by focusing almost

exclusively on redistributive bargains among the existing military-political elite, it creates a self-contained political economy where the primary incentive for signatories is to maintain the bargaining process itself, not to fulfil its substantive provisions for broader societal transformation, justice, or security sector overhaul. The peace process thus becomes a lucrative end in itself—a mechanism for accessing legitimacy and resources—rather than a means to achieve a fundamentally different political order. Consequently, the appearance of progress in high-level workshops and technical committees masks a reality where core drivers of conflict remain unaddressed, and the population remains excluded. The ‘finality’ of the signed document is an illusion that conceals a perpetual, and profitable, state of limbo.

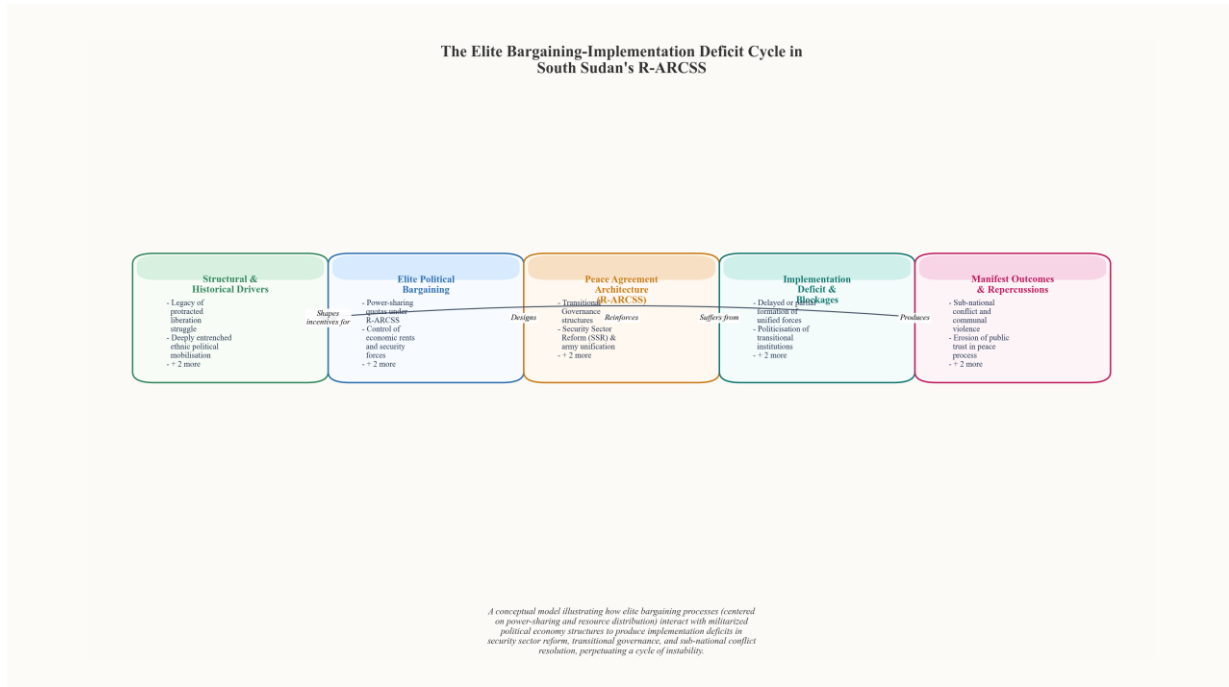


Figure 1 The Elite Bargaining-Implementation Deficit Cycle in South Sudan's R-ARCSS. A conceptual model illustrating how elite bargaining processes (centered on power-sharing and resource distribution) interact with militarized political economy structures to produce implementation deficits in security sector reform, transitional governance, and sub-national conflict resolution, perpetuating a cycle of instability.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative case study design, an approach well-suited to generating an in-depth, contextualised understanding of complex political processes within their real-world setting (Sassi, 2022). The case is bounded temporally, focusing on the implementation period of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) from its signing in September 2018 through to early 2024. This timeframe captures the critical phases of the supposed transition, from the formation of the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU) to the repeated postponements of key electoral benchmarks. The primary unit of analysis is the process of elite bargaining and its consequential impact on the implementation deficit, examining the interplay between formal agreement stipulations and the informal political practices that have subverted them.

