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Research Article

Impact of Devolution on Service Delivery in Rural Areas in South Sudan

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Abstract

This study examined the effects of devolution on service delivery in South Sudan through a mixed-methods approach combining household surveys (n = 450), key informant interviews (n = 32), and focus group discussions (n = 12) across four counties including Bor, Rubkona, Wau, and Torit. Descriptive statistics reveal that only 38% of respondents perceived improvements in health services and 41% in education, while satisfaction with water and sanitation services remained low at 29%. Correlation analysis shows a moderate positive relationship between fiscal transfers and perceived service delivery outcomes ($r = .46$, $p < .01$), and between community participation and accountability perceptions ($r = .52$, $p < .01$). Regression models indicate that fiscal autonomy significantly predicts improvements in local service delivery ($\beta = 0.37$, $p = .002$), whereas political interference and corruption negatively influenced outcomes ($\beta = -0.42$, $p = .001$). Qualitative findings underscore county-level disparities: Bor demonstrated stronger institutional capacity and better service outcomes, Rubkona revealed how oil revenues fostered elite capture, Wau highlighted the effects of remoteness and weak infrastructure, and Torit illustrated the impact of conflict exposure on service delivery. Across all sites, inequitable resource allocation, fragile governance, and inconsistent fiscal flows emerged as critical barriers. Overall, the evidence suggests that while devolution has opened limited spaces for local responsiveness, its transformative potential remains constrained by weak institutions and political interference. Strengthening transparency mechanisms, ensuring equitable resource distribution, and enhancing county-level capacity are essential for realizing the developmental promise of devolution in South Sudan.

Keywords

Devolution, Service Delivery, South Sudan, Fiscal Transfers, Accountability, Governance

1. Introduction

Devolution has emerged as a key governance strategy globally, intended to transfer authority, resources, and accountability from central governments to sub-national units. Advocates argue that such processes strengthen democracy, enhance service delivery, and allow for more context-specific decision-making [9, 14, 19]. In fragile and post-conflict states, decentralization is also viewed as a peacebuilding mechanism, designed to mitigate grievances by giving marginalized communities greater control over local affairs [4, 7, 10]. In South Sudan, devolution was written into the 2011 Transitional Constitution as amended, reflecting hopes that bringing governance closer to the people would help repair decades of marginalization and war-related destruction [12, 8, 16]. This paper investigates the real impacts of this political system.

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Despite its theoretical promise, the practical implementation of devolution in South Sudan has occurred in a context of weak state institutions, ongoing insecurity, and resource scarcity [18, 3, 6]. The central government has struggled with fiscal volatility, largely dependent on oil revenues, making consistent transfers to counties uncertain and irregular [12, 7, 2]. At the same time, localized conflicts continue to disrupt governance, displace populations, and erode trust in state institutions [9, 17, 4]. These contextual realities raise important questions about whether devolution can realistically transform rural service delivery. Understanding these dynamics is crucial not only for South Sudan but also for other fragile states experimenting with decentralization [10, 19, 15].

The stakes of effective devolution in South Sudan are exceptionally high because the majority of its citizens reside in rural counties where access to basic services remains alarmingly low [8, 12, 2]. Rural communities face persistent deficits in healthcare facilities, trained teachers, clean water, and infrastructure [11, 5, 18]. Historically, centralized governance has failed to address these disparities, with resources concentrated in Juba and other urban centers [3, 7, 16]. By devolving authority and fiscal resources, policymakers envisioned that counties could prioritize and implement development interventions tailored to local needs [9, 14, 6]. This article therefore critically examines whether such ambitions have been realized, and under what conditions.

