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Performance, Public Trust, and Accountability of Law Enforcement  
Agencies in South Sudan**



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## Assessing the Influence of Strategic Leadership on the Operational Performance, Public Trust, and Accountability of Law Enforcement Agencies in South Sudan

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** The purpose of the study was to critically examine the influence of strategic leadership on the operational performance, public trust, and accountability of law enforcement agencies in South Sudan, with particular attention to the South Sudan National Police Service (SSNPS) and the Criminal Investigation Department (CID).

**Methodology:** The research was conducted using a qualitative case study design involving 30 purposively selected respondents from law enforcement institutions, civil society organizations, reform agencies, and community leadership in Juba and selected state capitals. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis, and analyzed thematically using NVivo software.

**Findings:** The study reveal that the absence of strategic leadership has led to fragmented operations, weak community engagement, and limited internal accountability. However, isolated examples of visionary leadership within specific police units suggest that transformational and strategic leadership can significantly improve service delivery, rebuild public trust, and promote institutional legitimacy.

**Unique Contribution to Theory, Policy and Practice:** The study concludes that leadership is not a peripheral concern but a central pillar of law enforcement reform in fragile states. It recommends the institutionalization of leadership development programs, empowerment of oversight bodies, and alignment of police reform efforts with national development goals. The study offers practical insights for policymakers, development partners, and reform practitioners seeking to advance democratic policing and institutional resilience in South Sudan and similar contexts.

**Keywords:** *Strategic Leadership, Law Enforcement, Public Trust, Transformational Leadership, Post-Conflict Governance*

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Strategic leadership is widely acknowledged as a catalyst for strengthening institutional performance, enhancing public trust, and ensuring accountability within the public sector. Its role becomes particularly critical in fragile and post-conflict states, where institutions often lack the coherence, legitimacy, and resilience required to deliver on their mandates. In such contexts, leadership transcends routine administration to become a transformative force that shapes the trajectory of national development and institutional reform (Grindle, 2017; Rotberg, 2014).

South Sudan, the world's youngest nation, exemplifies the challenges of state-building in a post-conflict environment. Since attaining independence in 2011, the country has grappled with political instability, prolonged armed conflict, and institutional fragility, all of which have hindered the development of credible governance systems (Jok, 2017). Among the institutions most affected are law enforcement agencies, particularly the South Sudan National Police Service (SSNPS) and the Criminal Investigation Department (CID), which face significant constraints in fulfilling their mandate to protect citizens, maintain order, and uphold the rule of law.

Operating within a volatile political and security environment, these agencies contend with chronic capacity deficits, political interference, widespread corruption, and deep-seated public mistrust (Amnesty International, 2022; Small Arms Survey, 2021). Despite their critical role in post-conflict reconstruction and national stability, efforts to reform and professionalize law enforcement have been undermined by weak leadership structures, limited strategic planning, and an absence of accountability mechanisms (Nguyen, North, & Syrett, 2021).

Strategic leadership characterized by vision, ethical judgment, adaptive capacity, and long-term orientation offers a framework for transforming law enforcement institutions into effective, citizen-centered entities (Boal & Hooijberg, 2001). In the South Sudanese context, where institutional legitimacy is closely tied to perceptions of justice, security, and professionalism, strategic leadership holds the potential to drive operational reform, enhance public trust, and institutionalize accountability (Muggah & O'Neill, 2019).

This study therefore sought to examine the extent to which strategic leadership influences the operational performance, public confidence, and accountability of law enforcement agencies in South Sudan. It aims to generate empirical insights into leadership practices, challenges, and reform pathways that could contribute to the stabilization and modernization of the country's security sector.

Since gaining independence in 2011, South Sudan has struggled to establish functional and stable governance structures. The post-independence period has been marred by violent conflict, political factionalism, weak institutional capacity, and pervasive insecurity, all of which have severely constrained state-building efforts (de Waal, 2015; World Bank, 2023). These systemic challenges

are acutely reflected in the country's law enforcement institutions, which continue to operate under conditions of extreme fragility.

The SSNPS and CID are mandated to enforce laws, safeguard citizens, and provide public security. However, these agencies have faced persistent difficulties, including inadequate training, low morale, insufficient logistical support, and limited oversight. Numerous reports highlight instances of misconduct, human rights violations, and abuse of authority by police officers' behaviors that have significantly eroded public confidence and undermined the legitimacy of law enforcement institutions (Amnesty International, 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2020; Small Arms Survey, 2021).