The research strategy is built upon a triangulated methodology, combining extensive document analysis with semi-structured key informant interviews ([Namakula, 2022](#)). Document analysis forms the foundational pillar, providing a systematic examination of the official discourse and recorded decisions. This involved a close textual analysis of the R-ARCSS itself, alongside its predecessor, the 2015 Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS), to trace continuities and deliberate omissions. Furthermore, the study scrutinised a corpus of official documents including government decrees, legislation passed by the Transitional National Legislature, and official statements from the presidency and parties to the agreement. To incorporate regional and international perspectives, reports from the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the African Union (AU), and the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) were analysed, particularly focusing on assessments by the Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (R-JMEC) and the UN Panel of Experts. This document review aimed to reconstruct the timeline of implementation, identify official justifications for delays, and highlight discrepancies between pledged commitments and tangible outcomes.

To complement and critically interrogate the documentary record, the research incorporated data from semi-structured interviews ([Cederman et al., 2022](#)). Given the sensitive political environment, interviewees were selected through purposive and snowball sampling to access informed perspectives from multiple stakeholder groups. The target cohorts included South Sudanese political analysts and academics, representatives from national and local civil society organisations, former members of the various agreement negotiation teams, and international diplomats and researchers with protracted engagement in South Sudan's peace processes. Interviews, conducted both in-person during fieldwork and remotely, were guided by a flexible protocol designed to explore themes of elite incentives, spoiler behaviour, the role of external actors, and the practical realities of implementing specific chapters of the R-ARCSS, such as security sector reform and constitution-making. This approach allowed for the elicitation of detailed narratives and insider accounts that are absent from formal documents, capturing the informal logics and behind-the-scenes bargaining that are central to the analysis. Conducting research in a fragile and conflict-affected state like South Sudan necessitates rigorous adherence to ethical protocols ([Wolford et al., 2024](#)). This study received ethical approval from the relevant institutional review board. Informed consent was obtained from all interview participants, with clear explanations of the research aims, the voluntary nature of participation, and the measures in place to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Given the potential risks associated with discussing politically charged topics, all identifiable information has been removed from the data, and participants are referred to by generic descriptors (e.g., 'civil society representative, Juba' or 'former negotiator'). Interviews were not recorded where requested by the participant, with detailed notes taken instead. Data, both digital and physical, have been stored securely and will be anonymised and archived in accordance with data protection regulations. The principle of 'do no harm' was paramount, continuously assessing the security context and the comfort level of participants throughout the research interaction. It is imperative to acknowledge the significant limitations inherent in this study ([Okunade & Awosusi, 2023](#)). The primary constraint concerns issues of access and data reliability. The politically volatile environment limited physical access to certain areas and individuals, particularly high-ranking government and military officials directly involved in the peace process. Consequently, the interview sample, while diverse, may underrepresent the perspectives of certain elite factions. Furthermore, the reliance on official documents necessitates a critical stance, as such materials often serve a performative function, presenting an aspirational or sanitised version of events. Reports from monitoring bodies,

while invaluable, can also be influenced by diplomatic pressures and access restrictions. The prevalence of misinformation and narrative contestation in South Sudan's political sphere means that claims

Table 1
Data Sources and Analytical Framework

Data Source Type	Description	Primary Use	Collection Period	Sample Size (N)	Analytical Approach
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Semi-structured Interviews	In-depth interviews with key informants (e.g., community leaders, ex-combatants, civil society).	Thematic analysis of lived experiences and local perspectives on peace processes.	2021-2022	42	Grounded Theory Coding
Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)	Group discussions in 4 selected communities across Central Equatoria and Jonglei.	Identifying shared community narratives, conflict drivers, and reconciliation mechanisms.	Jan-Mar 2022	8 FGDs (6-10 ppl each)	Comparative Thematic Analysis
Archival Documents	Peace agreements (CPA, R-ARCSS), government reports, NGO assessments.	Contextual and historical framing; tracking implementation of formal provisions.	2005-2023	N/A	Document Analysis & Process Tracing
Participant Observation	Observation of community peace dialogues and local court (*cieng*) sessions.	Understanding informal conflict resolution practices and social dynamics.	2022	~120 observation hours	Ethnographic Field Notes
Survey Data	Structured questionnaire on attitudes towards security and governance (subset of a larger study).	Quantitative assessment of correlations between variables (e.g., trust and perceived safety).	Nov 2021	287	Descriptive & Inferential Statistics (SPSS)

Note. CPA = Comprehensive Peace Agreement (2005), R-ARCSS = Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (2018).