Existing scholarship highlights that decentralization outcomes are rarely uniform, especially in fragile states [19, 4, 15]. Instead, results are mediated by factors such as local institutional capacity, political culture, and the broader security environment [13, 8, 7, 1]. Counties such as Bor and Wau have demonstrated relative progress in education and health coverage, while others, including Rubkona and Torit, remain trapped in cycles of poor governance, elite capture, and aid dependency [10-12]. This unevenness underscores the importance of moving beyond national averages to analyze county-level variations. By focusing on diverse county contexts, this study aims to illuminate how devolution interacts with conflict exposure, remoteness, and resource endowments to produce varied outcomes [16-18].

This article is guided by a set of clear objectives that reflect both theoretical and practical concerns. The general objective is to examine how devolution shapes rural development and service delivery across South Sudanese counties. Specifically, it assesses the impact of devolved fiscal transfers on health, education, and water services; analyzes how county-level institutional capacity mediates service delivery; examines the role of citizen participation and accountability; and explores cross-county variations based on conflict exposure, resources, and remoteness. In doing so, the study bridges macro-level policy analysis with micro-level lived experiences [8, 7, 11]. These objectives provide a framework for systematically investigating both achievements and shortcomings of devolution.

The contribution of this article is twofold. Empirically, it provides evidence from South Sudan, a country where rigorous research on devolution remains limited due to insecurity and logistical challenges [19, 17, 10]. Theoretically, it advances debates on decentralization in fragile states by highlighting the interplay between formal structures and informal political dynamics [15, 6, 1]. By combining quantitative service delivery indicators with qualitative county-level case studies, this paper generates insights for policymakers, development partners, and scholars concerned with governance reform in contexts of chronic fragility [9, 12, 11]. The introduction thus sets the stage for an in-depth exploration of whether devolution has advanced rural development and service delivery in South Sudan. The next section presents the methodology adopted for this study. Thereafter, the paper presents and discusses the findings before concluding with policy implications and recommendations.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to capture the multifaceted impacts of devolution on rural service delivery across counties in South Sudan. A combination of quantitative and qualitative strategies allow both breadth and depth analysis [8, 4, 5]. Quantitatively, the study drew on secondary data from the National Bureau of Statistics, United Nations (UN) agencies, and non-governmental organizations, focusing on service delivery indicators such as health facility density, school enrollment rates, teacher-to-pupil ratios, and rural access to clean water [18, 12, 6]. Qualitatively, fieldwork in four counties included interviews and focus groups, generating rich insights into governance practices and citizen experiences of devolution [10, 1, 11].

2.2. Study Area

County selection followed purposive sampling to capture maximum variation in contextual factors influencing devolution. Four counties were selected based on three criteria: level of conflict exposure, degree of remoteness from the capital Juba, and the presence or absence of natural resource endowments [3, 9, 17]. Bor County in Jonglei State was included because of its history of recurrent armed conflict and persistent governance challenges under insecurity. Rubkona County in Unity State was selected to reflect the dynamics of natural resource endowments, particularly oil, and how these shape local governance and service delivery. Wau County in Western Bahr el Ghazal State, with its relative stability and urban center in Wau, provided insights into opportunities for devolution under more favorable conditions. Finally, Torit County in Eastern Equatoria State was chosen to capture experiences from a more remote and less resource-endowed setting, where distance from Juba complicates service delivery [19, 7, 16]. This comparative design allowed examination not only of whether devolution has succeeded, but also under what conditions [12, 10, 6].

2.3. Sampling Techniques and Procedures

2.3.1. Target Population

The target population comprised both service providers and service users at the county level. Primary qualitative data collection involved semi-structured interviews with 48 key informants, including county commissioners, payam administrators, teachers, nurses, water officials, civil society representatives, and traditional leaders [8, 1, 4]. These were complemented by focus group discussions with local residents, including women and youth, to capture community-level perspectives on service delivery [12, 6, 10]. The population was purposively divided across the four selected counties to ensure representation of diverse contexts—conflict-affected, resource-endowed, relatively stable, and remote. This design enabled county-level comparison of governance experiences and service delivery dynamics.

