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Unlocking Post-Conflict Resilience: Pathways to Sustainable Peacebuilding, Institutional Reform, and Economic Reconstruction in South Sudan

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Abstract

South Sudan, the world's youngest nation, continues to grapple with the legacy of prolonged civil conflict, which has resulted in pervasive instability, weak institutions, and ongoing humanitarian crises. The persistent volatility in political, social, and economic spheres has made the quest for sustainable peace particularly complex, highlighting the urgent need for evidence-based strategies. This study systematically explores the primary barriers and potential pathways to peacebuilding in post-conflict South Sudan. Employing an exploratory mixed-methods approach, the research collected comprehensive empirical data from 169 stakeholders, comprising government officials, NGO practitioners, traders, and scholars, through structured and semi-structured questionnaires. SPSS version 24 was used for quantitative analysis to ensure rigor and reliability. Findings reveal that weak strategic planning and the lack of a shared national vision, both cited by 63% of respondents ($p < 0.001$), stand out as the most critical obstacles, largely attributed to inadequate institutional arrangements (45%) and inefficient financial mechanisms (18%). Nonetheless, economic reconstruction was identified as the foremost opportunity for sustainable peace (50.3%), followed closely by security sector reform and social reconstruction. Respondents emphasized that robust, context-sensitive implementation frameworks (63%) and transparent, accountable governance partnerships (52%) between state and international actors are essential for progress. The study concludes that integrating state-building with localized economic stabilization, reinforcing institutional capacity, and establishing co-managed accountability mechanisms are vital steps for overcoming elite-driven fragmentation, restoring public trust, and fostering lasting peace in South Sudan. These insights offer practical guidance for policymakers, international partners, and local actors committed to supporting the nation's transition from conflict to sustainable development.

Keywords

Post-Conflict Peacebuilding, Economic Reconstruction, Institutional Governance, Conflict Transformation, State Fragility, South Sudan

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1. Introduction

Peacebuilding in post-conflict societies is inherently complex and requires coordinating security, governance, economic recovery, and social reconciliation [9]. In South Sudan, these challenges are compounded by a legacy of prolonged conflict, deep-seated ethnic divisions, and fragile state institutions [3]. While traditional peacebuilding often focuses on top-down state-centric models, scholars argue that such approaches frequently fail to account for the unique socio-political features of South Sudanese society, such as the persistent "conflict trap" created by group-identity issues and competition over land and resources [7, 33]. Recent contributions highlight the critical importance of insider perspectives and bottom-up initiatives for sustainable peace [4].

The Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan, signed in 2018, was designed to provide a comprehensive framework for ending hostilities. Yet, experts describe its implementation as the "politics of delay" [48]. Critical provisions, including army unification and the establishment of transitional justice institutions, remain significantly behind schedule [33]. This sluggish implementation breeds uncertainty and is often attributed to a lack of political goodwill and to ruling elites prioritizing power preservation over genuine reform [25, 48].

A major structural impediment to lasting peace is widespread institutional weakness, which some researchers characterize as "elite-managed fragmentation". In this model, ruling elites may deliberately maintain weak institutions to preserve their own power and control over resources [10]. This institutional vacuum hinders the state's capacity to provide security and basic services, leading to a reliance on informal rules of elite enrichment and exclusion that mirror the governance failures seen in other fragile states like the Democratic Republic of Congo [37].

Beyond governance, South Sudan faces severe economic and social hurdles that threaten to destabilize the fragile peace. The country has struggled with hyperinflation, which ranged between 64% and 109% in 2019, and a rising debt-to-GDP ratio that limits the government's ability to meet citizens' needs. Furthermore, the humanitarian crisis remains dire, with millions of civilians still living as refugees and localized violence such as cattle rustling and inter-communal disputes persisting despite the formal cessation of national-level conflict [3].

Recent comparative studies emphasize that progress toward post-conflict resilience in South Sudan must be understood within the broader global context of peacebuilding. [26] argue that prevailing liberal peacebuilding paradigms are increasingly inadequate in today's multipolar global order, where traditional donor-driven models often fail to accommodate both new geopolitical actors and local complexities. Their research advocates for a more inclusive and adaptive framework that integrates both global standards and indigenous approaches, a perspective echoed by [49], who highlight the overlooked intersection of environmental sustainability and peacebuilding. They demonstrate that in fragile states, neglecting environmental and livelihood considerations can undermine even the most well-intentioned peace initiatives, suggesting that peacebuilding in South Sudan requires holistic, cross-sectoral strategies that account for environmental, economic, and social dimensions.

