

CIVILIAN DEMOBILIZATION AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN SOUTH SUDAN: ASSESSING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF POST-CONFLICT REINTEGRATION POLICIES

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of civilian demobilization on political participation in post-conflict South Sudan, focusing on the effectiveness of reintegration policies implemented after the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement. Despite, several disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) initiatives designed to advance peacebuilding in communities and promoting political inclusion, questions persist about their success in transforming former combatants into active participants in democratic governance. This study adopted the Social Reintegration Theory and Participatory Governance Theory, while relying on qualitative research design involving in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with reintegrated civilians, community leaders, DDR officials, and civil society actors across Jonglei, Central Equatoria, and Upper Nile States.

The results reveal that while reintegration policies have facilitated limited social and economic reintegration, their political impact remains uneven. It argues that several former combatants have not fully engaged in political processes, with less than 20% reportedly participating in the 2018 and 2021 electoral participations, mainly in Juba and Bor. It posits that the increasing incidence of insecurity, weak institutional capacity, political exclusion, and distrust in government structures continue to undermine participation. This study recommends that reintegration in South Sudan remains significantly incomplete without genuine political inclusion mechanisms. Also, it is necessary to redesign DDR frameworks that can incorporate civic education, participatory governance platforms, and sustainable livelihood programmes that will promote the long-term political empowerment of ex-combatants and other war-affected civilians.

Keywords: Civilian Demobilization, DDR, Political Participation, Post-conflict Governance, Reintegration Policies, South Sudan

Introduction

Since gaining independence in 2011, South Sudan's continuous cycles of armed conflict, political divide, and precarious peace processes have hindered the country's efforts to advance inclusive governance and peacebuilding. Demobilisation and reintegration of civilians is one of the most persistent post-conflict problems facing the developing nation. Rolandsen & Kindersley (2023) and Jok (2023) explain that disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) initiatives aim to transform affected civilians and former combatants into peaceful, productive citizens, but their implementation in South Sudan has been unequal and

politically constrained. A number of peace agreements, including those from 2015 and 2018, failed due to political mistrust among elites and the inability to include reintegration into broader frameworks of popular engagement and participatory governance (Johnson, 2021). The promise of DDR as a bridge from combat to peace is largely unmet as a result of the socioeconomic isolation, limited career opportunities, and lack of political representation experienced by many demobilised civilians.

In post-conflict environments, reintegration is more than just a technical process. It is a political act that determines who belongs and is qualified to participate in governance (McMullin, 2022). The social reintegration of civilians includes rebuilding social networks, re-establishing community trust, and re-establishing the legitimacy of state-citizen relationships. According to Schomerus (2022), in South Sudan, where local identities, ethnic tensions, and militarised politics combine, reintegration has proven particularly challenging. Similarly, De Waal (2015) noted that reintegration strategies have often prioritised short-term economic measures like microenterprise funding and vocational training over the political and civic elements that facilitate true inclusion. This mismatch carries the risk of sustaining the underlying grievances that fuel conflict because demobilised civilians are nonetheless blocked off from decision-making processes and susceptible to remobilization (Deng, 2022). This explains why nation building in South Sudan still remains a mirage and persistent political instability in Africa (Zambakari, 2015; Olisah et al., 2024).

Furthermore, political interference, inadequate institutional coordination, and persistent financial issues seem to have plagued the South Sudan Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration

Commission (SSDDRC), which was established to oversee reintegration. The United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS, 2023) notes that reintegration programs have been implemented infrequently, are not appropriately localised, and often do not connect with community-based governance and reconciliation mechanisms. As a result, many recipients believe that the reintegration process lacks legitimacy and sustainability. According to academics like Pinaud (2022) and Okech and Ajak (2022), reintegration should be viewed as a long-term social transformation process that combines civic engagement with economic development, particularly for women and youth, who make up the majority of South Sudan's population. However, generational and gendered marginalisation still exists, hindering inclusive peacebuilding. Therefore, the main issue is the gap between political inclusion and reintegration strategy, which runs the risk of sustaining structural violence, social disintegration, and cyclical conflict. Although existing literature has significantly advanced our knowledge of the subject matter however, the correlation between civilian demobilization and political participation in post-conflict South Sudan remains largely underexplored. To properly address this gap, the study is predicated on the following research questions:

1. Did post-conflict reintegration policies in South Sudan enhance demobilization of civilians to transit into active participants in governance and peacebuilding?
2. Did community-based dynamics significantly influence political participation among reintegrated populations?
3. To what extent did institutional and societal factors affect the transformation of former combatants into active participants in democratic governance?

