International Relations and Diplomacy, Sept.-Oct. 2026, Vol. 14, No. 5, 261-305
doi: 10.17265/2328-2134/2026.05.004

Challenges Faced by Non-State Actors in Navigating the Politics of Foreign Aid and Preventive Diplomacy in Post-independent South Sudan

Jacob Dut Chol Riak, Gong Ayuel Madut
University of Juba, Juba, South Sudan

The study investigates the challenges non-state actors (NSAs) faced in navigating the politics of foreign aid and preventive diplomacy in post-independent South Sudan. The study employed a mixed-methods design to provide comprehensive insights. The research targeted 2,070 individuals across seven stakeholder groups. Using Cochran's formula, a sample size of 325 respondents was determined, with 305 completing the survey, resulting in a high response rate of 93.85%. The qualitative component included 20 semi-structured interviews and three focus groups with 26 participants. Data analysis involved descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, regression analysis (Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), and thematic content analysis (qualitative data). All research instruments demonstrated reliability with Cronbach's alpha values between 0.788 and 0.835, and diagnostic tests confirmed the validity of assumptions such as normality, multicollinearity, homoscedasticity, and linearity. Findings show that challenges faced positively correlated with NSA capacities, with correlation coefficients between 0.583 and 0.647 ($p < 0.01$). Regression analyses confirmed that each factor significantly explained variance in NSA capacities, with the combined model accounting for 57.2% ($R^2 = 0.572$) of the variance. Notably challenges faced was $\beta = 0.192$. Descriptive results indicated that partnership strengthening was perceived as the most significant contribution to peacebuilding (mean = 4.08, SD = 1.283), whereas addressing root causes of conflict was viewed as less effective (mean = 2.58, SD = 1.489). Qualitative insights highlighted barriers such as short-term donor funding cycles, government restrictions, insecurity, capacity gaps, and a disconnect between community peace gains and national political dynamics. Cross-stakeholder analysis revealed differing perspectives, especially between international staff and local beneficiaries regarding NSA motivations and effectiveness. The study concludes that the challenges faced by non-state actors (NSAs) in turn affects foreign aid and preventive diplomacy in South Sudan. Recommendations include adopting multi-year flexible funding, establishing mechanisms to link grassroots peace efforts to national frameworks, increasing equitable partnerships with at least 25% direct funding to local actors, and developing joint accountability frameworks that incorporate community-level feedback.

Keywords: challenges, non-state actors, navigating, politics, foreign aid, preventive diplomacy, post independent, South Sudan

Jacob Dut Chol Riak, Ph.D., Senior Researcher and Associate Professor, School of Social and Economic Studies, Director (Dean), Institute of Japanese Studies, University of Juba, Juba, South Sudan.
Gong Ayuel Madut, Ph.D., Lecturer, Institute of Peace, Development and Security Studies, University of Juba, Juba, South Sudan.

Introduction

Foreign aid and preventive diplomacy have become important tools at the global level for addressing violent conflict, humanitarian crises, institutional fragility, and post-conflict reconstruction. Foreign aid is financial, technical, humanitarian, and development assistance given to countries and populations that need it. Preventive diplomacy is political, diplomatic, and peacebuilding measures designed to prevent disputes from arising, escalating into violence or spreading elsewhere. In fragile and post-conflict societies, foreign assistance is particularly important because prolonged conflict destroys infrastructure, erodes public institutions, disrupts livelihoods, and reduces governments' capacity to provide services (Toh & Kasturi, 2012). International assistance can help with post-conflict recovery and reduce conditions associated with renewed conflict if it is designed and implemented well (Macrae et al., 1997; Sudan study). Earlier research on Sudan also showed that relief, rehabilitation, development, and conflict prevention cannot always be treated as separate processes since political conditions generating vulnerability continue to influence aid interventions effectiveness (Macrae et al., 1997). The complexity of humanitarian emergencies and peacebuilding has increased the importance of institutions and actors alongside governments. International organizations, NGOs (non-governmental organisations), CSOs (civil society organisations), faith-based institutions, community organisations, universities, and other societal actors are involved in humanitarian assistance, development, advocacy, conflict prevention, and peacebuilding. They are particularly important in fragile settings where state institutions may lack resources or institutional capacity or geographical reach. Foreign assistance is not politically neutral because decisions about who gets what resources; which programmes are prioritised; which organisations become implementing partners; how assistance is distributed can shape relationships between international institutions, governments, local organisations and communities (Maxwell et al., 2018). International engagement in South Sudan has been shaped by changing political and institutional conditions (Maxwell et al., 2018), so it is important to analyse relationships between international and local actors rather than treat aid as a technical transfer of resources only.

The relationship between international and local organizations is especially relevant to the politics of humanitarian localization. Local organisations often have contextual knowledge, community networks, linguistic competence, and long-term relationships with affected populations but may not have financial resources or influence over strategic decision making as large international organisations do. Dijkzeul (2021) shows through NGO experience in South Sudan and northern Uganda that localisation needs sustained partnerships, capacity development shared objectives, and cooperation between international and local organisations. Capacity then cannot be understood solely in terms of internal resources: It is also shaped by access to donor funding, institutional partnerships, political relationships, and participation in decision-making.

Within Africa, the relationship between foreign assistance, governance, and non-state participation is especially relevant because humanitarian aid, peacebuilding, and institution-building often take place simultaneously in societies with prolonged conflict and weak institutions; boundaries between formal state authority and other sources of political and social authority may be blurred. Podder (2014) partly based on the experience of the Sudan People's Liberation Army/Movement (SPLA/M) shows that non-state structures can acquire forms of authority and legitimacy which then influence post-conflict state building. This perspective reinforces the need to know precisely which actors are being investigated and what their different sources of authority are, institutional capacities, resources, and relationships with the state are.

The historical experience of Sudan and Southern Sudan also shows how humanitarian intervention, development assistance, and conflict management are tightly intertwined. Macrae et al. (1997) questioned the assumption that humanitarian relief automatically leads to rehabilitation and development in chronic political emergencies showing aid interventions remain embedded in politics and conflict. The multi-donor evaluation of conflict prevention and peacebuilding assistance in Southern Sudan between 2005 and 2010 found international interventions operated under complex political and institutional conditions following the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (Bennett et al., 2010). These experiences show that foreign aid and peacebuilding outcomes cannot be understood in isolation from institutions and actors through which interventions are designed, financed, implemented, and received. At East African and regional level, South Sudan is an important setting for these relationships because humanitarian crises, displacement, political instability, and peace processes have sustained international and regional engagement. Maxwell et al. (2018) show that over time international engagement in South Sudan has alternated between humanitarian assistance, development, institution building, and renewed crisis response; they emphasise the limitations of applying mainly technical solutions to problems which are fundamentally political and institutional. So, understanding politics of foreign aid and preventive diplomacy in South Sudan requires attention not only to the government but also to international institutions, civil-society organisations, religious organisations, community actors, educational institutions, and other organisations involved in humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding processes.

If the study narrows the focus to South Sudan, these actors become more salient. South Sudan came out of decades of conflict with institutional, infrastructural, and socioeconomic problems so external assistance was an important part of reconstruction and development (Toh & Kasturi 2012). Foreign aid can help post-conflict economies recover but also reduce conditions associated with renewed conflict if it tackles obstacles to recovery (Maxwell et al., 2018), but South Sudan shows that extensive international assistance does not automatically produce effective institutions or sustainable peace; international engagement shifted from humanitarian intervention towards development and state building then back again to extensive humanitarian crisis response after renewed conflict (Maxwell et al., 2018). This trajectory makes South Sudan particularly interesting for studying capacities of the institutions operating between international assistance, national governance, and local communities. NGOs and civil-society institutions have always been important in South Sudan. Riehl (2001) showed how NGOs became involved in humanitarian assistance and the reconstruction of socio-political order during the conflict period beyond service delivery. The conflict which started in December 2013 also showed the importance of local and national organisations. Tanner and Moro (2016) found that local actors played a major role in humanitarian response because they were close to affected populations, knew local languages and cultures, and understood social and political dynamics but resources and unequal relationships within the international humanitarian system limited participation. All these results make it necessary to look at institutional capacities of specific actors rather than South Sudanese NSAs as a homogenous group.

Selected Non-State Actors (NSAs) for This Study

Against this background, the present study focuses on six selected NSAs: (1) UN Women; (2) South Sudan Council of Churches (SSCC); (3) Organisation for Children and Harmony (TOCH); (4) Starford International University (SIU); (5) United Nations Development Programme (UNDP); (6) Community Empowerment Progress Organisation (CEPO). These actors were chosen because together they offer different institutional perspectives through which foreign aid/preventive diplomacy/peacebuilding/local capacity can be examined:

international development institutions; faith-based organisations; civil-society and community organisations and an academic institution. Rather than treating all NSAs as having the same characteristics, the study uses these selected institutions to examine differences in organisational capacity, access to resources, relationships with donors and government, engagement with communities, and participation in conflict-prevention and peacebuilding processes. For analytical purposes, UN Women and UNDP are treated in this study as international institutional stakeholders rather than strictly non-state actors because they are entities within the United Nations system but inclusion of them is important because international institutions are central to the aid, development, and peacebuilding architecture within which South Sudanese NSAs operate. Wider experience of international engagement in South Sudan shows that relationships between international institutions, government authorities, and local actors shape design and implementation of aid and peacebuilding interventions (Maxwell et al., 2018). Studying UN Women and UNDP thus allows the study to analyse the international institutional dimension of foreign aid and preventive diplomacy and how it interacts with locally rooted organizations South Sudan Council of Churches (SSCC) represents the religious and faith-based dimension of the selected actors. Religious institutions are particularly important in South Sudan because churches and faith-based organisations have traditionally been involved in humanitarian work, reconciliation, dialogue, and peacebuilding. Agensky (2019) shows that religious institutions in South Sudan have an important place within the humanitarian-development-peace nexus and that their incorporation into aid and governance networks allows them to participate in political, social, and peace interventions. The inclusion of SSCC therefore allows the study to examine how religious legitimacy, community networks, and institutional relationships affect the capacity of faith-based actors to participate in preventive diplomacy and peacebuilding.

The Organisation for Children and Harmony (TOCH) and Community Empowerment Progress Organisation (CEPO) are the civil-society and locally grounded organisational dimension of the study. Inclusion of them allows the study to explore the position of local organisations within the wider aid and peacebuilding architecture because research in South Sudan has shown that local organisations can have contextual knowledge, community access, and understanding of local political and social conditions but at the same time structural disadvantages in terms of access to funding, institutional resources, and decision-making processes (Tanner & Moro, 2016). Localisation literature further suggests that strengthening locally based organisations is not just a matter of transferring implementation responsibilities from international to national organisations but requires sustained partnerships, institutional capacity building, trust and greater participation in decision making (Dijkzeul, 2021). Starford International University (SIU) is the academic and knowledge-producing dimension of the selected institutions. Universities and academic institutions are in a different position from humanitarian and civil-society organisations because their contribution is associated with education, research, professional training, knowledge production, and public engagement. Its inclusion broadens the study beyond organisations directly involved in delivery and allows investigation into how academic institutions may interact with wider debates and activities concerning peacebuilding, development, and preventive diplomacy but because the literature used in this background focuses on humanitarian, civil society, religious, and international actors the specific institutional activities of SIU are investigated empirically rather than assumed from existing literature.

The six selected institutions therefore differ greatly in institutional character (international institutional dimension, faith-based and religious dimension, civil-society and community-oriented organisations), sources of authority (who has the power to make decisions), access to resources (financial resources, technical expertise, international networks), and relationships with communities and government. International institutions (UN

Women and UNDP) represent the international institutional dimension; SSCC represents faith-based and religious dimension; TOCH and CEPO civil-society and community-oriented organisations; SIU academic and knowledge dimension. Differentiation is important because the capacity to influence foreign aid and preventive diplomacy may come from different sources: International institutions have financial resources, technical expertise, and international networks; religious organisations may have social and moral legitimacy; civil society organisations may draw on community relationships and contextual knowledge; academic institutions may contribute through research, education, professional expertise, and production of knowledge. The differences among these actors are particularly relevant to humanitarian localization. Tanner and Moro (2016) show that local and national actors can make humanitarian interventions more relevant because of proximity to communities and understanding of local conditions but also face structural constraints within the wider humanitarian system. Dijkzeul (2021) finds similarly that localization is more meaningful where partnerships are long term in nature and capacity building is involved. UN Women and UNDP on one hand, nationally or locally rooted institutions. SSCC, TOCH, SIU, and CEPO on the other, therefore provide an institutional setting for how international resources, local knowledge, organisational capacity, and decision making interact within South Sudan's aid and peacebuilding environment.

Preventive diplomacy also provides an important basis for studying these institutions. Conflict prevention in South Sudan cannot be limited to formal diplomatic negotiations between governments and political elites (although these are obviously part of it). Dialogue, reconciliation, advocacy, community engagement, capacity-building, and other interventions may reduce tensions and build peaceful relationships. Religious and community institutions can contribute legitimacy and access to communities; international institutions, resources, technical assistance, and institutional networks. The historical relationship between humanitarian assistance, peacebuilding and development in Sudan and South Sudan shows why study should analyse them together rather than as entirely separate spheres (Macrae et al., 1997; Bennett et al., 2010). However, politics around foreign aid can both strengthen and constrain the capacities of these institutions. Donor resources can increase organisational capacity (capacity to programme), programme coverage (coverage), and technical expertise but donor priorities and funding arrangements also affect institutional autonomy, sustainability, and programme choice. Maxwell et al. (2018) stress that international interventions in South Sudan are political relationships rather than purely technical environments. Dijkzeul (2021) and Tanner and Moro (2016) highlight inequalities between international and local actors in humanitarian systems too. So, looking at the selected institutions offers an opportunity to explore how funding structures, political relationships, institutional partnerships, local legitimacy, and organisational resources shape capacities and participation. Despite the large literature on foreign aid and peacebuilding in South Sudan, an important empirical gap therefore exists. Studies have looked at post-conflict foreign aid (Toh & Kasturi, 2012), international engagement with state and local actors (Maxwell et al., 2018), non-state governance and post-conflict legitimacy (Podder, 2014); conflict-prevention and peacebuilding assistance (Bennett et al., 2010), historical role of NGOs (Riehl, 2001), humanitarian localisation (Dijkzeul, 2021), local humanitarian actors (Tanner & Moro 2016), religious institutions (Agensky, 2019) and relief development and conflict nexus (Macrae et al., 1997). But none of these studies explain collectively how politics of foreign aid and preventive diplomacy shape capacities and changing patterns of participation of the particular institutional actors selected for this study. Against this background, the present study critically analyses foreign aid politics and preventive diplomacy through the experiences and views of UN Women, South Sudan Council of Churches, The Organisation for Children and Harmony, Starford International University, UNDP, and Community

Empowerment for Progress Organisation; what factors lead to their involvement; how they engage with aid and preventive-diplomacy processes; what contributions they make to peacebuilding and conflict resolution; institutional and political constraints on effectiveness; ways of strengthening capacity and collaboration. Because these institutions are identified from the outset and differentiated in terms of organisational characteristics, study has a concrete empirical basis for analysing capacities and trends of selected non-state and international institutional actors in post independent South Sudan.

Statement of the Problem

Political instability, recurrent insecurity, humanitarian vulnerability, and institutional fragility persist in South Sudan despite significant international assistance and sustained peacebuilding and diplomatic interventions since independence in 2011. Foreign aid has gone towards humanitarian relief, development, institutional strengthening and peacebuilding; national, regional and international initiatives have tried to prevent renewed violence and political transition but continued humanitarian needs, displacement, food insecurity, localised violence, poor service delivery, and weak capacity of institutions indicate that external engagement does not necessarily translate into sustainable peace and resilient institutions (Maxwell et al., 2018).

Foreign aid can help post-conflict recovery but this is dependent on the political, economic, and institutional context in which it is provided (Toh & Kasturi, 2012). The problem is therefore not so much that foreign aid and preventive diplomacy are available but whether the institutions through which they operate have financial, organisational, political, security, and contextual capacities to translate assistance into sustainable peacebuilding and development outcomes.

Although the wider South Sudanese environment contains many types of non-state actors, this study deliberately focused on six selected institutional actors: UN Women, South Sudan Council of Churches (SSCC), The Organisation for Children and Harmony (TOCH), Starford International University (SIU), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and Community Empowerment for Progress Organisation (CEPO). These institutions represent different aspects of the aid, development, and peacebuilding environment: UN Women and UNDP are international development and peacebuilding institutions; SSCC is faith-based sector; TOCH and CEPO are locally rooted civil society organisations; SIU is academic and knowledge production sector. For conceptual clarity UN Women and UNDP are UN entities so treated as international institutional stakeholders rather than NSAs in the strict organisational sense. The other selected institutions represent different forms of societal and non-state organisations. Together they provide an institutional basis for understanding how differences in resources, legitimacy mandates, organisational structures, and relationships with communities, government, and donors influence participation in foreign aid and preventive diplomacy.

