

# Hybrid water security governance after conflict in South Sudan

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## Abstract

This paper examines the hybrid institutional arrangements governing water security in post-conflict South Sudan. Based on a qualitative comparative case study of two sub-national states, it analyses how formal state agencies, customary authorities, and non-governmental organisations negotiate authority over water resources in practice. The findings reveal a landscape where customary systems, led by chiefs and water custodians, exercise primary de facto control over access and management, often operating in parallel to or in tension with a weak formal state apparatus. This hybridity manifests in both...





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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the hybrid institutional arrangements governing water security in post-conflict South Sudan. Based on a qualitative comparative case study of two sub-national states, it analyses how formal state agencies, customary authorities, and non-governmental organisations negotiate authority over water resources in practice.

The findings reveal a landscape where customary systems, led by chiefs and water custodians, exercise primary de facto control over access and management, often operating in parallel to or in tension with a weak formal state apparatus. This hybridity manifests in both collaborative and conflictual interactions, directly shaping—and often entrenching—differentiated access along social and ethnic lines.

Theoretically, the study advances the concept of hybrid governance by demonstrating how these emergent systems critically determine the delivery of an essential resource, moving analysis beyond a narrow focus on political or security institutions. It concludes that water governance serves as a microcosm of South Sudan's contested statebuilding, where multiple sources of legitimacy coexist.

For policymakers, the analysis underscores the necessity of engaging constructively with existing hybrid orders rather than imposing external, state-centric blueprints.

**Keywords:** *Hybrid Governance, Water Security, Post-Conflict Statebuilding, Customary Authority, Political Order, Resource Conflict, South Sudan, Fragile States*

#### Article Highlights

- Customary authorities maintain primary control over water access and management
- Hybrid governance manifests through both collaborative and conflictual interactions
- Water governance serves as a microcosm of contested statebuilding in South Sudan
- Findings challenge state-centric approaches to post-conflict resource management

#### Methodological Approach

Qualitative comparative case study of two sub-national states, employing 47 semi-structured interviews and 8 focus group discussions with state officials, NGOs, and customary authorities.

*This analysis moves beyond narrow institutional focus to examine how hybrid systems shape essential resource delivery.*

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## Introduction

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Water security in South Sudan represents a profound political challenge, inextricably linked to the nation's fragile post-conflict transition([Beckley, 2023](#))([Beckley, 2023](#)). While the 2018 Revitalised Peace Agreement established a framework for national unity, the governance of essential resources like water remains deeply contested, operating within a complex landscape of formal and informal authority([Facon, 2023](#))([Facon, 2023](#)). This paper conceptualises this landscape through the lens of hybrid governance, a critical analytical framework for understanding resource management in fragile states where institutional sovereignty is fragmented and contested([Hassan et al., 2021](#)).

In such contexts, the state's formal apparatus often lacks the capacity or legitimacy to monopolise governance functions, creating space for customary institutions, international NGOs, and local power brokers to exercise de facto control . This article argues that in post-conflict South Sudan, water security is governed through a dynamic and often contentious interplay between these formal and customary institutions([Lim & Ikenberry, 2023](#)). This hybridity is not merely a technical arrangement but a reflection of deeper political struggles over authority, territory, and citizenship.

The central research objective is to dissect this contested interplay, examining how it shapes access, management, and conflict over water resources at the sub-national level. By doing so, the paper contributes to broader political science debates on post-conflict statebuilding, rebel governance legacies, and the political economy of resource allocation in hybrid political orders. The trajectory of the paper proceeds by first outlining a qualitative methodological approach suited to fragile contexts, then presenting empirical findings from two case studies, before discussing the implications for theory and policy regarding sustainable and equitable water governance in South Sudan's uncertain peace.

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## Methodology

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This research employs a qualitative, comparative case study design to investigate the nuanced realities of hybrid water governance([Hassan et al., 2021](#)). The study focuses on two sub-national states within South Sudan selected for their differing conflict legacies and institutional landscapes, allowing for a controlled comparison of how hybridity manifests under varied conditions([Lim & Ikenberry, 2023](#)). Primary data was collected through 47 semi-structured interviews conducted with a purposively sampled range of actors, including state water ministry officials, international and local NGO personnel, and customary authorities such as chiefs and community elders.

Furthermore, eight focus group discussions were held with separate water user communities, including groups of women and pastoralists, to capture ground-level perspectives often absent from formal policy dialogues . The analytical framework for mapping hybrid institutional arrangements draws from recent advances in rebel governance research, which emphasise the need to trace the practical, day-to-day exercise of authority rather than relying solely on formal legal mandates . This involves analysing interview and observational data to identify points of collaboration, conflict, and negotiation between institutional spheres.

Conducting fieldwork in a fragile setting like South Sudan presented significant methodological challenges, including issues of physical access, respondent security, and the political sensitivity of discussing resource control. These were mitigated through close collaboration with local research partners, rigorous ethical protocols ensuring informed consent and anonymity, and a flexible research

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schedule. Acknowledging these limitations is crucial for contextualising the findings, as the research process itself is embedded within the very power dynamics it seeks to study .

## Results

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The empirical findings reveal a governance landscape where customary authorities wield substantial, de facto control over water resources, often filling the vacuum left by a formal state apparatus with limited operational capacity and geographical reach (Loyle et al., 2021). In both case study areas, traditional leaders, notably chiefs and their appointed water custodians, are primarily responsible for the day-to-day management of boreholes and handpumps, arbitrating local disputes, and enforcing community-derived rules on access and maintenance (Michaelsen & Thumfart, 2022). This stands in stark contrast to the described functions of state water agencies, which interviewees consistently characterised as under-resourced, intermittently present, and frequently bypassed by communities in favour of customary systems.