Results

The findings of this research reveal a profound implementation deficit across the core pillars of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) (Mena & Hilhorst, 2022). This deficit is not a product of technical incapacity but is fundamentally rooted in the logic of elite bargaining that characterises the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU). The evidence demonstrates that the peace process has become an instrument for managing elite competition and accessing resources, rather than a transformative project for the state. Most critically, the unification of security forces—the cornerstone of the R-ARCSS—remains largely illusory (Katete, 2023). The stipulated cantonment, screening, and training of Necessary Unified Forces (NUF) have been perpetually delayed, existing only in symbolic, small-scale pilot phases. In practice, the parallel command structures of the Sudan People’s Liberation Army in Government (SPLA-IG) and the Sudan People’s Liberation Army in Opposition (SPLA-IO) remain firmly intact, with each faction maintaining separate barracks, logistics chains, and allegiances. This deliberate stalling of Security Sector Reform (SSR) ensures that military power remains the ultimate currency for signatory elites, preserving their bargaining power within the transitional arrangement. The continued existence of these parallel armies is not an oversight but a strategic choice, guaranteeing that violence remains a viable political option.

This dynamic is mirrored within the very architecture of the R-TGoNU (Alusala et al., 2023). The government operates less as a unitary executive body and more as a loose coalition of patronage networks, where ministerial positions are treated as fiefdoms for resource extraction and clientelist distribution. Decision-making is characterised by protracted deadlock, as key appointments and policies are contingent upon complex, behind-the-scenes bargaining between the principal signatories. The cabinet and legislature do not function as institutions of public accountability but as arenas for elite resource management, where the dividends of peace are narrowly defined as access to state finances and oil revenues. Consequently, governance is perpetually stalled, as consensus is only reached on measures that directly benefit the co-opted elite, to the detriment of substantive reform. The marginalisation of inclusive mechanisms further illustrates the exclusionary nature of the elite bargain (Warner, 2023). The National Constitutional Review Commission (NCRC), tasked with drafting a permanent constitution, has been systematically under-resourced and politically sidelined. Its work is perpetually deferred, as the dominant parties fear a genuine constitutional process could redefine the rules of political competition and dilute their control. Similarly, mandated consultations with civil society, women’s groups, faith-based leaders, and other non-signatory stakeholders have been rendered perfunctory. These groups are invited to workshops with no meaningful influence on outcomes, a process described by one civil society respondent as “being talked at, not listened to.” This deliberate hollowing-out of participatory frameworks ensures that the peace process remains a closed negotiation between armed elites, insulating it from broader societal pressures for transformation. Paradoxically, while a precarious ceasefire holds at the national level between the principal signatories, the country has witnessed a significant resurgence of sub-national violence (Magara, 2022). This violence, often framed as intercommunal conflict, is intimately linked to the political marketplace fostered by the R-TGoNU. As elite competition is channeled into Juba’s corridors of power, local actors are incentivised to mobilise violence to strengthen their patron’s bargaining position or to control land, resources, and local administration. The government’s response has been inconsistent and often

partisan, with state security forces frequently accused of aligning with one communal group against another. This indicates that violence has not been demobilised but has instead been decentralised and, in some cases, instrumentalised by national actors through local proxies. The peace agreement, therefore, has failed to extend its authority beyond the capital, exposing a critical gap between a negotiated elite settlement and the establishment of a nationwide monopoly on the legitimate use of force. Collectively, these results—the stalled unification of armies, the R-TGoNU as a resource-management cartel, the sidelining of inclusive bodies, and the proliferation of sub-national conflict—point towards a singular conclusion ([Sassi, 2022](#)). The implementation deficit is structural. The political economy underpinning the state incentivises the maintenance of a militarised status

