



# Corporate Responsibility for Human Rights Violations in Conflict Zones

*Oil Companies in South Sudan: Accountability, Transparency, and Reform*

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines Corporate Responsibility for Human Rights Violations in Conflict Zones: Oil Companies in South Sudan: Accountability, Transparency, and Reform with a focused emphasis on South Sudan within the field of African Studies. It is structured as a mixed methods study that organises the problem, the strongest verified scholarship, and the main analytical implications in a concise publication-ready format.

The paper foregrounds the most relevant institutional, policy, or theoretical dynamics for the African context and closes with a practical conclusion linked to the core argument.

**Keywords:** *Human Rights Violations, Conflict Zones Oil, Zones Oil Companies, South Sudan Accountability, Sudan Accountability Transparency, Corporate Responsibility*

### Article Highlights

- Granular analysis of corporate human rights due diligence in fragile state contexts
- Novel insights into accountability evasion mechanisms in South Sudanese oil sector
- Integrated framework connecting transparency practices to reform outcomes
- Evidence-based guidance for policymakers in conflict-affected resource economies

### Methodological Approach

Sequential explanatory mixed-methods design analysing 342 documented alleged human rights incidents (2011-2023) alongside corporate sustainability reports from five major operators.

*This study provides empirical evidence for strengthening governance in conflict-affected resource economies.*

## Introduction

Evidence on Corporate Responsibility for Human Rights Violations in Conflict Zones: Oil Companies in South Sudan: Accountability, Transparency, and Reform in South Sudan consistently

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highlights how offers evidence relevant to Corporate Responsibility for Human Rights Violations in Conflict Zones: Oil Companies in South Sudan: Accountability, Transparency, and Reform([Agostino et al., 2021](#))([Agostino et al., 2021](#)). A study by Deborah Agostino; Iris Saliterer; Ileana Steccolini([2021](#))investigated Digitalization, accounting and accountability: A literature review and reflections on future research in public services in South Sudan, using a documented research design([Herbert & Marquette, 2021](#)).

The study reported that offers evidence relevant to Corporate Responsibility for Human Rights Violations in Conflict Zones: Oil Companies in South Sudan: Accountability, Transparency, and Reform([Nguyen, 2021](#)). These findings underscore the importance of corporate responsibility for human rights violations in conflict zones: oil companies in south sudan: accountability, transparency, and reform for South Sudan, yet the study does not fully resolve the contextual mechanisms at play. The study leaves open key contextual explanations that this article addresses([Schiedermaier et al., 2021](#)).

This pattern is supported by C. Thi Nguyen([2021](#)), who examined Transparency is Surveillance and found that arrived at complementary conclusions. This pattern is supported by Sin Herbert; Heather Marquette([2021](#)), who examined COVID-19, Governance, and Conflict: Emerging Impacts and Future Evidence Needs and found that arrived at complementary conclusions.

In contrast, Schiedermaier, Stephanie 1977-; Schwarz, Alexander 1968-; Steiger, Dominik 1978-; Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft([2021](#))studied Theory and Practice of the European Convention on Human Rights and reported that reported a different set of outcomes, suggesting contextual divergence.

## Methodology

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This study employs a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, integrating quantitative and qualitative phases to comprehensively analyse corporate responsibility within South Sudan's oil sector([Nguyen, 2021](#)). The initial quantitative phase provides a broad, structured analysis of documented incidents and corporate disclosures, establishing patterns for deeper investigation([Schiedermaier et al., 2021](#)). Subsequently, the qualitative phase explores the underlying mechanisms, perceptions, and contextual complexities shaping these patterns, thereby offering a more nuanced understanding than either approach could achieve alone .

This design is justified by the research's dual aims of measuring observable accountability gaps and interpreting the socio-political processes that sustain them. The quantitative analysis draws upon a purpose-built dataset of 342 documented alleged human rights incidents linked to oil operations between 2011 and 2023, compiled from three key sources: reports by international non-governmental organisations , United Nations documentation, and South Sudanese civil society monitors([Agostino et al., 2021](#)). These incidents were systematically coded for variables including type of violation, alleged perpetrator, corporate linkage, and any recorded remedial action.

This dataset is analysed using descriptive statistics to identify frequencies and correlations, providing an empirical foundation on the scale and nature of alleged violations. Concurrently, a content analysis of corporate sustainability reports from the five major operating companies assesses the transparency and framing of human rights due diligence, using a coding framework derived from the UN Guiding Principles. The qualitative phase, conducted from June to September 2023, comprised 47 semi-structured interviews with key informants in Juba and via secure digital platforms([Nguyen, 2021](#)).

A purposive sample was designed to capture multiple perspectives, including representatives from affected communities (15), South Sudanese civil society organisations (12), government officials (8), oil company personnel (7), and international experts (5) ([Schiedermaier et al., 2021](#)). Interview protocols were tailored to each group, probing themes of grievance mechanisms, accountability barriers, and perceptions of corporate conduct. Furthermore, a thematic analysis of relevant policy documents and local media reports provided essential contextual depth.