The first problem is financial gaps. Adequate, predictable, and sustainable funding is central to institutional capacity but international assistance distribution can give unequal relationships between international and locally rooted organisations: Local actors may have rich contextual knowledge and community networks but are substantially less financially resourced and strategically decision-making than international organisations (Tanner & Moro, 2016). Dijkzeul (2021) shows similarly that localisation requires sustained partnerships and long-term capacity development rather than short-term transfers of implementation responsibilities. Within the six selected institutions, the nature of the financial challenge will be different. UN Women and UNDP operate within international funding and programme structures so the issue is adequacy, continuity, and flexibility of resources for country level interventions; SSCC has to sustain long term peace, reconciliation, and community

programmes beyond donor funded projects; TOCH and CEPO have access to sufficient and predictable donor funding and institutional resources to compete for, manage, and sustain externally financed programmes. For SIU the relevant funding gap is resources for research, training, knowledge production and sustained peacebuilding and preventive-diplomacy activities. These are institutional propositions to be tested empirically not assumptions that each organisation has an identical funding deficit.

The second problem is institutional and technical capacity gaps. Foreign aid and preventive diplomacy require organisations that plan programmes, implement them, manage finance, monitor and evaluate, research, advocate, analyse conflict, mediate, coordinate and learn from institutional processes. Organisational capacities vary greatly between international and national actors (Dijkzeul, 2021) but also within them (Tanner & Moro, 2016). At UN Women questions arise about the ability to connect international gender, peace, and development programming with diverse local institutions and communities; at UNDP about coordination and translation of broad development and peacebuilding programmes into sustainable national and local capacity; SSCC raises questions about institutionalizing and sustaining its community-based peace and reconciliation mechanisms; TOCH and CEPO raise questions about technical staffing, organisational systems, monitoring and evaluation, programme management, and sustained institutional development; SIU raises questions about research capacity, specialised expertise, policy engagement, and translating academic knowledge into practical conflict-prevention and peacebuilding interventions. The problem is therefore to find empirically which institutional capacities are strong and which need further development in each selected organisation.

The third concern relates to political gaps and constraints. Foreign aid and preventive diplomacy operate within political environments in which government policies, donor priorities, institutional mandates, elite interests and relationships among international and national actors can influence programme choices and organisational space. Maxwell et al. (2018) demonstrate that international interventions in South Sudan cannot be separated from the political context within which international, state, and local actors interact. For UN Women and UNDP, the political challenge concerns operating within formal relationships with national institutions while maintaining programme objectives and engaging diverse societal actors. For SSCC, political sensitivity may arise from its involvement in dialogue, reconciliation, and peacebuilding while retaining religious and community legitimacy. TOCH and CEPO, as civil-society actors, may confront challenges relating to civic space, access to decision-makers, regulatory conditions, and the ability to influence national peacebuilding processes. SIU may experience constraints in translating independent research and academic analysis into policy influence within a politically sensitive environment. The research problem is therefore to establish how political relationships facilitate or constrain each institution's ability to participate effectively in foreign aid and preventive diplomacy rather than assuming that all six organisations experience political constraints in the same manner.

The fourth problem concerns security gaps and operational vulnerability. Recurrent insecurity can restrict humanitarian access, community engagement, staff mobility, field research, programme implementation, and continuity of peacebuilding activities. The importance of local actors during conflict partly derives from their proximity to affected communities and familiarity with local conditions, although this proximity may simultaneously expose them to considerable operational risks (Tanner & Moro, 2016). The selected institutions may encounter security challenges differently according to their mandates and geographical reach. UN Women and UNDP may face constraints in reaching populations and sustaining programmes in insecure locations; SSCC may depend on church and community networks to conduct dialogue and reconciliation in conflict-affected areas; TOCH and CEPO may face direct operational risks when engaging communities affected by violence or political

tensions; and SIU may encounter limitations on field research, community-based studies, and academic engagement in insecure locations. The security problem therefore concerns both physical protection and the capacity of institutions to maintain access, relationships, and programme continuity under unstable conditions.

The fifth concern is the contextual gap, particularly the challenge of ensuring that internationally supported interventions respond to South Sudan's diverse political, cultural, and community realities. South Sudan's conflicts are embedded in complex local and national relationships, meaning that externally designed programmes may have limited effectiveness when insufficiently connected to local knowledge and institutions. Macrae et al. (1997) demonstrate that humanitarian, development, and conflict interventions cannot be separated from the political contexts producing vulnerability, while Maxwell et al. (2018) emphasise the importance of contextual and political analysis in international engagement with South Sudan. Local organisations can possess important advantages in understanding languages, community structures, and conflict dynamics (Tanner & Moro, 2016). Accordingly, UN Women and UNDP face the challenge of adapting international frameworks and programme priorities to varied South Sudanese contexts; SSCC must connect its extensive religious and community legitimacy with changing national and local conflict dynamics; TOCH and CEPO must transform their local knowledge and community relationships into sustainable programme and policy influence; and SIU must produce contextually relevant research capable of informing policy and practice. The problem is therefore not simply whether organisations possess contextual knowledge but whether that knowledge is effectively incorporated into programme design, decision-making, and preventive diplomacy.

These five dimensions are interconnected. Financial constraints may limit recruitment and technical capacity; weak institutional systems may reduce access to donor funding; political restrictions may constrain community engagement and advocacy; insecurity may increase programme costs and restrict geographical coverage; and inadequate contextual understanding may reduce the relevance and sustainability of interventions. This interconnectedness is particularly important because the six institutions possess fundamentally different resources and institutional advantages. International institutions may possess greater technical and financial resources, whereas locally rooted civil-society and faith-based organisations may have stronger community relationships and contextual knowledge. Religious organisations may derive influence from moral and social legitimacy, while universities may contribute through research, education, and knowledge production. Consequently, the capacity of each institution must be assessed according to its mandate and position within the aid and peacebuilding system rather than against a single uniform measure.

The broader literature confirms the importance of these institutional differences but does not sufficiently explain them in relation to the six organisations selected for this study. Existing research examines foreign aid in post-conflict South Sudan (Toh & Kasturi, 2012), trajectories of international engagement with state and local actors (Maxwell et al., 2018), non-state governance and post-conflict legitimacy (Podder, 2014), international support for conflict prevention and peacebuilding (Bennett et al., 2010), the historical influence of NGOs (Riehl, 2001), humanitarian localisation (Dijkzeul, 2021), the participation of local humanitarian actors (Tanner & Moro, 2016), religious institutions within the peace-humanitarian-development nexus (Agensky, 2019), and the relationship between humanitarian relief, development, and conflict (Macrae et al., 1997). However, this literature does not provide a comparative institutional analysis of how financial, organisational, political, security, and contextual factors shape the capacities of UN Women, SSCC, TOCH, SIU, UNDP and CEPO within the politics of foreign aid and preventive diplomacy in post-independent South Sudan.

The specific problem addressed by this study is therefore the limited empirical understanding of the nature, extent and variation of financial, institutional/technical, political, security and contextual capacity gaps affecting the six selected institutions and how these gaps influence their engagement with foreign aid and preventive diplomacy in South Sudan. The study consequently investigates what capacities each institution possesses, where the principal gaps occur, how foreign-aid structures and political relationships strengthen or constrain those capacities, and how the selected institutions contribute to preventive diplomacy, peacebuilding, and conflict resolution. By comparing the international institutional actors (UN Women and UNDP), the faith-based actor (SSCC), civil-society actors (TOCH and CEPO), and the academic actor (SIU), the study seeks to generate institution-specific evidence rather than generalizing about NSAs as an undifferentiated category. Such evidence is necessary for developing targeted strategies for financing, institutional strengthening, political engagement, security resilience, contextual adaptation, coordination and collaboration in support of sustainable peace and development in South Sudan.

Objective of Study

To investigate challenges faced by non-state actors in navigating the politics of foreign aid and preventive diplomacy in South Sudan.

Literature Review

Theoretical Review

Constructivism theory. Constructivism is an important perspective in international relations, which focuses on ideas, norms, identities, values, and shared understandings in the behaviour of states and non-state actors. Unlike realism, which focuses on material power, and liberalism which focuses on institutions and cooperation, constructivism sees international politics as socially constructed through interaction and shared meanings. Alexander Wendt developed this perspective by arguing that the effects of international anarchy depend on how actors interpret and understand their relationships (Wendt, 1999; Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). Other constructivist scholars have shown how the norms of sovereignty, human rights, humanitarianism, gender equality, and responsibility to protect emerge, spread, and affect political behaviour (Autesserre, 2021; Jok, 2021). For this study, constructivism is particularly helpful to understand how non-state actors (NSAs) promote norms and influence peacebuilding and preventive diplomacy in South Sudan. Through norm entrepreneurship, NSAs can reinforce values like accountability, human rights, gender equality, community participation, good governance, and conflict sensitivity. Finnemore and Sikkink's concept of norm life cycle (norm emergence, norm cascade and norm internalisation) helps explain why these ideas are accepted as norms in society and institutions. Constructivism also explains why donors and humanitarian organisations engage in South Sudan not only for a strategic purpose but also for humanitarian and moral reasons. And the identity of the organization (like NGOs, development partners, human rights defenders or peacebuilders) can also influence their strategies and relationships with government and communities (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Wendt, 1999; Jok, 2021).

Moreover, constructivism alone cannot explain NSA behaviour in South Sudan because material and structural factors like lack of funding, insecurity, government regulations, donor conditionalities, and organisational competition also determine their capacities and activities. The focus on norms might also overlook organisational interests and cultural differences among NSAs. Nonetheless, constructivism is the perfect basis for this study and explains how normative commitments, identities, legitimacy, and social relationships relate to

foreign aid and preventive diplomacy. It also explains how non-state actors are still engaged in humanitarian, development, advocacy, and peacebuilding in South Sudan despite the difficult working conditions and the tension that arises when their values or behaviour conflict with government interests and existing power structures (Autesserre, 2021; Garang & Sims, 2025; Jok, 2021).

Liberal internationalism theory. Liberal internationalism is an international relations perspective that believes that international cooperation, multilateral institutions, economic interdependence, democracy, and international law can promote peace and development. Embodied by Immanuel Kant, Woodrow Wilson, and the post-1945 international order, it stresses the role of the United Nations and international agreements in creating rules, facilitating cooperation, resolving disputes, and addressing collective problems. In conflict-affected countries these principles have been extended to peacebuilding, state-building, humanitarian assistance, and development cooperation (Barakat & Milton, 2020; United Nations, 2020; OECD, 2022; de Coning, 2018). In this study, liberal internationalism explains the institutional framework in which South Sudan non-state actors (NSAs) operate. UNMISS (United Nations Mission in South Sudan), IGAD (Intergovernmental Authority on Development) mediation structures, bilateral development programmes, and humanitarian coordination mechanisms are among the mechanisms that support NSAs to access funding, legitimacy, information, partnerships, and opportunities for peacebuilding and governance. Donors such as United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Foreign Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), Norwegian Agency for Development (NORAD), Denmark's Development Cooperation (DANIDA), and Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) also support NSA activities with humanitarian and development assistance, and transparency, accountability, results-based management, and alignment with donor interests are among the key aspects of the NSAs' operations. The Paris Declaration, Accra Agenda, and Busan Partnership also promote ownership, alignment, harmonisation, and mutual accountability in order to create a common ground in the areas of ownership, alignment, and accountability (Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation, 2017; Breslawski, Cunningham, & Fleishman, 2024).

However, liberal internationalism tends to be limited in fragile and conflict-affected contexts such as South Sudan because it tends to be too centric on international institutions and not take into account power asymmetries, local ownership, cultural contexts, and political interests. Donor-driven priorities and aid conditionalities can diminish local NSAs and potentially give rise to rivalry over sovereignty and external influence. Liberal institutional models also have difficulty accommodating indigenous political structures, traditional authorities, ethnic identities, and patronage networks. Thus, liberal internationalism is useful to understand the institutional organization of foreign aid and NSA engagement but should be complemented by approaches that take into account local actors, power relations, political contestation, and context (PeaceRep, 2022).

Nicolaidis' strategic framework for preventive action. The Nicolaidis strategic framework for preventive action is a systematic tool to understand the timing, form, and institutional requirements of conflict prevention. It distinguishes between ad hoc preventive action, which is reactive and responsive to emerging crises, and systemic preventive action, which addresses the underlying causes of conflict over the long term. It also distinguishes between direct prevention which focuses on immediate tensions through dialogue, mediation and confidence-building and structural prevention which is related to the deeper political, economic, and social conditions which drive conflict. The proposed approach includes different stages of the conflict cycle—stable peace, latent conflict, crisis and post-conflict—which require the right combination of preventive measures (Nicolaidis, 1996; Stares, 2023; United Nations, 2020; Marley, 2020). Such a framework is particularly relevant

for this study because it is a means of assessing whether the preventive activities of non-state actors (NSAs) in South Sudan are related to the stage and nature of conflict. It emphasizes early warning, conflict analysis, timely response, and institutional mechanisms that can prevent risk from being exploited to generate violence. In South Sudan, early warning and response mechanisms are still patchy, and recurrent violence and humanitarian crises have made NSAs struggle to move from emergency responses to long-term structural prevention. The framework therefore allows us to see whether NSAs are able to address immediate crises or are more concerned with the underlying causes of conflict (e.g. poverty, inequality, weak governance, and ethnic conflict) (Nicolaidis, 1996; Stares, 2023; Tchie, 2023).

However, the Nicolaidis framework has limitations in South Sudan. Because of recurrent conflict, humanitarian crises, and short-term donor support, NSAs are more likely to be reactive to the problem rather than to intervene to solve it and hence do not tackle structural causes of conflict. The framework may also overestimate the ability of institutional planning and external actors to shape the political system and the way a country is governed by elites competing for political and economic power. At the same time, it was created largely in a European conflict prevention context and therefore it might not be fully representative of South Sudan's social, political, and institutional dimensions. Thus, the framework is most effective when coupled with other perspectives that include local dynamics, power relations, institutional constraints, and the South Sudan context (Nicolaidis, 1996; Marley, 2020; Stares, 2023).

Problem-solving approach to conflict resolution theory. The problem-solving approach to conflict resolution theory of John Burton and other authors such as Herbert Kelman and Edward Azar has emphasized that violent conflicts are often due to not meeting the basic human needs which are security, identity, recognition, participation, and justice; sustainable peace is about addressing these needs rather than force, bargaining, or temporary settlement. Burton advocated for a proactive approach to conflict prevention which was based on dialogue, analysis of conflict causes, and the development of solutions that meet the needs of the conflict parties from the beginning. This approach is particularly relevant for South Sudan because it is the framework for the move from reactive humanitarian interventions to preventive and structural peacebuilding (Burton, 1990; Kelman, 2005; Autesserre, 2021; Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2023). Edward Azar's long-term social conflict theory adds to this picture by demonstrating how many conflicts are caused by the denial of human needs, divisions in one's identity, governance failures, and external political actors. These are characteristics that can be seen in South Sudan, where ethnic division, weak institutions, insecurity, competition among political elites for state resources and regional and global involvement all contribute to conflict. Herbert Kelman's interactive model of problem solving also emphasises unofficial dialogue between representatives of opposing communities which creates opportunities for mutual understanding, empathy, and local solutions. Non-state actors (NSAs) in South Sudan, especially those who are faith-based, community-based, and peacebuilders, use such approaches to resolve conflict on land, cattle, water, inter-community conflict and political representation as a whole (Kelman, 2005; Jok, 2021).

The approach is thus useful to explore how NSAs contribute to community-level peacebuilding and preventive diplomacy when there is still national political conflict. But the effectiveness of the approach may be limited by deep distrust, power imbalance, armed groups, political interests and willingness of parties to engage in genuine dialogue. Also, the focus on the human needs might understate more general political and economic aspects like resource competition, patronage networks, and elite manipulation of ethnic identities. So, the problem-solving approach can be useful to explain local dialogue and mediation but must be complemented by

theories that include structural conditions, institutional weaknesses, power relations, and preventive diplomacy in South Sudan (Burton, 1990; Kelman, 2005; Nwosu, 2023; Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2023).