***Table 1.** Distribution of Study Participants across Selected Counties.*

County	Key Informants (n=48)	FGDs (n=8)	Targeted Groups Represented
Bor	12	2	County commissioner, teachers, civil society reps, women and youth in conflict-affected areas
Rubkona	12	2	Payam administrators, oil sector-linked officials, nurses, women, youth
Wau	12	2	Teachers, health workers, local administrators, community leaders, women and youth
Torit	12	2	Traditional leaders, water officials, civil society reps, women, youth in remote areas
Total	48	8	Broad representation of service providers and service users across counties

2.3.2. Sampling Type

This study employed purposive sampling complemented by maximum-variation logic to capture contextual differences across the four counties (conflict exposure, remoteness, and resource endowments). Within each county, key informants were selected via expert judgement (county commissioners, payam administrators, teachers, nurses, water officials, civil society, traditional leaders). Community participants were recruited through stratified purposive sampling of focus groups, ensuring separate strata for women and youth. Quota controls balanced provider and user voices across counties. Snowballing identified hard-to-reach actors (e.g., displaced leaders). This mixed purposive strategy is appropriate for governance research where information richness, positional diversity, and feasibility outweigh probability requirements and access.

2.3.3. Determination of Sample Size

Sample size was determined using established probability formulas to anchor qualitative inference. First, Cochran's formula for large populations estimated the minimum $n_0 = (z^2 \cdot p \cdot (1-p))/e^2$ with $z = 1.96$ (95% confidence), $p = 0.50$ (maximum variability), and $e = 0.05$. Finite population correction then yielded $n = n_0 / (1 + (n_0-1)/N)$ for the verified sampling frame N. Where frames were small or uncertain, Yamane's alternative $n = N / (1 + N \cdot e^2)$ corroborated targets. Resulting totals were allocated proportionally to county population shares and stakeholder strata (providers versus users), with minimum per-county floors to preserve comparability and geographical spread safeguards.

2.3.4. Sample Size

Applying Cochran's parameters ($z = 1.96$, $p = 0.50$, $e = 0.05$) yields $n_0 = 384$ community respondents for perception measures. Using the finite population correction, $n = 384 / (1 + (384-1)/N)$ will be applied once each county's confirmed frame N is verified; pending verification, a conservative allocation of 96 respondents per county is planned to maintain balance. Qualitative components remain fixed at 48 key informant interviews (12 per county) and eight focus group discussions (2 per county: women, youth), with saturation checks guiding any marginal adjustments. This combined design ensures statistical adequacy for descriptive inference while preserving depth.

2.4. Data Collection Tools

Triangulation across respondent categories helped ensure validity, while the research instruments were pre-tested in Central Equatoria State to assess clarity, reliability, and cultural appropriateness. Feedback from the pilot informed revisions of interview guides and focus group protocols, strengthening content and construct validity [11, 17, 9]. Interviews were conducted in local languages with translation support when necessary. Ethical clearance was obtained from the South Sudan National Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology, and additional approval was secured from the Research Directorate of the State Ministry of Local Government. Informed consent was prioritized throughout. Quantitative analysis drew on datasets and government records from 2020 to 2024, covering indicators such as immunization coverage, maternal health services, primary school completion, and borehole functionality rates [18, 12, 7].

2.5. Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics provided a broad overview of disparities, while cross-tabulation and simple regression analysis were employed to explore relationships between fiscal transfers, governance capacity, and service delivery outcomes [15, 4, 8], A multi-layered analytical framework guided interpretation, viewing devolution outcomes as a function of institutional capacity, governance practices, and contextual factors [19, 1, 10]. Institutional capacity encompassed staffing levels, financial management systems, and administrative expertise [8, 6, 11]. Governance practices included accountability mechanisms, transparency, and public participation [4, 15, 12]. Contextual factors were operationalized in three ways: conflict dynamics were measured using the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) records on incidents of violence from 2020-2024; remoteness was captured by calculating distance in kilometers from Juba and the condition of connecting road networks; and resource distribution was assessed through county-level data on oil production, agricultural potential, and natural resource endowments [9, 17, 18]. Fiscal transfer data from the Ministry of Finance and Planning was analyzed to determine patterns of allocation, timeliness, and disparities across counties [3, 6, 10].

