Ignorance and Poverty in Fragile States: A Critical Review of Empowering Citizens in South Sudan

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Abstract

Purpose: This study aims to critically examine the conceptual and practical challenges of empowering citizens in environments characterized by systemic ignorance and mass poverty. It seeks to analyze the interplay between deliberate political production of unknowing and efforts to enhance citizen agency, with a focus on South Sudan.

Methodology: Using a qualitative-descriptive approach, the study synthesizes findings from an extensive review of academic literature, policy documents, and empirical reports published between 2019 and 2025.

Findings: The main findings indicate that empowerment initiatives are often undermined by a hostile political environment that manipulates ignorance for control, persistent structural poverty that limits citizen agency, and a fragmented aid architecture that fails to address root causes. Additionally, socio-cultural barriers, especially affecting women and youth, exacerbate these challenges.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Policy and Practice: This research advances fragile state scholarship by conceptualizing ignorance as a political tool and proposing an integrated empowerment framework. It emphasizes the need for a transformative, politically-informed approach that combines economic strengthening, critical education, and political voice viewed as interconnected pillars to foster citizen resilience in challenging contexts like South Sudan.

Keywords: *Poverty*, *Fragile*, *Ignorance*, *Empowering*, *Transformative*, *Economic*

JEL Codes: *I3, O17, E01*

Introduction

South Sudan's journey since independence has been marked by recurrent conflict, humanitarian crises, and a state apparatus largely incapable of fulfilling its basic functions. Rather than progressing toward peace and development, the country remains embroiled in cycles of violence, poverty, and systemic disempowerment. It consistently ranks among the most fragile states globally, a stark illustration of a government unable to ensure even the most fundamental human security for its citizens (Bilali, 2020; Mohammed, 2023). Central to this persistent crisis are two deeply intertwined conditions: mass, multidimensional poverty and systemic ignorance conditions actively produced and maintained by the country's political economy.

Decades of conflict have destroyed livelihoods, decimated infrastructure, and displaced millions. Today, over 80% of the population subsists below the international poverty line, despite significant international aid inflows (World Bank, 2023). Most rely on subsistence agriculture or humanitarian assistance, with severe food insecurity, poor health outcomes, and lack of access to basic services like clean water and sanitation becoming the norm (Sennesael & Verhoeven, 2025). This multidimensional poverty fosters a state of constant vulnerability, leaving individuals and households with little capacity for long-term planning, civic engagement, or political participation (Roach, 2023).

Closely linked is a crisis of systemic ignorance, which extends beyond illiteracy South Sudan's adult literacy rates are among the lowest globally, especially for women (Zua, 2021). This ignorance is a deliberate political strategy, reinforced through collapsed education systems, government-controlled media, and opacity in governance. Citizens remain largely unaware of their rights, of how state resources are managed, or of the extent of elite corruption (Thiong, 2021). This cycle of poverty and ignorance sustains each other: poverty limits access to education and information, while ignorance prevents citizens from challenging elite dominance, thus perpetuating disempowerment.

Statement of the Problem

Despite significant investments by international donors and local actors in citizen empowerment initiatives, the majority of South Sudanese remain profoundly disempowered. These efforts tend to treat poverty and ignorance as technical deficits—problems to be solved through skills training or information dissemination—without addressing the underlying political structures that actively produce and sustain disempowerment. As a result, most programs fail to generate sustainable change.

The core of the problem lies in the systemic and political nature of South Sudan's disempowerment. The country's political economy is characterized by a neopatrimonial system—an informal "political marketplace" where elites control resources and information, maintain power through violence and patronage, and actively prevent the development of an

independent, informed citizenry (de Waal, 2015). Poverty functions as a tool of control, fragmenting society and discouraging collective action, while systemic ignorance ensures that citizens lack the knowledge or means to challenge elite dominance.

