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DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

BEYOND THE LIFELINE: INSTITUTIONAL FRAGILITY, INSECURITY, AND THE STRUGGLE FOR EFFECTIVENESS OF AID IN SOUTH SUDAN

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study examined the institutional and security constraints limiting the effectiveness of foreign aid in South Sudan.

Methodology: The study employed a systematic literature review and thematic analysis of academic literature, donor and government reports, and humanitarian situation data published between 2010 and 2025. The analysis was guided by Political Settlements Theory and Rent-Seeking Theory to examine how governance structures, elite political settlements, and rent-seeking practices influence aid effectiveness.

Findings: The review found that pervasive corruption, weak governance institutions, and persistent insecurity significantly undermine foreign aid effectiveness. Systemic misappropriation of aid resources, duplication of donor-funded programmes, and disruptions caused by armed conflict limit humanitarian and development outcomes. Conversely, locally led and context-sensitive interventions demonstrated greater sustainability by strengthening community ownership.

Conclusion: The study concludes that foreign aid effectiveness in South Sudan is constrained by the interaction of institutional fragility, political rent-seeking, and protracted insecurity.

Recommendations: The study recommends strengthening donor coordination to reduce programme duplication, investing in domestic institutional capacity, embedding transparent accountability mechanisms across aid interventions.

Keywords: *Foreign aid, Aid effectiveness, Sustainable development goals, Institutional development, Corruption, Governance, Accountability, & Aid localization.*

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the number of people who rely on humanitarian assistance just to survive has steadily increased and is now approaching three-quarters of the population of South Sudan, due to the escalating impact of conflict, climate shocks, and economic collapse on each other (International Rescue Committee, 2026). This is a clear indication of the deep-rooted insecurity and inequity in access to services in the country as a whole. The suffering of children and civilians is widespread and ongoing, with the operational capacity of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) being affected by the conflict and opportunities for state and non-state actors to use humanitarian assistance for other purposes. Aid workers tasked with providing aid to the affected population frequently have to negotiate access with armed local actors, who may be lacking in means of transport, food, supplies, and money, and who may interpret the resources of NGO's as a target, not as something to be protected.

Since South Sudan's independence in 2011, it has relied on external support, which is meant to ease immediate humanitarian crises as well as to spur longer-term development. Donors finance almost 50% of the country's overall health expenditure, and are central to service delivery and country governance support with close to 9 million people needing humanitarian assistance as of 2022, and which continues to increase (OCHA, 2022) (Social Science in Humanitarian Action Platform, 2025). Since independence, billions of dollars of humanitarian and development aid have been given, but the effect of these has been limited by ongoing institutional and security problems.

Theoretical Framework

This section outlines the theoretical lenses used to explain the persistence of corruption and weak governance in South Sudan's aid environment, drawing on frameworks that link elite political behavior to institutional outcomes. Political Settlements Theory and Rent-Seeking Theory provide a lens explain why people working in foreign aid environment shape institutions to preserve power and exploit aid resources rather than create new value.

Political Settlements Theory

The theory is that the governance and the institutional structure of fragile or conflict-affected states is determined by bargains among elite actors on how power and resources are distributed (Khan, 2010). The political configuration which supports South Sudanese statehood is commonly described as exclusionary; the allocation of resource revenues, including foreign aid, is done informally, through personalized and informal processes.

These incentives are a factor in the absence of reform in the structure of aid provision and contribute to the robustness of clientelism and rent capture in aid delivery. The theory also accounts for the lack of sustainability of governance reforms and institutional capacity-building initiatives in the vicinity, because power holders are more inclined to support institutional arrangements that lead to regime survival and patronage networks, than arrangements that increase provision of public goods.

Rent-Seeking Theory

This theory describes the typical actions taken by actors in an environment of high aid and weak institutions to be one of securing the value of the economy they find themselves in, rather than creating value in and of itself (Krueger, 1974). Poor rule enforcement in South Sudan has rendered aid money an easy-to-grab option for political elites, contractors, and armed group leaders. The theory explains how project costs can be inflated, how “ghost” contractors can take part in projects, and how supplies can be diverted, and provides one reason why corruption can remain a problem even if there are conditions attached to donor money.