Preventive diplomacy theory. Preventive diplomacy theory is one of the theoretical bases of this study and it explains how conflicts can be prevented from happening, from spreading or from being triggered by early warning, fact-finding, confidence-building, preventive deployment, dialogue, good offices, and mediation. This concept was introduced to the United Nations by Dag Hammarskjöld and later developed through Boutros Boutros-Ghali in *An Agenda for Peace* (1992). The development of this theory has evolved from a narrowly state-centred approach to operational prevention, which addresses immediate crises, and structural prevention which addresses the causes of conflict as well. More recent efforts recognise that civil society, women's organisations, faith-based groups, regional organisations, and other non-state actors play a role in conflict prevention at the multi-level level (Boutros-Ghali, 1992; Department of Political Affairs, 2017; Jochemsen, 2022; Stares, 2023). The theory is very relevant to South Sudan as non-state actors (NSAs) are increasingly involved in early warning, mediation, dialogue facilitation, humanitarian negotiation, peacebuilding, and protection of civilians. The UNMISS provides the environment to enable this type of work and to demonstrate that preventive diplomacy is not just about diplomatic engagement but also operational and institutional cooperation among peacekeepers, humanitarian organisations, development agencies, and local civil society. The theory states that the effective prevention of conflict depends on early warning of risks, political commitment, resources and preventive instruments and coordination between actors and levels. In South Sudan, such recurring violence, lack of political commitment, bureaucracy, insecurity, and short-term funding have made it difficult for NSAs to sustain preventive interventions (Boutros-Ghali, 1992; Department of Political Affairs, 2017; Jochemsen, 2022). Preventive diplomacy theory has limitations when applied to South Sudan. Prevention success is hard to calculate because it is about conflicts that could have been prevented, and numerous outbreaks of violence show how difficult it is to prevent wars in the context of structural conflict and weak institutions and weak political will. In addition, the theory was originally state-centred and is not likely to be able to account for the many different challenges faced by NSAs such as legitimacy, access, sustainability, and external funding. Nevertheless, it is a good approach to assess how NSA engagement in early warning, community dialogue, mediation, and local peacebuilding goes hand in hand with conflict prevention, as long as they are funded and supported by adequate resources, institutional partnerships, knowledge, and political commitment (Boutros-Ghali, 1992; Jochemsen, 2022; Stares, 2023).

Empirical Review

Challenges faced by non-state actors in navigating the politics of foreign aid and preventive diplomacy in South Sudan. The empirical literature identifies multiple categories of challenges that constrain the effectiveness of NSAs in navigating the complex politics of foreign aid and preventive diplomacy in South Sudan. These challenges are structural, operational, and relational in nature, and they interact in ways that create compounding effects on NSA capacities and effectiveness (Fast, 2017; Erol Ayboke, 2018; PeaceRep, 2022; Donini & Maxwell, 2022). Insecurity and access constraints constitute the most immediately impactful challenge facing NSAs in South Sudan. The country has been classified as one of the most dangerous operating environments for humanitarian workers globally, with high rates of violence against aid workers including killings, assaults, abductions, and asset seizures. The ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2017) documented how insecurity directly constrains NSAs' ability to reach affected populations, maintain operational

presence in conflict-affected areas, and deliver services consistently. Between 2013 and 2023, over one hundred humanitarian workers were killed in South Sudan, making it one of the deadliest countries for aid operations in the world. Access constraints also include bureaucratic impediments such as government-imposed access restrictions, checkpoint delays, and requirements for travel permits that limit the operational mobility of humanitarian and development organisations. These access challenges are not merely operational inconveniences; they fundamentally shape the geographic distribution and quality of NSA engagement, creating situations where the most vulnerable populations in the most conflict-affected areas may receive the least support.

Funding volatility and donor dependence represent a second major category of challenges. The overwhelming majority of NSAs in South Sudan are dependent on external donor funding for their operations, creating a structural vulnerability to shifts in donor priorities, funding availability, and conditionality requirements. The cyclical nature of humanitarian funding, with annual appeals and short-term project cycles, creates operational instability and prevents NSAs from investing in the longer-term programmes and institutional capacities necessary for sustained preventive engagement. Furthermore, competition for declining donor resources creates perverse incentives among NSAs, including reluctance to share information, territorial behaviour regarding geographic or thematic coverage areas, and a focus on short-term outputs that satisfy donor reporting requirements at the expense of longer-term impact. The phenomenon of proposal fatigue and the administrative burden of managing multiple short-term grants further diverts organisational capacity from programme implementation to fundraising and compliance, reducing the proportion of organisational resources that are actually directed toward the populations and objectives that the organisations are mandated to serve (NORAD, 2017).

Government regulatory barriers constitute a third significant challenge. The relationship between the South Sudanese government and non-state actors has been characterised by periodic mistrust and tension, reflecting the government's concerns about sovereignty, political control, and the perceived alignment of some NSAs with opposition political interests. The government has imposed various regulatory requirements on NSA operations, including registration and reporting obligations, restrictions on advocacy activities, and limitations on the hiring and movement of staff (Kahyana, 2022).

Coordination failures represent a fourth category of challenges. Despite the existence of multiple coordination mechanisms, including the Humanitarian Country Team, the cluster system, the NGO Forum, and various inter-agency working groups, persistent gaps in coordination among NSAs and between NSAs and other actors result in duplication of efforts, inconsistent coverage of geographic areas, fragmented approaches to cross-cutting issues such as gender and conflict sensitivity, and inefficient use of scarce resources. The sheer number of actors operating in South Sudan, combined with the diversity of mandates, organisational cultures, and strategic priorities, makes effective coordination exceptionally challenging. The literature notes that coordination mechanisms tend to function most effectively in Juba, where most organisational headquarters are located, but become progressively weaker at the state and county levels where the majority of programming is implemented (Delgado, 2023).

Recent empirical research has provided systematic evidence on the severity and interaction of these challenges across multiple fragile state contexts. The Humanitarian Outcomes (2020) SCORE report, employing quantitative access metrics and remote surveys with affected populations across Nigeria, Afghanistan, and the Central African Republic, found that areas with greater access constraints had fewer aid organisations operating, resulting in lower per-person coverage, and that in hard-to-reach areas, programming defaulted to supply-driven

mechanical responses rather than needs-based interventions. Donini and Maxwell (2022), through 52 semi-structured interviews with humanitarian managers across Somalia, Syria, Yemen, and South Sudan, documented that remote management practices adopted in response to insecurity and COVID-19 accelerated delegation to national staff but without corresponding authority transfer or capacity support, and that staff turnover averaged 12 to 18 months for international personnel, with the psychological toll of sustained engagement identified as a significant but under-addressed factor. The Development Initiatives *Global Humanitarian Assistance Report* (2023), analysing OCHA (Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs) Financial Tracking Service data, confirmed that South Sudan has the world's most severe food insecurity gap at 29%, that per-capita food sector spending declined despite worsening conditions, and that competition between crisis contexts for limited resources creates structural funding pressure on NSAs in protracted settings, a pattern that has intensified with the emergence of new large-scale crises in Ukraine, Sudan, and Gaza.

The capacity disparity between international and local organisations represents a fifth and increasingly prominent challenge. International organisations typically possess significant advantages in terms of technical expertise, institutional infrastructure, access to funding, and international networks, while local organisations operate with more constrained resources and weaker institutional capacities. This disparity creates a structural imbalance in the aid architecture, with international organisations dominating strategic decision-making while local organisations are frequently relegated to sub-contracting or implementing partner roles with limited decision-making authority. The localisation agenda has drawn attention to this imbalance, but progress toward shifting power and resources toward local actors has been slow and uneven in practice. Data from financial tracking systems consistently show that the share of humanitarian funding reaching local and national organisations directly remains far below the 25% target set by the Grand Bargain, with most estimates suggesting that direct funding to local actors in South Sudan remains in the range of 2-5% of total humanitarian expenditure (Maweu, 2022).

A sixth challenge that has received increasing attention in the literature concerns the tension between humanitarian principles and political engagement. NSAs operating in South Sudan must navigate the tension between humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence, which require maintaining distance from political processes, and the recognition that effective peacebuilding requires political engagement, advocacy on sensitive issues, and willingness to challenge the actions of conflict parties. This tension creates organisational dilemmas regarding the appropriate scope of engagement, the balance between service delivery and advocacy, and the management of relationships with government authorities whose cooperation is needed for operational access but whose actions may warrant criticism. The resolution of this tension varies across organisations, with some prioritising operational access through a restrained political posture while others accept the risks associated with more vocal advocacy positions (Stares, 2023).

A seventh challenge concerns the rapid staff turnover and institutional memory loss that characterises the NSA community in South Sudan. International organisations operating in hardship duty stations such as South Sudan typically rotate staff on 12-to-24-month cycles, resulting in the constant departure of experienced personnel and the arrival of new staff who require time to develop the contextual understanding, relationships, and institutional knowledge necessary for effective engagement. This pattern of constant rotation has significant implications for organisational effectiveness, as the relationships of trust and understanding that are essential for effective conflict-sensitive programming and preventive diplomacy must be rebuilt with each staff transition. The problem is compounded by the high rates of staff burnout and psychological stress associated with working in a

protracted conflict environment, which contribute to premature departures and reduced productivity among those who remain. Local organisations, while less subject to rotation policies, face their own human resource challenges, including the difficulty of retaining qualified staff in competition with international organisations that offer substantially higher compensation packages, creating a brain drain from local to international organisations that further widens the capacity gap (Fast, 2017; Erol Ayboke, 2018; PeaceRep, 2022; Donini & Maxwell, 2022).

An eighth challenge relates to the accountability deficit that characterises the aid architecture in South Sudan. The existing accountability frameworks primarily orient NSAs upward toward donors and institutional headquarters, with detailed reporting requirements focused on financial compliance and output delivery. Downward accountability to affected communities, which many observers regard as the most critical form of accountability in humanitarian and development contexts, remains weak and inconsistently practised. The absence of robust mechanisms for community feedback, complaint handling, and participatory programme evaluation means that NSA programming may not adequately reflect the priorities and experiences of the populations it is intended to serve. This accountability deficit has practical implications for NSA effectiveness, as programmes designed without meaningful community input are more likely to miss their targets, generate resistance, or produce unintended negative consequences. Several recent initiatives, including the Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability and various inter-agency accountability mechanisms, have sought to address this deficit, but the literature documents that their uptake and implementation in South Sudan remain uneven and largely dependent on the institutional culture and commitment of individual organisations (Fast, 2017; Erol Ayboke, 2018; PeaceRep, 2022; Donini & Maxwell, 2022).

Objective-based synthesis of the empirical literature. Insecurity is the most direct constraint because it affects staff safety, access, continuity, cost, and the willingness of communities to participate. Risk-management measures can preserve operations but may also distance decision-makers from programme locations. Remote management transfers responsibilities to local staff while authority and resources remain concentrated elsewhere, raising ethical questions about risk distribution. The literature calls for security arrangements that recognize local expertise and avoid transferring danger without transferring decision-making power (ICRC, 2017; Donini & Maxwell, 2022). Funding volatility creates organisational fragility. Short grants encourage staff turnover, repeated proposal writing, and programme interruption. Restricted budgets limit the ability to respond to changing context, while competitive funding can discourage information sharing. These effects are cumulative: Unstable finance weakens institutional memory, which reduces programme quality, which can then reduce future funding. Multi-year and flexible support are therefore not simply a financial preference but a capacity-building mechanism (NORAD, 2017; Marley, 2020). Coordination mechanisms frequently exist without resolving fragmentation. Meetings may improve information exchange at national level while remaining weak at state and county levels. Participation costs can exclude smaller organizations, and coordination may become reporting rather than joint decision making. Effective coordination requires authority to address duplication, geographic gaps, incompatible standards, and unresolved responsibilities. It also requires community feedback so that coherence among organizations does not become coordination detached from affected populations (Aden & Ahmed, 2025; Mohamed & Ali, 2015). Capacity disparities between international and national organizations are reproduced through funding eligibility, salary structures, technical standards, and risk perceptions. Local actors may possess stronger contextual legitimacy but weaker access to unrestricted finance and formal systems. International actors may possess financial and technical infrastructure but face higher turnover and weaker local embeddedness. Partnership can combine these strengths only when authority, overhead, risk, and credit are shared

equitably. Subcontracting without strategic participation does not constitute localization (Barakat & Milton, 2020; Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2023).

Research Methodology

Research Philosophy and Design

The study's research philosophy is based on ontology, epistemology, and axiology. Ontology, for example, is about the nature of reality, epistemology is about how knowledge is created, and axiology is about values and ethics in research. Based on these considerations, the study uses a pragmatist philosophy as a framework of research methodology that according to the research questions and the nature of the problem being researched should be used. Pragmatism is a suitable approach towards the complex politics of foreign aid, preventive diplomacy, and non-state actors (NSAs) in South Sudan as it can be used to see both the data and subjective experience (Al-Ababneh, 2020; Creswell & Tashakkori, 2018). The philosophical position draws a direct connection between ontology, epistemology, and methodology. The study acknowledges that social and political reality is measurable and socially constructed and therefore requires both quantitative evidence and qualitative interpretation. A purely positivist approach would provide statistical evidence but will overlook the experiences and contextual meaning of NSA engagement; a purely interpretivist approach would provide rich contextual understanding but would not lead to testing relationships and producing measurable evidence. Pragmatism offers a balanced approach that is both measurement, interpretation, and practical understanding (Creswell & Tashakkori, 2018; Pretorius, 2024). In the design and interpretation of the study, the researcher's positionality was also considered. Being familiar with the East African academic and development environment gave the researcher context, institutional knowledge, and the ability to establish rapport with different survey participants. However, that familiarity could lead to assumptions or biases. To mitigate these risks, the researcher engaged reflexive methods like keeping a research journal, seeking supervisory review, systematic coding, and triangulating evidence from multiple sources. These forms of research were taken to improve credibility and objectivity in the research process.

The study was conducted in a mixed-methods research design that consisted of structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Quantitative data were able to provide empirical evidence for respondents' perceptions, experiences, and patterns of NSA engagement and qualitative data were able to shed light on strategies, experiences, challenges, and context. The combination of these methods allowed data triangulation and improved the quality, reliability, and comprehensiveness of the data. The study employed a convergent parallel mixed methods design with quantitative and qualitative data collected at the same time, analysed separately, and integrated for interpretation. This was a good design as it required statistical evidence but also deep contextual understanding in a complex and conflict-affected context. A simultaneous collection of data also helped minimize the risks of the volatile security and movement of respondents in South Sudan, and independent analysis ensured that each data stream was not compromised. In the end, the design was effective and robust to analyze NSA capabilities and trends in foreign aid and preventive diplomacy.

Study Location

The study was conducted in Juba, the capital city of the Republic of South Sudan, since it is the country's main political, administrative, diplomatic, and humanitarian center. Juba is home to major institutions of government, international organisations, bilateral development agencies, diplomatic missions, and national and

international non-governmental organisations involved in foreign aid, peacebuilding, and preventive diplomacy. The concentration of these institutions makes Juba a natural place to examine interactions between government, donors, international organizations, and NSAs. Location also plays an important role in facilitating access to relevant institutions and stakeholders, as noted by Aydın (2013), who found that location has significant effects on access, participation, and institutional attractiveness.

Juba was chosen because it offers a much more direct link to key stakeholders and institutions relevant to the study. Government ministries in the capital are responsible for finance, humanitarian affairs, peacebuilding, NGO coordination, and crucial coordination with humanitarian and development actors. The city therefore is an important platform for studying how foreign aid, donor priorities, institutional coordination, and preventive diplomacy affect NSA capacities and strategies. The study site has a large number of institutions so that the researcher can consult with different stakeholders in a small geographical area. This is consistent with Aydın (2013) that location can provide important institutional advantages by facilitating access and interaction among relevant actors. However, the study was limited to Juba only and there are also limitations in that Juba represents the national-level institutional and policy environment more strongly than the realities of remote and conflict-affected communities in other parts of South Sudan. Therefore, the study acknowledges that its results might not be representative of the experiences of NSAs in rural or highly insecure areas. To alleviate this limitation, the researcher included respondents and stakeholders with knowledge of developments beyond Juba in phone interviews and online interactions when possible. As Juba is a place with the most institutional concentration, accessibility and central role in foreign aid and preventive diplomacy, the geographical limitation of the study is acknowledged as well and the findings are analyzed and generalized.

Target Population

The target population of the study comprised 2,070 people from seven stakeholder categories directly or indirectly involved in (or affected by) politics of foreign aid and preventive diplomacy in post-independent South Sudan: 360 representatives of international humanitarian and aid agencies and international and national NGOs; 50 representatives of government institutions and foreign diplomatic missions; 460 representatives of civil society organisations, faith based organisations, community based organisations, and media organisations; 450 representatives of political parties and social movements, universities and research institutions, trade unions and professional associations, influential individuals, activists and public figures; 450 representatives from religious institutions, traditional authorities, and customary leadership structures; 250 representatives from banks and financial institutions, multinational corporations, and private businesses; and 50 people associated with armed groups, militias, insurgent organisations, criminal networks, and terrorist organisations.