Although the government and its development partners have initiated a series of reform interventions including security sector reform (SSR) programs, constitutional reviews, and leadership training progress has been incremental and often unsustainable. These efforts have frequently lacked a coherent strategic framework, resulting in fragmented implementation and limited impact on institutional transformation (UNMISS, 2022).

In this context, the relevance of strategic leadership becomes increasingly evident. As discipline and practice, strategic leadership emphasizes long-term thinking, ethical governance, stakeholder engagement, and the alignment of institutional goals with national development priorities (Nguyen et al., 2021). It offers a critical lens through which to examine the leadership deficits and opportunities within South Sudan's law enforcement sector.

By focusing on the interplay between leadership, performance, and accountability, this study addresses a pressing gap in existing literature and policy discourse. It seeks to identify how visionary leadership can reposition law enforcement agencies as credible, accountable, and citizen-oriented institutions capable of contributing meaningfully to peacebuilding and state reconstruction in South Sudan.

## **2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW**

Leadership is a fundamental determinant of institutional performance, particularly within law enforcement agencies operating in fragile and post-conflict settings. In such contexts, the quality of leadership often dictates whether reforms are effectively implemented, whether public trust is restored, and whether operational accountability is achieved. The literature on strategic leadership in fragile states highlights the need for a dual focus on both the transformational capacities of leadership and the strategic competencies required to navigate complex institutional landscapes.

Transformational Leadership Theory, first conceptualized by Burns (1978) and further refined by Bass and Riggio (2006), emphasizes leadership that transcends transactional relationships to inspire followers through vision, moral purpose, and personalized engagement. This form of leadership is particularly salient in post-conflict environments, where public institutions must rebuild legitimacy and foster internal cohesion. The four dimensions of transformational leadership idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and

individualized consideration have been shown to improve organizational morale and innovation, both of which are vital for police reform.

Strategic Leadership Theory, on the other hand, expands the analytical lens by focusing on a leader's ability to anticipate change, formulate long-term goals, and align operational tactics with institutional vision. As Boal and Hooijberg (2001) and Ireland and Hitt (2005) argue, strategic leaders play a critical role in shaping organizational culture, managing institutional complexity, and building capacity in politically sensitive environments. These competencies are essential in fragile states, where resource constraints, political volatility, and public disillusionment are persistent challenges.

Empirical studies from countries such as Somalia and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) illustrate the consequences of weak strategic leadership in the policing sector. Muggah and O'Neill (2019) highlight how law enforcement institutions in these countries suffer from fragmented command structures, lack of professional norms, and minimal strategic oversight, leading to a cycle of ineffectiveness and public mistrust. In contrast, Rwanda's post-genocide recovery offers an example of how deliberate leadership interventions including professional training, internal accountability, and citizen engagement can enhance police performance and legitimacy (Clark, 2018). These findings suggest that leadership style and institutional vision are key variables in determining the trajectory of policing reforms in fragile contexts.

In South Sudan, however, the leadership landscape within law enforcement remains deeply constrained. Jok (2017) documents how politicization, ethnic bias, and lack of strategic planning have compromised the effectiveness of the South Sudan National Police Service (SSNPS) and related institutions. Despite extensive donor involvement and national-level reform agendas, security institutions have failed to achieve the desired transformation due to leadership failures at both strategic and operational levels (Small Arms Survey, 2021; Amnesty International, 2022). Law enforcement officials often lack the training, resources, and ethical frameworks necessary to perform their roles effectively, while systemic corruption and impunity further erode public trust (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

Furthermore, Andersen and Brochmann (2021) argue that in the absence of strong, reform-oriented leadership, law enforcement agencies in post-conflict states are unlikely to develop into accountable and citizen-responsive institutions. This pattern is evident in South Sudan, where the gap between policy intent and implementation remains wide. Although security sector reform (SSR) initiatives have been introduced, their impact has been limited by weak leadership commitment, short-term planning, and insufficient political will.

Despite this growing recognition of leadership as a central pillar of institutional reform, there remains a notable gap in the academic literature specifically examining the influence of strategic leadership on policing outcomes in South Sudan. Existing studies tend to address broader themes

such as conflict resolution, state-building, or SSR, often neglecting the nuanced role that leadership plays in shaping law enforcement performance, public trust, and accountability mechanisms. Addressing this gap is essential, particularly in a country where the effectiveness of law enforcement institutions is closely linked to national stability and democratic consolidation.