Zooming in to the continental and regional levels, scholars such as [3] and [22] point out that African-led peacebuilding mechanisms, including the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), have achieved only partial success in South Sudan. These regional efforts often struggle with limited mandate, inconsistent funding, and the persistent challenge of elite-driven politics that circumvent accountability mechanisms. The literature underscores that without robust regional cooperation and sustained external support, country-level reforms are unlikely to take root or achieve meaningful scale.

At the national level, empirical research by [6] and [21] highlights an urgent need to recalibrate peacebuilding strategies toward local realities. Bill's mixed-methods assessment reveals a disconnect between the perceived benefits of international support and the actual integration of security sector reform with socio-economic development. Similarly, Garang's work on localized peacebuilding initiatives shows that bottom-up approaches, grounded in community-led dialogue and locally tailored interventions, are more likely to yield lasting results. This evidence suggests that moving beyond state-centric, top-down models, by empowering local actors and building institutional capacity at the grassroots, is critical for bridging the persistent gap between formal agreements and everyday realities.

Finally, current studies increasingly call attention to the role of non-state actors and inclusive leadership in promoting resilience. [30] demonstrate that non-state actors, including women's groups, faith-based organizations, and traditional authorities play a pivotal role in shaping governance and influencing the trajectory of foreign aid. Meanwhile, [11] provides quantitative evidence that inclusive leadership practices within the public sector improve motivation, job performance, and overall organizational culture, which are vital for navigating institutional fragility. These findings collectively support a funnel-shaped analysis: from global theoretical debates to regional and national implementation, culminating in locally driven, inclusive, and context-sensitive peacebuilding solutions for South Sudan.

Statement of the Problem

Despite unprecedented levels of international investment and the formal commitment embodied in the 2018 Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), the reality on the ground remains starkly at odds with the country's peacebuilding ambitions.

Ideally, the signing of R-ARCSS and the influx of foreign aid should have ushered in a period of sustained peace, institutional reform, and economic recovery, leading to improved security, the return of displaced populations, and the stabilization of livelihoods [26]. In practice, however, peacebuilding outcomes have been underwhelming: the transitional period has been extended several times amid what experts describe as a persistent "politics of delay" [33, 48]. As a result, South Sudan faces a catastrophic humanitarian situation: by 2019, approximately 4.3 million people remained displaced (1.9 million internally and 2.4 million as refugees), and hyperinflation rates ranging from 64% to 109% have eroded purchasing power, plunging around 8.3 million people into urgent need [3, 35]. The persistence of these crises points to a broader pattern of "elite-managed fragmentation," where ruling elites deliberately maintain institutional weaknesses to serve their interests, thereby undermining national stability and derailing reform [10, 37].

This disconnect between the ideal and the real underscores a critical problem: existing peacebuilding interventions have not produced the intended impacts, despite substantial resources and international oversight. While the literature provides thorough accounts of the origins and drivers of South Sudan's civil war [7, 24], there is a notable research gap regarding the specific mechanisms through which elite interests, weak institutions, and fragmented governance continue to impede the transition from conflict to peace. Most studies to date have centered on state-centric or top-down models of peacebuilding, which often overlook persistent localized drivers of violence, such as inter-communal disputes, cattle raiding, and resource-based conflicts, that flourish even after the conclusion of national agreements [14, 17, 21]. Additionally, little empirical work has been done to assess how the unique operational landscape and emergent institutional practices in South Sudan either facilitate or hinder the realization of peacebuilding objectives [6, 25].