This study will contribute to theoretical and empirical understanding of how South Sudan's post-conflict reintegration policies impact inclusive governance and political engagement, thereby supporting policy changes indicated to achieve long-term peace, civic empowerment, and successful democratic consolidation. This study is structured into six sections. Section one is introduction, while section two deals with literature review. Theoretical framework and methodology will constitute the section three whereas results and discussion will make up section four. Section five is discussion of findings. Conclusion and recommendations comprise section six. The last part of the study is references.

Literature Review

Conceptualizing Demobilization, Reintegration, and Political Participation

According to the African Development Bank Group (2011), demobilisation is the formal, regulated withdrawal of active fighters from armed forces or other armed groups. It is made clear that there are two phases to demobilisation. The initial stage of demobilisation includes the processing of individual soldiers and their placement in temporary facilities, as well as the massing of troops in camps designated for this purpose (cantonment sites, encampments, assembly areas, or barracks). The support package provided to the demobilised is part of the second stage, called reinsertion (African Development Bank Group, 2011). According to the United Nations (2010), demobilisation is the "formal and controlled discharge of active combatants from armed forces." Reception centers, which offer returning warriors a first home, are typically the initial step in the process. Demobilisation programs

continue by assisting and preparing ex-combatants for their return to civilian life.

According to Rufer (2005), civilian demobilisation refers to the real dismantling of military formations and structures as well as the individual release of soldiers from these units and the start of their transition into civilian life. For him, this is frequently accompanied with assistance given to meet their urgent requirements. There are other steps in the demobilisation to reintegration transition that could be crucial to accomplishing the overall process's objectives. This is the point at which reinsertion and resettlement become relevant. Rufer (2005) states that reinsertion includes the immediate, short-term needs of combatants and their relatives, if applicable, such as medical attention, food assistance, temporary financial support, etc., whereas resettlement is the demobilised combatant's return to his familiar surroundings or to a location of his choosing. The phrase "repatriation" is specifically used when combatants from another nation are demobilised and then sent back to their home country (Rufer, 2005).

Reintegration is defined by current research and policy practice as a multifaceted, long-term process that encompasses social, psychosocial, and political aspects in addition to disarmament and immediate financial support (Humphreys & Weinstein, 2007; Muggah, 2005). Scholars and practitioners now emphasise the need for people-centered approaches that rebuild social bonds, restore dignity, and enable civic roles for former combatants and affected civilians (Özerdem & Podder, 2015; UNDP, 2023). Earlier DDR literature focused on weapons collection and individual economic reinsertion (Kingma, 2000; Colletta, Kostner, & Wiederhofer, 1996). This multifaceted shift is

reflected in the UNDP's extensive 2023 DDR baseline for South Sudan (n = 12,226 respondents), which explicitly operationalises reintegration across economic, social, and governance indicators (UNDP, 2023). According to Spear (2006) and McMullin (2013), reintegration is intrinsically political since it modifies local power dynamics and legitimacy claims. According to Muggah (2005), Humphreys & Weinstein (2007), and UNDP (2023), the field today views reintegration as an integrated social, economic, and political process rather than a singular set of advantages.