In sum, the existing literature underscores the importance of leadership in driving institutional reform in fragile states. However, the South Sudan context remains underexplored, especially regarding the intersection of strategic leadership, operational performance, and accountability in law enforcement. This paper contributes to that emerging discourse by providing a focused analysis of how leadership dynamics shape institutional outcomes in one of the world's most fragile post-conflict settings.

### **3.0 MATERIAL AND METHODS**

This study employed a qualitative research design, utilizing a case study approach to investigate the influence of strategic leadership on law enforcement in South Sudan. The qualitative method was suitable for capturing complexity, context, and lived experiences of leadership practices within post-conflict institutions. Data were collected from Juba and selected state capitals, where the operational headquarters of the South Sudan National Police Service (SSNPS) and the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) are located. Participants included senior police officials, mid-level managers, civil society actors, reform advisors, and community representatives, selected through purposive and snowball sampling. A total of 30 respondents were engaged, ensuring a triangulated and diverse perspective base. Primary data collection involved semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and document reviews, enabling a comprehensive understanding of operational performance, accountability mechanisms, and public trust.

Data were analyzed thematically using NVivo software, with codes aligned to the study's core constructions: operational performance, public trust, and accountability. This analytic process allowed the researcher to identify recurring patterns, inconsistencies, and insights, interpreted through the lens of Transformational and Strategic Leadership Theories. Ethical approval was obtained from the national research ethics body, and all participants gave informed consent. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly upheld, and sensitivity to the political environment was maintained throughout, especially in framing interview questions and managing data handling procedures. The research approach prioritized trust-building, transparency, and methodological rigor to ensure the integrity and relevance of findings in a fragile security sector.

### **4.0 FINDINGS**

#### **4.1 Strategic Leadership and Operational Performance**

The study's findings indicate that the absence of strategic and visionary leadership within South Sudan's law enforcement agencies has significantly impeded their operational effectiveness. Respondents across institutional levels identified poor planning, a lack of clear performance

benchmarks, and reactive decision-making as chronic challenges. Mid-level commanders expressed frustration with limited operational autonomy and inconsistent communication from senior leadership, which undermined their capacity to proactively address emerging security threats.

These findings are consistent with the tenets of Strategic Leadership Theory, which emphasizes the critical role of aligning day-to-day tactical actions with overarching institutional objectives (Boal & Hooijberg, 2001; Ireland & Hitt, 2005). In the South Sudanese context, this misalignment has resulted in fragmented command structures, overlapping mandates, and duplication of efforts. Reform initiatives such as donor-supported training and security sector reform programs were described by respondents as episodic and poorly coordinated, lacking the long-term strategic vision necessary for institutional transformation. These challenges reflect the broader pattern in fragile states, where the absence of system-oriented leadership impedes the development of adaptive, performance-driven law enforcement institutions (Muggah & O'Neill, 2019).

#### **4.2 Strategic Leadership and Public Trust**

Public trust in law enforcement was overwhelmingly characterized by respondents as “deeply eroded,” particularly in communities affected by political violence, ethnic tensions, and policing abuse. Reports of extortion, arbitrary detention, and excessive use of force were commonplace, with civil society and community actors linking these behaviors not merely to individual misconduct but to the systemic failure of ethical leadership. Respondents noted that officers often acted without accountability or adherence to professional standards, contributing to a prevailing culture of fear rather than safety.

The absence of transformational leadership qualities particularly idealized influence and individualized consideration was evident across most institutional structures (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Without ethical role models at the top, junior officers lacked guidance and incentives to uphold public service values. However, the study also uncovered positive deviations: in select units where leaders actively engaged communities, demonstrated transparency, and upheld professional conduct, there was a notable increase in citizen cooperation and trust. These isolated examples affirm the transformative potential of ethical and community-engaged leadership in restoring public confidence (Clark, 2018). They underscore the argument by Burns (1978) that transformational leaders serve as moral exemplars, shaping institutional behavior through vision and integrity.

#### **4.3 Strategic Leadership and Accountability**

Accountability mechanisms within the SSNPS and CID were widely described as weak, inconsistent, or entirely absent. Internal disciplines, where they existed, were perceived as lacking both procedural clarity and enforcement power. Respondents highlighted a tendency among senior leaders to shield politically connected officers from sanction, thereby entrenching impunity and

weakening organizational norms. External oversight such as parliamentary committees or civilian review boards was reported to be either politically compromised or functionally inactive.

