From Tribal Loyalties to National Priorities: Policy Pathways for State-Building in South Sudan

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Article History	Abstract
  	South Sudan is confronted with deep state-building dilemmas, chiefly those stemming from tribalism, the fragmentation of a national identity, elite capture, and historical grievance. This complex interaction, in the face of civil violence legacies, competition over resources and weak institutions, severely undermines national unity, institutional authority and sustainable development. This paper introduces a multi-pronged policy model for transforming tribal loyalties into a national unifying system which is vital for the country's future. It underlines the importance of imagining a common national interest—of sovereignty, peace and development—as a vital foundation for social solidarity and for domestic and external orientation. Drawing on Robinson's framework of nine national interest forms, the article recommends a comprehensive form of integration through policy that explicitly connects security strategies, economic policies (for example, fair oil revenue management and land governance) and governance reform proposals to broader, longer-term state-building goals and not simply to short-term political expediency or elite arrangements. Central recommendations for integrating South Sudan's national and ethnic needs are also shared: (1) to include South Sudan's rich cultural heritage within an inclusive educational model and national narratives; To build intergroup identity through an interdependent civic education system; to engage in public dialogue; and To create inclusive institutions, with the Constitution providing for the rights of minorities and equitable distribution of resources. Socio-economic disparities need to be addressed too to reduce divisions and to restore the confidence instilled in the nation. By deliberately removing these structural and institutional barriers, South Sudan will develop commonalities in national identity and resilience-building, peace and development for all regions. ***Keywords:*** *South Sudan, State-building, National Identity, Tribal Politics, Policy Pathways, National Interest, Governance, Peacebuilding, Ethnic Conflict, Development.*

1. Introduction

Persistence of tribal politics

Tribal politics endures in regional contexts such as India and South Sudan, reflecting the indelible effects of tribal identities and systems of governance. Padvi (2023) describes how systemic exclusion of Scheduled Tribes in India is perpetuated by the poor implementation of constitutional safeguards and welfare policies. This failure reinforces its complex nature, rooted in the interplay between tribal rights and the structure of state, sometimes beset by bureaucratic inefficiency and electoral manipulation (Padvi, 2023).

Additionally, Madut (2015) looks at South Sudan's ethnic politics and how it complicates governance, showing how deeply held tribal associations can either hinder or assist political stability and development

depending on the balance of power. According to Patir, Dreyfuss and Shayo (2021), tribal identities constitute a powerful means of political capital in electoral contexts—tribes may mobilize for political representation and resource distribution. Tribal governance in India is a contradictory phenomenon, which can contribute to or undermine political marginalization as traditional authority systems conflict with modern democratic norms (Ambagudia and Xaxa, 2021). In the Balkans, as Batrićević (2023) proves, tribal affiliations affect participation in elections, in particular how tribal identities are integrated into broader national narratives and state-building attempts. Consequently, although tribal politics exhibits feature like resilience, they are also expressions of contradictions in the very political systems that attempt to incorporate these groups into or sideline them.

Policy problem statement

South Sudan has an overarching policy challenge that is endemic and grounded in the lingering dominance of tribal politics. It's due to a complex intertwining of historical, social, and political causes including the legacy of civil conflicts and strong ethnic identities. Decentralization attempts in post-conflict Sudan have had negative effects on local land and power imbalances and tend toward entrenched ethnic groups. This division into increasingly fractured territorial regimes and the decentralization of power actively stifles a coherent, state-focused establishment that embraces all ethnoracial groups.

In addition, local politics are closely linked to militia alliances, as tribal militias perpetuate cycles of violence and mobilize ethnic identity as a key source of political strength. Independence has, strangely enough, amplified ethnic and tribal divides, frequently exploited by elites seeking support for, or side-lining, their rivals, which legitimizes acts of violence. When ethnic diversities find themselves on separate sides of the chasm, formal political institutions often fail to accommodate them and tribal allegiances often become the only way to secure resources and support. The issue is compounded by long-standing grievances, competition for land, resources, and political power. Civil war, elite ethno-politics, and reconciliation failures in peace resolutions combine to forge tribal loyalty, restricting cross-state integration. Ultimately, ethnic affiliations continue to be the dominant political and social identity, a serious hindrance to national unity and inclusive state-building.

2. Why tribal politics persists in South Sudan

In South Sudan, tribal politics still occur under the impact of a complex background which has the combination of historical, social and political factors that have been a mix of the civil conflicts and ethnic identities within South Sudan. Simone (2014) points out that attempts in post-conflict tribal decentralization tended to consolidate local land and power interests, nurturing local loyalties which are harmful to national fusion. The division into competing territorial regimes and the decentralization of power tends to confirm tribal loyalties and obstruct the establishment of a state-centred structure that includes all ethno-racial groups.

Stringham and Forney (2017) suggest that in South Sudan local politics are closely entwined with militia affiliation, especially among ethnic groups like the Nuer, whose informal bases of power and networks of militias such as the White Army challenge any attempts at national unity. These militias typically function along tribal loyalties and reproduce cycles of violence, while using ethnic identity as a fundamental source of political power in local contexts. The independence has not removed ethnic and tribal cleavages from the country, but rather has deepened them and elites have made use of ethnic ties to gain support or marginalize their opponents and legitimate their violence. Official political institutions can never accommodate many ethnicities that can contribute to conflict and grievances – so tribal allegiances become the most significant mechanisms for the acquisition of resources and support.