In post-conflict societies, civilian demobilisation undoubtedly affects the political process as a whole as well as citizen political engagement. The idea of participation is that citizens are involved in some way in the political system's decision-making process. According to Roberts and Edwards (1991), the term "participation" is typically used to refer to voluntary rather than forced actions. They went on to define participation as "the voluntary activities of an individual in political affairs including inter alia: voting as one of the tenets of democracy, is found to be liberal and unrestrictive" when applied in a political setting (quoted in Luka 2011). This category includes membership in and participation in political organisations, political movements, and political parties; holding a position in a political group; exercising political leadership through unofficial activities like taking part in political debates or attending political events like protests; and attempting to persuade public officials or citizens to take particular actions in support of political objectives. Thus, the voluntary involvement of eligible citizens in the political, social, and economic facets of the democratic system is referred to as participation. According to Nwanegbo and Odigbo (2013), participation is defined by Okolie (2004) as "freedom of expression, association, right to free flow of communication, right

to influence decision process and the right to social justice, health services, better working condition and opportunity for franchise." He asserts that political participation is one of the fundamental elements of democracy in its purest form.

The central question in the literature is whether and how demobilization/reintegration encourages political participation. Participatory governance theory (Arnstein, 1969; Gaventa, 2006) holds that participation in public forums alone is insufficient unless it is supported by substantial voice and influence. In the context of DDR, this entails assessing not only whether former combatants attend meetings or register to vote, but also their capacity to influence decisions, assume leadership positions, and exercise political agency (Colletta and Muggah, 2009). Conflicting results are seen in research from other African post-conflict settings: when reintegration is coupled with civic or leadership training and community ownership, ex-combatants are more likely to constructively participate in local governance (Mazurana and Carlson, 2004; Jennings, 2007). However, in regions where reintegration is technocratic and controlled by the elite, political marginalisation persists or worsens (Richmond, 2010; Knight, 2011). According to recent assessments and syntheses (UNDP, 2023; UNMISS, 2022; Small Arms Survey HSBA), large program evaluations (e.g., UNDP baseline; UNMISS reporting) record reinsertion and livelihood outcomes but rarely produce systematic, nationally comparable indicators of ex-combatant political participation in South Sudan. This gap reflects both political (limited, sometimes delayed voting opportunities and elite control of local government spaces) and methodological (sensitive identification, lack of linked administrative data) limitations.

Community-Based Reintegration and Structural Constraints on Political Inclusion in South Sudan

The majority of people agree that community-based reintegration (CBR) is an effective post-conflict strategy that connects social healing and inclusive governance. By combining public goods, shared livelihoods, and reconciliation initiatives, CBR promotes cooperation between host communities and returnees. Investments in communal infrastructure, like water stations, schools, and local management committees, help to create opportunities for civic engagement and lessen perceptions of inequality, according to Jennings (2007) and Özerdem and Podder (2015). Empirical evaluations, like the UNDP South Sudan baseline and NGO assessments, show that well-funded and locally managed CBR initiatives can have positive community-level outcomes (Samuel Hall, 2023; UNDP, 2023). However, sustainability concerns persist due to short donor financing cycles, weak local institutions, and elite capture, all of which often limit long-term political effect (Munive and Jakobsen, 2012). Therefore, CBR can only effectively encourage political participation in conjunction with grievance procedures, institutional governance links, and transparency procedures.

In South Sudan, institutional and political problems significantly impede reintegration efforts. Persistent insecurity, dispersed armed groups, population displacement, and weak state institutions limit civic space and hinder program implementation (UNMISS, 2022; Small Arms Survey, 2023). According to data from UNDP and Samuel Hall show that women, youth, and ex-combatants are often underserved (Samuel Hall, 2023; UNDP, 2023). Conflicts over land and cattle, militarised local administration, and elite rivalry further limit access to political positions (Small Arms Survey, 2023; Okafor et al., 2024).

Clearly, the civilian demobilization programme was poorly planned, militarized, highly decentralized, and inadequately supported by the GoSS (Munive, 2013; Stibbe, 2012). Furthermore, the lack of overarching policy or clear legal framework and implementation was erratic and outcomes widely diverse (Madut, 2023; Owujie, 2023; Okafor et al., 2024). The top-down order, as opposed to bottom-up initiative was backed by little consultation and few resources, the narrowly defined civilian demobilization programme failed to build partially because the civil society was not engaged or provided any incentives in order to buy into the program (Ayeni et al., 2025).