This situation raises critical questions: How do these intertwined conditions operate to reinforce each other? Why do current empowerment models, rooted in liberal and apolitical assumptions, consistently fail? What alternative approaches could be more effective in fostering genuine citizen agency in such a complex context? The specific objectives are:

i) To critically analyze the concepts of ignorance and poverty as interconnected, politically-produced conditions within the context of a fragile state.

ii) To evaluate the dominant models of citizen empowerment currently being implemented in South Sudan by NGOs and other actors.

iii) To identify the primary structural, political, and socio-cultural barriers that undermine the effectiveness of these empowerment initiatives.

iv) To propose an integrated conceptual framework for more effective and sustainable citizen empowerment in fragile contexts like South Sudan.

Research Questions

i) How do systemic ignorance and mass poverty mutually reinforce each other to create a cycle of disempowerment in South Sudan?

ii) What are the underlying assumptions of current economic, social, and political empowerment programs in South Sudan, and how do these align with the country's political-economic realities?

iii) What are the most significant barriers (political, institutional, social) to the successful implementation and sustainability of citizen empowerment projects?

iv) What would a more holistic and politically-informed framework for citizen empowerment in a fragile state look like?

Significance of the Study

This study offers significant contributions to both theory and practice. Theoretically, it advances the scholarship on fragile states by conceptualizing ignorance not just as an educational deficit but as a tool of political power, providing a more nuanced understanding of the mechanisms that sustain fragility. Practically, it provides a critical assessment of current aid paradigms, offering valuable insights for policymakers, donors, and practitioners working on peacebuilding, governance, and development in South Sudan and other conflict-affected contexts. By proposing an integrated framework, the study aims to inform the design of more effective, sustainable, and

transformative empowerment strategies that can better address the root causes of vulnerability and contribute to building a more resilient and engaged citizenry.

Literature Review

To understand the profound challenge of empowerment in South Sudan, it is essential to move beyond viewing poverty and ignorance as isolated, technical issues. Instead, they should be understood as parts of an interconnected, politically generated system an active configuration that sustains elite dominance and disempowerment.

South Sudan's political economy is often described as a "political marketplace," where authority is not derived from institutional legitimacy or popular consent but through violence, control of resources mainly oil and patronage networks (de Waal, 2015; Kaldor & de Waal, 2020). The stability of this system depends on the elite's ability to monopolize both material wealth and information, ensuring that the masses remain impoverished and uninformed. Such a dynamic creates a feedback loop: poverty facilitates dependence on patronage, while systemic ignorance prevents citizens from understanding or challenging the status quo (Thiong, 2021; Nyaba, 2019).

Mass poverty operates as a form of social and political control. When most of the population is consumed by daily survival facing food insecurity, lacking healthcare and education long-term civic engagement becomes impossible. Citizens are compelled to enter patronage networks where loyalty is exchanged for basic needs, reinforcing ethnic and hierarchical allegiances and preventing the emergence of a unified, class-based national identity (Nyaba, 2019; Samuel et al., 2019). The state's chronic underinvestment in public services further entrenches this dependency, maintaining a cycle where poverty and disempowerment sustain elite control.

Systemic ignorance is actively managed through repression, media control, and the collapse of independent journalism (Chom, 2020; Elseddige, 2023). Citizens lack access to credible, independent information about their rights, the allocation of state resources, or the details of national budgets and oil contracts. Such opacity fosters political fatalism and learned helplessness, making citizens unaware of their entitlements and unable to challenge elite corruption.

Current empowerment programs such as vocational training, microfinance, civic education, and gender initiatives are rooted in liberal assumptions that skills and knowledge will automatically translate into agency. However, in South Sudan's context, these models are fundamentally flawed because they ignore the political environment that actively suppresses citizen action. Without security, functioning institutions, and a fair political economy, such interventions tend to be superficial and unsustainable.