These diverse categories were used to reflect the heterogeneous nature of NSAs and the stakeholder environment in which foreign aid and preventive diplomacy operate in South Sudan. International humanitarian and aid agencies, international and national NGOs, civil-society organisations, community-based organisations, faith-based organisations, and other actors directly involved in humanitarian assistance, development, advocacy, conflict prevention and peacebuilding were targeted; other categories were added for political, governmental, diplomatic, academic, economic, traditional, community, and security perspectives on NSA capacities and trends. This diversity allowed the study to explore how different actors relate to foreign aid and preventive diplomacy and how political institutional financial social and security conditions shape their participation and effectiveness in post-independent South Sudan.

Table 1

Target Population

Category	Estimated number
1. International humanitarian and aid agencies, international and national NGOs	360
2. Government and foreign diplomatic missions	50
3. Civil-society organizations, faith-based organisations and community-based organizations, media organizations	460
4. Political parties and social movements, universities and research institutions, trade unions and professional associations, influential individuals, activists and public figures	450
5. Religious institutions, traditional authorities and customary leaders	450
6. Banks and financial institutions and multinational corporations and private businesses	250
7. Armed groups, militias, insurgent organizations, criminal networks and terrorist organizations	50
Total	2,070

Source: Primary data.

Sample Size

The sample size for this study was determined using the Cochran formula for finite populations, which is widely used in social science research to calculate statistically representative sample sizes. The key parameters used in the calculation included a confidence level of 95% (Z = 1.96), a margin of error of 5% (e = 0.05), a population proportion of 50% (p = 0.5, used as a conservative estimate for maximum variability), and a total population size of 2,070 individuals (N).

The initial sample size for an infinite population was calculated as:

$$n^0 = \frac{Z^2 \times p \times (1 - p)}{e^2}$$

$$= \frac{(1.96)^2 \times 0.5 \times 0.5}{(0.05)^2}$$

$$= 385.$$

The adjusted sample size for the finite population was then calculated as:

$$n = \frac{n^0}{1 + \frac{n^0 - 1}{N}}$$

$$= \frac{385}{1 + \frac{384}{2070}}$$

$$\frac{385}{1.1855} \approx 325 \text{ respondents.}$$

Thus, the required sample size for this study was 325 respondents drawn proportionally from the six target groups. This sample size ensured a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error, providing a strong basis for statistical inference and generalisability of findings. The sample size of 325 respondents was deemed adequate for the inferential statistical techniques employed in this study. For multiple linear regression analysis with four independent variables, the minimum recommended sample size is typically calculated as 50 + 8k, where k is the number of predictors, yielding a minimum of 82 respondents. The actual sample size of 305 completed questionnaires substantially exceeds this minimum, providing adequate statistical power to detect medium-sized

effects at the 0.05 significance level. The sample size also satisfies the requirements for Pearson correlation analysis, which typically requires a minimum of 30 observations per variable, and for the diagnostic tests employed, including the Shapiro-Wilk test for normality and the Breusch-Pagan test for homoscedasticity. The adequacy of the sample size for the statistical analyses employed provides confidence in the robustness and reliability of the inferential findings.

A total of 325 questionnaires were distributed to respondents across the six target population categories. Of these, 305 questionnaires were completed and returned, representing a response rate of 93.85%. The remaining 20 questionnaires, accounting for 6.15%, were not returned, attributed to respondents who chose not to participate or were unavailable during the data collection period. In addition, 24 semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted with purposively selected key informants, all of which were successfully completed, yielding a 100% response rate. Three focus group discussions were also conducted as planned. The high response rate achieved in this study is particularly noteworthy given the challenging security environment and the conflict-sensitive nature of the research topic, which might have been expected to reduce respondent willingness to participate. The response rate compares favourably with similar studies conducted in conflict-affected environments in Sub-Saharan Africa, where response rates in the range of 60 to 80% are more commonly reported. The 93.85% return rate was facilitated by several methodological strategies, including the researcher's personal administration of questionnaires, the provision of Arabic translation assistance for respondents with limited English proficiency, the use of follow-up visits to collect outstanding questionnaires, and the establishment of trust through institutional introductions and transparent communication about the study's purposes and confidentiality protections. The non-response of 20 questionnaires (6.15%) was examined for potential bias by comparing the demographic profile of non-respondents, where identifiable, with that of respondents, and no systematic patterns of non-response bias were detected.

The questionnaire was structured into seven sections. Section A collected demographic information including gender, age, marital status, educational background, occupation, and working experience. Section B contained six Likert-scale items addressing the first specific objective on factors influencing NSA involvement in foreign aid and preventive diplomacy. Section C contained five Likert-scale items addressing the second specific objective on NSA strategies in shaping the political landscape and foreign aid interventions. Section D contained five Likert-scale items addressing the third specific objective on NSA participation in preventive diplomacy and peacebuilding outcomes. Section E contained five Likert-scale items addressing the fourth specific objective on challenges faced by NSAs in navigating foreign aid and diplomacy politics. Section F contained five Likert-scale items addressing the dependent variable on capacities and trends of non-state actors. Section G contained categorical and open-ended items addressing the fifth specific objective on strategies for enhancing NSA capacity and collaboration. Each Likert-scale item was accompanied by a five-point response scale: Strongly Agree (5), Agree (4), Disagree (3), Strongly Disagree (2), and Not Sure (1). The items were phrased as declarative statements to which respondents indicated their level of agreement, consistent with standard practice in attitudinal measurement in the social sciences.

Sampling Procedures

The study employed a combination of probability and non-probability sampling techniques to select respondents from the seven target population categories. Stratified random sampling was used as the primary technique, whereby the target population was first divided into sev strata corresponding to the target categories.

Within each stratum, respondents were selected proportionally based on the stratum's share of the total target population, ensuring that each category was represented in proportion to its size. The proportional allocation of the sample across the six strata is presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2

Sample Size Distribution

Category	Population	Proportion	Sample Size
International humanitarian and aid agencies; international and national NGOs	360	17.39%	56
Government and foreign diplomatic missions	50	2.42%	8
Civil-society organisations; faith-based organisations; community-based organisations; media organisations	460	22.22%	72
Political parties and social movements; universities and research institutions; trade unions and professional associations; influential individuals, activists and public figures	450	21.74%	71
Religious institutions; traditional authorities and customary leaders	450	21.74%	71
Banks and financial institutions; multinational corporations and private businesses	250	12.08%	39
Armed groups, militias and insurgent organisations; criminal networks and terrorist organisations	50	2.42%	8
All categories	2,070	100%	325

Source: Authors' computation.

Following the classification of target population into seven categories in Table 2, the study used stratified, simple random, purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Stratification was first applied to ensure representation of all categories of NSAs and other relevant stakeholders involved in politics of foreign aid and preventive diplomacy in South Sudan: (1) international humanitarian and aid agencies and international and national NGOs; (2) government institutions and foreign diplomatic missions; (3) civil-society organisations, faith based organisations, community-based organisations, and media organisations; (4) political parties and social movements, universities and research institutions, trade unions and professional associations and influential individuals, activists and public figures; (5) religious institutions, traditional authorities, and customary leaders; (6) banks and financial institutions, multinational corporations, and private businesses; (7) armed groups, militias, insurgent organisations, criminal networks, and terrorist organisations. In strata where sampling frames were available (established humanitarian agencies, international and national NGOs, civil-society organisations, universities, professional associations and registered private-sector institutions), simple random sampling was used to give eligible participants a chance to be sampled.

Where complete sampling frames were not available or participants had specialised knowledge which could not be sampled, randomly purposive sampling was used (e.g. traditional authorities and customary leaders, religious leaders, political and civil-society actors, activists, public figures, media representatives etc., selected because they knew directly or had experience of foreign aid, conflict prevention, peacebuilding and preventive diplomacy). Snowball sampling complemented purposive selection in finding hard to reach and specialised respondents (knowledgeable government officials, diplomatic representatives etc. whose positions or security circumstances made conventional sampling difficult); categories sensitive to security issues (armed groups, militias, insurgent organisations persons with knowledge of criminal/terrorist networks) were approached cautiously only where ethically acceptable and safe to do so. Probability and non-probability sampling thus combined so that the study could represent proportional quantitative categories across the seven categories as well as information rich participants able to provide specialized evidence relevant to the research objectives.

For the qualitative component 24 key informants were purposively selected on seniority, professional experience, institutional responsibility and knowledge of foreign aid, preventive diplomacy, humanitarian assistance, peacebuilding and NSAs activities in South Sudan. The key informants came from relevant categories represented in target population (international humanitarian and aid agencies; international and national NGOs; civil-society and faith-based organisations; government and diplomatic institutions; traditional and religious leadership structures; academic and professional institutions; other actors directly knowledgeable about issues being studied). Three focus group discussions (FGDs) of 5-10 participants each were also conducted to get collective views on capacities, roles, challenges, and changing trends of NSAs. Participants were chosen to represent diversity in terms of institutional affiliation gender age professional experience and community level engagement.

A participant-selection matrix was used to ensure appropriate coverage of the seven stakeholder categories and different levels of experience but without concentrating on any single institutional group. This complementary sampling approach was consistent with convergent parallel mixed methods design of the study (quantitative and qualitative data were collected to give complementary perspectives on the same research problem). Quantitative data provided evidence on general patterns and relationships across the sampled population whereas interviews and FGDs gave deeper explanations of how donor priorities, political interests, institutional relationships, security conditions, and local dynamics affected capacities and trends of different NSAs. The combination of these sampling approaches therefore strengthened triangulation and offered a more holistic view of the politics of foreign aid and preventive diplomacy in post-independent South Sudan.

Data Collection Instruments

The study used four instruments for data collection—structured questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and observation—to obtain quantitative and qualitative data and perform methodological triangulation. The questionnaire was the main quantitative measure and was completed on 325 respondents. The questionnaire contains six sections on demographic information and the five research objectives, using five-point Likert scale items, yes/no questions, impact-rating questions, and an open-ended question. The semi-structured interviews were conducted with 24 purposively selected key informants, including those that work for national and international organizations, government organizations, diplomatic missions, and so on. The interviews were conducted in a series of 10 open-ended questions, which lasted 45-90 minutes and were recorded and transcribed with the consent of participants. Three FGDs, involving 5-10 participants from NGO staff and beneficiaries in South Sudan, were conducted to provide a shared perspective and identify areas of agreement and disagreement. Additional observation was also performed to complement the other instruments in terms of contextual conditions, environment, and non-verbal cues. Before collecting the data overall, the pilot study was conducted in November 2024, with 30 participants not included in the final sample. The pilot study examined the clarity and reliability of the instruments and estimated completion time, field procedures, and logistical difficulties. Based on participants' feedback, technical vocabulary was simplified, Arabic translation help was provided for some terms, and the sequence of some questions on the questionnaire was revised.

The instruments were designed based on the research concepts, theoretical foundations, and research goals. Questions were clear, neutral, culturally appropriate, and suitable for respondents from different educational and professional backgrounds. The instruments also sought to capture both convergence and divergence of views with respect to the six stakeholder categories and to guard against social desirability bias and to keep participants

in a conflict-sensitive research environment. In general, the use of quantitative and qualitative instruments enhanced the credibility and contextual relevance of the study results.

Pilot Study

A pilot study with 30 respondents was conducted before the main data collection to test and validate the research instruments. Participants were drawn from the six target population categories but didn't fit into the final sample. The pilot was designed to identify questions which were ambiguous or unclear, biases that could be present, instrument reliability, and the time it would take to complete the study. In a full study, 30 respondents are sufficient to identify problems in questionnaire clarity, measurement consistency, and data collection. The pilot data were not considered in the final analysis.

The pilot study identified some areas that needed improvement, including ambiguous wording in three Likert-scale items, excessive questionnaire length, and the need for more demographic categories. The interview guide was also tested with five key informants, and revised questions and additional follow-up probes were added to the qualitative data to increase the depth and consistency of qualitative data. The final instruments incorporate feedback from participants and recommendations from the research supervisor. After these changes, the total completion time for the questionnaire was reduced to approximately 25 minutes, making it suitable and manageable for the main study.

Reliability of research instruments. Reliability refers to the consistency, stability, and dependability of the research instrument in producing consistent results when administered repeatedly under similar conditions. In this study, the reliability of the structured questionnaire was assessed using the Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which measures the internal consistency of the Likert-scale items. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was computed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software based on data collected during the pilot study. A Cronbach's alpha value of 0.70 or above was adopted as the threshold for acceptable reliability, in accordance with established methodological standards in social science research. The results of the reliability analysis indicated that all sections of the questionnaire achieved Cronbach's alpha coefficients above the 0.70 threshold, confirming that the instrument demonstrated acceptable internal consistency and was suitable for use in the main study.

Specifically, the Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the five substantive sections of the questionnaire were as follows: Section B (Factors Influencing NSA Involvement) achieved an alpha of 0.812, Section C (NSA Strategies) achieved an alpha of 0.788, Section D (Preventive Diplomacy Impact) achieved an alpha of 0.835, Section E (Challenges Faced by NSAs) achieved an alpha of 0.794, and Section F (Dependent Variable: Capacities and Trends) achieved an alpha of 0.806. These values, all exceeding the 0.70 threshold and with the majority exceeding 0.80, indicate good to excellent internal consistency across all measurement scales. The consistently high alpha values across sections provide confidence that the questionnaire items within each section are measuring the same underlying construct and that the composite scores derived from these items are reliable indicators of the variables of interest.

Validity of research instruments. Validity is when we know research tools are measuring the intended concepts. In this study, we validated content, construct, and face validity through expert review, theoretical alignment, and pilot testing. The questionnaire and the accompanying interview guides were reviewed by the research supervisor and political science and research experts so that the items were relevant, clear, and appropriate and could be biased. The Content Validity Index (CVI) was calculated using expert ratings (changes

were made or removed items). Our overall CVI was above the recommended level, which means content validity was good. Construct validity was found by comparing the content of the questionnaire to the theoretical constructs and empirical literature reviewed in Chapter 2. Face validity was confirmed by the pilot respondents' feedback on clarity, relevance, and comprehensiveness.

The study was also designed to ensure external and ecological validity. The stratified random sampling ensured that each of the six stakeholder groups was represented, and the high response rate of 93.85% was not a concern for non-response bias, and the quantitative results were more generalized in Juba. The use of different data collection methods (questionnaires, interviews, focus group discussions, and observation) and also different stakeholder perspectives made the study more ecological in nature, reflecting the real-world complexity of foreign aid and preventive diplomacy in South Sudan, but because of the concentration of the study in Juba, the findings are limited to remote and conflict-affected areas where conditions might vary. The systematic expert review, CVI assessment, pilot testing, theoretical alignment, sampling strategy, and methodological triangulation gave sufficient data to support the claim that the instruments were valid and appropriate to the study.

Data collection procedures. Data collection was conducted in a systematic manner with ethical conditions. The researcher was approved for ethical permission from the University of Juba and required research permit from the relevant South Sudanese authorities. They were also requested permission by programme coordinators and the management of non-state actors and government institutions. Introductory letters from the University of Juba were given to the gatekeepers to demonstrate the legitimacy and purpose of the study.

The primary data were collected over about three months using structured questionnaires, semi-structured face-to-face interviews, and focus group discussions. Of the 325 questionnaires, 305 were completed and returned, representing a 93.85% response rate. All 24 interviews were completed and three focus group discussions were conducted. Questionnaires were self-administered or researcher-assisted, with Arabic translation where needed. Secondary data were also collected from scholarly books, peer-reviewed articles, institutional reports, policy documents, treaties and organisational records to complement the primary findings.

Data quality was maintained through continuous checks and verification. The completed questionnaires were checked for accuracy and consistency and those with more than 20% missing responses were excluded. Interview and focus group recordings were transcribed and compared with the original recordings within 72 hours to ensure accurate and appropriate attribution. These methods, together with multiple data sources and instruments, were used to make sure that the data were reliable and credible and were not biased.

Data analysis techniques. The data collected were analyzed with quantitative and qualitative methods in the study. Quantitative questionnaire data were coded and analysed using SPSS using frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations, variance, and cross-tabulations. Pearson correlation, simple linear regression, and multiple linear regression were applied to study the relationships between the independent variables and NSA capacities and trends. Statistical significance was calculated at the 0.05 level and results were presented in tables and charts.

