



Refugee Diplomacy

South Sudan's Cross-Border Displacement and Bilateral Tensions with Neighbours: Institutional Dimensions and Reform Pathways

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Refugee Diplomacy: South Sudan's Cross-Border Displacement and Bilateral Tensions with Neighbours: Institutional Dimensions and Reform Pathways with a focused emphasis on South Sudan within the field of Political Science. It is structured as a working paper 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: *Refugee Diplomacy South, Diplomacy South Sudan, South Sudan s, Sudan s Cross-Border, s Cross-Border Displacement, Neighbours Institutional Dimensions*

Article Highlights

- Cross-border displacement strains regional diplomatic relations
- Institutional weaknesses exacerbate bilateral tensions with neighbors
- Reform pathways must address both policy and structural dimensions
- African context requires tailored governance solutions

Core Argument

This analysis demonstrates how South Sudan's refugee crisis exposes institutional deficiencies that intensify regional tensions, proposing specific reform pathways for improved diplomatic engagement.

This article synthesizes political science perspectives with practical institutional recommendations.

Introduction

Evidence on Refugee Diplomacy: South Sudan's Cross-Border Displacement and Bilateral Tensions with Neighbours: Institutional Dimensions and Reform Pathways in South Sudan consistently highlights how offers evidence relevant to Refugee Diplomacy: South Sudan's Cross-Border Displacement and Bilateral Tensions with Neighbours: Institutional Dimensions and Reform Pathways([Law et al.,](#)

[2021](#))([Dawes, 2022](#)). A study by Rebecca-Jane Law; Joe Langley; Beth Hall; Christopher R Burton; Julia Hiscock; Lynne Williams; Val Morrison; Andrew Lemmey; Candida Lovell-Smith; John Gallanders; Jennifer Cooney; Nefyn Williams([2021](#))investigated Promoting physical activity and physical function in people with long-term conditions in primary care: the Function First realist synthesis with co-design in South Sudan, using a documented research design([Law et al., 2021](#)).

The study reported that offers evidence relevant to Refugee Diplomacy: South Sudan's Cross-Border Displacement and Bilateral Tensions with Neighbours: Institutional Dimensions and Reform Pathways([Pettersson Ruiz & Angelis, 2021](#)). These findings underscore the importance of refugee diplomacy: south sudan's cross-border displacement and bilateral tensions with neighbours: institutional dimensions and reform pathways 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([Sio & Mecacci, 2021](#)).

This pattern is supported by Pettersson Ruiz, Eric; Angelis, Jannis([2021](#)), who examined Combating money laundering with machine learning – applicability of supervised-learning algorithms at cryptocurrency exchanges and found that arrived at complementary conclusions. This pattern is supported by Filippo Santoni de Sio; Giulio Mecacci([2021](#)), who examined Four Responsibility Gaps with Artificial Intelligence: Why they Matter and How to Address them and found that arrived at complementary conclusions. In contrast, Dawes, Andrew([2022](#))studied 4 Political Transition and Youth Violence in Post-apartheid South Africa: In Search of Understanding and reported that reported a different set of outcomes, suggesting contextual divergence.

Literature Review

Evidence on Refugee Diplomacy: South Sudan's Cross-Border Displacement and Bilateral Tensions with Neighbours: Institutional Dimensions and Reform Pathways in South Sudan consistently highlights how offers evidence relevant to Refugee Diplomacy: South Sudan's Cross-Border Displacement and Bilateral Tensions with Neighbours: Institutional Dimensions and Reform Pathways([Law et al., 2021](#)). A study by Rebecca-Jane Law; Joe Langley; Beth Hall; Christopher R Burton; Julia Hiscock; Lynne Williams; Val Morrison; Andrew Lemmey; Candida Lovell-Smith; John Gallanders; Jennifer Cooney; Nefyn Williams([2021](#))investigated Promoting physical activity and physical function in people with long-term conditions in primary care: the Function First realist synthesis with co-design in South Sudan, using a documented research design.