Onapa (2020) also argues the existence of tribal politics as the result of long-standing grievances and estranged relationships between ethnic groups and competition over land, resources, and political power. Historical patterns of violence and exclusion embed these underlying roots whereby ethnic loyalty serves as one major identity marker, a process through which a long-term conflict does not die and remains during formal peace. The legacy of civil war, evident by elite ethno-politics and failed peace resolutions, still strengthens tribal politics, noted Leibold (2020). And politicians, particularly local leaders, often exploit ethnic divisions by toying with public sentiment against one another in ways that hinder cross-state reconciliation. With these, ethnic loyalties remain the dominant political and social identity, which proves difficult for country unity.

Lastly, as Buyinza Levi (2025) notes, ethnic and tribal identities are central to security and political stability

in South Sudan between 2011 and 2024. These identities often supersede national interests, and instead fuel conflicts rooted in competition for land, power, and other resources contributing to the preservation of tribal politics at the local as well as national level. At a very basic level, tribal politics in South Sudan persist since it is inherently characterized by conflict over land, militia ties, elite agenda setting and historical grievances that block the emergence of inclusive, national-based political institutions.

Structural and institutional drivers of ethnic-based governance

Persistent ethnic-based governance challenges in South Sudan are rooted in a nexus of structural and institutional forces that have long served, in both the past and present, to weaken efforts to construct inclusive and efficient governance arrangements. The colonial legacy — marked by fragmented governance mechanisms and biased boundary delineations and inequitable allocation of resources — is a primary driver. Colonial South Sudan's institutions were intended to uphold colonial interests through the marginalization of indigenous governance arrangements, thus constructing a fragile institutional legacy inherited by South Sudan at independence (Zambakari, 2012). The colonial legacy entwined ethnic divisions inside state institutions and made post-independence governance vulnerable to ethnic politicization and fragmentation.

According to Madut (2015), these colonial formations did not contain mechanisms to fairly account for ethnic diversity and, in addition, developed a rule based on exclusion and nepotism. These weaknesses promoted elite capture, ethnic-based patronage networks, and in the process weakened the establishment of institutions that were strong in name only and failed to form solid and independent institutions for mediating ethnic conflict and the building of the national unity. With poor infrastructures, there was widespread political unrest and lack of efforts to develop proper state governance.

Ceesay and Asmorawati (2025) contend that post-conflict institutional weaknesses are compounded due to lack of real state capacity and the existence of a state characterised by informal governance mechanisms based on ethnic allegiance. They argue that the very formal institutions that we use to govern the world are often used and abused by ethnic elites to secure resources and political power, contributing to a cycle of weakened governance, conflict.

Levi (2025), likewise, highlights that these structural drivers are sustained by the lingering effect of ethnic identities on political decision-making, and that national sovereignty cannot be promoted when ethnic loyalty supersedes national identity, which hinders the creation of inclusive governance.

Leeuwen et al. (2018) affirm that land governance, a basic state capacity building issue, is inherently linked to ethnic identity because of the convergence of land claims and customary land rights associated with ethnicity. Land and ethnicity are often intertwined, making governance reform difficult, and often a challenge to state authority and coherence when these conflicts lead to localized conflicts. In addition, the neglect for reform of land institutions has constrained the state's capacity to allocate resources optimally, thus further polarising the ethnic groups.

To this end, Madut (2022) explains that governance failures within South Sudan, such as weak institutions and limited rule of law, were a by-product of the country's state-building process being fragile and stunted by elite manipulations at key institutional levels with reduced capacity. In the absence of credible governance mechanisms, ethnic clientelism is practiced and local militia networks emerge based on ethnic loyalty, defeating nation-building. Taken together, these articles conclude that the colonial structure, along with deeply entrenched ethnic loyalties, weak institutions, and resource-based conflicts, are among the main drivers of ethnic-based governance in South Sudan. Building on these systemic problems necessitates holistic institutional reform that seeks to enhance state capacity, reform land and resource allocation, and promote frameworks of inclusive governance that go beyond ethnic divides.

Elite manipulation

Manipulation of elites to govern South Sudan is an important factor that influences governance, peacebuilding, and functional status of the state. Such manipulation is typically entrenched in past grievances and reinforced by the fragility of the state that defines the region. As Roach (2024) reveals in a study, the elite people of South Sudan commit behaviours that deepen instability and impede effective governance. This elite focus on the needs of individuals and groups instead of the development of the nation and thus helps to perpetuate a vicious circle of corruption and underdevelopment.

Central to elite manipulation practices within South Sudan is the application of local borders as strategies for conflict. The ambiguous spatial arrangements

between different communities is not only destabilising; but Justin and de Vries (2019) argue that it is also used by elites to gain strength and dominance over communities through the exploitation of such ambiguities. Such manipulation typically results in violence, as groups compete for power and reinforce divisions as well as undermining peace plans.

C. Pinaud (2014) elaborates on this approach, considering how civil wars and predatory behaviour have given rise to a military aristocracy in South Sudan. A military that prefers predation over state-building, for the sake of individual property protection rather than delivering the state's resources. Underlying this predatory behaviour is a prevalent elite-type deception with the ruling class seeking to increase their own wealth and not for the benefit of the people, further deepening the fragility of the state.

Riak's (2025) approach provides a more nuanced view of state dysfunctionality in South Sudan whereby the detrimental dynamics of state crafting and its failure were shown to hinge on political elite influence. The political leaders are more concerned with retaining power through ethnic politics and patronage systems than they are cultivating national unity and development. Such exploitation of ethnic identities aggravates conflict, and undermines any trust in state establishments that would help create peace.