Thus, the core problem addressed by this study is the persistent gap between the expectations of the international community and the lived realities faced by diverse local stakeholders in South Sudan. By systematically investigating the challenges encountered in implementing peacebuilding strategies, from the perspectives of government, civil society, and affected communities, this research aims to identify both structural barriers (such as institutional fragmentation and economic instability) and agency-based obstacles (including elite manipulation and weak local ownership) that constrain the country's pathway to resilient, sustainable peace [21, 33]. This evidence-based approach not only clarifies the limitations of current peacebuilding efforts but also highlights the urgent need for context-sensitive, stakeholder-driven solutions that address the root causes of South Sudan's protracted instability.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Framework

2.1.1. Liberal Peacebuilding Theory

Liberal Peacebuilding Theory, advanced by [16] and [19], proposes that sustainable peace is best achieved by transforming conflict-affected states into stable, market-oriented democracies with robust institutions and the rule of law. This theory is highly relevant to South Sudan, as it underpins many international peacebuilding interventions by emphasizing democratization, economic integration, and the creation of a rule-based order [40-42]. Its key strength lies in offering a comprehensive vision for stability, rooted in institutional reform and human rights protections.

Despite these ambitions, critics highlight the theory's top-down, externally driven approach, which often results in limited local ownership and ineffective implementation in societies with complex local dynamics [5, 23]. The imposition of foreign models may fail to resonate with local realities, leading to superficial reforms that overlook deep-rooted grievances. As a mitigation, scholars such as [29, 42] advocate a hybrid, post-liberal approach that integrates international standards with local agency and contextual knowledge, aiming for genuine participation and legitimacy.

Proposed hypothesis: Peacebuilding efforts in South Sudan are most effective when international frameworks are adapted to local realities, balancing global principles with indigenous agency and ownership.

2.1.2. Conflict Transformation Theory

Conflict Transformation Theory, pioneered by [27, 28, 47], and [20], shifts the peacebuilding paradigm from merely ending violence to fundamentally transforming relationships, institutions, and narratives that sustain conflict. Especially pertinent to South Sudan, this theory acknowledges that deep-seated grievances, identity divisions, and historical injustices perpetuate instability. Its core strength is a holistic, bottom-up approach that prioritizes reconciliation and restoration of social networks for long-term peace [17, 29].

However, Conflict Transformation Theory can struggle with practical implementation, particularly in volatile or resource-constrained settings, as it tends to deliver results slowly and may underestimate the role of elites or structural economic factors [38, 43]. To address these shortcomings, scholars recommend a contingency or hybrid approach, bridging grassroots initiatives with formal state structures and engaging both traditional and official leaders to tailor peace efforts to the specific context [32].

Proposed hypothesis: Community-driven, relationship-focused approaches to peacebuilding, when effectively linked with formal governance, are more likely to produce resilient and enduring peace in South Sudan.

2.2. State Fragility Theory

State Fragility Theory, as articulated by [44] and [12], defines a fragile state as one unable to provide security, essential services, or political representation to its citizens. In South Sudan, the theory is directly relevant, as persistent institutional weakness and elite-driven governance remain central barriers to peace and reconstruction. Its strength is its diagnostic clarity, pinpointing institutional and governance failures as key drivers of instability [3, 12, 18, 24].

Yet, the theory is sometimes criticized for encouraging external interventionism and perpetuating a "fragility trap", where international efforts reinforce elite capture or undermine local sovereignty [18, 41]. Its technocratic focus can sideline indigenous institutions and neglect the need for local agency and trust-building. To mitigate this, contemporary scholarship recommends empowering homegrown institutions, emphasizing human security, and supporting community-driven governance reforms for resilience [32, 43, 45].

Proposed hypothesis: Building resilient peace and effective reconstruction in South Sudan depends on addressing state fragility through inclusive, locally led institutional reforms and governance strategies.

3. Empirical Reviews

Recent empirical research on post-conflict South Sudan presents a multifaceted but fragmented picture of peacebuilding outcomes. [6] establishes that while international support for security sector reform (SSR) can yield measurable progress, these initiatives are rarely harmonized with broader economic and social reconstruction efforts. The result is a patchwork of security gains that fail to catalyze systemic transformation or enable displaced populations to rebuild livelihoods. Notably, Bill's work also exposes how divergent priorities among international actors can generate competition rather than synergy, further diluting the efficacy of aid. [30] extend the empirical conversation by examining the informal power wielded by non-state actors, including traditional chiefs, women's associations, and youth groups. Their findings underscore the inadequacy of state-centric peacebuilding models, pointing out that these actors often mediate local disputes and distribute aid more effectively than formal institutions. However, the absence of formal mechanisms to harness this influence leaves a gap in translating grassroots legitimacy into national policy impact. Similarly, [11] provide evidence that inclusive leadership practices in the public sector can boost motivation and performance, yet note that entrenched patronage networks and weak accountability structures limit the scalability of such reforms.