These findings align with both Transformational and Strategic Leadership Theories, which emphasize the leader's role in shaping institutional culture, promoting fairness, and embedding systems of performance monitoring and ethical governance (Nguyen, North, & Syrett, 2021). The failure to establish and uphold accountability frameworks reflects not only institutional weakness but a profound leadership deficit. Respondents consistently noted that without a commitment to integrity, transparency, and professional standards at the leadership level, efforts to reform law enforcement institutions are unlikely to succeed. This reinforces previous studies that highlight the pivotal role of leadership in institutionalizing accountability in fragile and transitional states (Andersen & Brochmann, 2021; Jok, 2017).

From the foregoing, the findings demonstrate that the dysfunction within South Sudan's law enforcement sector is closely tied to the quality of its leadership. Where strategic and transformational leadership is lacking, institutions become reactive, unaccountable, and mistrusted. Conversely, pockets of ethical, visionary leadership show that meaningful change is possible, even within deeply fragile environments. This underscores the argument that strategic leadership is not merely an administrative function but a foundational pillar for law enforcement reform and democratic consolidation in post-conflict states.

## **5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **5.1 Conclusion**

This study reaffirms the critical importance of strategic leadership in shaping the operational effectiveness, institutional accountability, and public legitimacy of law enforcement agencies in fragile and post-conflict settings. In the case of South Sudan, the persistent dysfunction within law enforcement manifested in operational inefficiency, human rights abuses, politicization, and eroded public trust is not solely the result of inadequate resources or systemic underdevelopment. Rather, it stems fundamentally from leadership deficits that have allowed impunity, institutional inertia, and public alienation to take root. The absence of transformational and strategic leadership at key levels of the police and criminal investigation structures has severely constrained reform efforts, obstructed accountability, and undermined the legitimacy of the state's security apparatus.

Yet, the research also highlights that change is possible, even within fragile institutional contexts. Evidence from selected units and leadership practices in South Sudan demonstrates that where leadership is visionary, ethically grounded, and strategically responsive, there are tangible improvements in performance, citizen engagement, and public confidence. Such findings affirm that leadership is not a peripheral concern but a cornerstone of institutional transformation, particularly in post-conflict societies where rebuilding trust and restoring order are paramount.

The implications of this study extend beyond theoretical discourse to inform practical reform pathways. Strengthening leadership capacities within South Sudan's law enforcement sector is not merely a technical intervention but a strategic imperative for peacebuilding, rule of law, and democratic consolidation. Building a cadre of leaders who are capable of long-term visioning, ethical decision-making, and adaptive governance is essential for dismantling cultures of impunity and repositioning the police as a citizen-centered institution.

In conclusion, the future of law enforcement reform in South Sudan and by extension, the broader project of state-building hinges significantly on the quality and character of its leadership. Investing in leadership development, aligning reform with national priorities, and institutionalizing accountability mechanisms must be prioritized to ensure a legitimate, professional, and responsive security sector. Only through such leadership-centered approaches can fragile institutions begin to earn the trust of the people they serve and contribute meaningfully to national stability and development.

## **5.2 Recommendations**

To strengthen law enforcement governance in South Sudan, there is an urgent need to institutionalize leadership development within the SSNPS. This can be achieved by establishing a dedicated leadership academy that prioritizes transformational and strategic leadership training. Such an institution should integrate modules on ethical leadership, vision setting, crisis management, and citizen engagement within the existing police training framework to ensure a professional, future-oriented police force.

Internal accountability mechanisms must also be reinforced. This involves developing and consistently enforcing clear performance benchmarks for officers, supported by transparent and impartial disciplinary systems. Internal affairs units should be empowered with sufficient autonomy and resources to investigate misconduct effectively, free from political interference or ethnic bias.

Community-engaged policing should be formalized as a core policing approach. Police units led by officers of high integrity should spearhead this model, with deliberate efforts to build structured, ongoing feedback channels between law enforcement and local communities. This would help rebuild public trust and foster collaborative approaches to public safety.

Law enforcement reform must also be aligned with South Sudan's broader national development strategy. Ensuring that police reform initiatives are not isolated but embedded in national priorities will enhance coherence and sustainability. Furthermore, engaging police leadership in peacebuilding and governance dialogues will anchor institutional reforms within the wider state-building agenda.

Finally, meaningful reform requires strong oversight and political will. Civilian oversight bodies must be granted independence and authority to monitor law enforcement conduct effectively. At

the same time, political leadership must demonstrate a firm commitment to depoliticizing police appointments and promoting merit-based leadership to restore professionalism and public confidence in the sector.

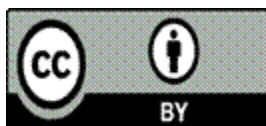
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