Dominant Models of Empowerment: A Critical Assessment of Apolitical Interventions

In the landscape of South Sudan's profound human development crisis, a vast ecosystem of international and national non-governmental organizations (NGOs) has deployed a plethora of programs aimed at "empowering" its vulnerable citizens. These interventions, while diverse in their specific activities, can be broadly categorized into three dominant models: Economic Empowerment, Social and Educational Empowerment, and Political/Civic Empowerment. However, this critical review posits that these models are fundamentally flawed because they are designed with a set of liberal, apolitical assumptions that are dangerously misaligned with the realities of South Sudan's fragile, neopatrimonial, and violent context. By treating complex political problems as technical deficits, these interventions frequently lead to fragmented, unsustainable outcomes that fail to address the root causes of disempowerment.

Economic Empowerment: The Fallacy of Livelihoods in a Conflict Economy

Economic empowerment initiatives in South Sudan are based on the assumption that alleviating poverty through the provision of productive assets, financial services, and skills training will lead to resilience, self-sufficiency, and increased agency. These programs include distributing agricultural inputs, vocational training, and promoting savings groups, with the aim of enabling households to withstand shocks and reduce reliance on humanitarian aid. However, their effectiveness is severely limited by the structural realities of South Sudan's conflict economy, where pervasive insecurity, violence, and the absence of the rule of law make productive assets highly vulnerable to theft and expropriation. Moreover, macroeconomic issues such as hyperinflation, lack of infrastructure, and market access further undermine entrepreneurial efforts, while the deeply political nature of the economy, controlled by elites through patronage networks, restricts opportunities based on connections rather than merit or effort. Consequently, these economic interventions often provide only short-term relief or marginal gains, failing to address the systemic violence and political economy that prevent the sustainable accumulation and protection of assets, thus rendering many livelihoods programs ineffective in fostering genuine economic empowerment..

Social and Educational Empowerment: The Chasm Between Knowledge and Agency

The social and educational empowerment model in South Sudan operates on the belief that increasing knowledge about legal rights, health practices, and social norms can foster individual well-being and collective agency. Initiatives such as literacy programs, civic education, and awareness campaigns aim to inform citizens and stimulate behavioral change, with the hope that this knowledge will translate into greater social cohesion and rights-based action. However, the fundamental flaw of this approach lies in the stark gap between awareness and actual power, especially in a fragile state where systemic insecurity, weak institutions, and pervasive impunity dominate. For example, a girl may be educated about her right to refuse child marriage, but economic desperation and social norms rooted in bride price often override her knowledge, while communities aware of their rights face repression and violence if they attempt to hold leaders

accountable. Without a supportive environment of security, justice, and functioning institutions, knowledge alone remains ineffective; it is the lack of an enabling "hardware" such as rule of law and safety that renders awareness programs impotent in transforming power relations and achieving meaningful empowerment in South Sudan.

Structural Barriers to Empowerment: A Synthesized Analysis

The structural barriers to empowerment in South Sudan are profound and interconnected, fundamentally rooted in the country's ongoing state fragility. Widespread insecurity and violence dominate the landscape, as the state fails to establish a monopoly on the legitimate use of force, leaving citizens exposed to unpredictable violence from militias, criminal groups, and other armed actors. This environment of constant threat constrains opportunities for collective action, economic development, and rights-based demands, as individuals prioritize physical survival over empowerment. Simultaneously, the neopatrimonial political economy perpetuates a system of patronage and resource diversion, where state resources are siphoned off for personal enrichment and military interests, deepening poverty and undermining public service provision. The collapse of formal institutions and the erosion of the social contract further exacerbate this situation, leaving citizens with limited access to justice or protection, often relying on traditional or local authorities that may lack legitimacy or capacity.