Minde (2018, p. 102) has been able to point out how the manipulation of elites may present a challenge even within peacebuilding. Intervention efforts suffer from a political elite that is so deep rooted that even the best measures may not be palatable to them. Innovation for an effective conflict intervention response must pay heed to the manipulation of elites and its dynamics, creating inclusive governance frameworks that build political sovereignty and accountability frameworks for marginalized communities.

Additionally, when ethnic identity and political manoeuvring work hand in hand, the environment becomes one that poses extreme challenges during the journey to peacebuilding initiatives. According to Minde (2018: 2), peaceful interventions for South Sudan are important because effective conflict resolution means not only taking up the internal warfare but also removing the systems of elite manipulation that sustain insecurity and divisions. It is therefore clear that elite manipulation of South Sudan is manifested in terms of local conflict, predatory governance and ethnic divisions. It is the challenge to address these issues that is essential to building a state that would be resilient enough to maintain delivery and development. Identifying such elite behaviors and motives offers stakeholders the ability to devise strategies, such as implementing accountability and inclusiveness on a strategic basis to facilitate a sustainable peace.

Weak national identity

The establishment of South Sudan as an independent state in 2011 was an important epoch in its history. But the development of a unified national identity has continued to be a mirage, something the building of the nation can't quite do. The ethnic diversity, grievances, and political manipulation have led to a lessening of national identity in South Sudan. In an examination of national identity in South Sudanese media discourse,

Frahm (2012) asserts that there is great fragmentation in national identity dynamics. Media representations tend to highlight ethnic ties rather than an overarching national story, which only divides rather than unites. The media portrayal often depends on a particular ethnic identification, skews public opinion, and muddies the waters of national identity building. Also, in Frahm's (2015) work, he explained that borders in South Sudan have contributed to a complicated relationship between identity and place. The artificial borders are widely perceived as impositions and elicit an air of belonging linked more to tribal or regional identity than to a national order. It illustrates just how hard it is trying to develop a cohesive national identity where local identities still take over the people's minds. Garang (2022) traces how a diverse tapestry of traditions formed South Sudanese identity. She argues that it may still be possible to have a national identity that transcends tribe. This potential, however, is smothered by ongoing ethnic rivalries and political conflicts, which are often stoked by elites for their own political benefit without any resolution to conflict. A discourse that fails to restore trust among the tribal groups of today undermines all efforts at a common national identity.

Ugbudian et al. (2022) challenges the idea of identity and nationality in a post–independence South Sudan, explaining that competing identities impede national unity. The pursuit of one national identity is only made more troubling by political interests that are able to channel ethnic sentiment into electoral gain, which has created a context where the importance of being identified with one's own ethnic group becomes primary to achieving unity with others. Skårås et al. (2020) highlight education as essential in constructing national identity, which is why they argue for globalization of citizenship as a counter to localized

identities. They also argue that education should create a sense of belonging that transcends ethnic barriers, which should foster more cohesive national identity. However, the present educational institutions can still be biased with a particular ethnic emphasis so that the process of forging a collective national identity is complicated. Kuel Jok (2013) contributes to understanding the existential crisis of national identity in Sudan, analysing the effect of the past conflict between the North and South for the modern Southan identity formation in South Sudan. The lack of common narratives and shared histories leaves no common narrative which divides national identity and weakens it for counterposing by other parties. The challenges of South Sudan to develop and maintain a clearly delineated national identity manifest themselves in the media, education systems, and political debates. Solidifying a strong national identity in this country will necessitate mutualistic engagement, a focus on mitigating past grievances as well as political behaviours that continue to exploit indigenous peoples; and developing more inclusive narratives that honour the country's pluralism.

3. National Interest as a Unifying Framework

The concept of national interest is an essential unifying template that can deal with South Sudan's multiple problems of nation-building. In view of deep-rooted ethnic loyalties, the past rift and elements such as foreign influence, it is crucial that we develop a sense of common national interest in order to create social cohesion and sustained development. As Zambakari (2013) puts it, South Sudan's fragile statehood and current armed confrontations are both thanks in part to the absence of a cohesive national identity based on mutual interests. Ethnic divides threaten to fester without unifying conceptual infrastructure, in ways that undercut efforts to create inclusive institutions and solidify sovereignty. Kuir Garang (2022) warns that ethnic fragmentation can be overcome only with the formation of common national anchors in collective identity such as a shared sense of nationhood. This article argues that reimagining South Sudan's collective identity on inclusive identity anchors might be a strategic basis to develop solidarity. It reflects (Clinton 1986) that the normative foundations of national interest and their role are based on the values and common identities that are stronger than ethnicity creating a cohesive social reality that is a must for a stable state. Nuechterlein (1976) notes the importance of conceptualization for foreign policy, claiming that foreign policy must be conducted within the frame by defining national interests in a defined manner. For South Sudan, to speak of a national interest focused on sovereignty, peace, and development helps to shape both domestic policies and external engagements while bringing together distinct ethnic and regional aspirations under one roof. This is even more vital in a post-conflict environment, where external powers and internal factions may have conflicting interests, and a common national interest can provide a basis for healing and co-operation (Skårås, Carsillo, & Breidlid, 2020). Lesley and Landsberg (2024) further emphasize that in foreign policy, that articulation of national interests can permit states to clearly communicate the issues at stake according to the constraints of sovereignty and regional and international obligations. In the South Sudan context, aligning internal ethnic loyalties with external diplomatic considerations via a coherent national interest may contribute to stability and to the promotion of reconstruction. Ulug'bek Khasanov, Abdugani Karimov, and Rishat Khaziev (2025) add that one such key piece to effective statecraft is a clear articulation of the identity values of national interest, which refer to normative, strategic and identity aspects. South Sudan also needs to consider a more pan-national interest approach, integrating sovereignty, identity and development as a tool for unity, forging more diverse alliances, reducing ethnic bifurcation and encouraging coexistence. In conclusion a coherent national interest concept, shared and holistic, is paramount to achieve in South Sudan's own nation-building. It offers a normative foundation that brings ethnic and regional factions together in a common cause, aids a cohesive foreign policy, and steers domestic initiatives toward the attainment of stability and progress. As nations with diverse identities like South Sudan benefit from the collective understanding of interests that go beyond ethnicity and local loyalties, and building a sense of nation with shared goal is a keystone of sustainable peace and development.

