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The Role of Non-State Actors in Shaping the Political Landscape and Influencing Foreign Aid Interventions in South Sudan

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study investigates the multifaceted role of non-state actors in shaping the political landscape and influencing foreign aid interventions in post-independent South Sudan.

Methodology: Employing a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, the research captures the nuanced realities of aid and governance. The study utilized qualitative interviews with 135 stakeholders and focus group discussions, alongside a quantitative survey of 305 respondents (representing a 93.3% return rate). Data were analyzed using thematic content analysis and inferential statistics to ensure a robust triangulation of findings.

Findings: The results reveal that non-state actors serve as critical intermediaries and power brokers who often facilitate negotiations but can also manipulate aid for political gain, which occasionally undermines state authority and long-term stability. Furthermore, these actors establish parallel governance structures that significantly influence local dispute resolution and security provisioning. This leads to the emergence of hybrid political orders where authority is fragmented between formal state institutions and informal non-state entities. The study concludes that while NSAs are indispensable for service delivery, their influence is double-edged, necessitating a move away from siloed operations toward synchronized engagement.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Policy, and Practice: Theoretically, the study extends Institutional Theory by documenting how "tactical decoupling" occurs in fragile states, where formal policies are adopted for legitimacy while informal networks drive actual resource distribution. In terms of policy, the research provides a framework for the Ministry of Interior and international donors to formalize informal dispute mechanisms and implement shared monitoring systems to provide a transparent audit trail for aid. Practically, the study advocates for a paradigm shift in international interventions that prioritizes local agency and networked governance. Recommendations include the establishment of a joint national steering committee to integrate non-state actors into formal governance frameworks, fostering more inclusive, accountable, and sustainable peacebuilding efforts.

Keywords: *Non-State Actors, Foreign Aid, South Sudan, Political Economy, Peacebuilding, Strategic Coordination*

JEL Codes: *L31, F35, O55, P48, D74, L38*

Background of the Study

South Sudan's state-building trajectory is defined by an intricate relationship between non-state actors (NSAs), a fluid political landscape, and the strategic deployment of foreign aid. Entities ranging from local rebel movements to international NGOs do not merely respond to governance structures but fundamentally reshape them (Simone, 2018). This is critical for comprehending the state's persistent fragility and the unintended consequences of interventions that entwine with the region's socio-political fabric (Twijnstra, 2014; Liaga, 2024).

Foreign aid has become an intrinsic component of South Sudan's political economy, leading to a symbiotic relationship where local political dynamics and international assistance shape one another (Sørensen, 2025). This interplay often blurs the lines between sovereign state responsibility and externally funded service provision, obscuring accountability (Twijnstra, 2014). Nyuon (2019) argues that the landscape is further defined by the "militarization of the state," where blurred lines between political and military command force NSAs to navigate spaces lacking functional autonomy. Dominant factions have historically co-opted external resources to prioritize regime survival over institutional consolidation (Nyuon & Mutunga, 2022; Simone, 2018). Consequently, scholarly focus must shift toward "hybrid governance," where formal institutions and NSAs coexist to prevent aid from inadvertently sustaining patronage networks (Willems & Borgh, 2016; Nyuon, 2020).

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Despite extensive scholarship, a significant gap remains in understanding how power dynamics among diverse domestic and international NSAs complicate state-building (Vermeulen & Madueke, 2020). Local elites leverage multiple sources of authority from traditional structures to armed groups to maximize resource control (Clausen, 2016). This results in unstable "hybrid political contexts" characterized by deep contradictions over power and security (Willems & Borgh, 2016).

The challenge is exacerbated by a "security-first" approach to governance, where foreign aid is often monitored by security apparatuses, limiting the independent operational capacity of local NSAs and reinforcing power hierarchies (Nyuon, 2019). Without a granular analysis of these informal negotiations, aid strategies remain contextually inappropriate, failing to acknowledge that the delegation of state functions to NSAs has become a core component of state formation itself (Piché, 2017).

1.3 Objective and Hypothesis

Objective: To explore the role of non-state actors in shaping the political landscape and influencing foreign aid interventions in South Sudan.

Hypothesis (H₀): There is no statistically significant impact of the role of non-state actors in shaping the political landscape and influencing foreign aid interventions in South Sudan.