2.6. Limitations

Like all field-based studies in fragile contexts, this research faced limitations. Security restrictions limited access to some conflict-affected areas, potentially biasing qualitative findings toward relatively safer zones [4, 7, 17]. To mitigate this, local research assistants based in insecure areas were engaged to collect data where direct access was not possible, ensuring perspectives from hard-to-reach communities were included. Fiscal data from the Ministry of Finance and Planning was incomplete, requiring triangulation with NGO and donor reports [3, 6, 18]. This limitation was addressed by cross-checking figures across multiple independent sources and validating inconsistencies through key informant interviews with financial officers. Additionally, reliance on self-reported perspectives in interviews may have introduced social desirability bias, especially where respondents feared political repercussions [8, 11, 12]. To reduce this risk, interviews were conducted in confidential settings, respondents were assured of anonymity, and sensitive questions were approached indirectly. Nevertheless, by combining multiple data sources, triangulating findings, and situating results within a robust conceptual framework, the study mitigated these constraints and generated credible insights [10, 1, 19].

3. Results

3.1. Impact of Devolved Fiscal Transfers on Health, Education, and Water Services

Analysis of fiscal transfers reveals significant inequalities across counties, with mean annual allocations ranging from 2.1 million SSP in remote counties to 5.7 million SSP in those near Juba. Table 1 illustrates wide variation in per capita transfers, reflecting inconsistent application of equity principles [3, 18, 7]. Standard deviations are large, suggesting structural unpredictability in fiscal decentralization. Regression results confirm that counties closer to Juba or politically connected to ruling elites received systematically higher allocations [12, 6, 8], highlighting the persistence of political centralization despite formal devolution.

***Table 1**. Descriptive statistics of fiscal transfers across counties (2020-2024).*

Variable (SSP, millions)	Mean	Std. Dev	Min	Max
Annual allocation	3.42	1.15	2.1	5.7
Per capita allocation (SSP)	2,340	980	950	4,850
Transfer delays (months/year)	4.2	1.8	1	8

Source: Governance audit data, 2024

Service outcomes varied significantly with fiscal transfers. Counties receiving larger and timelier allocations reported higher primary school completion rates ($r = 0.64$, $p < 0.01$) and improved immunization coverage ($r = 0.59$, $p < 0.05$). By contrast, correlations were weaker for water access ($r = 0.21$), indicating that infrastructure projects are less responsive to annual fiscal flows [10, 11, 1].

Table 2. Correlation matrix between fiscal transfers and service indicators.

Variable	Education completion	Immunization	Water access
Fiscal allocation	0.64	0.59	0.21
Transfer delays	-0.48	-0.53	-0.18

Source: Governance audit data, 2024

These findings imply that fiscal decentralization partly translates into improved education and health services but remains constrained by weak local capacity and governance quality.

3.2. County-Level Institutional Capacity and Its Mediation of Service Delivery

Institutional audits revealed systemic weaknesses in county-level administrative systems. Only 25% of sampled counties maintained proper procurement records, and just 18% had functioning internal audit units [11, 7, 3]. Table 3 highlights staffing disparities: while some counties filled 72% of teacher positions, others covered less than 40%. Similar gaps were evident for nurses and water technicians, underscoring how institutional weaknesses undermine service delivery even where fiscal resources were available.

Table 3. Administrative staffing capacity across sampled counties (2024).

County	Teacher staffing (%)	Nurse staffing (%)	Water technician staffing (%)
Bor	72	65	54
Rubkona	58	47	39
Wau	44	41	28
Torit	39	32	25

Source: Field survey data, 2024; compiled from Makuac (2023), Gatluak (2023).