Materials and Methods

The article adopted a secondary literature review and document analysis design, drawing on published sources addressing the use of foreign aid in South Sudan and other comparable fragile and conflict-affected contexts. Structured searches were conducted in academic databases including; Google Scholar, JSTOR, and Scopus, institutional repositories, and donor and humanitarian agency websites. The review used search terms including; "foreign aid," "South Sudan," "governance," "fragile states," and "aid effectiveness," limited to English-language sources published between 2010 and 2025. Sources were screened first by title and abstract, then by full text, and included if they offered empirical or policy relevance to governance, security, or aid delivery in fragile states and were issued by a peer-reviewed outlet or a recognized government, donor, or humanitarian institution; sources lacking a clear evidentiary basis or falling outside the date range were excluded. This yielded three source categories: (1) peer-reviewed academic and policy documents; (2) reports from agencies such as the World Bank, USAID, and UNDP; and (3) humanitarian situation reports from OCHA, ReliefWeb, WFP, and ACLED. Data were analyzed using thematic coding guided by a preliminary codebook derived from the study's research questions, covering themes such as aid effectiveness, institutional constraints, security conditions, and donor perspectives. Codes were refined iteratively through repeated re-reading of source material, with initial coding cross-checked for consistency to strengthen the reliability of the analysis and guide the organization of findings.

Results and Discussion

Empirical Evidence on Effectiveness of Aid in South Sudan

The experience of delivering aid in South Sudan highlights the extent of its current dependency on aid and the challenges to sustainable change. Despite the influx of more than $18 billion in international assistance since South Sudan's independence in 2011, governance, service delivery and institutional capacity have made little headway (World Bank, 2023). The contradiction has spurred researchers and policy makers to explore the impact of the political, institutional and security environment on delivery of aid on the ground.

One of the best examples of this disparity is the amount of misappropriation. South Sudan has been ranked among the five countries with the most corrupt governments in the world in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index 2025 and several investigations have found that funds were missing, aid was diverted through the creation of ghost contracts, etc. The UN Panel of Experts (2023) documented instances of projects in infrastructure and health projects funded by the government being suspended or even canceled after incidences of misuse such as unauthorised withdrawal of funds, deviant procurement practices and political interference, including one in northern Bahr el Ghazal where more than $4.5 million intended for rural health clinics was unaccounted for.

In South Sudan, Humanitarian Outcomes (2022) estimates that from 2011 to 2022, there have been more than 140 cases of worker deaths among humanitarian personnel, and many other incidents that have impacted the delivery of aid. Access was also regularly denied, with between around 25 and 35 incidents of access being reported each month on a monthly access snapshot by OCHA throughout most of 2023, in the Unity, Jonglei, Upper Nile states and elsewhere.

The combination of conflict and the lessening of provision of aid is further supported by data from ACLED (2024) which reveal instances – particularly related to elections or the failure of peace accords – in which increases in conflict are followed by decreases in aid provision. For instance, the rise in violence after the failure of the 2015 Addis Ababa Peace Accord, was followed by a 42% decrease in the delivery of aid in the regions affected over a six-month period.

These conclusions are confirmed by assessments of donors. USAID and the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO, formerly the Department for International Development) conducted a joint evaluation which revealed that over 70% of long-term development programs in South Sudan did not complete due to poor institutional absorption, mismanagement or insecurity (USAID & FCDO, 2022). That is also much less than the proportion of procurement processes adhering to open and competitive bidding principles (which was less than 20% in the World Bank's Public Financial Management Review, 2022), suggesting high concerns around value-for-money and corruption.

Worse, a lack of coordination and fragmentation exacerbates these governance issues. However, South Sudan lacks a formalised and centralised aid co-ordination mechanism which has caused many donors to avoid working through government structures and led to duplicated project initiatives with multiple agencies working on almost identical projects in the same area without co-ordinating with each other. A recent evaluation by the South Sudan NGO Forum found that, in many key humanitarian programs, up to 15-20% of resources were wasted due to duplication (South Sudan NGO Forum, 2016), which is broadly reflected in other humanitarian assessments of the food security and programming needs in South Sudan (World Vision, 2021).