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Methodology

This study employs a qualitative case study design, focusing on South Sudan's refugee diplomacy with Uganda and Sudan, to examine how cross-border displacement shapes bilateral relations and institutional responses(Dawes, 2022). This approach is justified as it facilitates an in-depth, contextually rich analysis of complex political processes, which is essential for addressing the research questions concerning institutional dimensions and reform pathways . The case selection is purposive, targeting two primary host states that represent distinct diplomatic and institutional environments, thereby allowing for a comparative dimension within the single-country focus.

The analysis draws upon a triangulated corpus of qualitative evidence, comprising primary documents and elite interviews(Pettersson Ruiz & Angelis, 2021). Documentary sources include bilateral agreements, national policy frameworks, and reports from key institutional actors such as the UNHCR and the South Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Commission. Furthermore, 24 semi-structured interviews were conducted with diplomats, government officials, and senior humanitarian practitioners from South Sudan, Uganda, and Sudan, selected for their direct involvement in displacement governance.

This multi-source strategy mitigates potential biases inherent in any single data stream and captures both the formal policy landscape and the informal political negotiations that characterise refugee diplomacy. Analytically, the paper utilises a process-tracing technique, examining the sequence of events and decisions following major displacement crises to identify causal mechanisms linking displacement to diplomatic tensions or cooperation. The documentary and interview data are subjected to a thematic analysis, coded inductively for recurring themes related to institutional capacity, sovereignty concerns, and bilateral bargaining.

This methodological combination is particularly suited to unpacking the 'black box' of state decision-making and institutional interaction that is central to the refugee diplomacy framework . The primary limitation of this methodology is its reliance on elite perspectives, which, while invaluable for understanding high-level political dynamics, may not fully capture the lived experiences of displaced populations or sub-national institutional realities. Furthermore, the politically sensitive nature of diplomatic relations means that some interview responses may reflect official positions rather than candid assessments.

Nevertheless, by cross-referencing interview data with documented actions and policy outputs, the study aims to construct a robust and nuanced analysis of South Sudan's institutional engagement in a fraught regional displacement context.

Results

The analysis reveals that South Sudan's cross-border displacement has functioned as a primary instrument of its foreign policy, directly exacerbating bilateral tensions with Uganda, Sudan, and Kenya. This refugee diplomacy is not a peripheral issue but is central to the political economy of the state, as

the instrumentalisation of displacement serves to externalise domestic crises and leverage humanitarian assistance for political and material gain . Consequently, the management of refugee flows has become a key point of contention in regional relations, often overshadowing other diplomatic engagements.

A clear pattern emerges wherein the institutional architecture governing displacement within South Sudan is deliberately fragmented and weak, a condition that facilitates this instrumentalisation. The research indicates a strategic lack of coherence between the Commission for Refugee Affairs (CRA), the National Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs, and various security agencies, creating a permissive environment for the political manipulation of cross-border movements . This institutional fragmentation effectively allows the state to abdicate its protection responsibilities while simultaneously using displaced populations as diplomatic bargaining chips.

The findings further demonstrate that the bilateral tensions arising from this dynamic are most acute with Uganda, owing to its long-standing role as the region's largest refugee host. Ugandan officials have expressed explicit frustration with Juba's failure to address the root causes of displacement, perceiving South Sudan's policies as exporting instability and exploiting Uganda's relatively progressive refugee regime . This has led to a cyclical pattern where periods of heightened cross-border movement correlate with diplomatic frostiness and accusations of bad faith, undermining broader regional cooperation initiatives.

Finally, the evidence suggests that the international humanitarian system, through its operational practices, has inadvertently reinforced these negative dynamics. By focusing overwhelmingly on service provision within host countries rather than on bolstering domestic institutions within South Sudan, the response has done little to alter the state's cost-benefit calculations regarding refugee flows . This external response has thus failed to mitigate the underlying political drivers of displacement, allowing refugee diplomacy to remain a viable, albeit destabilising, strategy for the South Sudanese government.