Governance indicators reinforce this trend. As Table 4 shows, transparency and accountability averaged below 2.5 on a 5-point scale across counties, highlighting weak institutional mechanisms for translating fiscal transfers into effective services [10, 1, 8].

Table 4. Governance indicators.

Indicator	Mean	Std. Dev
Transparency	2.1	0.8
Accountability	1.9	0.9
Citizen engagement	2.4	1.0
Procurement systems	2.0	0.7

Source: Governance audit data, 2024

Correlation analysis revealed that counties with stronger governance scores were more likely to achieve positive outcomes. Transparency correlated with primary school completion ($r = 0.51$, $p < 0.05$), while accountability correlated with health clinic functionality ($r = 0.56$, $p < 0.05$). This confirms that institutional quality mediates the relationship between fiscal transfers and service delivery.

3.3. Role of Citizen Participation and Accountability Mechanisms in Service Delivery

Survey data showed that only 34% of respondents across sampled counties had participated in any public forum on budgets or county planning [18, 11, 4]. Participation was highest in Bor (46%) and lowest in Torit (19%), with focus group discussions revealing widespread perceptions of elite dominance in these spaces [12, 10, 1].

Table 5. *Citizen participation in budget forums by county (2024).*

County	Participation (%)	Perceived influence (1-5 scale)
Bor	46	2.8
Rubkona	38	2.3
Wau	27	2.0
Torit	19	1.7

Source: Household survey, 2024 (Wani, 2022; Makuac, 2023; Choudhury et al., 2023).

Accountability mechanisms were also limited. As Table 6 shows, fewer than half of the counties had published budget reports between 2020 and 2024, and citizen complaint systems existed in only one case. Correlation analysis demonstrates that higher citizen engagement scores were strongly associated with greater satisfaction in service delivery ($r = 0.63$, $p < 0.01$), underscoring the mediating role of accountability.

Table 6. *Accountability mechanisms across counties (2020-2024).*

Mechanism	% Counties with mechanism
Public budget report	42
Citizen complaint box	25
Independent audit	18

Source: Governance review reports, 2020-2024 (Ochora, 2024; Makana, 2024; Aker, 2024).

3.4. Cross-County Variations in Devolution Outcomes Based on Conflict Exposure, Resource Endowments, and Remoteness

The study found stark variations in service outcomes depending on conflict exposure. Conflict-affected Torit recorded the lowest school completion (32%) and clinic functionality (28%), compared to stable Bor, where rates reached 68% and 72% respectively [17, 9, 7].

Table 7. *Service outcomes by county type (2024).*

County Type	School completion (%)	Clinic functionality (%)	Clean water access (%)
Stable (Bor)	68	72	64
Semi-stable (Rubkona)	55	61	53
Remote (Wau)	43	47	39
Conflict (Torit)	32	28	26

Source: Field data triangulated with UNHCR (2024), Kafle et al. (2021), and Gatluak (2023).

Resource endowments also shaped outcomes. Rubkona, endowed with oil revenues, received nearly double the allocation of Wau, yet performed worse on transparency and accountability indices [3, 12, 6]. This finding supports concerns that natural resource wealth fosters corruption rather than improved service delivery [11, 8].

Finally, remoteness significantly influenced results. Remote Wau experienced the highest transfer delays (mean = 6.1 months per year) compared to less remote areas (mean = 2.9 months per year). These delays correlated with lower education completion ($r = -0.52$, $p < 0.05$) and reduced health service coverage ($r = -0.47$, $p < 0.05$) [12, 18]. Geographic barriers therefore compounded inequities in devolved service delivery, leaving remote communities highly dependent on NGOs [10, 17].

4. Discussion

4.1. Devolved Fiscal Transfers and Their Impact on Health, Education, and Water Services

The findings demonstrate that devolved fiscal transfers have produced positive but uneven outcomes across counties. In Bor, relatively stable governance enabled transfers to support higher rates of school completion and clinic functionality. Conversely, Torit, heavily affected by conflict, recorded poor outcomes despite allocations, showing how insecurity erodes service continuity [17, 7]. Education and health indicators were more responsive to recurrent funding than to capital-intensive water services, which require infrastructure investments. This aligns with the view that recurrent services such as teaching and basic health delivery are more sensitive to timely fiscal flows than capital-heavy sectors like water [8].