These challenges are compounded by deeply rooted patriarchal norms that systematically disempower women and restrict their participation in economic and political life, often viewing gendered practices such as child marriage and bride price as vital survival strategies in a context of extreme poverty. Additionally, the international aid architecture, while vital for humanitarian relief, often unintentionally reinforces these structural issues by promoting short-term, apolitical projects that overlook or sideline political and social realities. The influx of aid can create dependency, distort local economies, and fragment efforts due to coordination failures and power imbalances between international actors and local communities. Collectively, these systemic barriers actively undermine efforts at empowerment, requiring comprehensive strategies that address security, governance, social norms, and the political economy to achieve sustainable change.
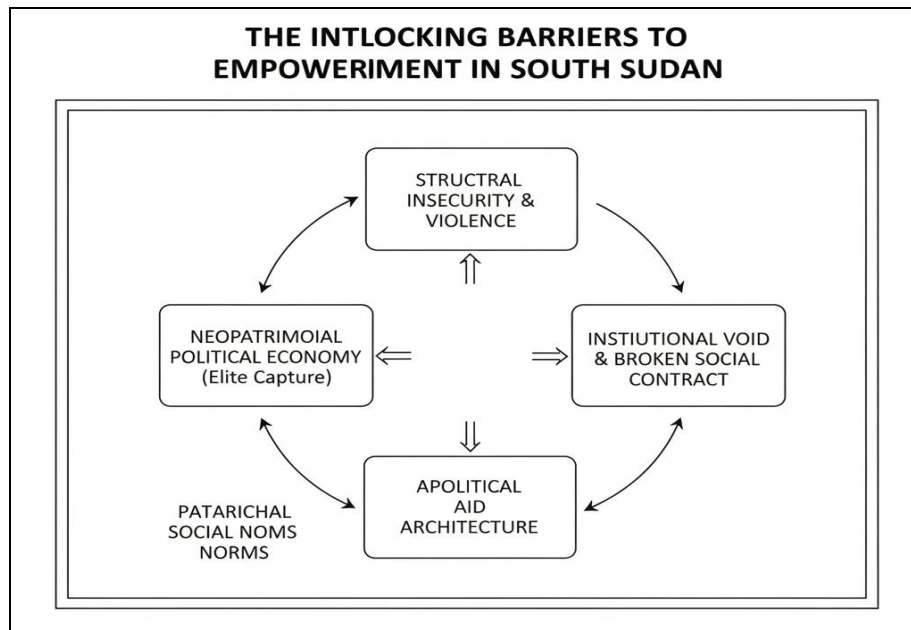
Figure 1: The Interlocking Barriers to Empowerment in South Sudan

Figure 1 visual representation of the five key structural barriers. Structural insecurity sits at the top as the most dominant factor, directly influencing and being influenced by the political economy and the institutional void. Patriarchal norms and the nature of the aid system are reinforcing barriers that intersect with and exacerbate the core political and institutional challenges, creating a formidable, interlocking system of disempowerment.

Methodology

This study employed a critical review methodology to synthesize and interpret a diverse body of literature on citizen empowerment in fragile states, particularly South Sudan. Unlike a systematic review, which assesses the effectiveness of specific interventions, the critical review aimed to deconstruct underlying concepts, identify dominant themes, and analyze power dynamics within the discourse. The research questions were developed prior to the review to maintain focus, and a comprehensive search strategy was implemented across multiple databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and ProQuest, supplemented by targeted grey literature searches on key organizational websites. The search combined keywords related to South Sudan, empowerment, poverty, and civic engagement, with all sources screened through a two-stage process initial title and abstract review followed by full-text assessment based on clearly defined inclusion and exclusion criteria focusing on recent, relevant literature in English.

Data from included sources was systematically extracted using a charting form that captured both descriptive information and substantive content aligned with the study's themes. This was followed by a qualitative thematic synthesis, which involved open coding to identify recurring

concepts, and grouping these into interpretive themes such as "Poverty as Political Control" and "The Gap Between Knowledge and Agency." Guided by a critical theoretical lens, this analytical process aimed to deconstruct the power relations and political-economic factors influencing poverty, ignorance, and empowerment in South Sudan. The resulting themes serve as the foundation for the study's results and discussion, providing an integrated, critical interpretation of the evidence.