Additionally, reintegration programs are geographically concentrated in places that are comparatively stable, marginalising areas devastated by war (UNDP, 2023; UNDP, 2024). As a result, political involvement among reintegrated communities is still low and inadequately recorded despite significant demobilisation efforts (UNMISS, 2022; Small Arms Survey, 2023). The discrepancy between anticipated DDR goals and actual results in South Sudan is seen in Table 1. It demonstrates that although the goals of disarmament, demobilisation, reinsertion, and reintegration are to advance stability, their capacity to encourage significant political engagement among former soldiers has been hampered by poor execution and structural limitations.

Table 1: DDR Outcomes vs Political Participation

DDR Dimension	Expected Outcome	Observed Reality	Implications on Political Participation
Disarmament	Reduced weapons circulation	Partial compliance, hidden	Limited trust in security institutions

		arms	
Demobilization	Transition to civilian life	Incomplete and inconsistent	Weak civic reorientation
Reinsertion	Short-term support	Sporadic and uneven	Temporary relief, no sustained engagement
Reintegration	Social inclusion	Fragile and underfunded	Low participation and political apathy

Sources: UNMISS (2012); UNDP (2023)

Theoretical Perspectives

This study is guided by two interrelated frameworks, Social Reintegration Theory and Participatory Governance Theory. The Social Reintegration Theory offers an overview for analysing the reintegration of individuals and groups that have been disengaged from combat into civilian life. The broader Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR) literature is the origin of the theory, which emphasises that reintegration is a social transformation involving identity restoration, community acceptance, and sustainable livelihoods rather than just a technical or economic process (Kingma, 2000; Colletta, Kostner, and Wiederhofer, 1996; Muggah, 2005). This perspective holds that successful reintegration occurs when affected civilians or ex-combatants find steady employment, restore their social status, and are accepted as respectable members of their communities (Humphreys & Weinstein, 2007). Reintegration, then, entails

social and psychological healing, reconciliation, and rebuilding trust in communities devastated by war.

This theory helps explain the social and economic aspects of DDR programs in the South Sudanese context, including as cash-for-work programs, vocational training, and psychosocial support meant to help displaced people and former fighters reintegrate into society. Additionally, it provides a prism through which to evaluate the reintegrated individuals' sense of belonging and community acceptance, both of which are crucial markers of long-term peace and stability. Participatory Governance Theory expands the analysis to include political involvement and civic empowerment, whereas social reintegration theory concentrates on community acceptance and livelihood restoration. This idea, which was developed by academics like Arnstein (1969), Gaventa (2006), and Fung and Wright (2003), contends that citizens' active participation in life-affecting decision-making processes is essential to long-term peace and democratic consolidation. It suggests that rather than being a top-down approach, governance should enable marginalised or previously excluded groups such as women, youth, and former combatants to make significant contributions to local development, community leadership, and policy creation.

This theoretical standpoint holds that reintegration is insufficient if it does not lead to political engagement, including participation in local council representation, voting, and peace committees or community associations. Therefore, participatory governance theory provides the theoretical basis for assessing whether reintegration efforts in South Sudan promote both societal stability and political empowerment. It is also helpful to assess how reintegrated individuals engage in civic education, inclusive representation, and local peace committees.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research approach to examine the impact of post-conflict reintegration policies on civilian demobilisation and political involvement in South Sudan. The study focuses on three conflict-affected states where disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) efforts have been most prevalent: Upper Nile, Central Equatoria, and Jonglei. Participatory Governance Theory and Social Reintegration Theory serve as its theoretical frameworks. Participants include reintegrated people, community leaders, DDR officials, and civil society actors actively involved in peacebuilding and governance processes. About 25 participants were included in focus groups and in-depth interviews by using purposeful sampling in order to get comprehensive narratives and reflections on political engagement and reintegration outcomes. Further information can be obtained by documenting policy reports and DDR frameworks. To identify patterns and links among the emergent subjects, thematic analysis will be conducted using NVivo software. To ensure credibility, ethical guidelines such as informed consent, confidentiality, and consideration for participants' post-conflict experiences will be strictly followed. Despite anticipated limitations related to accessibility and political volatility, the qualitative approach provides nuanced insights on how reintegration programs impact civilian engagement in South Sudan's evolving democratic framework.