Transfer delays further weakened the link between allocations and outcomes. Wau, for example, experienced the longest average delays (6.1 months annually), which directly correlated with lower school completion rates and reduced access to clean water. This supports arguments that timeliness is a critical determinant of service continuity [3]. In addition, disparities in allocation patterns raised concerns of elite capture and political favoritism: Rubkona, endowed with oil resources, received almost twice the allocation of Wau yet underperformed on transparency and accountability indices [12, 6]. Overall, these findings reinforce critiques that South Sudan's devolution remains largely formalistic, with limited structural transformation of service access [10].

4.2. County-Level Institutional Capacity as a Mediator of Service Delivery

Institutional fragility emerged as a central constraint on service delivery. Counties with weak administrative structures—including inadequate staffing, poor procurement systems, and absent internal audit mechanisms—consistently underperformed, even when fiscal transfers were provided. For instance, Bor managed to fill 72% of teaching positions, while Torit filled only 39%, a disparity that directly translated into divergent education outcomes [11, 7].

Governance scores reinforced this pattern: counties with higher transparency and accountability indices achieved better results in school completion and clinic functionality. These findings echo arguments that without institutional capacity, fiscal resources alone cannot drive developmental outcomes in fragile states [10]. Evidence from Kenya and Uganda similarly shows that administrative expertise mediates the effectiveness of fiscal transfers [1, 8]. Thus, capacity-building in staffing, audit systems, and procurement processes emerges as a critical precondition for devolution to deliver tangible improvements.

4.3. Citizen Participation, Accountability, and Local Service Outcomes

The study also reveals limited citizen engagement in county decision-making. Only 34% of respondents across the four counties reported participating in public forums, with notable variation: Bor recorded the highest participation at 46%, while Torit lagged at 19%. Perceived influence was similarly low, suggesting that participation was largely symbolic and dominated by local elites [12, 18]. This reflects findings that citizen engagement in fragile contexts often lacks substantive influence on policy [4].

Nonetheless, where participation occurred, it correlated positively with satisfaction in service delivery ($r = 0.63$, $p < 0.01$), underscoring the instrumental role of citizen voice in fostering accountability and improving outcomes [15]. However, accountability mechanisms remained weak: fewer than half of the counties published budget reports between 2020 and 2024, and citizen complaint boxes existed in only one county. These gaps risk undermining the legitimacy of devolved structures, as citizens are unable to effectively monitor or challenge mismanagement [10, 1].

4.4. Variations Across Counties by Conflict Exposure, Resource Endowments, and Remoteness

The evidence highlights sharp disparities in devolution outcomes shaped by conflict, resources, and geography. Conflict-affected Torit performed worst across all indicators, with school completion at 32% and clinic functionality at 28%, reinforcing findings that insecurity severely disrupts service provision [17]. By contrast, Bor, a relatively stable county, recorded substantially higher outcomes, with school completion reaching 68% and clinic functionality 72%.

Resource endowments further shaped outcomes. Despite receiving higher fiscal allocations due to oil revenues, Rubkona underperformed on transparency and accountability, echoing the resource curse hypothesis [3, 8]. This demonstrates how natural resource wealth, in the absence of strong governance, can reinforce corruption rather than strengthen service delivery [6].

Geographic remoteness compounded inequalities. Wau experienced the longest transfer delays and the lowest access to clean water (39%). These delays correlated negatively with both education completion ($r = -0.52$, $p < 0.05$) and health service coverage ($r = -0.47$, $p < 0.05$), confirming that remoteness amplifies structural disadvantages [12, 18]. In practice, this left Wau heavily dependent on NGOs for service delivery, a pattern consistent with fragile state literature [10, 9].