Interview and focus group discussion data were analysed with thematic content analysis. Transcripts were read and first coded in the process, themes were developed, patterns of stakeholder groups were charted, and the qualitative findings were interpreted in relation to the quantitative findings and theoretical framework. The qualitative results were organized according to the purpose and responsive quotes were presented in the qualitative findings. Quantitative and qualitative findings were combined and merged in a way that helped the

study identify areas of agreement and discord and gain a comprehensive picture of the roles and capabilities of non-state actors in foreign aid and preventive diplomacy in South Sudan.

Diagnostic tests for regression assumptions. Prior to correlation and regression analyses, we investigated the main assumptions for parametric statistical techniques. Researchers examined four diagnostic areas: normality, multicollinearity, homoscedasticity, and linearity. Normality was assessed using the Shapiro-Wilk test, histograms, Q-Q plots, skewness, and kurtosis; multicollinearity using Variance Inflation Factor (VIF), tolerance values, and correlations among predictors. Homoscedasticity was tested using the Breusch-Pagan test and residual plots, and linearity through scatter plots and ANOVA tests to check linearity and deviation from linearity. A significance level of 0.05 was applied to all the tests, and appropriate corrective action was developed in case of violations.

The quantitative analysis was conducted in five stages, starting with data cleaning to assess the completeness, consistency, missing values, and outliers. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations, and cross-tabulations were then calculated, and composite scores for the independent and dependent variables were derived. The diagnostic tests and inferential analysis were thereafter performed using Pearson correlation, simple linear regression, and multiple linear regression to analyze the relationship between the study variables and the individual and combined effects of each of them on NSA capacity and trends.

Qualitative and quantitative findings were then combined into the convergent parallel mixed-methods approach. Interview and focus group transcripts were analysed thematically and compared to the quantitative results from each research objective. Where both data sources had similar findings, these were taken as corroborated findings, while divergent results were examined for different perspectives, measurement differences, or genuine contradictions. This systematic comparison and synthesis enhanced the credibility of the findings and provided a fuller picture of non-state actors in foreign aid and preventive diplomacy in South Sudan.

Ethical considerations. The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards, including that for human participants. Ethical consent was approved by the University of Juba and the required research permit from the South Sudanese authorities and from the organisations involved. They were informed about the purpose, procedures, expected duration, voluntary nature of the work, and their right to withdraw without consequence. Questions were also given to them before signing up to questionnaires, interviews, and focus group conversations.

Data protection was maintained throughout the research so that confidentiality, anonymity, and data protection were maintained. Questionnaires did not collect identifying information and qualitative participants received codes in the form of which personal information and potentially identifying information were removed from transcripts. The data were encrypted and stored safely with passwords and encryption for the SPSS files, transcripts, and audio recordings. The researcher followed the research process and objectively reported findings by attributing all data to sources using APA referencing and not misleading or deceiving them and organisations.

Because this research was conducted in conflict-affected and politically sensitive settings, conflict sensitivity and the do-no-harm principle were specifically included. Interview locations were chosen so that participants could be more protected and the questions were based on professional experiences rather than personal accusations. A conflict sensitivity assessment was also performed prior to fieldwork and safeguards taken to address potential risks and keep researchers safe. The research was done in a way that minimized harm and the exposure of participants and the ethical effects of the research were minimized.

Results and Discussions

Questionnaire Return Rate

The results of the questionnaire distribution and return are presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3

Questionnaire Return Rate

Instrument	Count	Percent	Cumulative %
Distributed	325	100.0	—
Returned	305	93.85	93.85
Not Returned	20	6.15	100.0

Source: Primary data.

A total of 325 questionnaires were distributed by the six target population groups. 305 of them were completed and returned, for a 93.85% response rate, and 20 were not returned. 24 semi-structured interviews with purposively selected key informants were completed, for a 100% response rate, and three focus group discussions were conducted. The high response rate is impressive considering the security issues and sensitivity of the research topic in South Sudan. It was achieved through the personal administration of questionnaires, Arabic translation support where required, follow-up visits, institutional introductions to the research team, and the assurance of confidentiality. Examination of the available characteristics of non-respondents did not indicate any systematic pattern of non-response bias, so the data collected can be seen as credible.

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

This section presents the demographic profile of the 305 respondents who participated in the study. The demographic variables analyzed include gender, age, marital status, educational background, occupation, and working experience. Understanding these characteristics is essential for contextualizing the study findings and assessing the representativeness of the sample.

Gender of Respondents

Table 4 below presents the gender distribution of the 305 respondents who participated in the study. The gender variable was included to assess the representativeness of the sample and to enable analysis of gender-based differences in perceptions of the politics of foreign aid and preventive diplomacy in South Sudan.

Table 4

Gender of Respondents

Category	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative %
Male	257	84.3	84.3
Female	48	15.7	100.0
Total	305	100.0	

Source: Primary data.

Figure 1 below provides a visual representation of the gender composition of the sample, illustrating the predominance of male respondents in the study.

Figure 4.1: Gender Distribution of Respondents

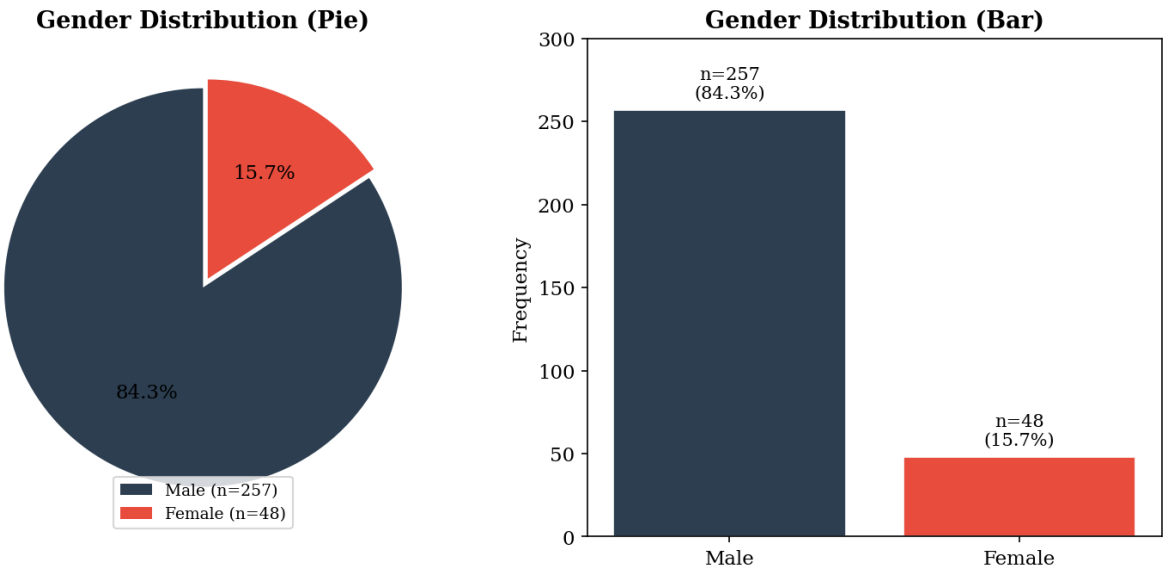

Figure 1. Gender distribution of respondents. Source: Primary data (2025).

The researchers found that on average, male respondents contributed almost two-thirds of 305 respondents (84.3% (n = 257)), while females were 15.7% (n = 48). This gender disparity is a reflection of the underrepresentation of women in leadership, decision making, foreign aid and peacebuilding in South Sudan. Similar trends were noted by Garang and Sims (2025) in peace and governance that few women have a significant role. The low number of female respondents limits gender-based statistical comparison, but qualitative data, which were conducted in a qualitative manner with a qualitative approach, were also considered.

And the findings also demonstrate that gender inequality even extends beyond formal peace talks to the institutional structure of aid and preventive diplomacy. The predominance of men may influence who makes decisions on aid and programme implementation and peacebuilding priorities, and this may mean focusing only on gender-specific needs. The findings also align with Kahyana (2022) who found there was a gender disparity in senior humanitarian decision-making roles in Uganda, which suggests the gender inequality in aid and peacebuilding institutions is a regional phenomenon.

Age of Respondents

Table 5 below shows the age distribution of the 305 respondents. Age was included as a demographic variable to determine the generational composition of the sample and to assess whether professional experience and maturity levels were adequately represented across the respondent pool.

The age distribution showed that the largest proportion of respondents were aged 36 to 45 years (36.7%), followed by those aged 26 to 35 years (32.8%). Together, these two categories constituted 69.5% of the sample, indicating that the majority of respondents were in their professionally active years with substantial experience in the field. Respondents aged 46 to 55 years comprised 14.4%, while younger respondents aged 18 to 25 years accounted for 11.1%. The smallest group comprised respondents aged 56 to 65 years (4.9%).

Table 5

Age of Respondents

Category	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative %
18-25	34	11.1	11.1
26-35	100	32.8	43.9
36-45	112	36.7	80.7
46-55	44	14.4	95.1
56-65	15	4.9	100.0
Total	305	100.0	

Source: Primary data.

Figure 2 below illustrates the age distribution of respondents, highlighting the concentration of participants within the professionally active age categories of 26 to 45 years.

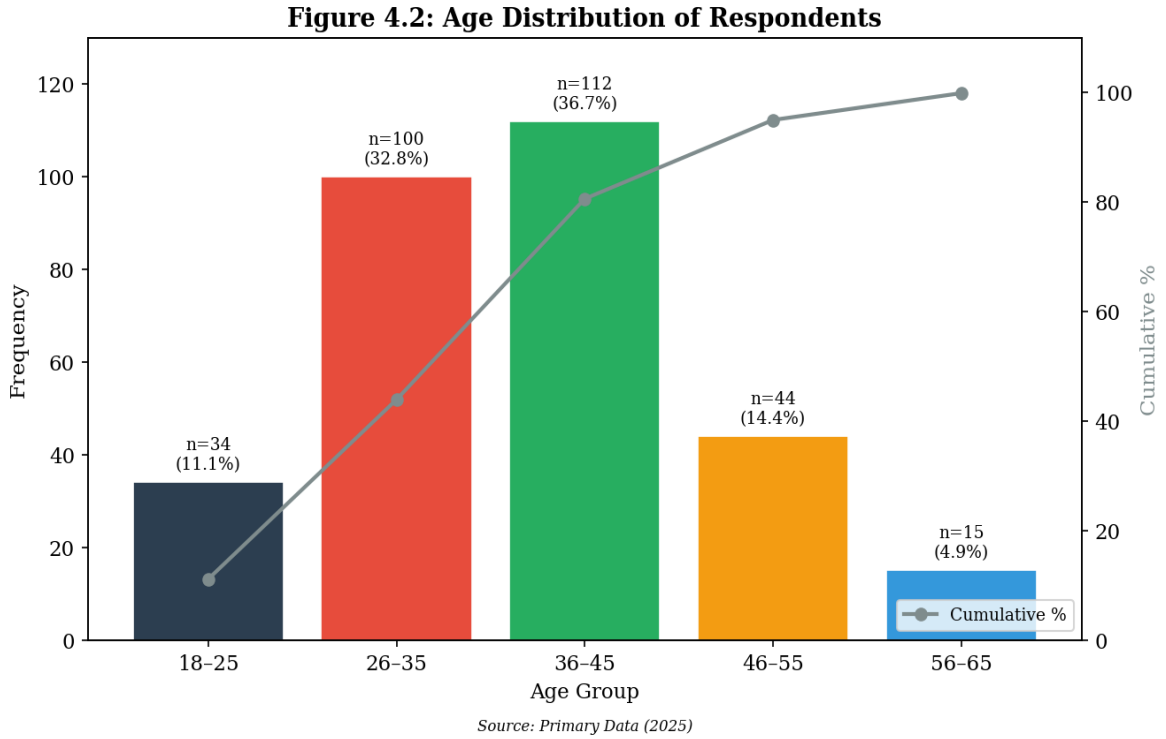

Figure 2. Age distribution of respondents. Source: Primary data.

As can be seen in Figure 2, most of the 305 respondents were between 26 and 45 years old, with 36.7% aged 36-45 and 32.8% aged 26-35 (n = 100). In total, respondents of these age groups represented 69.5% of the sample. Respondents aged 46 to 55 years were 14.4% (n = 44), those aged 18 to 25 years 11.1% (n = 34), and those aged 56 to 65 years 4.9% (n = 15). The overall distribution indicates that the study mainly covered the views of the active professional and productive age group who have relevant experience in foreign aid, diplomacy, and peacebuilding.

The high proportion of respondents aged 26-45 years is consistent with the professional nature of the foreign aid and peacebuilding industry, in which people usually require several years of training and field experience. This is quite comparable to Maweu (2022), who found that 68% of peacebuilding practitioners in East Africa

were aged 30-50 years, and Liaga (2024) reported that most civil society leaders in Juba were in the 30-50 age range. The relatively small proportion of respondents aged 56-65 years may reflect the limited presence of older professionals in demanding humanitarian and development settings.

Marital Status of Respondents

Table 6 below presents the marital status of the respondents. Marital status was included in the demographic profile to provide insight into the social characteristics of the sample and to contextualise the personal circumstances of individuals engaged in the politics of foreign aid and preventive diplomacy.

Table 6

Marital Status of Respondents

Category	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative %
Single	102	33.4	33.4
Married	186	61.0	94.4
Divorced	7	2.3	96.7
Widowed	10	3.3	100.0
Total	305	100.0	

Source: Primary data.

Of the respondents, 61.0% were married while 33.4% were single. Divorced respondents were 2.3%, while widowed respondents were 3.3%. The large proportion of married respondents indicates that most participants had family responsibilities and were working in foreign aid and preventive diplomacy. The findings in general are consistent with Odhiambo (2021) who find that 58% of humanitarian workers in Ethiopia are married. Since married respondents were the majority in this study, we should also consider the relationship between family involvement and professional responsibilities in South Sudan's high-pressure working environment. Such responsibilities may impact staff retention, mobility, deployment flexibility, and personnel's capacity to cope with the pressures of humanitarian and peacebuilding work.

Education Level of Respondents

Table 7 below shows the educational attainment of the 305 respondents. Education level is a critical demographic variable in this study because the cognitive demands of engaging with the nuanced concepts of foreign aid politics and preventive diplomacy require a certain level of educational sophistication, and the distribution of educational qualifications has implications for the quality and reliability of the Likert-scale responses analysed in subsequent sections.

Table 7

Education Level of Respondents

Category	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative %
Certificate	80	26.2	26.2
Diploma	8	2.6	28.9
Degree	172	56.4	85.2
Masters	31	10.2	95.4
Ph.D.	14	4.6	100.0
Total	305	100.0	

Source: Primary data.

The educational profile of respondents revealed a well-educated sample, with the majority (56.4%) holding Bachelor's degrees. Certificate holders constituted 26.2%, while respondents with postgraduate qualifications (Masters and Ph.D.) comprised 14.8% of the sample. Diploma holders represented only 2.6%.

Figure 3 below provides a graphical representation of the educational profile of respondents, visually confirming the predominance of degree holders in the sample.

Figure 4.3: Education Level of Respondents

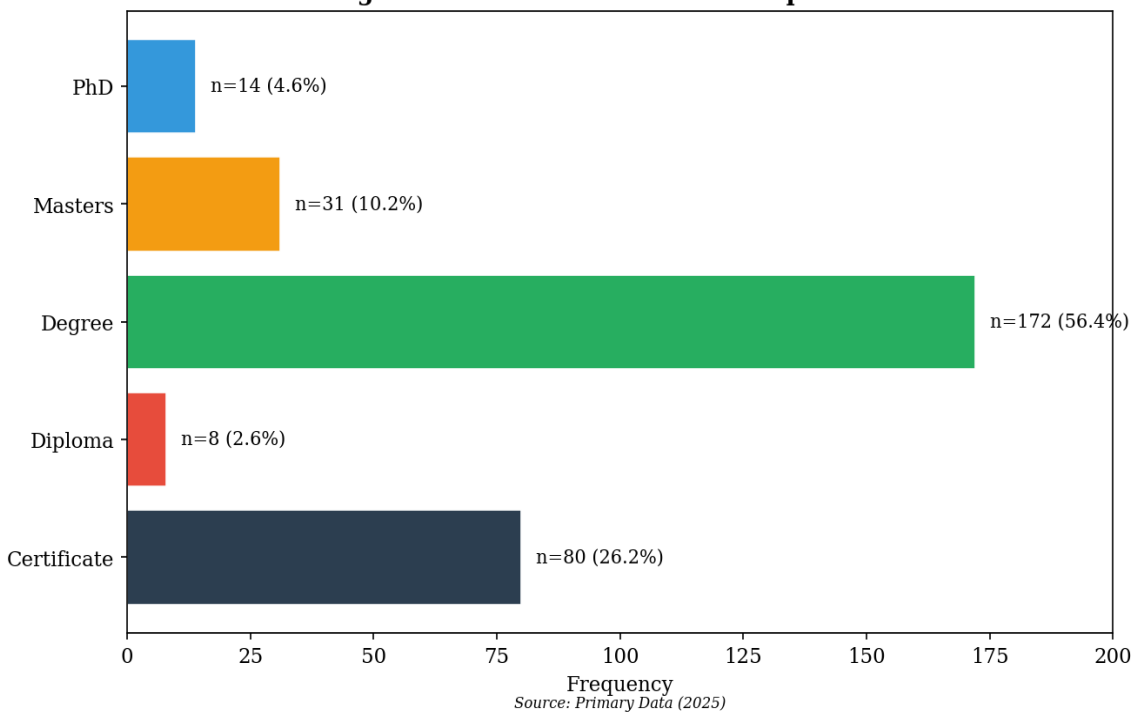

Figure 3. Education level of respondents. Source: Primary data.