Results and Discussion

This study explored how post- conflict reintegration policies have shaped civilian demobilization and political participation in South Sudan. Drawing on in- depth interviews with reintegrated individuals, community leaders, DDR officials, and civil society

actors alongside document reviewed. The results reveal three core thematic domains: (1) the fragmented nature of reintegration processes, (2) the critical role of community- based dynamics in enabling or inhibiting political participation, and (3) the structural and institutional obstacles that limit the translation of reintegration into meaningful civic and governance engagement. Each of these domains is discussed below.

1. Fragmented Reintegration Processes:

One of the main indicators of South Sudan's disjointed reintegration processes is the short period of reintegration assistance provided to former combatants, returnees, and displaced communities. According to Özerdem (2026), the majority of initiatives have remained short-term, donor-driven, and emergency-focused rather than long-term, despite the fact that Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR) programs were designed to facilitate long-term transition into civilian life. Many reintegration initiatives prioritised short-term reinsertion packages with few long-term follow-up measures, according to recent studies (UNDP, 2023). Several participants reported feeling disconnected from DDR programs and the day-to-day realities of reintegration (Baas 2011; Bakker, 2021). Munive (2013) confirmed that although formal demobilisation procedures including the collection of weapons, registration, and first orientation were usually completed, the reintegration phase that followed frequently seemed haphazard, time-limited, and unrelated to local sociopolitical situations. A former Jonglei fighter explained:

"We returned to the village after they gave us the tool kit, but nobody asked if we were employed, trusted, or involved in community decisions."

According to Rolandsen, & Kindersley (2023), campaigns especially in Jonglei State were often militarized and poorly coordinated, leading to resistance, violence, and limited long-term security gains. Likewise, the Jonglei experience showed that the GoSS's narrow tactics were not tied to a broader strategy of building community security by addressing the root causes of conflict (Gordon, 2014). Similarly, research by Samuel Hall (2023) shows that even after taking part in reintegration programs, a large number of returnees still face frequent displacement, unstable employment, and insecurity. As a result, the short-term nature of support has made reintegration outcomes less sustainable and made recipients more susceptible to recurrent instability and social isolation (Aganas, 2012; Mackuliaková, 2013; Bakker, 2021). The length of institutional support, according to many reintegrated people, was only six to twelve months. After then, there was little follow-up and returnees or ex-combatants were left on their own. A youth leader in Central Equatoria, for instance, observed that the shift from program support to community self-sufficiency was sudden:

"After the first year, we were left on our own with the promise that we had started something, but no one checked if it succeeded; our circle stopped meeting and the money stopped coming."

The DDR programs, which were designed to provide livelihood assistance, psychosocial support, and vocational training to ex-combatants and conflict-affected civilians, have been dispersed unevenly, with some states receiving more support than others. This disjointed strategy has reduced public trust in state-led peacebuilding initiatives and produced inequalities in access to reintegration benefits (Opiyo, 2024).

Another important feature of fragmented reintegration in South Sudan is the restricted livelihood focus of most projects (Logo & Mariani, 2022). Reintegration strategies have frequently prioritised cash-for-work programs, small business grants, and vocational training above the broader social and political dimensions of reintegration. Even though livelihood support is still essential, the overemphasis on economic reinsertion has often ignored emotional trauma, reconciliation, community trust, and civic involvement. The UNDP DDR Baseline Study states that reintegration issues for ex-combatants and conflict-affected communities extend beyond employment and include identity reconstruction, social acceptance, and participation in community structures (UNDP, 2023). A female ex-combatant in Upper Nile observed:

“I learned tailoring and got a sewing machine, but the market is far and unsafe; I can’t travel easily and local customers are few.”