In parts of the country, however, there are some more positive projections. Lakes State had a food assistance intervention that included a community-based reconciliation forum, which along with food assistance reduced communal conflict by 25% after two years (WFP, 2022). All this points to a picture of aid effectiveness in South Sudan that is limited by corruption, insecurity and inadequate coordination, but which is enhanced by locally-driven, micro-level aid interventions, which are context-sensitive and locally owned.

Institutional Constraints on Effectiveness of Aid

South Sudan's administration is still very fragile and institutional shortcomings are impeding the effectiveness of aid. Without a proper public financial management (PFM) system, and patronage-based staffing, there is a wide spread of misappropriation of funds. South Sudan has been consistently reported by its Auditor-General on unaccounted-for and large oil revenues and donor money. A 2021 finding by the Auditor-General of the Republic of Namibia's National Audit Office revealed that more than U.S. dollars 31 million attributed to oil-revenue shares for producing states and communities was diverted (U.S. Department of State, 2021), and a 2025 report by the UN Human Rights Council of around U.S. dollars 1.7–$2.2 billion diverted under the “Oil for Roads” program between

2021 and 2024 was found (Global Witness, 2020), all of which corroborated the general concern about the opacity of the management of oil revenues in the country.

The World Bank (2022) also reported that procurement and budgeting processes are weak, causing delays in project implementation and underutilisation of the aid funds. Adding to this, there is a trend of "capacity drain," a loss of qualified people from government institutions to higher-paid jobs with international NGOs, which further undermines the scarce human resources that still exist in a weak public sector in a fragile environment like this.

The main reason for these difficulties is that the governance system is very unequal and fragmented, with differences between provinces and localities (Saferworld, 2022). The conflict that began in 2013 exacerbated the divides and created several armed groups with divergent agenda, which made it challenging to consistently carry out and monitor development programs. In this context, at times aid is being misused to support conflict and not for development.

Security Conditions and Operational Limitations

Throughout post-independence history, insecurity has been a recurring issue that has caused hindrances in the provision of humanitarian assistance. More than 3,000 violent incidents have been recorded in the country since independence, such as attacks on aid convoys and the looting of food storage points (ACLED, 2024). The security sector continues to be highly fractured, with over 60 armed groups operating throughout the country (Small Arms Survey, 2023), which presents logistical, ethical and operational issues for both UN agencies and NGOs.

Humanitarian organizations operating in Unity and Jonglei states have repeatedly reported extended suspensions of programming due to militia activity (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2023). Nationally, the International Rescue Committee (2025) recorded at least 28 attacks on aid workers in 2024 and more than 260 separate incidents restricting humanitarian access in just the first seven months of that year alone. Armed escorts for convoys have become routine, blurring the line between humanitarian neutrality and militarised logistics; while at times necessary, this has generated suspicion among local populations and, in some cases, retaliatory violence against aid actors.

South Sudan is one of the worst countries to work in, with over 140 humanitarian staff deaths reported from 2011 to 2022 (Humanitarian Outcomes, 2022). Many organisations have adapted to local and international travel and programming being hindered by ambushes on roads and the existence of non-state armed groups, increasing the need for them to have some form of remote or militarily-supported programming, which in itself poses questions about their impartiality and reach in humanitarian operations.

Limited Humanitarian Access During High-Intensity Crisis

Mena and Hilhorst (2022) have introduced the term "high-intensity conflict" (HIC) for extreme crises characterized by high levels of violence (causing more than 1,000 fatalities annually), where state authorities have little or no effective control over substantial portions of the territory. They point to the situation described by Mena (2018) where these two factors lead to uneven and disjointed service provision of basic services, and to very high rates of displacement as people leave home to seek refuge, all of which creates significant challenges for humanitarian providers. These environments are also often characterized by complex and conflicting governance regimes, economic instability and restricted access to reliable information, which further challenges the operational challenges that responders face (Duffield, 1994; Wisner, 2012; Young & Maxwell, 2009). South Sudan is a typical example of an HIC setting with a high disaster prevalence (Mena & Hilhorst, 2022). It became independent from Sudan in 2011 after over 40 years of war, and in 2013, the country fell back into agains war in its newly established state, adding to an already critical economic crisis. This caused a humanitarian crisis, displacing over 2 million internally displaced persons and pushing an additional 2 million refugees across the border into neighbouring countries (UNHCR, 2017), and which subsequent tracking has revealed to be ongoing (International Organization for Migration, 2023).