Figure 3 shows that Bachelor's degree holders made up 56.4% of the respondents (n = 172) and certificate holders 26.2% (n = 80). Master's degrees were 10.2% (n = 31), Ph.D.s 4.6% (n = 14) and diploma holders 2.6% (n = 8). More than 70% of respondents had at least a bachelor's degree, indicating a relatively well-educated sample with the capacity to understand and respond to the Likert-scale questions concerning foreign aid and preventive diplomacy.

The high educational attainment in the study population is also consistent with government officials, diplomats, international organisations, and NGO personnel. The results also corroborate Ndlovu and Van der Westhuizen (2019) who noted the high education of civil society actors in post-conflict settings and Delgado (2023) who linked the increasing complexity of humanitarian programming to the increased demand for advanced skills. They also noted that respondents with certificate-level education engaged in real life to give the study the experience of beneficiaries and of the community.

Occupation of Respondents

Table 8 below presents the occupational distribution of the 305 respondents across the six target population categories. The occupational variable is central to the study's sampling strategy, as the research deliberately sought representation from government officials, foreign diplomatic missions, international organisations, NGOs,

students, and South Sudanese beneficiaries to capture the full spectrum of stakeholder perspectives on the politics of foreign aid and preventive diplomacy.

Table 8

Occupation of Respondents

Category	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative %
Government	22	7.2	7.2
Foreign diplomatic missions	9	3.0	10.2
International organisations	68	22.3	32.5
Students	15	4.9	37.4
NGOs	44	14.4	51.8
South Sudanese beneficiaries	147	48.2	100.0
Total	305	100.0	

Source: Primary data.

The occupational distribution showed that South Sudanese beneficiaries constituted the largest group (48.2%), followed by staff of international organisations (22.3%) and NGO personnel (14.4%). Government officials represented 7.2%, students 4.9%, and foreign diplomatic mission staff 3.0%. This distribution ensured that both the providers and recipients of foreign aid were represented, enabling a comprehensive analysis of the politics of foreign aid and preventive diplomacy from multiple stakeholder perspectives.

Figure 4 below illustrates the occupational composition of the sample, showing the proportional representation of each of the six stakeholder categories targeted by the study.

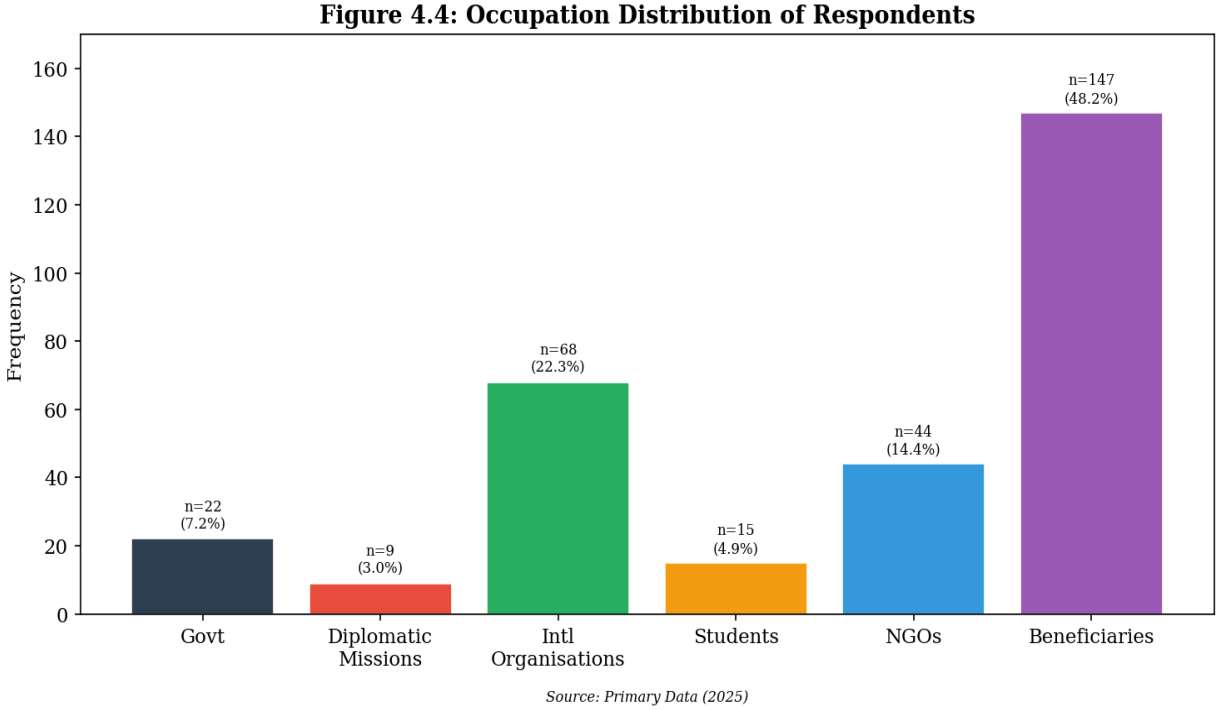

Figure 4. Occupation distribution of respondents. Source: Primary data.

Figure 4 shows that South Sudanese beneficiaries were the largest group at 48.2% (n = 147) followed by staff of international organisations at 22.3% (n = 68) and NGO workers at 14.4% (n = 44). Government officials

were 7.2% (n = 22), students 4.9% (n = 15), and foreign diplomatic mission personnel 3.0% (n = 9). This distribution is in line with the fact that all six groups of stakeholders have been included and the study covers both the provider and recipient of foreign assistance and preventive diplomacy.

The strong presence of beneficiaries provides an important grassroots perspective that is often overlooked in aid research and the fact that international organisations, NGOs, government, diplomatic missions, and students are included in the study can help to compare across institutions. The findings are in line with Faust, Grävingholt, & Ziaja, (2013) who found that beneficiary and international staff perceptions of aid effectiveness differ and Jochemsen (2022) who highlighted the intertwined relationship between government, international organisations and civil society in South Sudan. The occupational diversity in the study makes it more likely to identify differences in perception of NSA capacities and roles.

Working Experience of Respondents

Table 9 below summarises the working experience of the 261 respondents who provided valid responses to this item. Working experience was included as a demographic variable to assess the depth of professional exposure that respondents bring to their assessments of NSA capacities and the politics of foreign aid and preventive diplomacy in post-independent South Sudan.

Table 9

Working Experience of Respondents

Experience	Frequency	Valid %	Cumulative %
Less than 1 year	57	21.8	21.8
1-2 years	30	11.5	33.3
3-5 years	53	20.3	53.6
6-10 years	31	11.9	65.5
11-15 years	45	17.2	82.8
16-20 years	23	8.8	91.6
21-25 years	15	5.7	97.3
Over 25 years	7	2.7	100.0
Total (valid)	261	100.0	

Source: Primary data.

As the working experience data were in 261 valid responses, there was strong professional diversity in the respondents. The least experienced respondents are among the largest (21.8%) and the most experienced (3-5 years and up to 11-15 years) and the second largest group is those with 16 years of experience or more. The third largest group is those with 6-10 years in experience. And the distribution is diverse from the perspective of new participants to those from older professional backgrounds in the past and present. The distribution also shows a bimodal trend, with large concentrations among younger personnel and veterans with a few years of experience. This might reflect the ongoing recruitment of new staff in humanitarian organisations, as well as the retention of experienced professionals who provide institutional knowledge and continuity. The findings are similar to Morari (2026) who observed similar trends of staff turnover and long-term personnel in humanitarian organisations in long-term conflict contexts. The 44 missing responses may partly represent beneficiaries who had no formal employment history.

The demographic profile is diverse in terms of job experience, in addition to gender, age, education, and occupational status. The fact that we consider new participants in addition to experienced ones in the study helps

us provide a contemporary and historical perspective on non-state actors, foreign aid, and preventive diplomacy in South Sudan. This diversity contributes to the contextual depth of the study and supports the interpretation of the data at different professional and institutional levels.

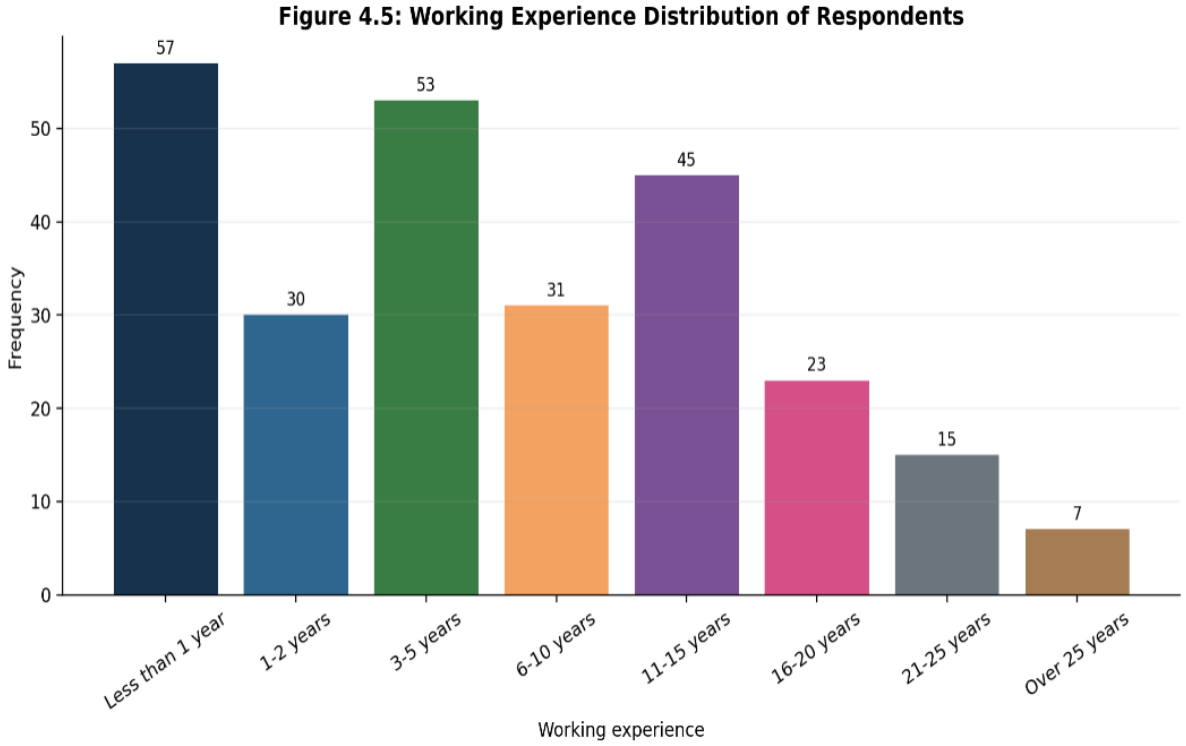

Figure 5. Working experience distribution of respondents. Source: Primary data.

Figure 5 above displays the distribution of working experience across the 261 respondents who provided valid responses. The chart reveals a bimodal distribution pattern, with the largest single group having less than one year of experience (21.8%, n = 57), followed closely by those with three to five years (20.3%, n = 53) and 11 to 15 years (17.2%, n = 45). Respondents with one to two years constituted 11.5% (n = 30), those with six to 10 years 11.9% (n = 31), and those with 16 to 20 years 8.8% (n = 23). The long tail of experienced professionals—5.7% (n = 15) with 21 to 25 years and 2.7% (n = 7) with over 25 years—represents a valuable reservoir of institutional memory and contextual expertise. This bimodal distribution, with peaks at the entry level and the mid-career range, reflects the dual dynamics of the South Sudan humanitarian context: a constant influx of new personnel responding to ongoing crises alongside a committed core of experienced professionals who provide essential continuity for NSA operations. The 44 missing values on this variable, representing respondents who did not provide working experience data, are not shown in the chart but are discussed in the interpretation above.

Descriptive Statistics

Challenges faced by non-state actors in navigating the politics of foreign aid and preventive diplomacy in South Sudan. The descriptive statistics for Objective 4 revealed strong agreement on the importance of strengthening partnerships (M = 4.08, SD = 1.283) and the necessity of training and capacity-building (M = 3.98, SD = 1.300). These two items received the highest ratings across all study variables, underscoring the perceived urgency of addressing capacity deficits within NSAs. This finding aligns with Delgado (2023), who documented

those integrated approaches to humanitarian-development programming require capacities that many NSAs currently lack, and with Tchie (2023), Table 10 below displays the descriptive statistics for the five Likert-scale items under Objective 4, which assessed the challenges faced by NSAs in navigating the politics of foreign aid and diplomacy in South Sudan.

Table 10

Challenges Faced by Non-State Actors in Navigating the Politics of Foreign Aid and Preventive Diplomacy in South Sudan

Statement	N	SA	A	D	SD	NS	M	SD
NSAs encounter significant challenges understanding the political landscape	305	86	76	30	48	65	3.59	1.833
NSA capacity is undermined by a lack of resources and support	297	72	86	48	56	35	3.58	1.266
Strengthening partnerships can enhance effectiveness of foreign aid interventions	305	108	84	32	42	39	4.08	1.283
NSAs have the potential to play a transformative role in aid and diplomacy	297	62	90	56	58	31	3.58	1.122
Training and capacity-building initiatives are essential for NSA effectiveness	305	102	86	34	44	39	3.98	1.300

Source: Primary data.

The qualitative evidence further substantiated the quantitative findings, with key informants providing detailed accounts of the challenges facing NSAs. One senior official from an international humanitarian organisation noted that insecurity and access constraints represent the most critical operational challenge, while another key informant emphasized that genuine civil society participation in peace processes remains constrained by institutional resistance.

Respondents also acknowledged that NSAs encounter significant challenges in understanding the political landscape (M = 3.59, SD = 1.833), with the notably high standard deviation indicating widely divergent experiences. The perception that resource limitations undermine NSA capacity (M = 3.58, SD = 1.266) is consistent with the findings of ICRC (2017), which documented the acute operational challenges facing humanitarian workers in South Sudan. The recognition of NSAs' transformative potential (M = 3.58, SD = 1.122) suggests that despite existing challenges, respondents see opportunity for significant improvement. These findings strongly support hypothesis H_4.

A cross-objective comparison of the descriptive statistics reveals that the objective-four items generated the highest absolute mean scores of any section in the study, with partnership strengthening (M = 4.08) and capacity-building (M = 3.98) exceeding all items from objectives one through three. This pattern is analytically significant because it indicates that respondents are more confident about what needs to be done to improve NSA effectiveness than they are about the current state of that effectiveness. The forward-looking, solution-oriented items in Objective 4 generated stronger agreement than the diagnostic items in objectives one through three, suggesting that the study's diverse stakeholder base shares a common vision regarding the necessary direction of reform even where they disagree about the assessment of current conditions. The standard deviation on the political landscape item (SD = 1.833) is the highest observed in the entire study, indicating that the experience of navigating the political environment varies more dramatically across respondents than any other aspect of NSA engagement, likely reflecting the different levels of political exposure and sophistication across the six stakeholder categories.

Regression Analysis

Simple and multiple linear regression analyses were conducted to test the study's objective and determine the extent to which each independent variable explains the variance in the dependent variable. For this objective, the model summary, ANOVA results, and regression coefficients are presented.

Challenges faced by non-state actors in navigating the politics of foreign aid and preventive diplomacy in South Sudan. ***Model summary.***

Table 11

Model Summary—Challenges Faced by Non-State Actors in Navigating the Politics of Foreign Aid and Preventive Diplomacy in South Sudan

Model	R	R^2	Adj. R^2	Std. error
1	0.601	0.361	0.359	0.6359

Source: Primary data.