Similarly, studies by Brethfeld (2010), Noel (2011), and Samuel Hall (2023) found that many returnees believed that reintegration programs were insufficient because they failed to adequately address local insecurity, social belonging, and land disputes. As a result, many reintegrated people continue to be socially marginalised even after receiving financial support, which reduces reintegration's efficacy as a peacebuilding strategy.

Weak connections between reintegration programs and local governance systems can contribute to fragmented reintegration processes. There are fewer opportunities for civic engagement and inclusive governance in South Sudan because reintegration programs frequently function independently of local government institutions, peace committees, and community decision-making

mechanisms (Saeed, 2024; Maluki & Regina, 2025; Garang, 2026). According to research on DDR cooperation in South Sudan, fragmented and uneven results have been caused by inadequate institutional coordination, overlapping duties, and low accountability among implementing actors (Munive & Jakobsen, 2012). One DDR representative admitted:

"How reintegrated individuals join community development committees or local decision-making structures was not specifically planned for."

According to contemporary governance-focused initiatives, reintegration needs to be integrated with local government, community violence reduction, and participatory planning procedures (UNDP, 2024). Nevertheless, elite-driven politics, inadequate governmental structures, and a lack of public space hinder these efforts. As a result, South Sudan's reintegration program is still disjointed and unable to transform displaced individuals and former combatants into fully integrated, politically capable citizens (Saeed, 2024).

2. The critical role of community- based dynamics in enabling or inhibiting political participation:

Community-based dynamics are important in promoting or restricting political participation in post-conflict areas because reintegration outcomes are often mediated through local connections, trust networks, and community institutions. Community reconciliation and trust-building are crucial for former combatants, returnees, and displaced civilians to participate in public life in South Sudan (Santschi, 2016; Agwella, 2018; Slom, 2024). According to Daboh et al. (2010) and Gahungu (2023), decades of violent conflict, displacement,

and ethnic polarisation weakened local social cohesion and undermined interpersonal trust, making reintegration into civic and political domains difficult. It has been demonstrated that community-based reconciliation strategies, such as peace talks, elder mediation, local peace committees, and intercommunal participation, increase social acceptability and decrease stigma against returnees (UNDP, 2023; Samuel Hall, 2023; Garang, 2026). Opportunities for involvement in local meetings, conflict resolution, and group decision-making tend to increase where communities perceive reintegrated individuals as legitimate and reliable. On the other hand, unsolved complaints and social mistrust sometimes reinforce exclusion and hinder involvement (Hartwig & Ong'ondi, 2014; UNDP, 2023; Samuel Hall, 2023).

The degree to which reintegrated people can exercise political agency is also influenced by local governance forums and community groupings (Wilson, 2024). Marginalised groups can gain civic voice and leadership skills by participating in village committees, youth associations, women's groups, local councils, and peacebuilding forums (Alshaikh & Shinya, 2015). Group of Jonglei respondents stated:

"We felt accepted again after the village elders sat with host families and returnees; we ate, chatted, and each selected a project."

Similarly, a youth leader in Central Equatoria described how they created a youth cooperative with the help of a reintegration grant, which ultimately led to the inclusion of youth representatives in the local council.

"We started with a small loan, but the youth chairman now attends monthly council meetings and was given a seat in the community development committee."

In support of this perspective, a woman from Upper Nile observes that:

"I now represent our block in the village women's council, and our women's cooperative meets once a week."

Research on governance and local peacebuilding in South Sudan has shown that when reintegration programs are linked to local institutions, former combatants and civilians affected by conflict are more likely to take part in community decision-making and contribute to local development processes (UNMISS, 2022; UNDP, 2024). However, limited decentralisation, elite control over local government, and inadequate institutional coordination frequently limit access to these public spaces (Laguya, 2012; Madut, 2023). Therefore, reintegration may enhance lives without necessarily translating into meaningful political participation or representation (Madut, 2023).