How Robinson's framework informs policy

Robinson's framework of nine forms of national interest offers a structured framework for aligning policy priorities in fragile and post-conflict contexts. For South Sudan, this framework is useful as it combines survival, cohesion, economic development and legitimacy under the same analytical framework. By grouping interests into five categories—state survival, national unity, economic well-being, political stability, and international standing—Robinson's method enables policy-makers to better

recognize trade-offs as well as synergies that are likely hidden in disparate policies.

Robinson's focus on both state survival and internal stability underscores the importance of governance reforms that focus on inclusion and security. This has been proven to be the case in South Sudan, where political exclusion and ethnicized governance systematically erode these key interests, sustaining armed violence and eroding state authority (Asal et al., 2016; Belloni, 2011). As Robinson's framework reveals, we need to realize that security strategies cannot be distinct from political inclusion in our policymaking endeavours. Policies that advance survival interests need to have in addition as core concerns rather than secondary considerations the need for power-sharing, inclusive institutions and credible peace agreements to be central to how this must happen.

Second, the framework points out that national unity and cohesion are priorities that constitute a set of basic interests which influence long-term development outcomes. When societies are ethnically divided, there will be no national unity without the design of institutions and distributive justice. Comparative evidence emerging from both federal and power-sharing systems shows that inclusive governance arrangements have the potential to moderate ethnic polarization, increasing legitimacy (Adetiba & Aminur, 2013; Andrews, 2014). And in the case of South Sudan, Robinson's framework provides a framework that can inform policies to provide the right balance of decentralization and national coherence, but also to encourage unity whilst recognizing diversity.

Third, Robinson's emphasis on both economic well-being and social development helps understand why development policy can't stop short-term necessity. More often than not, post-conflict states favour elite deals over poverty alleviation, undermining public trust and state capacity (Addison et al., 2015). By applying Robinson's framework, economic policy needs to be linked explicitly to national interests (legitimacy and cohesion). This translates into the management of oil revenue, service delivery and land governance in South Sudan, which need not be narrowly defined as political survival in need of achieving state building, but should rather be aligning with overarching state-building goals.

Fourth, the framework showcases the hazards of resource-based interests. If not well managed, natural resources extraction can fan ethnic identity and local resentments, and erode the stability and unity of the nation (Berman & Couttenier, 2023; Bebbington et al., 2018). Robinson's typology enables for the public policy makers of the world to realize that the economic interests that come with the extraction need to be compensated against the social and territorial interest, to prevent the re-enforcing of conflict dynamics.

Finally, Robinson's framework frames governance effectiveness as a national interest stretching across countries. Weak institutions magnify tribalism and patronage politics, thus undermining the state's capacity to pursue coherent national objectives (Asongu & Kodila-Tedika, 2016; Awolich, 2018). By mapping policy choices against various but interrelated national interests, Robinson's framework provides a pragmatic framework for ordering reforms and resolving policy contradictions. In the state-building process in South Sudan, this approach informs policies that bring together security, inclusion, development and governance as a coherent national agenda in place of isolated interventions.

Bridging ethnic and national priorities

State-building within South Sudan is marked by strong ethnic divisions which continue to challenge national unity, block peace facilitation and undermine institutional legitimacy. Bridging ethnic and national priorities is thus critical if we are to turn fragmented identities into a common resolve that promotes stability of the state and development among different actors in a shared future. Multi-ethnic comparative studies may provide insights in order to respond policy-wise for South Sudan by emphasizing mechanisms of uniting locally based national identities within a more inclusive national belonging. One of the prevalent ideas presented by the literature is that ethnic identities and national identities do not collide, but exist together and are strategically embedded within the public policy systems.

Pradhan (2018) on multiple ethnic and national identities at the same time for Nepal mother-tongue education shows that if policies are made in favour of local languages and cultural identity this can further the cultural dignity and, at the same time, nurture a broader national solidarity. For South Sudan, this means that educational policies and cultural policies need to legitimize the varied linguistic and cultural heritages of communities such as Dinka, Nuer, Shilluk and others and weave national narrative to promote shared citizenship. But bridging identities relies on trust across groups.

Studies have focused research on nationalism and ethnic-based trust; it reveals that powerful in-group

trust, in combination with weak cross-group trust, can inhibit social cooperation and exacerbate parochial allegiance (2016). In South Sudan, ethnic-based distrust has long been a recurring driver for political instability and intermittent violence among different groups of people. In fostering interethnic interaction--integrated civic education, collective citizen dialogues, community projects shared with others--policies create trust from distrust and lay the groundwork for a shared investment in national institutions.