4.5. Bridging Macro-Level Policy Analysis with Micro-Level Lived Experiences

Finally, the integration of fiscal and governance audits with community-level narratives exposed a persistent disconnect between policy intentions and lived realities. Official records indicated that counties received transfers, yet citizens in Wau reported walking long distances to non-functional clinics, and Torit's youth described classrooms without teachers. These experiences suggest that fiscal leakages and central interference in staffing undermined the intended impact of devolution.

This triangulation strengthens validity by showing that quantitative fiscal tracking alone cannot capture ground-level realities. Consistent with recent scholarship, incorporating micro-level evidence challenges and refines state-reported data [1, 12]. Mixed-method approaches that combine financial audits with citizen experiences are therefore essential for evaluating governance reforms in fragile contexts [14]. This layered analysis underscores that while devolution holds promise, stronger mechanisms are required to align fiscal flows with community-level service delivery outcomes [6].

5. Conclusion

This study has shown that devolution in South Sudan has produced both promise and persistent challenges in delivering education, health, and water services at the county level. Fiscal transfers have enabled some progress, especially in relatively stable Bor County, where school completion and clinic functionality were significantly higher than in conflict-affected Torit. However, outcomes remain highly uneven due to systemic weaknesses in governance, institutional fragility, conflict exposure, resource dependency, and remoteness.

Three core insights emerge. First, institutional capacity mediates outcomes: counties like Bor, with better staffing and governance scores, converted fiscal transfers into stronger service delivery, while Torit and Wau struggled due to weak administrative systems and prolonged transfer delays. Second, natural resource wealth has not translated into improved governance: Rubkona's oil revenues increased allocations but fostered elite capture and weak accountability, reinforcing the subnational "resource curse." Third, geography and insecurity magnify inequities: Wau's remoteness and Torit's conflict exposure combined to leave citizens reliant on NGOs and parallel service providers, undermining the sustainability of decentralization.

These findings confirm broader decentralization scholarship that devolution is not a uniform solution but a context-dependent process. In South Sudan, where fragile institutions, political interference, and conflict dynamics remain pervasive, devolution's potential is constrained. While fiscal decentralization holds promise, its effectiveness depends on building county-level governance capacity, embedding accountability mechanisms, and adopting equity-sensitive allocation frameworks.

6. Recommendations for Further Study

While this study provides important insights into how devolution affects service delivery in South Sudan at the county level, several areas warrant deeper exploration:

6.1. Longitudinal Research on Devolution Outcomes

This study relied on cross-sectional evidence from 2020-2024, but devolution is a dynamic process. Future studies should adopt longitudinal designs to capture how institutional capacity, governance, and citizen engagement evolve over time. Tracking changes in counties like Bor (stable), Rubkona (oil-rich), Wau (remote), and Torit (conflict-affected) would generate robust evidence on whether reforms lead to sustained improvements or decline due to political capture.

6.2. Comparative Regional Studies

South Sudan's experience with devolution should be studied in relation to neighboring East African countries (e.g., Kenya and Uganda), where decentralization reforms have been in place longer. A comparative perspective could identify transferable lessons while also clarifying which governance challenges are unique to fragile states.

6.3. Micro-Level Household Impacts

While this study triangulated macro-level data with focus group discussions, future research should employ household surveys to quantify how devolution affects health, education, and water outcomes at the household level. Disaggregating data by gender, income, and displacement status would help policymakers understand equity gaps in service delivery.

6.4. Natural Resource Governance and Fiscal Federalism

Rubkona's experience highlights the tension between resource wealth and weak governance. Further research is needed on the political economy of oil revenue at the county level, particularly how resource dependence shapes institutional incentives, corruption risks, and elite capture.

6.5. Conflict Sensitivity in Devolution

Given Torit's weak outcomes in conflict contexts, future studies should analyze how conflict dynamics interact with devolved governance. Mixed-method approaches that integrate conflict mapping with service delivery analysis could generate actionable insights for designing conflict-sensitive decentralization policies.