Host community engagement is another crucial factor influencing political participation since reintegration is successful when local communities actively participate in developing and implementing support systems (Madut, 2023; Slom, 2024). Programs that prioritise shared public goods, dialogue forums, and community-based livelihoods are more likely to enhance civic cooperation and reduce animosity between host populations and returnees (Özerdem & Podder, 2015; UNDP, 2023). Group engagement, however, can be harmed by inadequate consultation and unequal aid distribution, which can worsen social division and favouritism. The realities of gender and youth make political inclusion more challenging. Social marginalisation, unemployment, and patriarchal norms often present additional challenges for young returnees and women who were formerly involved with armed groups (Komujuni, 2013). Studies

increasingly demonstrate that women and young people are under-represented in local administration despite making up the majority of South Sudan's population, which restricts inclusive peacebuilding outcomes (Samuel Hall, 2023; UN Women, 2023). Therefore, community environments that can foster inclusivity, trust, and equitable civic opportunities are equally crucial to long-term political participation as reintegration initiatives.

3. The structural and institutional obstacles that limit the translation of reintegration into meaningful civic and governance engagement:

Institutional and structural impediments continue to hinder meaningful political participation in South Sudan, particularly for women, youth, displaced people, and reintegrated groups (Riak & Ebele, 2026). One of the main challenges is the weakness of local government structures. Decentralisation was intended to promote inclusive administration and citizen engagement, but in many parts of South Sudan, local administrative institutions remain underfunded, poorly coordinated, and heavily reliant on national political elites (Laguya, 2012; Kwori, 2022). Due to inadequate administrative capacity, poor service delivery, and poor accountability procedures, there have been few opportunities for civic engagement and a decline in public confidence in local governing institutions (UNDP, 2024; Mirzov, 2025). Local councils and peace committees in many rural communities lack the institutional resources required to successfully integrate marginalised groups and former combatants into governance processes, undermining democratic inclusion and community ownership of reconciliation programs.

Elite capture and patronage networks further impede political participation by consolidating political power within particular

ethnic and political groups (Riak & Dada, 2025). According to de Waal (2015) and ICG (2023), political authority in South Sudan is frequently characterised by militarised patronage structures, where access to public offices, state resources, and security protection is largely determined by ethnic identification and loyalty to key political figures. Such regimes marginalise regular people and impede merit-based participation in government (Lomeri, 2016; Joseph, 2025). Reintegration initiatives have also been impacted by elite influence, with certain prizes given out based more on political or ethnic considerations than on the needs of the community. In a group discussion the youth of Jonglei lamented that:

"The returnees never had the opportunity to join; the elites decided who got the kit." "We are allowed to participate in the youth league, but we are instructed to wait for the elders to make decisions."

This has reinforced political apathy among populations affected by conflict and discouraged wider civic engagement by contributing to popular conceptions that government procedures are exclusive and influenced by strong individuals (Folorunsho & Samuel, 2025). In South Sudan, travel issues and insecurity also severely restrict political engagement. Particularly in conflict-prone areas like Jonglei, Upper Nile, and Unity States, ongoing armed violence, cattle raids, intercommunal disputes, and localised insurgencies continue to impede mobility and disrupt civic operations (UNMISS, 2023). Citizens are frequently discouraged from attending community gatherings, taking part in elections, or participating in public discussions due to fear of violence and displacement. A veteran Upper Nile fighter observed:

"I was elected to the peace committee, but I have no voice because the chair is the same cattle-raider who used to attack us."

Women and young people are disproportionately affected by these issues because they already experiencing unemployment, structural marginalisation stemming from patriarchal norms, and restricted access to leadership and educational possibilities. In Central Equatoria, a woman stated: *"We are aware that the meetings are risky and far away. I go once, but we all cancel when there's a raid"*.

Women and young people continue to be disproportionately under-represented in political and governance institutions, despite making up the majority of the population (UN Women, 2023). Economic marginalisation and militarisation, which enhance susceptibility to recruitment into armed organisations rather than civic engagement, exacerbate youth isolation. Consequently, the development of inclusive and participatory governance in South Sudan is undermined by institutional weakness, structural insecurity, and entrenched socioeconomic inequality.