Results and Discussion

Recent empirical research and field reports reveal critical themes that illuminate the profound disempowerment experienced by communities in South Sudan. These themes also expose the shortcomings of conventional empowerment initiatives, which often fail to address the root causes of vulnerability.

1. The Primacy of Fear: How Insecurity Cripples Agency

Insecurity stands out as perhaps the most immediate barrier to empowerment. The government's inability to establish a monopoly on violence means that armed groups, militias, and criminal gangs operate with impunity, creating a persistent environment of threat and violence. This pervasive insecurity fosters an atmosphere of fear that inhibits citizens from engaging in civic, economic, or social activities. A 2023 UNMISS survey underscores this reality, with many civilians emphasizing that peace is a prerequisite for any meaningful participation. One respondent from Jonglei expressed this sentiment starkly: "How can you talk about a loan for a new business when the man with the gun can come tomorrow and take everything? First, give me peace." Such statements reflect how insecurity effectively silences voices, rendering collective action and development efforts impossible. Women are particularly affected; their participation in peacebuilding activities is often limited by threats and intimidation. Many women prefer silence over risking retaliation, illustrating how fear constrains even the most motivated actors from contributing to community resilience.

2. The Poverty Trap: When Survival Outweighs Citizenship

Another dominant theme is the pervasive poverty that traps communities in a cycle of dependence and disempowerment. Widespread food insecurity, lack of income, and the absence of basic services compel households to prioritize immediate survival above all else. A report by the World Food Programme vividly illustrates this reality, noting that families facing starvation resort to wild foods, and children are often sent out to forage instead of attending school. As one mother from a displaced camp explained, "My children go out to find food; school can wait when hunger is so deep." In this environment, efforts such as microfinance and livelihood projects, although well-intentioned, often falter because assets are quickly looted or expropriated. Moreover, macroeconomic instability—hyperinflation, poor infrastructure—limits the potential of such initiatives. The political economy further complicates matters; economic opportunities

are controlled through patronage networks that favor elites, making it nearly impossible for ordinary individuals without political connections to improve their circumstances. As de Waal and colleagues (2019) observe, "Economic power is concentrated in the hands of a few, leaving the majority dependent and disempowered."

3. Gendered Dimensions of Disempowerment

Women and girls face layered disadvantages rooted in insecurity, poverty, and deeply entrenched patriarchal norms. Child marriage remains widespread, driven by economic hardship and cultural practices associated with bride price—a tradition that commodifies girls and restricts their access to education. Oliha (2022) notes that "the economic desperation and cultural expectations mean that many girls are married off early, truncating their futures." Women's participation in civic and economic life is often symbolic; even when involved, decision-making remains dominated by men. Women's groups involved in Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs), for instance, report that loan decisions are frequently controlled by husbands or elders. Peace processes and development initiatives tend to exclude women from meaningful roles, reducing them to symbols rather than active agents of change. As one woman's group lamented, "Our involvement is just for show; real decisions are made by men." These gender norms reinforce subordinate status and limit women's capacity to influence their communities or participate fully in rebuilding efforts.

4. Structural Barriers to Progress

Beyond insecurity, poverty, and gender norms, several structural barriers hinder progress across South Sudan. First, the environment of structural insecurity and violence continues to inhibit collective action. Fragmented armed groups and ongoing conflicts create a climate of constant fear, preventing communities from organizing or advocating for change (Bilali, 2020). Second, the political economy of patronage and resource control sustains dependency; elites divert resources and monopolize markets, ensuring that the majority remain impoverished and powerless (Nyaba, 2019). Third, institutional collapsen weak judiciary, police, and public services leaves citizens with no avenues for justice or redress, further eroding social trust and accountability (Madul, 2024). Fourth, patriarchal cultural norms continue to restrict women's participation in decision-making, reinforcing gender hierarchies supported by customary laws (Oliha, 2022). Finally, the limitations of aid architecture short-term, apolitical interventions often exacerbate dependency and fragmentation rather than fostering sustainable empowerment (Zürcher, 2022).