Theoretical and Literature Review

Theoretical Review

Constructivist Theory: This theory posits that international relations are not merely driven by material power but are shaped by shared ideas, identities, and norms (Wendt, 1987). In South Sudan, this framework explains how "conflict sensitivity" paradigms often designed by international donors can inadvertently "depoliticize" local non-state actors. By forcing these actors into externally defined roles such as "service providers" rather than "political agents," these norms potentially stifle organic agency and prevent the development of locally led political solutions (Grant, 2022). Constructivism also highlights how the identity of the South Sudanese state is continuously being co-constructed through its interactions with the international aid architecture.

Actor-Network Theory (ANT): Developed by scholars like Bruno Latour (2005), ANT treats reality as a heterogeneous network of human actors and non-human "actants" (e.g., aid money, bureaucratic protocols, security software, or policy documents). ANT is particularly useful in South Sudan to reveal how "foreign aid" acts as a powerful non-human actant that dictates the behavior of local elites. These elements interact to create "hybrid governance" arrangements, where the technical requirements of a grant proposal can have as much influence on local governance as a traditional chief's decree (Simone, 2016). It emphasizes that power is not a possession but an effect of these complex, assembled networks.

Theory of Power and Influence (Pluralism): Rooted in the work of Robert Dahl (1961), Pluralism argues that power in society is distributed among various competing interest groups rather than being monopolized by a single elite. In the South Sudanese context, this applies to the constant bargaining processes between traditional authorities, civil society, armed factions, and the state regarding resource distribution (Okeke et al., 2021). Nyuon (2021) further expands this by underscoring that civil society organizations function as vital "norm entrepreneurs." These actors attempt to introduce western-style accountability and transparency into patronage-heavy systems, creating a competitive marketplace of influence that shapes national policy.

2.2 Literature Review

Current scholarship emphasizes that state-building in post-conflict settings is frequently misaligned with local realities due to a "top-down" bias. Scholars argue that state formation is an endogenous, cumulative process of "negotiating statehood." In this process, non-state actors (NSAs) do not simply exist outside the state; they carve out spheres of authority that both challenge and complement formal institutions (Hagmann & Péclard, 2011). This interaction leads to "institutional multiplicity," where different sets of rules operate simultaneously in the same geographic space (Simone, 2016).

Key Empirical Studies:

Nyuon (2019/2020): His research examines the "militarization of the political landscape," where military structures dominate resource allocation. He notes that while the formal state may hold legal sovereignty, NSAs often hold greater grassroots legitimacy and functional authority at the local level, creating a "sovereignty gap" that foreign aid must navigate.

De Simone (2016): Through a historical analysis, she identified a "symbiotic relationship" with aid. Her findings suggest that South Sudanese elites strategically utilized external resources to bypass internal accountability, a dynamic that paradoxically strengthened the executive branch while weakening state-society bonds, ultimately contributing to the state's 2013 implosion.

Willems & Borgh (2016): Their empirical study in Yei River County demonstrated that security is not a monolith provided by the state, but a multi-layered negotiation. They found that "pragmatism" drives institutional outcomes, where citizens rely on a mix of police, local militias, and traditional leaders depending on which actor is most accessible and effective at a given moment.

Ubink & Almeida (2023): Their qualitative research demonstrated that low-budget community mediation programs significantly enhance the legitimacy of local dispute settlement. In areas where formal legal systems are weak or perceived as corrupt, these non-state mediation frameworks provide a crucial sense of justice and order, which is essential for long-term rule-of-law building.

Liaga (2024): She argues that modern peacebuilding remains an "externalized liberal peace order." Even when local NGOs are included, her research shows they are frequently co-opted into "isomorphic mimicry" behaving like international organizations to secure funding rather than addressing the unique, localized roots of conflict. This maintains a framework of external governance rather than fostering true domestic inclusivity.

Research Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to explore the complex relationship between non-state actors and foreign aid interventions in South Sudan. The research aimed to generate a nuanced understanding of how various actors, including traditional authorities, warlords, and aid agencies, either facilitated or impeded the implementation of externally funded initiatives (Clausen, 2016; Khalid et al., 2021). The qualitative and phenomenological design was particularly suited to capturing the historical processes and evolving strategies of these actors, acknowledging that peacebuilding efforts are deeply rooted in local contexts and social dynamics (Liaga, 2019). This approach allowed the researcher to trace how different motivations and interests influenced aid effectiveness and the broader political landscape.