Discussion of Findings

This study argues that South Sudan's reintegration processes are still fragmented and unrelated to long-term political inclusion. Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR) programs, have freed thousands of former combatants and civilians injured by violence, but reintegration support has mostly focused on short-term financial assistance rather than long-term civic empowerment. These results demonstrated that many participants received short-term economic support in the form of

financial assistance, vocational training, and small business grants without additional mechanisms for social reconciliation or political integration. This result is consistent with the findings of Muggah (2005) and McMullin (2013), who argued that DDR initiatives often become overly technical and economically focused while ignoring wider governance and citizenship components. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2023) states that in addition to economic survival, reintegration obstacles in South Sudan include issues of identification, belonging, social trust, and access to local decision-making institutions. Therefore, the analysis shows that reintegration without continued political and social inclusion reduces the likelihood of enduring peace.

This study also found that community-based dynamics significantly influenced political engagement among reintegrated groups. The results of research showed that Communities with inclusive local forums, trust-building activities, and reconciliation initiatives were more likely to encourage former combatants and returns to engage in civic life. In areas with active local peace committees, youth groups, women's organisations, and community dialogues, reintegrated individuals had shown a greater willingness to participate in local governance and peacebuilding initiatives. This result supports the research of Özerdem and Podder (2015), which highlighted that when local residents are actively involved, community-based reintegration fosters civic inclusion and increases social cohesion. Similarly, Samuel Hall (2023) noted that social trust, local involvement, and community acceptance are critical for effective reintegration in South Sudan. However, this study also discovered that among returnees and former fighters, unresolved intercommunal

conflicts, ethnic differences, and stigmatisation typically hindered political engagement and reinforced social exclusion.

Another important result of this study is that genuine political involvement in South Sudan is still undermined by institutional and structural obstacles. The main barriers preventing reintegrated populations from participating in civic life were found to be weak local government structures, elite dominance, insecurity, and gendered exclusion. According to the report, many local governance structures lacked the institutional ability and autonomy necessary to successfully integrate marginalised populations into political processes. Furthermore, elite patronage structures and insecurity sometimes limited political participation, especially in conflict-prone areas where civic engagement and mobility were still restricted. These results are in line with de Waal's (2015) contention that militarised patronage networks that marginalise common people shape political authority in South Sudan. In a similar vein, UNMISS (2023) and UN Women (2023) reported that patriarchal norms, poor institutions, and insecurity still prevent women and young people from participating in governance processes. Overall, the results indicate that integrated strategies combining economic assistance with social reconciliation, institutional reform, and inclusive governance frameworks are necessary for South Sudan's sustainable reintegration and democratic involvement.

Conclusion

The study concluded that South Sudan's post-war reintegration plans have not been very effective in transforming demobilised

civilians and populations affected by the conflict into active participants in governance and peacebuilding. Even though DDR initiatives assisted with disarmament and short-term financial support, fragmented implementation, weak local government institutions, insecurity, elite dominance, and insufficient community participation seriously hindered sustainable reintegration and political involvement. The study also showed that social reconciliation, trust-building, civic empowerment, and inclusive governance systems are all necessary for effective political involvement in addition to economic reinsertion. Therefore, long-term peace and democratic sustainability in South Sudan require integrated reintegration strategies that combine long-term socioeconomic support with institutional reform, community involvement, and greater political opportunities for women, youth, and other marginalised groups.

Recommendations

1. The South Sudanese government and its international partners should redesign DDR programs to include long-term civic empowerment, community reconciliation, and political inclusion components in addition to economic support in order to enhance sustainable peacebuilding and democratic engagement.
2. Local governance institutions, peace committees, women's organisations, and youth associations should be carefully integrated into DDR implementation and monitoring processes in order to increase community ownership, accountability, and the participation of reintegrated individuals in local decision-making.
3. The government should strengthen institutional changes aimed at reducing elite domination, insecurity, and social

exclusion by expanding civic space, improving local security, and mandating inclusive inclusion of women and youth in governance and peacebuilding processes.

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