Table 1: Key Barriers to Citizen Empowerment in South Sudan - Synthesis of Findings

Barrier Category	Specific Manifestation	Illustrative Quote/Data Point	Impact on Empowerment
Structural Insecurity	- Pervasive sub-national violence - Predation by state and non-state armed actors - Absence of rule of law	*"First, give me peace. Give me a life without fear. Then we can talk about empowerment."* (UNMISS, 2023)	Cripples all forms of agency; creates a climate of fear that silences dissent; makes accumulation of assets impossible.
The Poverty Trap	- Extreme food insecurity and dependency on aid - Lack of economic opportunities and infrastructure - Elite control over resources and patronage	*"A bag of sorghum can buy political loyalty more effectively than any ideology."* (Sudd Institute)	Forces focus on immediate survival, undermining long-term planning and civic engagement; fosters dependency on elites.
Political & Institutional Environment	- Repressive political space with no tolerance for dissent -Pervasive corruption and lack of transparency -Non-existent or non-independent accountability institutions	*"We say what they want to hear, or we say nothing."* (Liaga, 2019)	Renders civic education on rights impotent; makes advocacy dangerous; leads to co-optation of participatory processes.
Socio-Cultural Norms	- Deeply entrenched patriarchy - High value placed on bride price - Low social value of female education	*"A daughter is a source of wealth... To educate her is to lose this wealth."* (Oliha, 2022)	Systematically disempowers women and girls; makes them instruments of household economic strategy rather than independent agents.
Aid Architecture	- Apolitical, technical project designs - Short-term funding cycles - Lack of coordination and focus on symptoms over causes	Over 60% of beneficiaries lost productive assets to looting within one year of a livelihood project (Zürcher, 2022).	Interventions are often unsustainable, fragmented, and fail to address the root political causes of disempowerment.

5. Rethinking Empowerment in a Fragile State

The previous discussion underscores the harsh reality that citizens in South Sudan experience deep and multifaceted disempowerment, driven by political violence, systemic poverty, and a

governance system rooted in opacity and dependency. Conventional empowerment efforts, which focus on technical solutions like skills training or information dissemination, have largely failed because they overlook the underlying political structures that sustain inequality. Instead of viewing empowerment as a technical challenge, a radical shift is needed towards a politically-informed approach that recognizes power dynamics. Such an approach must confront the system that benefits a small elite while maintaining the majority in dependent poverty and managed ignorance. International actors often avoid this political confrontation to maintain operational neutrality, but without addressing these fundamental power relations, efforts to build citizen agency remain superficial and limited.

Moreover, the review emphasizes the importance of moving beyond individualistic models of empowerment, which tend to focus solely on personal capacity-building. In contexts like South Sudan, sustainable change depends on fostering collective platforms community groups, social movements, and independent media that enable people to act together, share risks, and amplify their voices. Successful examples often involve trusted local institutions like the church, highlighting the need for a collective approach rather than isolated skills transfer. Additionally, the relationship between economic and political empowerment must be reconsidered; economic progress alone does not lead to political participation without guarantees of security and political reform. Effective empowerment programs must incorporate a deep political analysis, asking critical questions about power, control, and risks, and aim to build a broad constituency for peace and accountability. Ultimately, empowering citizens in South Sudan is a political challenge that demands integrated, strategic, and collective action rooted in an understanding of the inseparable links between poverty, ignorance, and power.