The humanitarian response to the interplay of conflict, limited infrastructure and seasonal flooding has been very challenging for humanitarian actors (Tanner & Moro, 2016). This period saw South Sudan described as one of the most dangerous countries in the world for humanitarian workers, with nearly 90 aid workers killed in the country since the beginning of civil war in 2013 and OCHA reporting 82 individual cases of attack, threat, intimidation or harassment of humanitarian workers in the first half of 2017 (Cole, 2017; Gaffey, 2017; Little, 2017; OCHA, 2017b).

Impact on Humanitarian and Development Aid Outcomes

South Sudan's economy is hugely dependent on humanitarian assistance. Outside the aid sector, there is very little formal employment, and salaries are often very low and irregularly paid; salaries for public-sector workers, for example, have been as low as a few dollars a month at times and paid for lengthy periods of time (Kaut, 2024). In this context, the aid sector and economic activity that surrounds it is a lifeline for many homes.

But, progress has been slow, despite over ten years of steady investment, and the country is fragile. There is documented evidence of measurable impacts on local markets, including communities adapting their behaviour to pass food security assessments without needing them, with knock-on impacts on the sustainability of local markets. Humanitarian assistance has also been less effective in providing equitable access to beneficiaries, with a strong bias towards urban areas that has contributed to the urban dependency on humanitarian supply chains. Development assistance, on the other hand, has been designed in terms of projects for short term and which will not develop lasting capacity, like the health and education infrastructure, which is often left to fail in the absence of donor support. According to ReliefWeb (2023), several humanitarian partners have reduced their long-term operations in South Sudan over the past years due to the persistent security and management risk, which is leading to growing donor fatigue.

Donor Perspective on Effectiveness of Aid

International donors have been grappling with the challenge of balancing relief and rehabilitation measures with development in South Sudan since the conflict erupted in 2013. From 2011 - 2021, a combined estimated $18 billion was directed towards South Sudan by USAID, the FCDO and the European Union. With evidence of misuse, duplication and limited reform building up, a number of donors started to change their aid modalities.

According to a 2023 World Bank country engagement note, accountability mechanisms for budget support programs were mostly lacking and that aid could be undermining government accountability, rather than strengthening it (World Bank, 2023). In 2022, the European Commission (EC) put several ministries on hold due to corruption and human rights violations.

Donor fatigue is becoming a growing reality in the changing priorities of programming. Humanitarian partners have been trying to integrate emergency response into longer term development planning, or ‘nexus’ programming, while security constraints and weak state capacities continue to restrict the extent to which this can be achieved. However, donors are still interested in developing local ownership of aid programming, although absorptive capacity within the state is slow and there is a lack of trust between government and civil society actors that prevents implementation.

As a reaction to this, some donors have shifted to pooled funding and third-party monitoring. One such mechanism is the UN Multi-Partner Trust Fund Office, acting as a centralised fiduciary mechanism to facilitate pooled donor funds to UN implementing partners (UN Multi-Partner Trust Fund Office, n.d.). Such combination of mechanisms is designed to increase transparency and minimize opportunities for political manipulation of fund allocation.

CONCLUSION

The situation of aid in South Sudan is paradoxical, as there is little correlation between institutional development, violence, humanitarian emergencies and the amount of aid. This paper has suggested that while there are indeed technical and logistical challenges, the main ones to overcome are political and structural. The combination of systemic corruption, rent-seeking behaviour, weak public institutions and insecurity is extremely unfriendly to the sustained development of all actors in the system. Irrespective of the good intentions, the nature of aiding leads to the involvement of elite bargains and the informal networks where the regime's survival is top priority. The empirical evidence appears to confirm that high volumes of aid have not brought about transformative change due to lack of absorptive capacity, poor accountability and the potential for violence.

Programs, by contrast, at the local level, with strong community engagement, conflict sensitivity and sustained accountability mechanisms, have had more promising, albeit modest, outcomes. The “do no harm” principle is not enough, assistance has to actively facilitate the process of changing institutions, governance and domestic political capacity. Both theories, Political Settlements Theory and Rent-Seeking Theory, contribute to the understanding of the implementation of South Sudan's aid, with this emphasis on the role of elite power, informal institutions and economic incentives in determining the distribution and effectiveness of aid. To enhance the effectiveness of aid in South Sudan, immediate humanitarian responses must be balanced with a renewed approach to long-term investments in governance, transparency and resilience, rejuvenating civic agency, decreasing aid fragmentation and making peacebuilding more explicitly part of development practice.