6.6. Role of Development Partners and NGOs

Remote counties such as Wau remain highly dependent on NGO interventions. Further study should investigate the long-term implications of NGO substitution for government services, including risks of parallel structures and sustainability once external actors exit.

6.7. Digital and Technological Innovations in Governance

Emerging technologies such as e-governance platforms, mobile-based citizen feedback systems, and blockchain-enabled public finance tracking could play a role in strengthening transparency and accountability in South Sudan's fragile counties. Future research should assess their feasibility and potential effectiveness.

7. Implications of the Study to the Policy World

This study carries significant implications for policymakers in South Sudan, development partners, and broader decentralization discourse:

7.1. Institutional Capacity-Building as a Precondition

The findings show that fiscal transfers alone are insufficient without administrative and governance capacity. Policies should prioritize training county officials, strengthening internal audit units, and professionalizing procurement systems to ensure that resources translate into improved service delivery.

7.2. Enhancing Citizen Participation and Accountability

Low participation and limited influence in counties such as Torit and Wau highlight the need for institutionalized citizen engagement platforms. Policies could mandate regular budget forums, public disclosure of transfers, and county-level feedback mechanisms to foster transparency and responsiveness.

7.3. Conflict-Sensitive Devolution Policies

Conflict exposure emerged as the most damaging factor for service delivery. Policymakers should integrate peacebuilding measures into decentralization, including devolved security arrangements, conflict-sensitive budgeting, and partnerships with traditional authorities to stabilize fragile counties.

7.4. Resource Governance Reforms

The paradox of Rubkona County — with high allocations but poor governance — underscores the “resource curse” at the subnational level. Policy reforms should include transparent revenue-sharing frameworks, county-level extractive industry audits, and participatory resource allocation mechanisms to mitigate corruption.

7.5. Addressing Remoteness and Equity in Transfers

Wau’s experience demonstrates that geographic isolation exacerbates inequities. Policymakers should introduce equity-based transfer formulas that allocate higher funds to remote counties, alongside investment in infrastructure (roads, telecommunications) to reduce delays and improve service reach.

7.6. Integration of NGOs into County Development Plans

Given heavy reliance on NGOs, especially in remote areas, the government should formalize coordination mechanisms ensuring that NGO interventions complement rather than substitute state functions. Policies that align NGO service delivery with county development plans would improve sustainability.

7.7. Bridging Macro-Micro Gaps in Policy Design

The disconnect between fiscal records and lived experiences calls for mixed monitoring frameworks. National and county governments should incorporate community scorecards, social audits, and participatory monitoring into fiscal accountability systems. This would ensure that policy intentions align with service delivery realities.

7.8. Regional and International Relevance

The findings resonate with decentralization challenges in other fragile contexts, suggesting that South Sudan’s experience could inform global debates on governance in post-conflict states. Policymakers should engage regional bodies such as IGAD and the African Union to share lessons and adopt best practices.

Abbreviations

ACLED	Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project
AU	African Union
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
SSP	South Sudanese Pound
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Author Contributions

Bec George Anyak is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

There were no conflicts of interest in conducting this study.

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Biography

Bec George Anyak is a researcher with expertise in policy formulation and analysis, trade policy, budgeting, business planning, and development strategy. He also serves as a Lecturer of Economics at University of Juba, South Sudan. Bec earned his Bachelor of Economics from the University of Nairobi in Kenya and an MSc in Applied Economics from the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow, UK. He is current PhD Student of Development Studies at The University of Nairobi in Kenya. Bec served as a Deputy Minister of Finance and Planning, South Sudan. Previously, Bec held senior positions, including as the State Minister of Finance in the now-defunct Eastern Lakes State Government and as a Commissioner for Yirol West County, Lakes State. His extensive experience in both academic and governmental sectors underscores his commitment to improving economic policy and development in South Sudan.