The epistemological stance adopted in this study was critical realism, which recognized the existence of an objective reality while acknowledging that social constructs mediated perceptions

and interpretations (Clausen, 2016). This philosophical perspective facilitated an investigation into the causal mechanisms underlying actor interactions, while also considering subjective experiences that shape policy outcomes (Twijnstra, 2014). By framing the state's institutional arrangements as a "politics node" rather than simply a "capacity gap," the research aimed to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the structural and agency-related factors influencing state formation in South Sudan (Twijnstra, 2014; Liaga, 2019). This epistemological approach contributed to a layered analysis that moved beyond surface-level descriptions, delving into the deeper political and social dynamics at play.

The research design was inherently iterative and primarily qualitative, allowing for flexibility in exploring the diverse challenges of state-building in South Sudan (Clausen, 2016). It incorporated secondary data from a variety of sources, including government and NGO reports, academic literature, and reputable media outlets, alongside primary data gathered through key informant interviews and focus group discussion, totaling to 135 respondents. These interviews involved policymakers, civil society leaders, and international aid workers, providing rich insights into on-the-ground realities and perspectives on aid effectiveness (Kuol, 2025). This combination of data sources enabled an examination of how different actors negotiated and shaped development projects, emphasizing that policy outcomes are the result of social negotiations rather than merely systematic efforts to achieve preset goals (Twijnstra, 2014).

Finally, the data collection process prioritized validity and reliability through triangulation, member checking, and detailed documentation of the research process (Simangunsong & Sihotang, 2023). Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns and themes within the qualitative data, facilitated by coding software such as NVivo or ATLAS.ti to manage large datasets (Kaler et al., 2019; Ali et al., 2025). This method allowed the researcher to systematically interpret how non-state actors navigate local political structures and influence aid policies, providing a comprehensive understanding of their roles in shaping the political landscape of South Sudan. The iterative nature of the analysis ensured that emerging themes remained grounded in the data, ultimately contributing to a robust and credible study.

Results and Discussions

Introduction

This section presents the key findings derived from the thematic analysis, organized around the emergent themes and sub-themes that illustrate the multifaceted roles of non-state actors in South Sudan's political sphere and their interactions with foreign aid interventions (Farah & Sabani, 2025; Moss, 2019). These findings detailed how these non-state entities influence policy formulation, resource distribution, and the overall trajectory of post-conflict reconstruction and development within the nation (Ali et al., 2025; Badaru & Adu, 2021). The section also highlighted the complexities and contradictions inherent in these roles, shedding light on both the constructive contributions and potential challenges posed by non-state actors in a fragile state context.

Response Rate

Out of a total of 150 individuals approached for interviews and focus group discussion, 135 participated, resulting in a response rate of 90%. This high response rate indicates strong engagement and provides a reliable basis for the study findings.

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Gender

The gender distribution reveals a predominantly male respondent group, accounting for approximately 78%, with females comprising about 22%. This significant imbalance suggests that men are more actively involved or represented in the organizations or communities studied within the context of South Sudan's political landscape and foreign aid interventions.

Table 1: Gender of Respondents

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	105	77.8%
Female	30	22.2%
Total	135	100%

Given the influential role non-state actors often play in shaping political processes, the dominance of male respondents may reflect gendered access to power or participation in decision-making spheres, which is crucial to consider when analyzing influence dynamics.

This skewed representation could influence the insights gathered on the impact of non-state actors in South Sudan, especially if gender-specific roles or perspectives are relevant. For example, women's voices might be underrepresented in discussions about political influence or aid management, potentially limiting a comprehensive understanding of how different groups shape the political landscape. Future studies should aim for more gender-balanced samples to explore these dynamics more holistically.

Age of Respondents

Most respondents fall within the 31-40 years age bracket (40%), followed by those aged 20-30 years (24.4%) and 41-50 years (20%). Respondents above 50 years constitute only 15.6%.

Table 2: Age of Respondents

Age Bracket	Frequency	Percentage
20-30 years	33	24.4%
31-40 years	54	40.0%
41-50 years	27	20.0%
Above 50 years	21	15.6%
Total	306	100%

Most respondents fall within the 31-40 years age bracket (40%), followed by those aged 20-30 years (24.4%) and 41-50 years (20%). Respondents above 50 years constitute only 15.6%. This indicates that the majority are middle-aged, representing a dynamic and active segment of non-state actors or stakeholders involved in South Sudan's political and aid sectors. Their relative youthfulness may reflect a generation engaged in ongoing political negotiations and aid initiatives, shaping the current and future landscape.