Expanding the analytical lens, comparative and conceptual studies by [26] and [49] critique the rigidity of liberal peacebuilding approaches and the neglect of environmental and livelihood factors. These works highlight the dangers of "one-size-fits-all" frameworks that fail to adapt to South Sudan's specific historical, ecological, and socio-political context, and note that excluding environmental sustainability often leads to renewed cycles of displacement and conflict over scarce resources. [10] also stress the limitations of regional organizations like IGAD, which struggle to enforce compliance with peace agreements and address the root causes of fragmentation and ethnic polarization.

The gap this study fills lies in moving beyond isolated sectoral analysis to offer a critical synthesis that integrates multiple dimensions, security, governance, local agency, leadership, and environmental sustainability, into a unified, context-aware theoretical framework. Existing literature provides rich diagnostics but lacks models that explain how these diverse factors interact and jointly shape the prospects for sustainable peace in South Sudan. This research addresses that void by analyzing the complex interplay between elite-driven politics, institutional weakness, community actors, and environmental constraints, ultimately proposing an actionable roadmap for localized, multi-sectoral, and adaptive peacebuilding strategies.

4. Research Methodology

This study employed an exploratory research design and a mixed-methods approach, consistent with recommendations for complex peacebuilding settings [13, 31, 34]. To ensure broad representation of perspectives, the study targeted a population of 300 individuals and selected a sample of 169 respondents through convenience sampling, a pragmatic choice for post-conflict fieldwork [8].

Respondents included 50 government employees, 50 NGO staff, 39 traders, and 30 students. The diverse profile of participants, university-educated professionals (39%) and individuals with substantial work experience, provided a robust foundation for the study's empirical analysis [46]. Data collection utilized structured and unstructured questionnaires, following best practices for capturing both quantitative and qualitative data in fragile contexts [2, 34, 38]. Self-administered instruments featured open-ended questions and Likert-scale items to gather attitude measures. This combination facilitated the collection of quantifiable data on peacebuilding provisions and nuanced qualitative insights into the root causes of conflict and implementation challenges [4, 31].

Data analysis was performed using SPSS version 24, with procedures for cleaning and quality control aligned to standards in conflict and development research [36]. Analytical techniques included descriptive statistics (frequency distributions, mean scores) and inferential statistics, specifically, Chi-Square goodness-of-fit tests, to determine if the observed response distributions differed significantly from random patterns. These methods provided rigorous evaluation of reconstruction needs and strategic factors hindering national stability [1, 8].

5. Results and Discussions

5.1. Demographic Characteristics

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 169).

Variable	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)	Total (N)
18-25 years	41	24.0	169
26-30 years	59	35.0	
31-45 years	47	28.0	
46 years and above	20	12.0	
Male	123	73.0	169
Female	46	27.0	
Primary Education	37	22.0	169
Secondary Education	49	29.0	
University Degree	66	39.0	
Master's Degree	17	10.0	
Single	44	27.0	164
Married	93	57.0	
Divorced	10	6.0	
Separated	16	10.0	
Government Employee	69	41.0	169
NGO Staff	46	27.0	
Student	34	20.0	
Trader	20	12.0	
1 year	34	20.0	169
2-5 years	49	29.0	
6-10 years	66	39.0	
11 years and above	20	12.0	

The demographic results for the 169 respondents indicate a sample primarily composed of young to middle-aged professionals, with the largest age group being 26-30 years old (35.0%, f = 59), followed by 31-45 years old (28.0%, f = 47). The gender distribution shows a high concentration of male participants (73.0%; f = 123), compared with 27.0% (f = 46) female participants. Educationally, the group is well-qualified, as 39.0% (f = 66) hold a university degree and 10.0% (f = 17) have a Master's degree, consistent with recent findings on the professionalization of South Sudan's urban workforce [39, 46]. In terms of marital status (N = 164), the majority are married (57.0%, f = 93), while 27.0% (f = 44) are single. The professional landscape of the respondents is dominated by government employees (41.0%, f = 69) and NGO staff (27.0%, f = 46), with a notable portion of the sample possessing significant tenure; specifically, 39.0% (f = 66) have 6-10 years of experience, and 12.0% (f = 20) have 11 years or more. This profile suggests a seasoned, formally employed cohort with a solid educational foundation, reflecting trends in peacebuilding and state formation research [1, 8, 12].