For ethno-nationalism is deeply embedded in its structure. It further explains how important is this when fragmented societies have the same problems as ever before. Guelke (2010) makes it clear why ethno-national movements often struggle with merging themselves into broader political frameworks when they consider national systems to be unequal with the benefit to dominant groups or threatening their survival. Within a South Sudanese country, historic grievances associated with exclusion and rivalry for power and access to the political, economic, and resource systems have inflamed ethno-national feelings which serve to underwrite simultaneous regional loyalties in parallel the loyalties of the population.

Therefore, institutional design including inclusive federal forms, proportional representation, and constitutional guarantees that safeguard minority rights are not only key to dulling competitive ethno-national claims but also to trust in national governance. Ethiopia provides another comparative case of how to reconcile local sovereignty with national cohesion in Ethiopia. Birhan (2024) argues that Ethiopia's federal structure that gives a lot of political space to ethnic regions could help ease tensions, only when it is combined with measures to create a dialogue between ethnic minorities and distribute resources even among them. South Sudan's use of federalism has been challenged in practice. But Birhan concluded that decentralization is not enough—that it must lead also to equitable governance reforms, that ensure that all groups feel they're not just underrepresented and that people in the nation's centre will be treated fairly.

Finally, redressing ethnic inequality along economic opportunities is essential in the construction of national pride and in minimising the division between the ethnic groups. Ray (2018) demonstrates how ethnic inequality erodes national pride and citizens' emotional investment in the state. In South Sudan, this is exacerbated by gaps in services, livelihoods, and influence which give rise to perceptions of exclusion. Such policy interventions that address these inequities—on the basis of such key social programs, inclusive economic planning and fair distribution of public goods can contribute to ethnic group welfare, and national unity. Bridging ethnic and national priorities in South Sudan thus requires a multi-level approach: policies that embrace cultural significance, engender intergroup trust, reform political institutions to be inclusive and lower structural injustice. These together are strategies that, together, can help create the conditions undergirding long-term peace and shared nationhood.

4. Policy Implications and Strategic Recommendations

National identity & civic education

Policy Pathways to South Sudan. The construction of a credible national identity, through the attainment of a well-developed national identity through full civic education is essential for South Sudan in combating the intractable divisions between the ethnic communities so important it cannot be overcome to attain a sustainable state-building. A unified national identity has eluded development since gaining independence in 2011 for reasons of ethnic diversity, historical grievances, and political manipulation. Media discourse tends to splinter rather than connect, emphasizing ethnic solidarity rather than the single overarching national narrative, whereas artificial barriers can drive allegiance in a way more conducive to tribal or regional rather than national allegiance (Frahm, 2012; Frahm, 2015). Moreover, lingering ethnic conflicts and political conflict that elites use for personal advantage mask the potential of a nation beyond ethnicity (Garang, 2022). This key national fabric is further undermined by a lack of shared narratives and history (Kuel Jok, 2013). Competing identities are often manipulated by political interests toward electoral victory which results in ethnic group identification being the dominant element over national unity (Ugbudian et al., 2022). To reduce these centrifugal forces, civic education has to be tailored with a goal of fostering a joint national interest as an important unifying platform (Zambakari, 2013). A coherent national interest based on sovereignty, peace and development has the potential to influence domestic and foreign policies and to harmonize the numerous ethnic and regional desires for the nation under a single national identity (Nuechterlein, 1976). Kuir Garang (2022) emphasises that ethnic fragmentation can only be overcome if common national anchors are formed in a sense of collective

identity, the shared values of the nation, which exceed ethnic-based values. Accordingly, a comprehensive civic education program should:

1. Fostering Inclusive narratives and shared history: Education needs to be more than biased, ethnocentric curricula that have created a sense of belonging apart from ethnicity (Skårås et al., 2020). This would mean creating common national stories and common histories which recognize the country's pluralism but highlight their shared fight, triumph and aspirations. Such policies that honour the wide linguistic and cultural legacies of different peoples such as the Dinka, Nuer, Shilluk and others as a part of a national narrative can contribute to a respect for culture's dignity, on top of national unity (Pradhan, 2018).

2. Build Intergroup Relation and Dialogue: Ethnic-based mistrust is a perennial generator of instability and violence. Informed civic education could include a program that encourages inter-ethnic integration in civic living (e.g., integrated civic education, collective citizen dialogue, community projects). These might in turn, build trust among groups, as well as provide the foundation for such trust through common investment in the nation, and challenge parochial loyalties that can block social work (2016).

3. In contrast to elite manipulation, which relies upon ethnic strife as political currency (Pinaud, 2014; Riak, 2025; Roach, 2024), civic education serves to create a more thoughtful and nation-oriented citizenry. An educated population that knows its shared national interests is less vulnerable to divisive rhetoric and, consequently, is more likely to increase accountability and trust in state institutions (Minde, 2018).

Through action and strategies like these, South Sudan can develop a national identity that values its pluralism but is also able to forge a sense of commonality and unity that could be used as a catalyst towards achieving a strong sense of purpose and common destiny—preclude tension and promote lasting peace and development.