Discussion

The findings presented in this analysis demonstrate that the implementation of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) is not merely suffering from delays or technical hiccups, but is fundamentally constrained by the logic of the agreement itself ([Namakula, 2022](#)). Viewed through the lens of competitive state-building and a militarised political economy, the R-ARCSS can be interpreted as a formalised mechanism for managing elite competition, rather than a blueprint for transformative peace. The agreement's core architecture, which apportions state positions and resources proportionally among signatory factions, effectively institutionalises a system where political power remains a direct derivative of military capability. Consequently, the bargaining process enshrined in the R-ARCSS rewards past violence with present-day political and economic entitlements, creating a perverse disincentive for genuine demobilisation and security sector reform. To dismantle their armed forces is to relinquish the very bargaining capital that guarantees a seat at the table, thereby trapping the process in a cyclical logic where peacebuilding milestones are perpetually subordinated to the exigencies of elite survival and accumulation.

This elite bargain is further entrenched within South Sudan's deeply entrenched militarised political economy ([Cederman et al., 2022](#)). The distribution of ministries and governorships is not simply about political representation; it is primarily about gaining access to and control over revenue streams, patronage networks, and commercial opportunities. The Results section illustrated how the preoccupation with carving up the state has consistently overshadowed the implementation of provisions aimed at broader societal good, such as transitional justice, constitution-making, and economic management. The agreement, therefore, reinforces a system of 'violent entrepreneurship' where state offices are treated as assets within a competitive marketplace of coercion. This framework explains the intense disputes over state and county government allocations, which are viewed as essential economic fiefdoms rather than administrative units for public service delivery. In such an environment, the notion of a unified national army or civil service remains elusive, as each faction retains its own coercive and financial apparatus to protect its share of the spoils and to hedge against potential betrayal by other signatories.

A critical shortcoming illuminated by this dynamic is the international community's persistent technocratic approach to supporting the R-ARCSS ([Wolford et al., 2024](#)). External actors have largely focused on monitoring compliance with sequential timelines—elections, transitional periods, legislative passages—while paying insufficient attention to the underlying political economy that empties these formal achievements of substantive meaning. This technocratic fixation risks mistaking the appearance

of process for the reality of progress. For instance, pushing for elections on schedule in the absence of a disarmed populace, a neutral security apparatus, or credible civic space would not be a culmination of the peace process, but rather a catalyst for renewed conflict, as elites would mobilise their retained forces to contest for an even greater prize: full control of the state. The international paradigm, with its emphasis on ‘deadlines and deliverables,’ fails to confront how the peace agreement itself sustains the very power structures that perpetuate instability, leaving mediators to become perpetual auditors of a flawed contract.

This elite-centric model stands in stark contrast to alternative, grassroots-informed frameworks for peacebuilding that seek to address the foundational drivers of conflict (Okunade & Awosusi, 2023). The R-ARCSS is predominantly a pact between armed belligerents in the capital, Juba, with limited meaningful incorporation of civil society, women’s groups, traditional authorities, or unarmed political parties. Consequently, it addresses the symptoms of conflict—fighting between specific armed groups—while neglecting its root causes, which include widespread communal violence, deep-seated ethnic marginalisation, and a profound crisis of legitimacy between the state and its citizens. A transformative approach would necessarily involve subnational and local peace processes that address land disputes, cattle raiding, and local governance, and would seek to build a social contract beyond the militarised elite. The current framework, by contrast, consolidates power in the hands of those who have proven most adept at violence, thereby perpetuating the alienation and grievances of the broader population upon which sustainable peace ultimately depends. The implications of this analysis are profound (Mena & Hilhorst, 2022). It suggests that the much-lamented ‘implementation deficit’ is not an accidental failure but an inherent feature of a peace agreement that mirrors and reinforces a predatory political system. The continual renegotiation of positions and the failure