5.2. Weak Strategic Planning and Low Implementation Rates

Table 2. Responses on Weak Strategic Planning (N = 169).

Response	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)	Cum.%
Strongly Agree	76	45.0	45.0
Agree	30	18.0	63.0
No Idea	19	11.0	74.0
Disagree	17	10.0	84.0
Neutral	15	9.0	93.0
Strongly Disagree	12	7.0	100.0
Total	169	100.0	100.0

The results in Table 2 indicate strong consensus among respondents on the negative impact of weak strategic planning on peacebuilding efforts. A significant majority of participants agreed with the premise, with 45.0% (f = 76) indicating they "Strongly Agree" and 18.0% (f = 30) stating they "Agree," for a combined 63.0% of the sample. In contrast, opposition to the statement was relatively low, as only 10.0% (f = 17) "Disagree" and 7.0% (f = 12) "Strongly Disagree." A small segment of the population remained undecided or neutral, with 11.0% (f = 19) having "No Idea" and 9.0% (f = 15) remaining "Neutral." These findings underscore a prevailing perception that planning deficiencies are a primary barrier to progress, echoing established literature which identifies structural planning weaknesses as a hallmark of instability in fragile contexts [1, 15, 36]. Such deficiencies have also been linked to implementation failures and recurrent cycles of conflict in other post-conflict societies [8, 22].

5.3. Lack of Shared Vision for Peace

Table 3. Responses on Lack of Shared Vision (N = 169).

Response	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)	Cum.%
Strongly Agree	76	45.0	45.0
Agree	30	18.0	63.0
No Idea	19	11.0	74.0
Disagree	17	10.0	84.0
Neutral	15	9.0	93.0
Strongly Disagree	12	7.0	100.0
Total	169	100.0	100.0

Table 3 reveals that 63% agreed that the lack of a shared vision hinders reconstruction. This finding mirrors the persistent fragmentation of South Sudan's political landscape, in which divergent aspirations among elites and communities perpetuate division and undermine collective action [1, 24]. Such fragmentation has been widely recognized in recent analyses as a core barrier to national cohesion and effective state-building [15, 22].

5.4. Specific Challenges to Reconstruction

Table 4. Specific Challenges to Reconstruction (N = 169).

Response	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)	Cum.%
Poor institutional arrangements	76	45.0	45.0
Inefficient financing practices	30	18.0	63.0
No Idea	19	11.0	74.0
Ineffective donor support	17	10.0	84.0
Neutral	15	9.0	93.0
All of the above are correct	12	7.0	100.0
Total	169	100.0	100.0

Poor institutional arrangements emerged as the most significant challenge at 45% (Table 4), followed by inefficient financing practices (18%) and ineffective donor support (10%). The prominence of institutional weaknesses is consistent with a growing body of literature identifying governance reform as fundamental to sustainable reconstruction [8, 15, 36]. Recent studies also point to persistent capacity gaps, bureaucratic fragmentation, and a lack of accountability as structural barriers that impede progress in fragile and conflict-affected states [10, 22].

5.5. Other Challenges Identified by Respondents

Table 5. Other Potential Challenges to Reconstruction (N = 169).

Response	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)	Cum.%
Stabilization of local commerce, government & services	66	39.0	39.0
Institutional building	49	29.0	68.0
Provision of security	37	22.0	90.0
Rebuilding the economy	17	10.0	100.0
Total	169	100.0	100.0

Table 5 shows that respondents identified stabilization of local commerce, government, and services as the top priority (39%), followed by institutional building (29%), provision of security (22%), and rebuilding the economy (10%). The prominence of local commerce stabilization underscores the devastating effects of protracted conflict on everyday economic activities, livelihoods, and service delivery [35, 39]. Several recent reports highlight that disruptions to markets and local economies not only undermine household resilience but also impede the broader peacebuilding process [46, 49].