The model summary indicates that Challenges Faced by NSAs (IV4) explains 36.1% of the variance in the Capacities and Trends of NSAs ($R^2 = 0.361$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.359$). This positions IV4 as the second-lowest predictor among the four simple regression models, above NSA Strategies (34.0%) but below Factors Influencing Involvement (37.7%) and Preventive Diplomacy Impact (41.9%). The standard error of the estimate (0.6359) indicates a moderate level of dispersion.

ANOVA.

Table 12

ANOVA—Challenges Faced by Non-State Actors in Navigating the Politics Of Foreign Aid and Preventive Diplomacy in South Sudan

Model	Sum of Sq.	df	Mean Sq.	F	Sig.
Regression	69.309	1	69.309	171.354	0.000
Residual	122.616	303	0.405		
Total	191.925	304			

Source: Primary data.

The ANOVA results confirm that the regression model is statistically significant ($F(1, 303) = 171.354$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that Challenges Faced by NSAs significantly predicts the Capacities and Trends of NSAs. The regression sum of squares (69.309) accounts for approximately 36% of the total variability, with the residual (122.616) representing the unexplained variance attributable to other factors.

Coefficients. The regression coefficient for IV4 ($\beta = 0.601$, $t = 13.090$, $p < 0.001$) is statistically significant, indicating that a one-unit increase in the composite score of Challenges Faced by NSAs is associated with a 0.608 unit increase in the Capacities and Trends of NSAs.

These results support Objective 4, confirming that the operational, political, and financial challenges facing NSAs significantly constrain their effectiveness. This finding corroborates the ICRC (2017) report documenting the acute operational challenges in South Sudan and is consistent with Kahyana (2022), who found that competition among NSAs for limited donor funding creates coordination challenges in East Africa.

Table 13

Coefficients—Challenges Faced by Non-State Actors in Navigating the Politics of Foreign Aid and Preventive Diplomacy in South Sudan

	B	Std. error	β	t	Sig.
(Constant)	1.312	0.184		7.130	0.000
IV4: Challenges	0.608	0.046	0.601	13.090	0.000

Source: Primary data.

The positive direction of the regression coefficient warrants careful interpretation. The positive beta indicates that higher scores on the challenges variable are associated with higher scores on the dependent variable. This may appear counterintuitive, as one might expect challenges to have a negative effect on capacities. However, the items in the challenges scale are framed in terms of the recognition of challenges and the importance of addressing them, rather than as a direct measure of the severity of challenges experienced. Respondents who scored higher on this variable are those who more strongly recognise the significance of challenges and the importance of partnership strengthening and capacity building as responses. The positive relationship therefore indicates that organisations and individuals who are more aware of the challenges facing NSAs also tend to be those who are more engaged with and knowledgeable about NSA capacities, a finding that is consistent with the theoretical expectation that awareness of challenges is a prerequisite for the development of effective capacity-building strategies.

The practical significance of the positive coefficient for challenges (B = 0.608) should be interpreted in light of the specific items that constitute the challenges scale. The challenges variable captures not merely the severity of obstacles faced by NSAs but also the degree of respondent awareness of and concern about these obstacles. Organisations and individuals who score higher on this variable are those who more clearly recognise the constraining effects of insecurity, funding volatility, regulatory barriers, coordination failures, and capacity disparities. This heightened awareness is itself an indicator of organisational sophistication and engagement with the operational environment. In the context of South Sudan, where many NSAs operate under conditions of extreme constraint, the ability to accurately diagnose and articulate the challenges facing the sector is a form of organisational capacity in its own right. Organisations that cannot identify the obstacles to their effectiveness are poorly positioned to develop strategies for overcoming them. The positive relationship between challenges recognition and capacity outcomes therefore reflects a developmental dynamic in which organisations that are more analytical about their operating constraints are also those that are more intentional about building the capacities necessary to navigate those constraints. This interpretation is consistent with the qualitative finding that the most effective NSAs in South Sudan are those that combine realistic assessment of operational challenges with proactive strategies for addressing them.

Qualitative Analysis

This section presents the qualitative findings from the 24 semi-structured interviews and three focus group discussions conducted with key informants. The qualitative data were analysed using thematic content analysis, with themes organised according to the specific objective. The findings are presented by research objective and respondent group; detailed comparison with the literature is reserved for discussion section.

The 24 key informant interviews included representatives from all six stakeholder categories: government officials, diplomatic mission staff, international organisation personnel, NGO representatives, students, and

South Sudanese beneficiaries. The three focus group discussions were conducted with community-level stakeholders and local NGO representatives, with 5 and 10 participants respectively. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were conducted in English, with selected interviews conducted in Arabic with the assistance of a research assistant. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent, transcribed verbatim, and subjected to iterative coding using the framework approach. The themes that emerged from the analysis are presented below, organised by research objective.

Challenges faced by non-state actors in navigating the politics of foreign aid and preventive diplomacy in South Sudan. The qualitative findings revealed a complex set of challenges affecting the participation of the selected non-state and international institutional actors in South Sudan's foreign-aid and preventive-diplomacy environment (UN Women, SSCC, TOCH, SIU, UNDP, CEPO). These challenges were explored for UN Women, SSCC, TOCH, SIU, UNDP and CEPO. Five broad and interconnected categories of challenge emerged from interviews and focus group discussions: insecurity and access constraints; financial and funding limitations; political and regulatory constraints; coordination and partnership weaknesses; institutional and human-capacity gaps. Other concerns included staff turnover, psychosocial pressure, unequal power relations between international and local organisations, limited feedback from communities, duplication of interventions, and uneven geographical coverage.

Respondent perspectives varied according to institutional position: international-organisation respondents talked about insecurity, access negotiations, donor compliance requirements, staff turnover, and operating in unstable environments; local civil-society organisations talked about unequal partnerships, lack of financial resources, limited influence over decision making, donor due diligence requirements, and loss of qualified personnel to better resourced international organisations; government respondents talked about accountability, regulatory compliance, and alignment with national priorities; community and FGD participants talked about programme duplication, coverage gaps and weak mechanisms for communicating decisions and results back to communities. These differences show that the challenges faced by UN Women, SSCC, TOCH, SIU, UNDP, and CEPO are crosscutting as well as institution specific.

Insecurity and operational access. The first and most consistent challenge was insecurity and restricted operational access. Respondents described an operating environment where violence, checkpoints, intimidation, restrictions on movement and changing security conditions can disrupt programmes and limit access to communities. These challenges are especially serious for organisations involved in preventive diplomacy because conflict prevention is about sustained relationships, regular engagement with communities, early identification of tensions and timely responses. One respondent described the seriousness of the security environment:

> "It's serious." "Last year our compound was attacked twice. Staff were threatened at checkpoints. We suspended operations in three counties because the armed groups controlling those areas would not guarantee safe passage. This is not unusual; this is what operating outside Juba looks like." (Key Informant 12, Security Coordinator, UN Women, Juba, 2025)

Although this testimony was not attributed to any of the six selected institutions it speaks to a wider operating challenge that applies to them. UN Women and UNDP may find it difficult to maintain programme coverage and support partners in conflict-affected locations; SSCC (although its religious networks could reach further) might be insecure when dialogue and reconciliation are being facilitated across conflict-affected communities; TOCH and CEPO because of their locally oriented engagement may be directly at risk when staff and community

partners work close to areas of tension; SIU restrictions on field research, data collection, academic outreach, and community based activities. Security affects staff safety but also continuity, geographical reach, and effectiveness of preventive-diplomacy interventions.

Financial constraints and funding volatility. Financial uncertainty and dependence on short-term donor funding were a second major challenge. Respondents mentioned declining or unpredictable funding; short project cycles; restrictive funding conditions; competition for donor resources as barriers to sustainable institutional planning. Preventive diplomacy and peacebuilding cannot be short term because trust building, reconciliation, institutional development and behavioral change cannot easily happen in short project periods. Competition for scarce donor resources also weakened collaboration. One participant said:

> "Competition for limited donor funding weakens collaboration." "The competition for funding creates a toxic dynamic. Organisations that should be partners are competitors. We don't share information because information is leverage. We don't collaborate because collaboration might mean losing your niche to another organisation. The system incentivises fragmentation not coordination." (Participant 10, Grants Manager, International Organisation, Juba, 2025)

The financial challenge is different for each of the six institutions. UN Women and UNDP, despite their international institutional structures remain programme financed (donor priorities) and country level interventions not funded (programme financing). SSCC needs sustained financing to sustain long-term dialogue, reconciliation, and peacebuilding initiatives not just project specific funding; TOCH and CEPO may be more pressured by competition for grants, short funding cycles, donor compliance requirements, and limited unrestricted institutional funding; SIU can have financial constraints on research, staff development fieldwork, peace education, and policy engagement.

The findings therefore show that financial capacity is not just about how much money is available. It is also about predictability, duration, flexibility, and accessibility of funding as well as whether organisations can use resources to build long-term institutional capacity rather than simply implement short-term projects.

Unequal partnerships and decision-making power. A third major challenge is unequal relationships between international and local institutions. Local organisations reported that they were often treated as implementing partners rather than equal participants in strategic planning and decision-making; while they may have deep contextual knowledge and community access, they may have less influence over funding priorities, programme design, and resource allocation.

This challenge is particularly acute for the relationships between UN Women and UNDP as international institutional actors with nationally rooted institutions (SSCC, TOCH, SIU, and CEPO). International institutions have access to financial resources, international networks, and technical systems whereas local institutions have stronger community relationships and contextual knowledge. The problem arises when those complementary capacities are organised hierarchically rather than collaboratively.

The findings show that localisation cannot be achieved simply by transferring implementation tasks to national organisations and leaving strategic and financial decision making at the international level. TOCH and CEPO can have unequal partnerships which limit institutional growth and strategic influence (SSCC may have strong social legitimacy but still rely on external financing for particular programmes; SIU may generate useful contextual knowledge but has little power where academic evidence is not sufficiently incorporated into programme and policy decisions). More equitable partnerships therefore require greater local participation in agenda setting, budgeting, programme design, monitoring, and evaluation.

Political and regulatory challenges. Political instability was also identified as a challenge affecting organisational operations (government regulation, administrative requirements, censorship concerns, and political interference). Respondents recognised the necessity for government oversight and accountability but said that unpredictable regulatory requirements or political sensitivities could constrain organisational autonomy and make programme implementation difficult.

These political and regulatory challenges impact the six institutions differently: UN Women and UNDP have formal relations with government institutions but have to balance international mandates, programme objectives, and national priorities; SSCC must maintain enough political neutrality and religious credibility so actors with competing interests can dialogue; TOCH and CEPO (when advocacy, governance, community mobilisation, or sensitive peacebuilding is involved) may have to balance public advocacy against operational access and constructive government relations; SIU has a similar challenge in maintaining space for research, academic debate, and evidence-based policy engagement in politically sensitive environments.

The KIIs and FGDs therefore highlighted the need for political and religious neutrality where possible. Respondents felt neutrality was important for institutional legitimacy, community trust, and staff safety; but maintaining neutrality is difficult itself (in an environment where humanitarian assistance, peacebuilding, and advocacy can be interpreted through a political lens).

Coordination failures and programme duplication. A fifth major challenge was weak coordination between organisations and institutions. Coordination platforms, clusters, and sectoral working groups exist but respondents questioned their effectiveness outside Juba (programme duplication in some areas while other communities are left unserved). KIIs and FGD participants also identified weaknesses in feedback mechanisms through which communities are informed about programme priorities, implementation decisions and outcomes.

This challenge has direct impact on the six selected institutions. UN Women and UNDP are part of larger international and national coordination networks; SSCC has religious and community networks; TOCH and CEPO have community level relationships; SIU can provide research and evidence but these capacities may not add up to collective impact if information systems and institutional partnerships are fragmented.

Better coordination between these institutions could therefore open up opportunities for complementary action (e.g. community information generated by TOCH, CEPO, or SSCC could feed into research and analysis involving SIU; gender dimensions could be strengthened through engagement with UN Women; broader institutional and development responses linked through UNDP). But findings also show that complementarity requires effective information sharing, trust, and clearer mechanisms for joint planning.

Institutional and technical capacity gaps. Institutional and technical capacity differences (international vs. locally rooted organisations) were also found: Local participants said they struggled to meet donor requirements for proposal development, financial management, monitoring and evaluation, reporting, procurement and due diligence (requirements that exist even where local organisations have strong community knowledge and programme experience).

For TOCH and CEPO these requirements limit access to larger funding opportunities and increase dependence on international intermediaries. SSCC may need specialised technical and administrative systems alongside its extensive religious and community networks; SIU needs research infrastructure, specialised expertise, and stronger mechanisms for translating academic knowledge into policy and practice. UN Women and UNDP operate in more developed international institutional systems but have a different capacity challenge:

Technical expertise and international frameworks need to be adapted to South Sudanese contexts so that they contribute to sustainable national and local capacity rather than long term external dependence.

Participants acknowledged capacity building activities but asked whether short training programmes could address structural inequalities in aid systems. Findings therefore indicate that capacity development should go beyond workshops and include institutional strengthening, mentoring, organisational systems development, equitable financing, and sustained partnerships.

Staff turnover and loss of institutional memory. Another problem was high staff turnover (especially within international organisations). Respondents said frequent changes in international personnel broke institutional memory because new personnel undermined the ability of local staff and partner organisations to rebuild relationships with new personnel. One FGD participant explained:

> "Every twelve months there is a new Country Director, a new Head of Programmes; a new set of faces who need six months to understand the context and by the time they are effective they are already preparing to leave. Institutional memory walks out every rotation cycle and we (the local staff) are left to explain everything again to the next team." (FGD Participant 1, Local Staff Member, UN Women, Juba, 2025)

This is particularly relevant to international institutional engagement because preventive diplomacy relies heavily on contextual understanding, personal relationships, and institutional trust. For UN Women and UNDP organisations mechanisms for preserving institutional memory and building national staff capacity are therefore important; at the same time local institutions (SSCC, TOCH, SIU, and CEPO) may face another form of staff retention challenge: Skilled national personnel can be attracted into better paid positions in international organizations.

This movement of staff can strengthen individual professional development but also weaken the institutional capacity of smaller local organisations. Sustainable localisation therefore needs to focus on staff retention, career development, and organisational financing rather than short term technical training only.

Staff wellbeing, burnout, and psychosocial pressure. The qualitative findings also highlighted staff wellbeing and psychosocial pressure as important but often neglected challenges. Personnel working in conflict affected environments are repeatedly exposed to insecurity, humanitarian suffering, displacement, and traumatic experiences; over time burnout, compassion fatigue, and secondary trauma can occur. One respondent explained:

> "Burnout is real and nobody talks about it. You work in a context of constant trauma—you see suffering every day, you hear stories that stay with you, you live with the stress of insecurity. And there's no institutional support for mental health. You are expected to just go on. Good people leave because they simply can't take it anymore." (Key Informant 13, Programme Coordinator, UNDP, Juba, 2025)

This applies to all six institutions. Personnel working with UN Women and UNDP may be continuously exposed to humanitarian and conflict-related pressures; SSCC religious and peacebuilding personnel may work directly with traumatized communities; TOCH and CEPO staff may operate close to violence affected communities; SIU researchers and field staff may have difficult experiences during conflict related research or community engagement. Organisational resilience therefore requires more attention to staff wellbeing, psychosocial support, reasonable workloads, and supportive management structures.

Contextual challenges and the international-local knowledge gap. Another challenge highlighted by the findings is the gap between international technical frameworks and locally grounded contextual knowledge. International organisations often have more financial resources, formal technical systems, and global expertise

but local organisations may know more about community relationships, local languages, cultural norms, and conflict dynamics. Problems occur when international programme frameworks are insufficiently adapted to local realities or when local knowledge is only consulted after major decisions have been made.

This challenge affects relations between the six institutions directly. UN Women and UNDP bring international technical expertise and institutional networks, SSCC TOCH, and CEPO different forms of community knowledge and local legitimacy respectively; SIU can bridge these levels by producing systematic research based on South Sudanese realities. The findings suggest that stronger integration of these forms of knowledge could enhance programme relevance, conflict sensitivity, and sustainability.

Overall challenges facing the six selected institutions. Overall the qualitative evidence shows that UN Women, SSCC, TOCH, SIU, UNDP, and CEPO all operate in the same difficult foreign-aid and preventive-diplomacy environment but experience its constraints differently: UN Women and UNDP have stronger international institutional networks and technical systems but have to deal with donor requirements, government relations, context adaptation, security constraints, and staff continuity; SSCC has strong faith-based and community legitimacy but sustainability financing, security, institutional capacity, and neutrality across political divisions are challenges; TOCH and CEPO benefit from local knowledge and community relationships but funding shortages, donor compliance barriers, unequal partnerships, little decision-making influence, insecurity and staff-retention issues; SIU provides academic knowledge and human-capacity development but research financing, institutional resources, and translation of academic evidence into policy and peacebuilding practice are limitations.