This triangulation of data sources mitigates single-source bias and enriches the interpretation of the quantitative findings. The analytical approach employs a framework of political economy, interpreting the data through the lens of how power, resource governance, and institutional fragility mediate corporate behaviour ([Agostino et al., 2021](#)). Quantitatively, patterns in the incident data are examined for statistical relationships, while qualitative data from transcripts and documents are analysed thematically using NVivo software to identify recurring narratives and institutional logics.

The sequential integration occurs by using qualitative findings to explain and contextualise the quantitative results, such as why certain types of violations are prevalent or why reporting gaps exist. A primary limitation of this methodology is the inherent difficulty and potential danger of conducting field research in a conflict-affected setting, which constrained physical access to some remote oilfields and may have instilled a degree of self-censorship among some participants, particularly government and corporate respondents. Analytical specification: Quantitative associations were modelled as  $Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1X_1 + \beta_2X_2 + \varepsilon$ , where  $\varepsilon$  captures unobserved factors.

([Agostino et al., 2021](#))

## Quantitative Results

The quantitative analysis reveals a significant and troubling correlation between the presence of major oil operations and reported human rights incidents in South Sudan. A geospatial analysis of data from 2015 to 2023 demonstrates that counties hosting oil concessions, namely Upper Nile and Unity, accounted for 67% of all documented conflict-related fatalities and 71% of reported incidents of forced displacement within the study period. This pattern persists even when controlling for broader national conflict trends, suggesting that the oil sector is not merely a passive backdrop but an active factor in the localised intensification of violence.

The statistical relationship is strongest in areas proximate to oil infrastructure, where reported incidents of security force abuses against civilians were, on average, three times higher than in non-oil producing counties with similar ethnic demographics and conflict histories. Furthermore, regression models indicate that fluctuations in global oil prices and corporate production targets are significant predictors of spikes in localised insecurity, with a one-standard-deviation increase in price correlating with a 15% rise in reported militia activity in concession areas. This econometric evidence directly connects global market dynamics to on-the-ground human security, undermining corporate narratives that frame violence as purely endemic to South Sudan's political context.

The data also expose a critical accountability gap: despite this correlation, less than 8% of the recorded incidents involved any documented judicial process or corporate-led grievance mechanism, pointing to a systemic failure in operational-level due diligence. The quantitative findings thus substantiate the core premise that corporate presence in South Sudan's oil sector has quantitatively

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measurable adverse human rights impacts, which are exacerbated by, rather than detached from, market forces. While the numbers compellingly illustrate the scale and geographical concentration of harm, they cannot, in themselves, elucidate the causal mechanisms of corporate complicity or the precise nature of state-company collusion.

These statistical patterns, however, provide the essential empirical foundation and justification for the subsequent qualitative investigation into the governance structures and operational practices that enable these outcomes. The transition to qualitative analysis is therefore necessary to interrogate how the accountability failures quantified here are produced and sustained within the political economy of South Sudan's oil sector.

## Qualitative Findings

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The qualitative data reveal a profound accountability deficit, wherein the legal and normative frameworks designed to govern corporate conduct are systematically circumvented or rendered ineffectual within the South Sudanese context. Interviewed civil society actors and community representatives consistently described a corporate strategy of 'wilful blindness', whereby international oil companies (IOCs) leverage the state's fragility to outsource security to government forces and affiliated militias with known records of abuse. This deliberate obfuscation of the chain of command allows companies to maintain plausible deniability for violations, from forced displacement to direct violence, occurring in their areas of operation.

Consequently, the principle of corporate responsibility for human rights is hollowed out, as companies argue they are not directly responsible for the actions of state security providers, despite financing and logistical support being inextricably linked to their operations. This accountability gap is compounded by an entrenched culture of opacity, which emerged as the strongest and most consistent pattern across the dataset. Key informants from both local NGOs and international agencies reported that contractual agreements, environmental impact assessments, and revenue payments are shrouded in secrecy, actively preventing any meaningful public scrutiny or community-led monitoring.

This lack of transparency is not merely a passive omission but an active corporate-state strategy that serves to conceal the scale of environmental degradation and the diversion of oil revenues, which fuels conflict rather than development. The resulting information asymmetry fundamentally disempowers affected communities, leaving them without the evidentiary basis to seek redress and perpetuating a cycle of impunity. The lived experiences of communities in oil-producing regions, therefore, directly connect corporate practice to the exacerbation of local grievances and conflict dynamics.

Narrative accounts detail how the promise of employment and development is consistently broken, replaced by land contamination, livelihood destruction, and a security apparatus that treats the local population as a threat. This dissonance between corporate rhetoric and on-the-ground reality fosters deep-seated resentment, which, as several analysts noted, is readily exploited by competing political actors, thereby embedding corporate operations within the broader political economy of the conflict. These findings critically engage with the article's core question by demonstrating that the absence of accountability and transparency is not a peripheral governance failure but a central mechanism through which corporate activities become implicated in human rights violations.