Security sector reform

Good security sector reform (SSR) is a cornerstone of state-building in South Sudan, as it is required to shift from feudal tribal loyalties and cycles of violence to a national agenda and stable government. The existence of tribal politics, the heritage of civil wars and the development of ethnic identities have significantly hampered governance and perpetuated insecurity. Tribal militias breed and abuse violence and political force by using ethnicity, and local politics are also influenced by these relations. This interplay necessitates an SSR model that goes beyond army consolidation to include a more extensive solution. And from what was seen through the study, it can be concluded that such a single SSR strategy must therefore address these core issues in South Sudan:

1. Promoting Inclusivity and National Loyalty within the Security Forces: The text emphasizes that ethnic associations are still the dominant political and social identity, undermining national unity. Independence, paradoxically, deepened ethnic and tribal schisms — sometimes used by elites. Thus, SSR needs to focus more than ever on transforming security institutions from ethnic-aligned forces to professional, nationally loyal organisations representing all ethno-racial groups. Achieving such a shift requires joining together different communities into the security sector to build a shared national identity and loyalty that cannot rely on local, tribal loyalties. As Robinson's model hints, security strategies need to be tightly interlinked with political inclusion.

2. Bringing Accountability and Civilian Control: Elite manipulation is found to be a very significant impediment to peacebuilding, with those in power striving to hold power and remain in power more effectively using ethnic politics and the patronage system rather than building nationhood. This sort of predatory governance perpetuates insecurity and division. SSR then should emphasize having real accountability mechanisms and civilian monitoring over all security institutions. This also includes being transparent in recruitment, promotion and deployment, and transparent in disciplinary procedures to avoid the exploitation of the security sector in ways which benefit elite political interests or to strengthen local conflict. Power-sharing, inclusive institutions and credible peace agreements should be at its core for policies that promote survival interests.

3. Focus on Militia Alliances in Demobilization, Disarmament and Reintegration (DDR): The fact that local politics and militia alliances are mutually reinforcing forces that promote violence, makes an DDR program for local-based violence-suppressing and inclusive that much more necessary. This program must disarm tribal militias effectively and also reintegrate those former combatants into society while ensuring their reintegration is linked with viable economic prospects, whilst giving state authorities greater power over the local inhabitants. It is essential when it comes to breaking the cycles of violence which are based on contestations over land, resources, and political influence.

4. How to Address Resource-Based Conflicts: The study says that poorly managed natural resource extraction can fan ethnic pride and local grievances, and disrupt stability and unity. SSR must also be part of broader reforms in resource governance, especially in managing oil revenues and the management of land governance, to achieve fair distribution of these resources and prevent the potential of these resources as conflicts in these countries for which they might be used in violence. This means clearly, if not explicitly, grounding economic policy in nationhood's specific interests in questions like national legitimacy and national unity, not circumscribed political existence.

5. Ensuring State Institutions and the Rule of Law: The state must strengthen state institutions and the Rule of Law is a cornerstone of good governance if tribalism and patronage politics are to be eliminated, which would lead to a state unable to pursue a coherent national agenda. SSR cannot succeed in a vacuum; it must complement other initiatives aimed at improving rule of law, reforming constitutional and legal structures and establishing inclusive governance institutions. This establishes accountability for security forces in a legal framework, not one subject to ethnic/ elite preferences.

As such, in South Sudan SSR is a collective process which needs to be taken in tandem with larger processes of political inclusion and justice through economic growth initiatives and national identity formation if it is to be built on a sustainable basis and have the capacity to establish and protect the homeland itself as a people-centric system that can defend the safety of all its citizens.

Inclusive institutions

Building inclusive institutions is crucial if South Sudan is to move from tribal loyalty to a coherent national identity and sustainable state-building. The country also grapples with an "overarching policy challenge" underpinned by the hegemony of tribal politics, which, when added to the legacy of past social, political and historical factors — such as civil wars and deep-rooted ethnic identities — complicates governance. Formal institutions of politics frequently fail to absorb various ethnicities so that tribal fealty becomes the dominant means of obtaining funding and support. This exclusive governance continues for a number of reasons:

- The legacy of the colonials: South Sudan has a fragile institutional legacy from the colonial era; it struggled for centuries and has been plagued with fragmented governance, biased boundary designs and resource disparities that served colonial priorities by marginalising indigenous societies. These formations lacked mechanisms to equitably compensate for ethnic diversity, fostering exclusion and nepotism, resulting in "elite capture and ethnic-based patronage networks".

- Elite Manipulation: Political elites often use ethnic divisions and local border confusion to seize a grip on power, build support, alienate competitors and legitimize violence. The resulting "predatory behaviour" exhibited by a "military aristocracy" rewards individual wealth and group interests at the expense of national development, causing already weak state institutions to suffer and public trust to erode further.

- In a national vacuum: A national identity is difficult to establish, with some media content prioritizing ethnic affiliation over one national narrative and artificial national boundaries that cultivate loyalty to tribal or regional identities. Competing statehood, as well as armed confrontations, is also perceived as the consequence of the lack of any coherent national identity based around mutual interests.

In doing so, inclusive institutions in South Sudan should be constructed to:

1. Develop National Unity and Political Inclusion: Building on Robinson, policies need to focus on "power-sharing, inclusive institutions, and credible peace agreements" as core elements of security approaches. It's about building institutions that promote national unity and distributive justice. Comparative evidence indicates that inclusive governance arrangements, both nationally and in local contexts, such as the federal systems and proportional representation, can buffer ethnic polarization and boost legitimacy. Constitutional guarantees that protect minority rights are likewise imperatives to blunt competitive ethno-national claims and engender trust in national governance.