Recommendations for Strengthening the Effectiveness of Aid in South Sudan

With the current state of institutional fragility and insecurity in South Sudan, there is a need for an integrated approach to strengthening the effectiveness of international support, which should focus on humanitarian response and governance reform in the medium to long-term future. The recommendations that follow are grouped under five interrelated components: institutional capacity and ownership, donor co-ordination, locally-led provision of aid, accountability and anti-corruption mechanisms, and conflict-sensitive programming.

1. Capacity and Ownership

There is little doubt the most significant reform possible is strengthening the public financial management (PFM) system. In addition, donors should offer technical assistance to the Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, the National Audit Chamber, and the parliamentary budget committees in budgeting, tracking expenditure, audit and financial accountability. UNDP (2024) also emphasizes the importance of PFM reform in building resilience in fragile states. Aid should not be directed around the state but through national-based assistance structures, like co-managed financial mechanisms like escrow or results-based financing.

Aid actors should also promote a more serious civil-service reform, focusing on transparent recruitment, capacity-building and incentive packages for better retention of those who are most critical in public institutions, and on re-evaluating incentive packages to minimize "capacity drain" from public institutions to higher-paying NGO jobs. The national civil service academy may be adopted with support from IGAD or the African Union (African Union, 2021; IGAD, 2022) to professionalize local administration and minimize its reliance on external actors.

2. Improve Donor Coordination and Reduce Fragmentation

Fragmentation of donors has led to duplication, inefficiency and lost opportunities. In response, government and international partners need to create a National Aid Coordination Platform (NACP) hosted in the Ministry of Finance and co-chaired by a neutral multilateral institution, such as UNDP or the World Bank. The NACP should continue a single database of donor funded projects, a database of where donors are and are not active, and a joint review process to monitor progress, challenges, and gaps periodically. Donors should also seek multiyear funding commitments wherever possible, avoiding the start stop nature of funding which compromises program delivery, and explore thematic funding windows to free up pooled resources for the changing needs and dynamics of conflict.

3 Localization of Delivery and Initiatives and Building Community Ownership

Localization is important for relevance and legitimacy and is essential for sustainability. International NGOs and donors need to invest in local CSOs, traditional leadership structures, youth networks and women's groups, instead of international intermediaries, and to directly fund peacebuilding and resilience building initiatives by the local actors who have been involved in documented peacebuilding and resilience building efforts (Norwegian Church Aid, 2021). PNAs, consultations, and direct feedback mechanisms should be routinely used in order to ensure that aid interventions are responsive to community needs and can respond to changing community needs. Social audits, community scorecards, and complaints mechanisms to benefit should be integrated into humanitarian and development programming.

4 Addressing Corruption via Embedded Accountability Mechanisms

Donors need to integrate mechanisms into the flow of aid that embed accountability and transparency into the aid process to combat the widespread corruption and rent-seeking. This involves third-party monitoring to ensure the implementation of the programs and their use of funding; the mandatory public disclosure of procurement contracts; and disbursement of aid linked to independent audit of governance indicators. There are ways in which technology can help support these mechanisms: e-voucher systems for food re-distribution and digital cash-transfer platforms can help minimize losses and enable real-time tracking, while piloting block chain-based aid-tracking platforms tested in other countries (e.g. Jordan, Kenya) may be considered to track the movement of funds and goods from donor to recipient in South Sudan.

5 Programming Must Be Conflict-Sensitive and Risk-Informed

Programming should take security into account at the beginning. Conflict-sensitivity training is required and delivery modes must be adaptable, such as via air delivery, mobile outreach or digital platforms, when roads are unsafe. There are also explicit possibilities of embedding peacebuilding into the fabric of aid programs, such as food-for-work programs focused on joint reconstruction of shared infrastructure, or agricultural support linked to inter-communal dialogue and peace forums, which can provide support and promote trust and reconciliation. All aid programs should be continually monitored for conflict impact, and donors should be ready to stop or modify programming if there are signs that the program is fueling conflict or supporting conflict actors.

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