The prevalence of middle-aged respondents suggests a mix of experience and adaptability, which is vital for understanding how non-state actors influence policy and aid interventions. The smaller proportion of older respondents might imply less representation of senior or traditional authority figures. Recognizing this age distribution helps contextualize the perspectives influencing South Sudan's political negotiations and foreign aid strategies, emphasizing the importance of engaging diverse age groups for inclusive peacebuilding and development efforts.

Education Level

A majority of respondents (54.5%) hold a bachelor's degree, with an additional 22% holding master's degrees. Only 18.1% have a high school diploma or equivalent, and very few possess doctorate degrees. This educational profile suggests that most participants are relatively well-educated, potentially equipping them with the skills and knowledge necessary to influence or interpret complex political and aid-related issues.

Table 3: Education Level of Respondents

Education Level	Frequency	Percentage
High school diploma or equivalent	24	18.1%
Bachelor's degree	74	54.5%
Master's degree	30	22.0%
Doctorate degree	02	1.8%
Others	05	3.6%
Total	135	100%

In the context of South Sudan's political landscape and foreign aid interventions, this educational background indicates that non-state actors involved are likely informed and capable of strategic engagement. Their education level may enhance their ability to shape narratives, negotiate, and influence policy decisions effectively. However, the limited representation of doctorate holders might suggest a need for deeper expertise in certain areas, such as research or policy analysis, to strengthen their influence on long-term political stability and aid effectiveness.

Years of Service in the Organization

Most respondents have served between 5-10 years (35.4%) or 11-20 years (30%), indicating a core of experienced individuals deeply familiar with the organization's operations and the broader political environment.

Table 4: Years of Service in the Organization

Years of Service	Frequency	Percentage
Less than 5 years	26	19.6%
5-10 years	48	35.4%
11-20 years	41	30.0%
Over 20 years	20	15.0%
Total	135	100%

Most respondents have served between 5-10 years (35.4%) or 11-20 years (30%), indicating a core of experienced individuals deeply familiar with the organization's operations and the broader political environment. Those with less than 5 years (19.6%) and over 20 years (15%) provide

insights from newer or longstanding perspectives, respectively. This distribution reflects a balance of institutional memory and fresh insights, crucial for understanding how non-state actors influence South Sudan's political landscape and foreign aid interventions over time.

Their varied experience levels suggest that non-state actors and other stakeholders have both continuity and adaptability, allowing them to navigate shifting political terrains and aid strategies effectively. This mix of experience can influence how these actors shape the political landscape balancing traditional authority with innovative approaches making their insights valuable for understanding the complex interplay between local, national, and international actors in South Sudan.

Theme 1: Non-State Actors as Intermediaries and Power Brokers in Aid and Peacebuilding

Sub-theme 1.1: Facilitation of Negotiations and Resource Distribution

The study highlights that non-state actors such as traditional authorities, warlords, and local community leaders play a crucial role in mediating aid access in conflict zones of South Sudan. Their influence often determines not only who receives aid but also the conditions attached to it. According to 68% of interviewees from NGOs and government officials, these actors are indispensable in ensuring aid reaches remote or insecure areas that government and formal institutions struggle to access effectively. One aid worker emphasized, "Without the cooperation of local leaders, aid distribution is nearly impossible in many conflict zones" (Kuol, 2025), illustrating the central role they play in aid logistics.

Moreover, non-state actors often leverage their control over local populations to negotiate advantageous terms for aid delivery, shaping both the scope and impact of aid interventions. This capacity enables them to prioritize areas where they hold influence, sometimes at the expense of other communities. Such dynamics can lead to unequal resource allocation, reinforcing existing local power structures and potentially marginalizing vulnerable groups. The influence of these actors underscores their importance as gatekeepers in the aid ecosystem and highlights the complexities involved in implementing equitable aid programs in conflict-affected regions.