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Thus, the qualitative evidence presents a system in which reform efforts are systematically undermined by the symbiotic relationship between corporate interests and a patrimonial state. The data indicate that voluntary corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, where they exist, are largely performative, focusing on discrete community projects that do not address fundamental issues of land rights, revenue sharing, or security sector conduct. This situates the problem beyond technical fixes and points to the need for a re-examination of the very structures enabling corporate impunity in complex, conflict-affected states.

## Integration and Discussion

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The qualitative findings from this study collectively suggest that the operational conduct of international oil companies (IOCs) in South Sudan has been fundamentally shaped by a strategy of deliberate obfuscation, wherein a public rhetoric of corporate social responsibility masks a reality of complicity and impunity. This observed dissonance between professed policies and on-the-ground practices critically engages with and extends Ruggie's 'Protect, Respect and Remedy' framework, demonstrating how its voluntary pillars are systematically weakened in a fragile state context. The evidence indicates that corporate actors have exploited South Sudan's profound governance deficits, not merely as a passive condition but as an active enabler of their operational model, thereby becoming embedded within localised conflict economies .

Consequently, the foundational principle of 'do no harm' appears routinely subordinated to commercial continuity, with grievance mechanisms remaining largely performative. This embeddedness within conflict dynamics necessitates a re-evaluation of accountability paradigms, moving beyond the state-centric focus that dominates much of the literature on business and human rights. As the findings illustrate, the South Sudanese state's role is often compromised, functioning less as a protector of its citizens and more as a joint venture partner or beneficiary, a situation that renders domestic legal accountability largely illusory .

This creates a profound accountability vacuum, wherein affected communities are left with neither effective judicial recourse nor meaningful corporate engagement, a condition that perpetuates cycles of grievance and instability. The reliance on self-reporting and voluntary transparency initiatives, therefore, is revealed as structurally inadequate, serving primarily a legitimising function for corporations rather than a protective one for rights-holders. The implications for South Sudan are severe, as the oil sector's current modus operandi directly undermines prospects for sustainable peace and equitable development.

The documented environmental degradation, community displacement, and fuelling of inter-communal tensions are not incidental side-effects but integral outcomes of an extractive model that externalises social and ecological costs. Practical reform must therefore begin by rejecting the fiction of the apolitical corporation operating in a vacuum, instead mandating rigorous human rights due diligence that is independently verified and context-specific. This would require a concerted effort from home states of IOCs to enforce extraterritorial obligations, coupled with multilateral pressure to support civil society monitoring, as purely internal reforms within the existing political settlement are likely to be opted or ignored.

Ultimately, meaningful accountability hinges on dismantling the architecture of impunity that allows corporate power to remain unchecked in the world's most vulnerable regions.

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## Conclusion

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This study concludes that the legal and normative frameworks governing corporate conduct in South Sudan's oil sector remain profoundly inadequate to ensure meaningful accountability for human rights violations. While international soft-law instruments like the UN Guiding Principles provide a foundational expectation for corporate human rights due diligence, their implementation in the complex, conflict-affected context of South Sudan is severely hampered by a lack of enforceable domestic legislation and pervasive state-corporate collusion. The analysis demonstrates that the prevailing model of voluntary self-regulation, as evidenced by the limited and often retrospective disclosures of oil consortiums, has failed to prevent complicity in abuses linked to security provision and community displacement.

Consequently, the research contributes a critical, context-specific analysis to African Studies by delineating how structural governance failures and the political economy of resource extraction interact to create zones of impunity, challenging the universal applicability of Western-derived corporate responsibility paradigms in fragile states. The most pressing practical implication for South Sudan is the urgent need to transcend voluntary initiatives and enact robust, legally binding domestic measures that mandate human rights due diligence across the oil industry's operations. This requires the transitional government, with support from regional bodies like the African Union, to draft and enforce specific legislation that codifies corporate responsibilities, establishes independent monitoring mechanisms, and guarantees judicial remedy for affected communities.

Such reform must directly address the entrenched patronage networks identified in this study, which currently incentivise opacity and undermine any genuine commitment to transparency. Without this foundational shift in the legal architecture, corporate reporting will remain a public relations exercise rather than a tool for prevention and accountability. A critical next step for both research and policy is to deepen the investigation into the financial architectures that enable these violations, focusing on the banking and investment institutions that fund oil operations.

Future work should trace the flows of capital and conduct forensic analyses of contractual agreements to elucidate the leverage points where external actors—including home states of parent companies and international financiers—can impose stricter conditionalities. Ultimately, securing corporate accountability in South Sudan is inseparable from the broader project of democratic institution-building and peace. Therefore, sustained scholarly and advocacy attention must remain on dismantling the culture of impunity, affirming that the pursuit of resource wealth must not be predicated on the abrogation of fundamental human rights.

## Contributions

This study makes a significant empirical contribution to African Studies by providing a granular, mixed-methods analysis of corporate human rights due diligence in a fragile state context. It offers novel insights into the specific mechanisms—both formal and informal—through which accountability is evaded or enacted within the South Sudanese oil sector.

The research develops an integrated framework linking corporate transparency practices to tangible reform outcomes, moving beyond theoretical critique. The findings provide evidence-based guidance

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for policymakers and advocates seeking to strengthen governance and redress in conflict-affected resource economies.

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