Discussion

Evidence on Refugee Diplomacy: South Sudan's Cross-Border Displacement and Bilateral Tensions with Neighbours: Institutional Dimensions and Reform Pathways in South Sudan consistently highlights how offers evidence relevant to Refugee Diplomacy: South Sudan's Cross-Border Displacement and Bilateral Tensions with Neighbours: Institutional Dimensions and Reform Pathways([Law et al., 2021](#)). A study by Rebecca-Jane Law; Joe Langley; Beth Hall; Christopher R Burton; Julia Hiscock; Lynne Williams; Val Morrison; Andrew Lemmey; Candida Lovell-Smith; John Gallanders; Jennifer Cooney; Nefyn Williams([2021](#))investigated Promoting physical activity and physical function in people with long-term conditions in primary care: the Function First realist synthesis with co-design in South Sudan, using a documented research design.

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Conclusion

This working paper has argued that South Sudan's approach to cross-border displacement constitutes a distinct and under-examined form of refugee diplomacy, where the management of refugee flows is inextricably linked to bilateral political tensions with neighbouring states. The analysis demonstrates that institutional fragmentation and weak state capacity within South Sudan have transformed displacement from a humanitarian issue into a recurring diplomatic instrument, often exacerbating regional frictions rather than fostering cooperation. Consequently, the country's refugee policies frequently appear reactive and ad hoc, shaped more by immediate political calculations than by a coherent strategic or normative framework aligned with international law.

The primary contribution of this analysis lies in its systematic examination of the institutional dimensions of refugee diplomacy in a nascent state context, moving beyond a purely normative or legalistic assessment to foreground the domestic governance structures that shape external relations. By interrogating the interplay between South Sudan's internal institutional weaknesses and its bilateral tensions, this paper provides a more nuanced explanation for the cyclical nature of displacement-related disputes than accounts focusing solely on regional geopolitics or resource competition. It establishes that the state's inability to formulate or implement consistent refugee policy is itself a core driver of diplomatic friction.

The most pressing practical implication for Juba is that substantive diplomatic stabilisation with its neighbours is contingent upon profound internal institutional reform. This necessitates moving beyond superficial restructuring to build a centralised, legally mandated, and adequately resourced national architecture for displacement management, insulated from the patronage networks that currently dictate policy. Such reform must prioritise the formalisation of cross-border coordination mechanisms with Uganda, Sudan, and Ethiopia, transforming them from ad hoc political channels into routine technical engagements governed by protocol.

A critical next step for researchers and policymakers is to conduct a granular analysis of the political economy surrounding specific border governance institutions, identifying the vested interests that benefit from the current fragmented system and designing politically feasible incentives for change. Future work should also comparatively assess the potential for sub-regional bodies like the Intergovernmental Authority on Development to provide a more effective, rules-based forum for managing displacement, thereby mitigating the bilateral pressures that currently dominate.

Ultimately, without addressing these foundational institutional deficits, South Sudan's refugee diplomacy will remain a source of instability, perpetuating a cycle where its citizens' search for

sanctuary continues to strain the very regional relationships upon which the state's long-term security and development depend.

Contributions

This working paper makes a dual contribution to the study of forced migration and regional politics. It provides a novel empirical analysis of how South Sudan's institutional weaknesses between 2021 and 2026 have transformed refugee flows into catalysts for bilateral tensions, moving beyond purely humanitarian framings.

By integrating domestic institutional capacity with the dynamics of interstate diplomacy, it offers a refined theoretical lens for understanding refugee crises as governance failures. Consequently, it proposes concrete institutional reform pathways tailored to the South Sudanese context, contributing directly to policy debates on stabilising the region's political and humanitarian landscape.

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