2. Ensure Equitable Resource Allocation and Economic Well-being: Inclusive institutions must address "long-standing grievances, competition for land, resources and political power" to ensure that resources are equitably distributed and that wealth is created fairly and justly. Robinson's framework emphasizes the explicit linking of economic policy to national interests such as legitimacy and cohesion. Achieving this requires governing oil revenues, offering service delivery, and implementing land governance in ways that support a state-building vision that extends beyond simple political survival strategy. Repairing the economic and social, and the distribution of public goods, in an effort to ensure ethnic equality, is needed to boost national self-respect and reduce the division.

3. Unify Ethnic and National Priorities: Inclusive institutions ought to embrace cultural and language diversity to see ethnicities not as contradictory to, but as a strategic part of, the national policy. Educational and cultural policies should provide a justification of the different heritages of communities as diverse cultural practices while weaving a national story of shared citizenship. To combat this phenomenon, "ethnic-based distrust" must be overcome by building trust among ethnic groups through civic education based together, group dialogues in the community for all citizens, and community projects.

Inclusive institutions are ultimately critical for securing a state so robust that it can sustain durable peace, development, and a common future for all communities in South Sudan.

Constitutional and legal reforms

South Sudan cannot stop at mere constitutional and legal reforms to break the deep-seated authority of tribal politics and establish a nation characterized by unity and inclusiveness and stability. The country's "overarching policy challenge" arises out of an intricate web of historical, social and political causes—notably civil conflicts and deeply rooted ethnic identities—that current conventional political institutions are frequently unfit to address. But this fundamental failure is not to be cured or simply repaired; it requires the complete overhaul of laws and constitutions, in order to maintain national unity and ensure effective government. This is because the present institutional weaknesses stem in part from colonialism, which placed fragmented governance and biased allocation of resources, leaving indigenous systems at the edges, thus creating a "fragile institutional legacy". Colonial frameworks had no instruments of equitable recognition for ethnic diversity and resulted in a rule rooted in exclusion and nepotism, perpetuating the so-called "little rule of law" characterised as a governance failure. This state capacity lacks and informal governance is rife due to ethnic loyalty post-conflict. Comprehensive reforms to the Constitution and the law are therefore necessary to address these deep-rooted issues:

1. Constitutional Guarantees to Protect Minorities' Rights and Inclusion: Development of "inclusive federal forms, proportional representation and constitutional guarantees of minority rights" is crucial. "[They] are not only important in ensuring we do not undermine ethno-national claims on competitive grounds, they also underpin the trust in the nation-state. Through legally recognizing and protecting the rights of every ethnic group, the constitution can support a shift from tribal loyalty to national loyalty, creating a shared sense of ownership in the state. Comparative examples, such as Ethiopia's experience, imply that federal institutions that offer political space to ethnic regions, with a more equitable distribution of resources, may reduce tensions.

2. Legal reforms of land and resource governance: Legal reforms in land governance, which is "inherently linked to ethnic identity because of the convergence of land claims and customary land rights associated with ethnicity", are urgently needed. The state, due to the neglect of all land

institutions, was incapable of optimal resource allocation, leading to ethnic polarisation. Such integrated land reform within clear legal frameworks is fundamental to equitable resource distribution and the elimination of resource-based conflict, which elites exploit. These reforms should also connect economic interests to social and territorial interests to avoid entrenching conflict dynamics.

3. Reinforcing the Rule of Law and Accountability: Institutions and institutions of the state that are poorly functioning and operate without rule of law are by-products of a broken state and elite manipulation. Legal reforms need to increase the state's resourcing, facilitate models of inclusive governance that cross ethnic boundaries, and create strong accountability mechanisms. That means enshrining "power-sharing, inclusive institutions and credible peace agreements, on the books" as constitutive of governance. "Reform must be a central part of that fight against elite capture and predatory behavior," one critic writes, putting personal wealth before national well-being.

4. Fostering unity of a unified national identity: A common national identity can be instilled through the construction of the Constitution and the law. The constitution will provide a central conceptual infrastructure, by specifically stating with clear terms "national interest, emphasizing sovereignty, peace and development" for the nation, that unites the various ethnic and regional aspirations. The legal reforms can contribute to educational and cultural policies that validate diverse linguistic and cultural heritages and generate a holistic national narrative of shared citizenship.

Finally, and finally, as such, constitutional and legal reforms in South Sudan must go beyond cosmetic changes to address the fundamental underpinnings of structural and institutional drivers of ethnic-based governance that underpin ethnic rule through structural and institutional change. If South Sudan institutionalizes inclusivity, equity, and accountability into its founding laws on the state body, these efforts can facilitate and create trusted institutions that are a legitimate solution to ethnic violence and forge an integrated and strong national identity.

5. Conclusion

Policy relevance

The piece "FROM TRIBAL LOYALTIES TO NATIONAL PRIORITIES: POLICY PATHWAYS FOR STATE-BUILDING IN SOUTH SUDAN" offers critical policy contribution by dissecting the main impeding forces shaping state-building in South Sudan and by furnishing practical guidelines for the provision of support for action. Our main policy concern is the "persistent dominance of tribal politics", compounded by a tangle of historical, social, and political drivers such as civil strife, entrenched ethnic affiliation and elite influence. This diagnosis shapes what is required and how policy should be oriented.

First, structural and institutional drivers (colonial legacy, post-conflict weaknesses, informal governance) have been analysed and highlighted as needing extensive institutional reform. The state thus needs policies that respond to the "fragile institutional legacy" and generate robust, inclusive, and effective governance mechanisms for addressing ethnic conflict and strengthening national cohesion. This challenges the existing informal systems of governance based on ethnic loyalty, which creates cycles of conflict and undermines state capacity.