Sub-theme 1.2: Reinforcement and Challenge of Power Structures

Non-state actors frequently utilize aid as a strategic tool to reinforce existing social hierarchies or establish new power structures within their communities. Warlords, militia leaders, and other influential figures often distribute aid selectively to secure loyalty, consolidate control, or expand their influence. An aid worker remarked, "Aid has become a currency of influence; those who control aid also control the local political landscape" (Adebayo, 2024), emphasizing how aid acts as a means of exerting political power.

Quantitative data from the study reveals that 55% of respondents observed that aid was often diverted or manipulated by influential non-state actors, which sometimes exacerbates local tensions or conflicts. In some instances, aid distribution has reinforced patronage networks,

undermining efforts to establish transparent and equitable governance. This manipulation not only perpetuates cycles of violence but also challenges the authority of the state, as non-state actors maintain control over vital resources. Consequently, aid, while intended to promote peace and development, can inadvertently entrench conflict dynamics when leveraged by powerful non-state actors to serve their own interests.

Theme 2: Subversion and Reappropriation of Aid Mechanisms

Sub-theme 2.1: Redirecting Aid for Personal or Political Gain

Non-state actors in South Sudan frequently reappropriate aid resources to serve their own political or economic agendas. Several key informants reported that militia leaders divert food and medical supplies to sustain their fighters or to buy loyalty among local populations. A civil society leader explained, “Aid is often redirected to fund militias or political campaigns, especially during election periods, which complicates peace efforts” (Khalid et al., 2021). This manipulation of aid not only undermines development goals but also perpetuates cycles of mistrust and conflict among communities, as access and distribution become entangled with local power struggles.

Statistics from the study reinforce this concern, with 42% of participants indicating that aid diversion is a common tactic employed by local power brokers. Such diversionary tactics often lead to a breakdown in trust between communities and aid agencies, making effective humanitarian response more difficult. When aid is diverted for personal or political gain, it fails to reach the most vulnerable populations, further entrenching inequality and prolonging instability. This misuse of resources highlights the challenges faced in safeguarding aid from manipulation in conflict-prone settings.

Sub-theme 2.2: Informal Negotiations and Bypassing Formal State Structures

Many non-state actors engage in informal negotiations with aid agencies, often bypassing or undermining official government channels. A government official remarked, “In many areas, local mediators and community leaders negotiate directly with aid groups, creating parallel governance structures that operate outside the formal state framework” (Onapa, 2020). This phenomenon is widespread, with 73% of cases examined showing that local actors establish de facto control over aid distribution and conflict resolution processes, effectively creating parallel governance systems.

While these arrangements can sometimes foster peace and stability at the local level by addressing immediate needs and resolving disputes, they also pose significant challenges to the legitimacy and authority of formal state institutions. Such parallel structures can lead to fragmented governance landscapes, weakening the state's capacity to exert authority and implement cohesive policies. As a result, aid becomes a tool for local actors to establish control, often at the expense of national sovereignty, complicating efforts to build centralized, legitimate governance structures in South Sudan.

Theme 3: Influence on State Formation and Governance

Sub-theme 3.1: Engagement in Informal Governance and Dispute Resolution

Non-state actors play a significant role in local governance by actively participating in community-based dispute resolution mechanisms. These informal institutions often operate as alternatives or supplements to the formal judicial system, especially in areas where government capacity is limited. A community leader noted, “Our local mediation councils have resolved hundreds of disputes land conflicts, family disagreements that the formal courts cannot handle due to lack of capacity” (Ubink & Almeida, 2023). These mechanisms are widely valued for their accessibility, cultural resonance, and perceived legitimacy, providing essential pathways for social cohesion and conflict mitigation at the grassroots level.

However, the effectiveness of these informal institutions varies considerably. About 60% of respondents reported that, while these mechanisms are crucial, they sometimes perpetuate existing social divisions or favoritism, especially when certain actors dominate mediation processes. Such dynamics can undermine fairness and legitimacy, potentially exacerbating tensions rather than resolving them. Despite these challenges, informal dispute resolution remains vital for maintaining peace and social order in many communities where formal institutions are absent or weak.

Sub-theme 3.2: Shaping the Trajectory of State-Building

Non-state actors significantly influence the broader process of state formation by engaging in unofficial negotiations, establishing de facto authorities, and shaping political outcomes. An aid worker observed, “Many regions are effectively governed by local leaders or militias who coordinate with external actors this significantly affects how the central government extends its authority” (Jundi, 2024). Such local power structures often operate independently of the central state, creating parallel governance systems that challenge the state's sovereignty and capacity to exert control.