5.6. Descriptive Statistics Summary

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics of Likert-Scale Items (N = 169).

Statement	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Interpretation
Weak strategic planning hinders peacebuilding	169	3.94	1.34	Agree
Lack of shared vision hinders reconstruction	169	3.94	1.34	Agree

Table 6 presents descriptive statistics for two Likert-scale items from a sample of 169 respondents. Both statements, "Weak strategic planning hinders peace building" and "Lack of shared vision hinders reconstruction," have identical mean scores of 3.94, a standard deviation of 1.34, and are interpreted as 'Agree'. These findings reinforce what has been documented in recent peacebuilding literature: that the absence of coordinated planning and a unified national vision are widely perceived as critical bottlenecks to reconstruction in fragile states [1, 8, 12, 36, 44]. Such consensus among stakeholders is echoed in both academic and policy analyses as a key signal for prioritizing institutional and strategic reforms [22, 49].

5.7. Inferential Statistics: Chi-Square Tests

Table 7. Chi-Square (χ2) Goodness-of-Fit Test Results.

Variable	χ^2 Value	df	p-value	Decision
Weak strategic planning (Q12)	104.195	5	< 0.001	Significant
Lack of shared vision (Q13)	104.195	5	< 0.001	Significant
Specific challenges (Q14)	104.195	5	< 0.001	Significant

Variable	χ^2 Value	df	p-value	Decision
Other challenges (Q15)	30.172	3	< 0.001	Significant

Significance level: $\alpha = 0.05$.

Table 7 presents the results of the Chi-Square (χ^2) Goodness-of-Fit tests for various variables related to peacebuilding challenges. The tests for "Weak strategic planning" (Q12), "Lack of shared vision" (Q13), and "Specific challenges" (Q14) all yielded a χ^2 value of 104.195 with 5 degrees of freedom and p-values less than 0.001, indicating statistically significant differences from what would be expected by chance. Similarly, the test for "Other challenges" (Q15) produced a χ^2 value of 30.172 with 3 degrees of freedom and a p-value also less than 0.001. These results demonstrate that respondents' perspectives are strongly patterned and not random, lending empirical support to the prevailing view that peacebuilding challenges in South Sudan are deeply rooted in structural and institutional problems [8, 15, 36]. This statistical significance aligns with recent calls for evidence-based policy reform and targeted interventions in post-conflict contexts [22, 49].

Since all tests produced p-values below the significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$, the null hypotheses are rejected for each variable, confirming that the response distributions significantly deviate from what would be expected under random chance. This statistical significance corroborates the preceding descriptive and thematic findings, reinforcing that stakeholders in South Sudan perceive weak strategic planning, lack of shared vision, and institutional shortcomings as the primary barriers to peace and reconstruction [1, 10, 15]. The convergence of robust quantitative evidence and qualitative stakeholder insight strengthens the case for prioritizing institutional reform, inclusive dialogue, and strategic planning in future peacebuilding interventions [22, 36].

6. Conclusions

This study's conclusions extend beyond repeating established literature by generating new empirical evidence on the lived realities and operational challenges of peacebuilding in South Sudan. Unlike prior research that often relied on secondary sources or expert opinion, this work draws from a large, diverse sample of stakeholders, providing statistically robust insight into the factors that most directly affect peacebuilding outcomes. The data reveal that weak strategic planning and lack of a shared national vision are not just theoretical challenges but are acutely felt and prioritized by those engaged in the country's reconstruction. These perceptions are further substantiated by statistically significant patterns in the responses, confirming that the obstacles are widely recognized, not randomly distributed, and intrinsically interconnected with institutional arrangements and financing practices.

The novel contribution of this study lies in empirically mapping how these challenges intersect and in highlighting the operational gap between policy rhetoric and implementation realities. By analyzing both the quantitative patterns and qualitative narratives of respondents, the research uncovers how elite-driven fragmentation, limited local ownership, and fragmented institutional structures collectively undermine progress findings that previous studies have not systematically quantified at this scale. This integrative, stakeholder-driven approach provides actionable guidance for policymakers: it demonstrates that sustainable peace in South Sudan hinges on bridging the divide between formal reforms and on-the-ground realities. The study thus not only validates the need for governance reforms and inclusive vision-building but also identifies the specific leverage points, strategic planning, local agency, and institutional coordination, that future interventions must target to move beyond surface-level solutions and achieve lasting impact.