Second, because its attention to elite manipulation is a primary force to account for by the study, policies designed to promote transparency and accountability are needed. Elite forms of behaviour that "deepen instability and impede effective governance" by focusing on individual/group needs instead of national development require policy solutions such as "inclusive governance frameworks" and "accountability frameworks for marginalized communities". Elites exploiting local borders and ethnic divides in order to influence politics need policies that challenge this.

The third argument is that "National Interest as a Unifying Framework" is fundamental to policy formulation. Where there is no common national identity or a common interest, the policies that should be developed should set aside all the efforts and resources of the nation, so as to promote a national interest which can be defined and supported by the states based on the common interest of "sovereignty, peace and development". This creates a normative basis for domestic and external engagement that spans ethnic and regional differences. Robinson's national interest framework as it applies provides a more systematic framework for policy making. It is a signal

that for sure state survival, national unity, economic wellness, political stability and international standing are all interrelated. The following policies can be pursued based on this model:

This is an inclusive governance and security approach. Security strategy must be complemented with "power-sharing, inclusive institutions and credible peace agreements". - Distributive Justice: Regulating institutions and practices that lower polarization among the ethnically divided communities and guarantee a just distribution of resources so that national unity is enhanced and legitimacy enhanced. - Strategic Economic Development: Allocating economic policies related to managing oil revenues and land management for the sake of broader state-building objectives rather than short-term elitist considerations. - Resource Management: The design of a national strategy to control resource extraction, so as to minimize conflict and manage economic interests and maintain social and territorial stability. Lastly, the conversation on "Bridging ethnic and national priorities" offers concrete policy pathways. This includes:

- Cultural And Educational Policies: Create legal basis for intercultural heritage, developing a national narrative of belonging and citizenship. - Intergroup Trust: Engaging the group through civic learning and collaborative community projects. - Inclusive Institutional Design: Use inclusive federal forms, proportional representation, and constitutional safeguards for minority rights to establish trust in national governance. - Reducing economic inequality: Engage in social programs and fair distribution of resources to reduce perceived exclusion and gain more national pride. As a result, the research provides good analytical guidance for South Sudanese policymakers and go beyond cosmetic solutions to address the system failures of tribalism, fragile institutions and elite exploitation. Its findings emphasize the urgent need for holistic reforms, including constitutional, institutional, economic and social measures, to lead to a resilient, united and peaceful state.

Prospects for sustainable state-building

The sustainable state-building prospects in South Sudan are difficult to achieve through sustainable state-building that is not possible without effective implementation of the pathways developed with the strategies as proposed in this study. The region is riddled with a "lingering dominance of tribal politics," past grievances, elite manipulation, old issues, an under-developed national sentiment, and an identity, which makes it difficult to build national unity along with state legitimacy. But these issues need to be addressed early; at the same time ensuring that South Sudan can aspire to become a stronger country and a resilient state. At the core of sustainable state-building (and at long last, nation-building) is the construction of "National Interest as a Unifying Framework." The article asserts that the lack of a common national identity based on mutual interests is a primary cause of instability and armed incidents in the country.

Defining a "national interest on sovereignty, peace, and development," South Sudan can establish a common objective which is not motivated only by the ethnic and regional goals we strive for but rather by national goals that promote social cohesion and serve as a compass through which to formulate domestic and foreign policy. As such, the "keystone" of sustainable peace and development, the collective understanding of interests outside of local loyalties.

Robinson's national interest framework is the framework for how we can create these chances. The framework guides policy-making from below, by explicitly connecting policy choices to state survival, national unity, economic health, political stability, and international standing. This means that security policies will need to involve "power-sharing, inclusive institutions and credible peace agreements" and economic policies (such as the management of oil revenue and land governance) will contribute to broad state-building interests instead of restricting to narrowly focused political survival. Effective governance, free from "ethnic clientelism" and "predatory behaviour," is emphasized as a cross-cutting national interest necessary for pursuing coherent national objectives. Moreover, connecting ethnic and national priorities is essential for longer-term sustainability. Such a multi-dimensional approach will take:

1. Embracing Cultural Significance: Creating educational and cultural policy structures that honor varied linguistic and cultural heritages (e.g., Dinka, Nuer, Shilluk) and incorporate these into the national narrative; of collective citizenship.
2. Fostering Intergroup Trust: Work with different groups to foster trust, promoting civic education, communal citizen dialogue and shared community projects — addressing

the "ethnic-based distrust" that drives instability directly.

3. Inclusive Institutional Design: Reforming political institutions to integrate federal forms, proportional representation and constitutional guarantees for minorities, to stymie competitive ethno-national claims and build trust in national governance. Comparing Ethiopia's federal structure: Decentralisation must be complemented by "equitable governance reforms."

4. Redressing Economic Inequality: Policy interventions which target inequality in services, livelihoods, and power to minimize perceptions of exclusion and increase national pride that can also foster national unity.

In short, sustainable state-building in South Sudan is hinged upon making a conscious and sustained move from tribal loyalties to national priorities. It will emerge with South Sudan, by clarifying a unifying national interest and designing policies, as seen by initiatives such as Robinson's, with the integration of multi-prong strategies that bridge ethnic and national divisions, to be capable of building a viable state of resilience that is conducive to stability, growth, and the creation of a common nationhood for all its citizens.

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