The interplay between these spheres is neither uniformly cooperative nor adversarial. Instances of collaborative synergy were observed, such as in one county where state officials formally recognised customary bylaws to reduce friction, effectively creating a layered governance model. Conversely, overt conflict was documented where state-appointed water management committees, often perceived as politically aligned, attempted to usurp the revenue collection and allocation roles traditionally held by chiefs, leading to standoffs and sporadic violence .

This hybridity directly shapes differentiated access to water. The data illustrates how access is frequently mediated along entrenched social lines; women from certain ethnic groups reported being relegated to lower-priority times at water points, while pastoralist communities described being excluded from settled communities' resources during seasonal migrations, a dynamic that international actors sometimes inadvertently entrench through rigid programming . Thus, water access becomes a tangible manifestation of underlying political and social hierarchies.

## Discussion

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The findings necessitate an interpretation grounded in political science theories of hybrid political orders and institutional competition (Beckley, 2023). The persistent authority of customary institutions in South Sudan's water sector is not a mere governance gap but a deliberate feature of a political order where multiple sources of legitimacy coexist and compete (Facon, 2023). This reflects the unfinished project of statebuilding, where the central state's attempt to extend its bureaucratic reach is constantly negotiated, and sometimes resisted, by localised power structures with deep historical roots .

The hybridity in water governance thus serves as a microcosm of broader state-society relations, revealing a state that is often 'present' in name or through sporadic projects, yet 'absent' in terms of consistent, legitimate service provision. This has profound implications for equity and sustainability. As the results show, hybrid arrangements can entrench existing inequalities, as control over water becomes a tool for political control and social marginalisation .

Furthermore, the lack of a clear, universally recognised regulatory framework raises the risk of water-related conflict resurgence, particularly as competition intensifies due to climatic variability. This presents a fundamental policy dilemma for both national authorities and international partners: engaging

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directly with effective non-state authorities may deliver short-term water access but risks further undermining the formal state's legitimacy and long-term capacity. Conversely, insisting on a purely state-centric model ignores on-the-ground realities and can exacerbate service delivery failures.

Navigating this dilemma requires moving beyond technical solutions to engage with the inherently political nature of water allocation, recognising that in hybrid orders, governance is less about imposing a uniform model and more about managing ongoing negotiation and contestation .

## Conclusion

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This analysis concludes that water security in post-conflict South Sudan is governed through a dynamic and politically charged hybrid system, rather than through a coherent, state-led framework or a purely informal order([Hassan et al., 2021](#)). The research problem centred on understanding how governance functions in the contentious space between formal institutions and local realities; the answer lies in recognising hybridity not as a temporary condition but as the central, enduring mechanism of control and service provision([Lim & Ikenberry, 2023](#)). This system is characterised by constant negotiation between international humanitarian actors, state authorities—often operating through personalist networks as described by Hassan et al. —and local community structures, each leveraging water resources to consolidate political legitimacy and social control.

The findings underscore that post-conflict governance, particularly for a fundamental resource like water, is inherently a contested political project, not merely a technical or administrative challenge. The implications extend well beyond the water sector, offering a critical lens for understanding post-conflict governance beyond Juba's limited sphere of influence([Loyle et al., 2021](#)). It demonstrates how hybrid systems can simultaneously facilitate basic service delivery while entrenching power structures that may undermine long-term state-building and equitable development([Michaelsen & Thumfart, 2022](#)).

As seen in other post-conflict settings where non-state actors fill governance vacuums , the South Sudanese case reveals the peril of international approaches that inadvertently depoliticise essential services, treating water as a humanitarian commodity rather than a cornerstone of political settlement. This depoliticisation, akin to dynamics observed in other crisis contexts , can mask the ways in which control over resources is instrumentalised, potentially sowing seeds for future localised conflict. This study is limited by its primarily synchronic analysis, capturing a complex system at a particular point in time.

A significant avenue for future research would be longitudinal analysis to trace how these hybrid arrangements evolve with shifting political alliances, changing international engagement, and environmental pressures. Furthermore, research could productively examine the digital dimensions of this governance, exploring if emerging technologies become tools for centralised monitoring or community resistance, a relevant concern given global trends in digital transnational reach . For policymakers and practitioners, the analysis offers politically-informed reflections.

Interventions must move beyond technical fixes and explicitly engage with the political economy of water. Supporting water security requires navigating, and consciously shaping, the hybrid order rather than bypassing it to build parallel systems. This entails investing in local governance capacities while fostering accountability mechanisms that check the predatory potential of networked authority.

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Ultimately, sustainable water security in South Sudan will be forged not by ignoring the political contours of governance, but by strategically and ethically engaging with them to build a more inclusive and resilient pact between citizens, the state, and service providers.

## Contributions

This study makes a dual contribution to the literature on post-conflict governance and water security. Empirically, it provides a novel analysis of the hybrid institutional arrangements governing water access in South Sudan between 2021 and 2026, documenting how state and non-state actors negotiate authority in practice.

Theoretically, it advances the concept of ‘hybrid governance’ by demonstrating how these emergent, often informal, systems directly shape the delivery of a critical resource, moving beyond a focus solely on political or security institutions. The findings offer a framework for policymakers to engage constructively with existing hybrid orders rather than imposing external blueprints.

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