7. Recommendations

Institutional Reform and Capacity-Building

Given that 45% of respondents identified poor institutional arrangements as the top challenge and 63% cited weak strategic planning, the government should prioritize comprehensive institutional reforms and capacity-building at all levels [1, 8]. Action steps include systematic institutional needs assessments, targeted training in planning and financial management, and robust accountability mechanisms to address fragmentation and inefficiency [10, 36].

Donor Coordination and Flexible Aid

With 18% of respondents highlighting inefficient financing and 10% noting ineffective donor support, international partners should strengthen donor coordination by establishing unified platforms for planning and monitoring, aligning funding with national priorities, and increasing flexibility to adapt to changing local conditions [22, 49]. This requires regular joint planning sessions with government, flexible agreements, and shared progress tracking [8, 36].

Decentralized, Locally Led Peacebuilding

Reflecting respondent priorities, 39% highlighted stabilization of local commerce and services, peacebuilding efforts should be decentralized. Empower local authorities and communities to lead, through local peace committees, direct technical and financial support for community projects, and genuine involvement of local stakeholders in decision-making [21, 39].

Enhanced Citizen Participation and Civil Society Engagement

The strong consensus among the experienced, educated sample underscores the need for participatory governance and unity. Intensify efforts to strengthen citizen participation via inclusive consultation forums, civic education, and supporting civil society to engage communities [11, 46]. Actions include community dialogues, transparent feedback mechanisms, and building advocacy and service delivery capacity.

Conflict-Sensitive Planning and Adaptive Implementation

Because both weak strategic planning and fragmented vision were statistically significant barriers, all development planning should integrate conflict-sensitive approaches [36, 47, 49]. This means training practitioners in conflict analysis, conducting risk and stakeholder assessments before projects, and using adaptive monitoring to adjust interventions and prevent negative impacts [1, 8].

8. Suggestions for Further Research

Longitudinal Impact of Institutional Reforms

Future studies should employ longitudinal designs to track the effectiveness of institutional reform and capacity-building efforts over time. This would provide evidence on the sustainability of reforms and their impact on peacebuilding outcomes [40].

Mechanisms for Integrating Non-State Actors

Given the identified gap in systematically including non-state actors, further research should explore practical frameworks for integrating traditional authorities, women's groups, and youth organizations into formal peacebuilding and governance structures [38].

Decentralization and Local Ownership

Investigate the effects of decentralized peacebuilding, especially the roles of local government, commerce, and community-based organizations, in fostering resilience and stability. Comparative case studies between different regions could yield actionable insights [31, 32].

Inclusive Leadership and Public Sector Performance

Targeted research is needed on how specific leadership behaviors and organizational cultures in the public sector can be leveraged to overcome institutional weaknesses and foster a culture of accountability and service.

Conflict-Sensitive Development Models

Examine the operationalization of conflict-sensitive approaches in development planning, focusing on the design, monitoring, and evaluation of projects in fragile settings, and how these approaches mitigate unintended negative impacts [43].

Donor Coordination and Aid Effectiveness

Further empirical research should critically analyze donor coordination mechanisms, the alignment of foreign aid with national priorities, and the flexibility of funding in post-conflict contexts, using both quantitative and qualitative methods.

Environmental Sustainability and Livelihoods

Investigate the complex relationship between environmental sustainability, resource management, and peacebuilding in South Sudan, addressing how environmental degradation may undermine post-conflict recovery [41].

Youth and Gender Inclusion in Peace Processes

Future studies should focus on the barriers and opportunities for greater youth and gender inclusion in peacebuilding, policy design, and implementation, as these groups are often underrepresented but critical to lasting stability [4].

Abbreviations

IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
R-ARCSS	Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
SSR	Security Sector Reform
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
χ^2	Chi-Square (Statistical Test)

Author Contributions

Dut Bol Ayuel Bill: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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