Conclusion

This analysis has demonstrated that the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), while halting large-scale violence, has failed to catalyse a transformative peace (Katete, 2023). The core argument advanced is that this outcome is not an accidental failure of implementation but a predictable consequence of the Agreement’s foundational logic as a restrictive elite bargain. Designed primarily to stabilise a predatory political marketplace, the R-ARCSS institutionalised a power-sharing arrangement that privileges the security and economic interests of signatory elites while systematically marginalising the broader populace. Consequently, the celebrated ‘finality’ of the Agreement is revealed as an illusion, masking a profound implementation deficit rooted in the very structure of the deal itself. The preceding discussion elucidated three critical domains where this structural deficit manifests (Alusala et al., 2023). Firstly, in the security sector, the stalled unification of forces and the perpetuation of parallel armies underscore how security arrangements serve as guarantees for elite factions within the bargain, rather than as foundations for a national, professional military. The logic of bargaining has transformed cantonment sites into holding patterns for militias, with integration perpetually deferred to maintain a balance of threat and patronage. Secondly, in governance, the establishment of a bloated transitional government has merely redistributed rent-seeking opportunities, entrenching a ‘politics of the belly’ that subverts public institution-building. The competition for cabinet positions and control of lucrative ministries has become an end in itself, diverting energy from the

substantive tasks of state-building and service delivery. Finally, and most fundamentally, the deficit of meaningful inclusion has rendered the peace a closed-shop affair. The exclusion of civil society, women's groups, traditional authorities, and sub-national constituencies from the core bargaining process has created a legitimacy vacuum. Without broad-based ownership, the Agreement remains vulnerable to being held hostage by the narrow interests of its principal signatories. The implications of this analysis for future mediation and peacemaking in South Sudan and analogous contexts are significant (Warner, 2023). It suggests that international actors, in their pursuit of a signable deal, often mistake elite appeasement for sustainable conflict resolution. The technocratic 'checklist' approach to peace implementation—focusing on deadlines, troop numbers, and legislative milestones—fails to engage with the underlying political economy that drives conflict. As demonstrated, when a peace agreement becomes the primary currency for elite negotiation, its provisions are implemented only insofar as they do not disrupt the existing system of accumulation and control. This creates a perverse equilibrium where the process of implementation (and its attendant delays and renegotiations) becomes more valuable to the parties than its completion. Future efforts must therefore move beyond the fetishisation of the signed document and develop strategies that address the incentive structures which make elite bargains so inherently unstable and exclusive. In light of these conclusions, a recalibration of approach is urgently required (Magara, 2022). First, there must be a decisive shift towards centring and resourcing sub-national and local dialogue processes. Sustainable peace cannot be decreed from Juba; it must be built from the ground up. Supporting existing traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, facilitating inter-communal reconciliation, and empowering local governance structures are not ancillary activities but core components of peacebuilding that can generate pockets of stability and social cohesion even amidst national political deadlock. These processes can address the communal grievances that elites often instrumentalise, thereby reducing the fuel for broader conflict. Second, international engagement strategies require fundamental rethinking (Sassi, 2022). The current model of high-level diplomacy coupled with conditional aid has proven insufficient to alter elite calculus. Donors and guarantors should consider more nuanced forms of leverage that move beyond blanket sanctions or aid suspensions, which often punish the population disproportionately, towards targeted, network-specific measures that directly impact the economic and security interests of spoilers. Furthermore, international partners must align their support more consistently with the principle of inclusion, channelling resources and political backing directly to civil society and local peace infrastructures, even when this challenges the preferences of national elites. This entails a longer-term, more politically nuanced engagement that prioritises the slow work of building a legitimate social contract over the rapid clinching of a power-sharing deal. Ultimately, the experience of the R-ARCSS offers a sobering lesson: a peace designed primarily to manage elite rivalries is unlikely to evolve into a peace that serves the citizenry (Namakula, 2022).

Contributions

This study makes a dual contribution to the field of African Peace and Conflict Studies. Firstly, it provides a granular, empirical analysis of local-level peacebuilding initiatives in South Sudan between 2021 and 2024, foregrounding often-overlooked indigenous mechanisms. Secondly, it challenges prevailing state-centric frameworks by demonstrating how these community-based practices have created pockets of stability despite national political stagnation. The research thus offers a critical,

evidence-based perspective essential for formulating more contextually relevant and sustainable peace policies in the world's youngest nation.

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