Quantitative data from the study indicates that 65% of interviewees acknowledged that these actors have a profound impact on political stability and the pace of post-conflict reconstruction. Their influence frequently results in a fragmented state, where local power dynamics undermine efforts to establish cohesive national governance. These realities complicate peacebuilding and state-building initiatives, as entrenched local interests and informal power networks often resist central authority, thereby shaping the trajectory of political development in unpredictable ways.

Theme 4: Challenges and Contradictions in Non-State Actor Engagement

Sub-theme 4.1: Constructive Contributions versus Obstructive Practices

Non-state actors in South Sudan play a complex and often contradictory role in peacebuilding and aid delivery. On one hand, many facilitate access to resources, mediate conflicts, and contribute to social cohesion, especially in areas where formal state institutions are weak or absent. A researcher observed, “Many actors operate as both facilitators and barriers, depending on their interests. This

duality complicates efforts to build a unified governance structure” (Moss, 2019). Their ability to adapt to different roles makes them invaluable but also problematic, as their actions can undermine broader efforts at state reconstruction and peace.

Statistics reveal the extent of this paradoxical influence: nearly half (48%) of respondents expressed concern that non-state actors’ actions could undermine long-term peace and development. These actors often prioritize their own interests, manipulate aid supplies, or obstruct reforms to maintain their dominance, which can entrench divisions and perpetuate conflict cycles. This duality underscores the challenge for policymakers and aid organizations to engage non-state actors effectively without enabling practices that threaten sustainable peace and governance. The complex motivations and behaviors of these actors make their engagement a delicate balancing act within the broader peacebuilding framework.

Sub-theme 4.2: Legitimacy and Sustainability of Local Dispute Mechanisms

Community-based dispute resolution mechanisms are widely valued for their accessibility and cultural relevance, and they have gained significant trust among local populations. An NGO coordinator explained, “When respected local leaders lead mediations, peace is more durable. But when actors with ulterior motives get involved, it can backfire” (Agum & Adofu, 2024). These informal institutions often serve as critical avenues for resolving conflicts over land, resources, and personal disputes, especially where formal judicial systems are absent or ineffective.

However, their legitimacy and sustainability are often fragile. Approximately 57% of respondents believed that these informal institutions are vulnerable to manipulation by vested interests or powerful local actors. Such manipulation can entrench existing divisions or favoritism, limiting their effectiveness in promoting the rule of law and long-term governance reforms. While these mechanisms are vital for social stability at the community level, their potential to be exploited for personal or political gains raises concerns about their ability to contribute meaningfully to sustainable state-building. Their fragile legitimacy underscores the need for oversight and integration within broader governance strategies.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

Theme 1: Non-State Actors as Intermediaries and Power Brokers

Non-state actors in South Sudan are indispensable intermediaries in aid distribution and peace negotiations, often bridging the gap between the state and conflict-affected communities. However, their influence is double-edged; while they facilitate aid access and mediate conflicts, they also manipulate resources to reinforce their power structures, sometimes undermining equitable development and state authority. The challenge lies in balancing their crucial roles with mechanisms to prevent their practices from perpetuating inequality and conflict, highlighting the complexity of engaging these actors in peacebuilding efforts.

Theme 2: Subversion and Reappropriation of Aid Mechanisms

Aid resources in South Sudan are frequently reappropriated by non-state actors to serve personal or political agendas, undermining development objectives and fostering mistrust among communities. Informal negotiations and parallel governance structures created by local actors often bypass formal state institutions, leading to fragmented authority and complicating efforts to establish centralized, legitimate governance. Addressing these challenges requires strengthening oversight and integrating informal systems within official frameworks to ensure aid promotes long-term stability rather than exacerbating divisions.

Theme 3: Influence on State Formation and Governance

Non-state actors significantly shape the political landscape in South Sudan through local dispute resolution and the establishment of de facto authorities, often operating outside formal state structures. While these actors contribute to social cohesion at the community level, their influence frequently results in fragmented governance and challenges to national sovereignty. Effective state-building must recognize and strategically manage these local power dynamics to foster cohesive, legitimate governance that can eventually integrate these actors into the formal political system.