Recommendations: An Integrated Framework for Citizen Empowerment in Fragile States

Based on the critical review of the challenges and the failures of existing models, this section proposes a new conceptual framework for designing and implementing citizen empowerment programs in fragile states like South Sudan. This framework moves away from siloed, apolitical interventions and toward an integrated, politically-informed approach that treats empowerment as a holistic process of building citizen resilience. The framework is built on three indivisible and mutually reinforcing pillars: Economic Strengthening, Critical Consciousness, and Collective Voice. The central argument is that sustainable empowerment can only be achieved when interventions simultaneously address all three dimensions. The Integrated Empowerment Framework (IEF) is designed as a planning and evaluation tool for practitioners, donors, and policymakers. Its purpose is to ensure that empowerment initiatives are contextually grounded, politically aware, and structured to address the root causes of disempowerment, rather than just its symptoms.
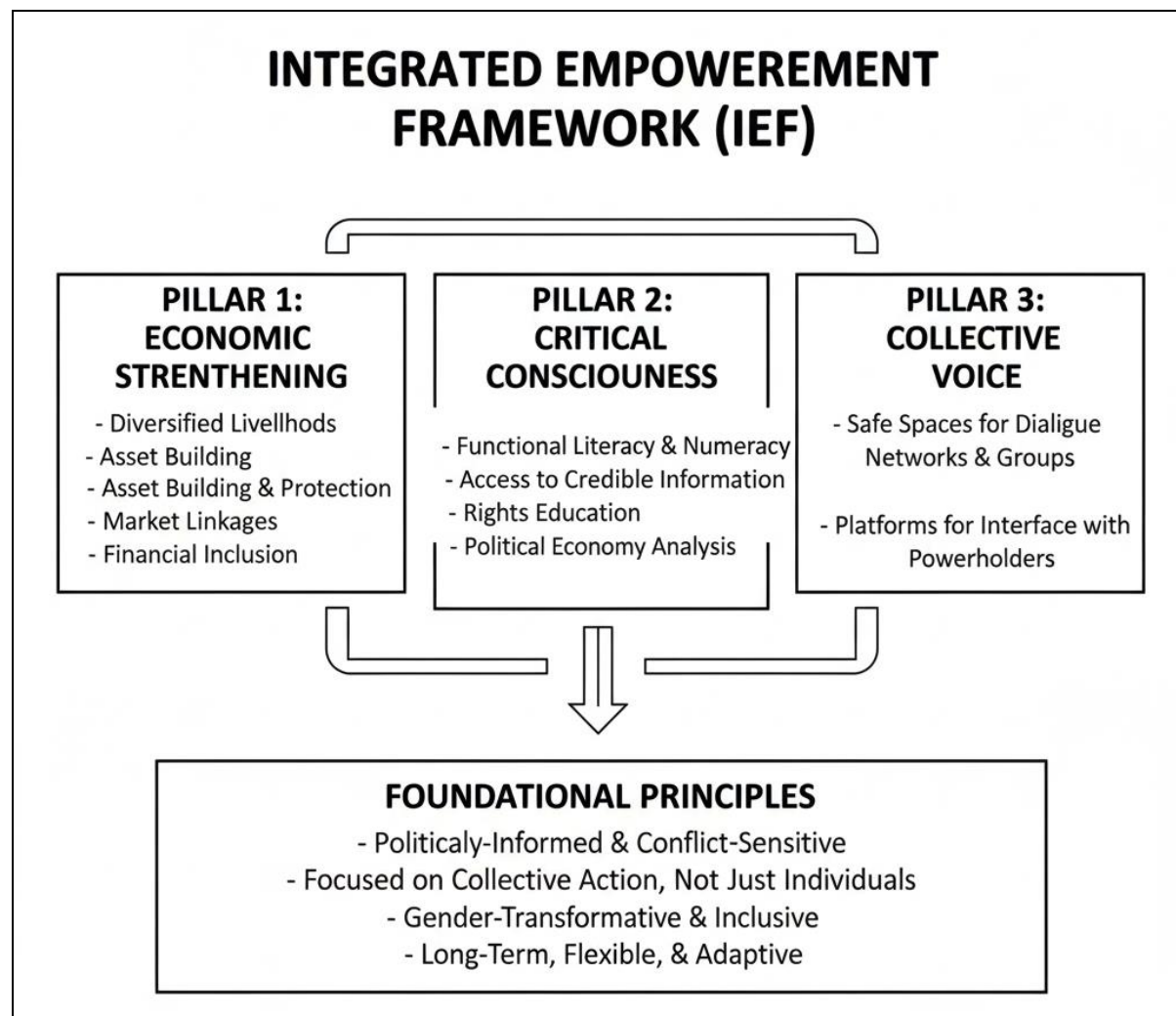
Figure 2 The Integrated Empowerment Framework (IEF)

Source: Author's compilation (2025).