The findings therefore show that the challenges faced by these institutions can be organised around five principal capacity gaps: financial, institutional/technical, political, security, and contextual gaps. Financial gaps are predictable and sustainable resources; institutional gaps are staffing, technical systems, research management, and organisational development; political gaps are regulatory uncertainty, political interference, neutrality and access to decision-making; security gaps affect staff safety, geographical access, and programme continuity; contextual gaps occur where international frameworks, donor priorities, and local realities are insufficiently connected.

These challenges cannot be solved by simply increasing the volume of foreign aid: Qualitative evidence shows that longer and more flexible funding arrangements are needed; more equitable international-local partnerships; stronger institutional capacity-building; better coordination; predictable regulatory frameworks; better security and access arrangements; stronger community feedback mechanisms; staff retention strategies; psychosocial support; greater integration of local knowledge into decision making. And most importantly, findings show that interventions should respond to the specific institutional position of each of the six selected actors rather than using a uniform capacity building approach. Complementarity among UN Women, SSCC, TOCH, SIU, UNDP and CEPO, could link international resources and technical expertise with faith-based legitimacy, civil society advocacy, community knowledge, and academic evidence so foreign aid and preventive diplomacy interventions in South Sudan become more effective and sustainable.

Conclusions

The study concludes that the politics of foreign aid and preventive diplomacy significantly shape the capacities and trends of non-state actors in post-independent South Sudan. The evidence confirms that NSAs are not merely implementers of donor-funded programmes; they are political, humanitarian, and peacebuilding actors

whose effectiveness depends on the conditions under which they operate. Their capacities are strengthened when aid priorities are aligned with community needs, when preventive diplomacy is supported by long-term investment, when coordination is institutionalised, and when local actors are treated as equal partners. Their capacities are weakened when donor funding is short-term, when operations are siloed, when government regulation becomes restrictive, when insecurity limits access, and when local peace efforts remain disconnected from national political negotiations.

The study further concludes that preventive diplomacy is the most important pathway through which NSA engagement can contribute to sustainable peace and development, but only when it is supported by political access, local legitimacy, and institutional coordination. The study has shown that preventive diplomacy impact had the strongest association with NSA capacities and further demonstrated conflict prevention and its extension by showing the limits of local peacebuilding when national political structures remain unstable. The study acknowledges the challenges faced by NSAs as thoroughly discussed in this study and noted that NSAs effectiveness in South Sudan will depend on the transformation of foreign aid from a short-term project system into a coordinated, locally grounded, and politically sensitive peacebuilding.

Recommendations

A Multi-year and Flexible Funding Structure

Donors need to invest time for long-term and flexible funding that enables NSAs to be able to invest in preventive diplomacy, local mediation, and long-term community trust-building, instead of short-term humanitarian outcomes. Such an approach would enhance strategic peacebuilding capabilities by enabling organisations to respond more effectively to crises, and to remain focused on longer-term peacebuilding objectives.

Establish a Joint National Steering Mechanism

The Government of South Sudan, international donors, and NSAs should have a coherent mechanism that aligns foreign aid, preventive diplomacy, and local peacebuilding goals in a unified way. This should include government agencies, international organisations, local NGOs, community representatives, women, youth, and beneficiary groups to make it transparent, reduce duplication, and connect grassroots efforts to national peace frameworks.

Localisation Through Direct Funding and Capacity-Building

Investment must be made through transfer of decision-making power, technical skills, financial knowledge and accountability to South Sudanese actors. Direct funding, structured mentoring, joint programme planning, organisational development support, and train-the-trainer models would cover capacity gaps and contribute to sustainable peacebuilding.

Establish a Shared Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Framework

Develop a comprehensive system with indicators for coordination, legitimacy, conflict sensitivity, early warning, community trust, mediation outcomes, and sustainability. This framework will help to make local communities accountable, to see whether peacebuilding activities really work, and to see whether they are effective or not.

Increase Coordination With Community Structures and Peace Institutions

NSAs should improve engagement with local governance, community dialogue, mediation and reconciliation activities by documenting, communicating, and integrating these efforts into formal peace mechanisms. This way they could link the local peace gains to the larger national peace process and address the disconnect between community-level success and national conflict dynamics.

Suggestions for Future Research

- Need to conduct longitudinal studies on NSAs capacities and trends. Researchers should follow the same organisations, donor programs, and community peacebuilding efforts over the course of multiple years. They should track how relationships and capacities evolve with changing political, security, and funding conditions. They should explain the stability, strengthening, or weakening of perceived relationships over time.
- Expand geographical scope beyond Juba. This should include states and counties with local peacebuilding dynamics, humanitarian access, and aid politics.
- Test whether findings are capital-centred or indicative of broader regional patterns. Conduct comparative studies with South Sudan, Sudan, Uganda, Kenya, Somalia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo to better understand the regional context of NSA engagement.
- Examine gender-specific experiences of NSA engagement. Address the gender imbalance in the respondent profiles currently. Investigate women's perspectives in peacebuilding, humanitarian decision-making, and community mediation. A better understanding of local legitimacy and inclusive preventive diplomacy, especially for the impact on women and girls affected by displacement, sexual violence, and the breakdown of the social system.
- Investigate the reasons for the unexplained variance in NSA Capacities. Consider variables like organisational leadership, internal governance, staff welfare, corruption risks, digital coordination, donor reporting burden, community trust history, and informal political networks. Deepen the analytical model so that researchers can know why some NSAs perform better when under pressure and others struggle. Refine and extend the conceptual framework to account for these additional factors, strengthening the understanding of NSA resilience in fragile settings.

References

Aden, A. H., & Ahmed, M. F. (2025). Barriers and enablers to effective collaboration and coordination mechanisms among humanitarian organizations delivering health and nutrition programmes in Somalia: An exploratory qualitative study. *BMJ Open*, *15*(3), e082541. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2023-082541

Al-Ababneh, M. M. (2020). Linking ontology, epistemology and research methodology. *Science & Philosophy*, *8*(1), 75-91.

Agensky, J. C. (2019). Religion, governance, and the "peace-humanitarian-development nexus" in South Sudan. In C. de Coning and M. Peter (Eds.), *United Nations peace operations in a changing global order* (pp. 277-295). New York: Palgrave Macmillan. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-99106-1_14

Autesserre, S. (2021). *The frontlines of peace: An insider's guide to changing the world*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Azar, E. E. (1990). *The management of protracted social conflict: Theory and cases*. Sudbury: Dartmouth Publishing.

Aydın, O. T. (2013). Location as a competitive advantage to attract students: An empirical study from a Turkish foundation university. *International Review of Management and Marketing*, *3*(4), 204-211.

Barakat, S., & Milton, S. (2020). Localisation across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus. *Journal of Peacebuilding and Development*, *15*(2), 147-163. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1177/1542316620922805

Bennett, J., Pantuliano, S., Fenton, W., Vaux, A., Barnett, C., & Brusset, E. (2010). Aiding the peace: A multi-donor evaluation of support to conflict prevention and peacebuilding activities in Southern Sudan 2005-2010. ITAD.

Boutros-Ghali, B. (1992). *An agenda for peace: Preventive diplomacy, peacemaking and peace-keeping*. Report of the Secretary-General Pursuant to the statement adopted by the Summit Meeting of the Security Council on 31 January 1992. United Nations.

Breslawski, J., Cunningham, K. G., & Fleishman, R. (2024). Regional organisations and conflict prevention: Diplomatic tools and their effectiveness. *Journal of Conflict Resolution, 68*(3), 412-438. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1177/00220027231198274

Burton, J. W. (1990). *Conflict: Resolution and provention*. New York: Macmillan.

Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict. (1997). *Preventing deadly conflict: Final report*. Carnegie Corporation of New York.

Creswell, J. W., & Tashakkori, A. (2018). Demystifying research paradigms: Navigating ontology, epistemology, and axiology in research. *The Qualitative Report, 24*.

De Coning, C. (2018). Adaptive peacebuilding. *International Affairs, 94*(2), 301-317. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix251

Delgado, C. (2023). *Food, agriculture and armed conflict: An overview of the nexus with a focus on the role of aid*. SIPRI Working Paper. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. Retrieved from https://www.sipri.org/publications/2023/sipri-working-papers

Department of Political Affairs. (2017). *United Nations handbook on preventive diplomacy in practice*. United Nations Secretariat.

Development Initiatives. (2023). *Global humanitarian assistance report 2023: Characteristics of crisis, need and funding*. Retrieved from https://devinit.org/resources/global-humanitarian-assistance-report-2023/

Dijkzeul, D. (2021). Making localization work: The everyday practice of three NGOs in South Sudan and Northern Uganda. *Frontiers in Political Science, 3*, 716287. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2021.716287

Donini, A., & Maxwell, D. (2022). From face-to-face to face-to-screen: Implications of remote management for humanitarian action in insecure environments. *International Review of the Red Cross, 104*(919), 585-608. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1017/S1816383122000108

Erol Ayboke, C. (2018). *The crisis in South Sudan: Humanitarian aid and the challenge of delivery*. Center for Strategic and International Studies. Retrieved from https://www.csis.org/analysis/crisis-south-sudan

Fast, L. (2017). Diverging data: Exploring the epistemologies of data collection and use among those working on and in conflict. *International Peacekeeping, 24*(5), 706-732. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2017.1383562

Faust, J., Grävingholt, J., & Ziaja, S. (2013). Foreign aid and the fragile consensus on state fragility. *Journal of International Relations and Development, 16*(4), 567-589. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1057/jird.2012.18

Finnemore, M., & Sikkink, K. (1998). International norm dynamics and political change. *International Organization, 52*(4), 887-917. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1162/002081898550789

Garang, J. M., & Sims, K. (2025). Community-based protection and peacebuilding in South Sudan: Challenges for women, children, and internally displaced persons. *African Journal of Peace and Conflict Studies, 14*(1), 1-22. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.31920/2634-3665/2025/v14n1a1

Humanitarian Outcomes. (2020). *Humanitarian access SCORE report: 2020 global synthesis—Survey on the coverage, operational reach, and effectiveness of humanitarian aid*.

Intergovernmental Authority on Development. (2018, September 12). *Communique of the 33rd Extra-Ordinary Summit of IGAD Assembly of Heads of State and Government*. Retrieved from https://southsudan.igad.int/index.php/igad-communique/98-demo-contents/summit-communiques/344-communique-of-the-33rd-extra-ordinary-summit-of-igad-assembly-of-heads-of-state-and-government

International Committee of the Red Cross. (2017). *South Sudan: Operational challenges in a protracted crisis*. ICRC Annual Report 2017. Retrieved from https://www.icrc.org/en/document/south-sudan-operational-challenges

Jochemsen, H. (2022). UNMISS and the local peace process in South Sudan: Opportunities and limitations of international peacekeeping. *International Peacekeeping, 29*(4), 618-642. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2022.2075890

Jok, J. M. (2021). South Sudan and the prospects for peace amidst violent political disagreements. *African Studies Review, 64*(2), 297-318. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2020.104

Kahyana, D. (2022). Non-state actors, refugee hosting, and social cohesion in Uganda: Coordination and sustainability challenges. *Journal of Refugee Studies, 35*(3), 1134-1152. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/feac019

Kelman, H. C. (2005). Interactive problem solving in the Israeli-Palestinian case: Past contributions and present challenges. In R. J. Fisher (Ed.), *Paving the way: Contributions of interactive conflict resolution to peacemaking* (pp. 41-63). Blue Ridge Summit: Lexington Books.

Liaga, S. (2024). The complexity of the intersectionality of domestic and international non-governmental peacebuilding organisations in South Sudan. *African Journal of Political Science, 11*(2), 1-13.

Mac Ginty, R., & Richmond, O. P. (2023). *The local turn in peace building: A critical agenda for peace* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.

Macrae, J., Bradbury, M., Jaspars, S., Johnson, D., & Duffield, M. (1997). Conflict, the continuum and chronic emergencies: A critical analysis of the scope for linking relief, rehabilitation and development planning in Sudan. *Disasters, 21*(3), 223-243. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-7717.00058

Marley, J. (2020). Peacebuilding in fragile contexts (OECD Development Co-operation Working Papers No. 83). Paris: OECD Publishing. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1787/d222bc0a-en

Maweu, J. M. (2022). Cross-border peacebuilding and non-state actor engagement in the Horn of Africa: The case of Kenyan-based organisations. *Africa Development, 47*(1), 89-112. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.57054/ad.v47i1.2176

Maxwell, D., Gordon, R., Moro, L., Santschi, M., & Dau, P. (2018). Trajectories of international engagement with state and local actors: Evidence from South Sudan. *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding, 12*(1), 98-119. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2017.1371876

Mohamed, A. A., & Ali, H. (2015). Collaboration between government and non-governmental organisations in delivering curative health services in North Darfur State, Sudan. *BMC Health Services Research, 15*, 162. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1186/s12913-015-0831-0

Morari, C. (2026). Non-state actors in international relations: Features and role. *Integrare prin cercetare și inovare. Științe Sociale*. Retrieved from https://msuir.usm.md/server/api/core/bitstreams/0f78b0bc-6196-4091-a863-6e9d3ffce4db/content

Nicolaidis, K. (1996). International preventive action: Developing a strategic framework. In R. Rotberg (Ed.), *Vigilance and vengeance: NGOs preventing ethnic conflict in divided societies* (pp. 23-72). Washington: Brookings Institution Press.

Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation. (2017). *Evaluation of Norwegian support to conflict-sensitive aid delivery and peacebuilding through NGOs*. NORAD Evaluation Report No. 8/2017. Retrieved from https://www.norad.no/en/toolspublications/publications/evaluations/

Nwosu, B. U. (2023). Conflict management and peacebuilding through community development in Nigeria: Non-state actors and grassroots reconciliation. *African Security Review, 32*(1), 58-77. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1080/10246029.2022.2156879

OCHA. (2022). *South Sudan humanitarian needs overview 2023*. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

Odhiambo, F. O. (2021). Non-state actors and humanitarian diplomacy in the Horn of Africa: Strategies, challenges, and outcomes. *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations, 15*(2), 45-62.

OECD. (2022). *States of fragility 2022*. Pairs: OECD Publishing. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1787/c7fedf5e-en

PeaceRep. (2022). *Perceptions of peace, governance, and non-state actors in South Sudan*. PeaceRep Research Report. Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform, University of Edinburgh. Retrieved from https://peacerep.org/research/south-sudan-perceptions/

Podder, S. (2014). Mainstreaming the non-state in bottom-up state-building: Linkages between rebel governance and post-conflict legitimacy. *Conflict, Security & Development, 14*(2), 213-243. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1080/14678802.2014.889878

Press. (2024). *Parameters Summer 2024*. The US Army War College Quarterly.

Pretorius, L. (2024). Demystifying research paradigms: Navigating ontology, epistemology, and axiology in research. *The Qualitative Report*.

Riehl, V. (2001). Who is ruling in South Sudan? The role of NGOs in rebuilding socio-political order (Studies on Emergencies and Disaster Relief No. 9).

Stares, P. B. (2023). *Preventive engagement: How the international community can do more to prevent conflicts*. Council on Foreign Relations. Retrieved from https://www.cfr.org/report/preventive-engagement

Tanner, L., & Moro, L. (2016). Missed out: The role of local actors in the humanitarian response in the South Sudan conflict. Christian Aid, CAFOD, Oxfam GB, Tearfund, & Trócaire. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.21201/2016.606290

Tchie, A. E. H. (2023). The African Union, civil society, and the politics of inclusion in preventive diplomacy. *Journal of Modern African Studies, 61*(2), 189-211. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X23000150

Toh, K., & Kasturi, P. (2012). Foreign aid in post-conflict countries: The case of South Sudan. *Journal of Third World Studies, 29*(2), 201-220.

Tran, L. (2020). International NGO centralisation and leader-perceived effectiveness. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly, 49*(2), 340-361. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1177/0899764019861741

United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs. (2026). *Prevention and mediation*. Retrieved from https://dppa.un.org/en/prevention-and-mediation

United Nations Mission in South Sudan. (2026). *UNMISS fact sheet*. Retrieved from https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/home-2/factsheet/unmiss

United Nations. (2020). *Peacebuilding and sustaining peace: Report of the Secretary-General* (A/74/976-S/2020/773). United Nations General Assembly and Security Council.

Wendt, A. (1999). *Social theory of international politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.