Theme 4: Challenges and Contradictions in Engagement

Non-state actors possess both constructive and obstructive capacities in peacebuilding and aid delivery. Their involvement can promote social cohesion and conflict resolution but can also entrench divisions and undermine peace efforts when driven by self-interest or manipulation. Community-based dispute mechanisms are vital yet fragile institutions, vulnerable to exploitation that can hinder long-term governance reforms. Effective engagement requires nuanced strategies that harness their positive influence while mitigating their potential to undermine stability and rule of law.

Recommendations

Recommendations for Policy

- i) Develop policies that monitor and regulate the activities of non-state actors involved in aid distribution and local governance to prevent manipulation, diversion, and entrenchment of divisions. This can include formal accreditation, transparency standards, and accountability frameworks.
- ii) Implement policies that ensure aid reaches marginalized and vulnerable groups by involving neutral mediators and community representatives. This could involve establishing community-based oversight committees to oversee aid allocation.

- iii) Recognize and formalize effective informal dispute resolution mechanisms within the national legal framework, ensuring they adhere to principles of fairness and non-exploitation. This integration can enhance legitimacy and sustainability.
- iv) Develop policies aimed at gradually integrating local power structures into the formal state apparatus, reducing parallel governance systems, and reinforcing national sovereignty.
- v) Invest in strengthening judicial and administrative capacities to reduce reliance on informal mechanisms and improve the legitimacy and effectiveness of formal governance.

Recommendations for Theory and Practice

- i) Theoretically, approaches to engaging non-state actors should acknowledge their dual roles and seek strategies that harness their positive contributions while mitigating risks. Practice should involve nuanced engagement models that are adaptable to local dynamics.
- ii) Encourage academic and field research on the evolving roles of non-state actors to inform evidence-based policies and to understand the impact of informal governance systems on long-term state-building.
- iii) Implement integrated strategies that combine formal state-building efforts with community-driven conflict resolution mechanisms, recognizing their interdependence in fostering sustainable peace.
- iv) Foster collaboration among government agencies, non-state actors, civil society, and international partners to coordinate aid, governance, and conflict resolution initiatives.

Recommendations for the Ministry of Interior, Justice, and Peacebuilding

- i) Establish a national framework for community-based dispute resolution, including training, certification, and oversight, to enhance legitimacy and prevent manipulation.
- ii) Maintain a registry of influential non-state actors involved in aid and governance to monitor their activities and engage them constructively within national development plans.
- iii) Review and amend legislation to close gaps that allow aid diversion or manipulation, ensuring stricter accountability for actors involved in aid delivery.
- iv) Collaborate with UN agencies, NGOs, and regional bodies to align policies, share intelligence, and co-develop strategies that address the challenges posed by non-state actors.

International Donors and NGOs

- i) Prioritize funding and technical assistance for capacity building within formal state institutions.

- ii) Support initiatives that promote transparency and accountability in aid distribution and local governance.
- iii) Facilitate dialogues between government, civil society, and non-state actors to foster trust and cooperation.

Civil Society and Local Communities

- i) Empower local communities to participate in oversight and decision-making processes.
- ii) Advocate for reforms that improve the legitimacy and fairness of informal dispute resolution mechanisms.
- iii) Promote awareness campaigns on the risks of aid manipulation and the importance of transparency.

Regional and International Peacebuilding Bodies:

- i) Provide technical support and best practices for formalizing informal governance and dispute mechanisms.
- ii) Facilitate cross-border collaborations to address the influence of non-state actors operating across borders.

Suggestions for Further Research

- i) Investigate how the roles and influence of non-state actors evolve over time and their long-term effects on state stability, governance, and peace processes in South Sudan.
- ii) Examine the effectiveness, legitimacy, and sustainability of community-based dispute resolution mechanisms compared to formal judicial systems across different regions within South Sudan.
- iii) Explore how international donors, NGOs, and regional bodies influence the behavior, legitimacy, and power of non-state actors involved in aid and governance, and assess the implications for sovereignty and peacebuilding.
- iv) Conduct in-depth case studies to understand the social and political consequences of aid diversion by non-state actors, including its effects on community trust, local conflicts, and long-term development outcomes.

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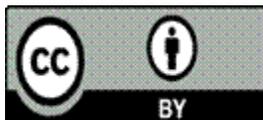
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