The IEF is built around three interconnected pillars—Economic Strengthening, Critical Consciousness, and Collective Voice—which reinforce each other to foster sustainable empowerment. The Economic Strengthening pillar emphasizes building resilient livelihoods, asset protection, and market access, aiming to reduce dependency on political patrons and promote economic autonomy. Critical Consciousness transforms traditional education into a tool for citizens to critically analyze their realities, understand their rights, and recognize the structural drivers of poverty through literacy, access to credible information, and rights-based education. The Collective Voice pillar centers on fostering safe spaces for dialogue, creating community-based networks, and establishing platforms for organized engagement with

powerholders, enabling citizens to shift from passive recipients to active participants in governance and accountability.

Operationalizing the IEF requires a fundamental shift in aid delivery, emphasizing integrated programming, long-term flexible funding, and investment in trusted local institutions such as churches and community groups. It mandates that projects incorporate political-economy analysis to understand and navigate local and national power dynamics, ensuring programs are contextually relevant and adaptive. This approach recognizes the immense political challenges in South Sudan but offers a more realistic and transformative pathway by framing empowerment as a collective, political process rather than a series of technical interventions. Through this integrated framework, the goal is to move citizens from enforced ignorance and dependence toward critical agency and resilient, collective action.

Conclusion

The crisis in South Sudan is often framed in terms of its visible symptoms: the violence, the humanitarian need, the state's failure to function. This paper has argued that beneath these symptoms lies a deeper, structural condition: the systematic disempowerment of the citizenry through the perpetuation of a symbiotic cycle of mass poverty and systemic ignorance. This condition is not an accidental byproduct of fragility but a functional element of a political system that benefits a small elite by keeping the majority dependent, fragmented, and uninformed.

The critical review of dominant empowerment models economic, social, and political reveals a fundamental flaw in the conventional aid paradigm. By treating poverty and ignorance as technical deficits to be solved through apolitical, project-based interventions, these models have consistently failed to address the root causes of disempowerment. They have provided temporary relief but have rarely built the sustainable, collective agency needed to challenge the political and economic structures that produce vulnerability. The lived realities of citizens, defined by the primacy of fear and the daily struggle for survival, render many of these well-intentioned programs ineffective and unsustainable.

The central conclusion of this study is that genuine citizen empowerment in a fragile state like South Sudan cannot be a technical exercise. It must be understood and approached as a political project aimed at gradually shifting power relations from the bottom up. This requires a new, integrated approach, as outlined in the proposed Integrated Empowerment Framework (IEF). By insisting on the indivisibility of Economic Strengthening, Critical Consciousness, and Collective Voice, the framework provides a conceptual roadmap for moving beyond siloed projects and toward a holistic strategy for building citizen resilience.

The path forward is neither quick nor easy. It demands that international partners and national civil society actors become more politically astute, more comfortable with complexity, and more committed to long-term processes over short-term results. It requires a fundamental shift from

delivering aid to facilitating agency. For the people of South Sudan, who have been systematically stripped of their power for generations, empowerment is not about receiving another handout. It is about reclaiming the capacity to analyze, to speak, and to act together to shape their own future. Supporting that difficult, dangerous, but ultimately transformative process is the most meaningful contribution that any external actor can make.
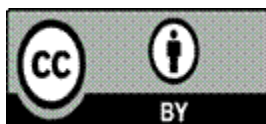
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