



## **Designing Mechanisms of Civil Society representation in Sudan Peace talks**

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## **Executive Summary**

This paper moves from diagnosis to design of a criteria-driven mechanism for civil society representation in Sudan's future peace negotiations. Now in its third year, the war has severely fractured the civic space, intensified political polarization, and undermined the capacity of grassroots actors, including women, youth, and local committees, to access and influence decision-making. While these groups are highly active on the ground, they lack a voice and leverage in formal peace talks due to the absence of clear, verifiable eligibility criteria, reasonable mandate processes, and explicit procedural rights. Historically, this gap has led to the dominance of organized political parties and armed movements, resulting in tokenism and the exclusion of genuine grassroots networks, which weakens the validity and sustainability of peace agreements.

This research examines the structural and political obstacles restricting effective civil society representation. Drawing on normative international frameworks, comparative case studies from Tunisia, Yemen, and South Sudan, and primary data from semi-structured interviews with Sudanese civil society actors, negotiators, and policy experts, the paper moves beyond theoretical models to propose a context-specific solution. It identifies a profound crisis of leadership and legitimacy, deep political polarization, and significant capacity gaps as core challenges. The paper concludes by proposing a feasible, criteria-oriented process designed to enhance the legitimacy, diversity, and functionality of civil society representation. The proposed model is centered on the establishment of an independent national selection committee, the implementation of verifiable eligibility criteria based on tangible contributions, the guarantee of foundational procedural rights, and the creation of a transparent, neutral funding mechanism.



### **Research Context:**

Sudan is in its third year of a prolonged war, about two and a half years, characterized by periodic intensifications, extensive violence, mass displacement, and large-scale out-migration. These forces have acutely undermined the capacity of the civil society to access and affect the decision-making arenas. Polarization of political actors has intensified the crisis. Sections of the civil spectrum sided with the army camp (the Democratic Bloc, personalities associated with the National Congress, and allied armed movements). Political forces, including the Ta'sis Alliance, were on the other side and aligned with the Rapid Support Forces and established arrangements in Nyala. A third group of actors, including "Sumood," has proclaimed neutrality. In parallel to these poles is a wide grassroots sector, like emergency rooms, community kitchens, charitable organizations, resistance committees, and small local CSOs, that is well-represented on the ground but lacks voice, access, and leverage at decision-making venues.

At the institutional level, Sudan is in effect running two governments and two presidential councils, which creates a negotiation space with no visible center of power and draws civil society into opposing camps. Simultaneously, an external mediation process under the leadership of the United States has invited the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Egypt to form a quartet; however, the fundamental questions are unresolved: what form of authority will prevail in any transition (civilian since the very beginning versus prolonged military rule), and who will have the legitimacy and ability to govern the state after the war? In these debates, civil society's representation consistently presents itself as a prerequisite for political legitimacy.

Historically. The issue being discussed is not new to the ongoing conflict. Following the December Revolution, representational and legitimacy gaps widened in favor of organized parties and armed actors, while grassroots networks, women, and youth suffered as a result. The aim is to propose a practical, criteria-driven method for choosing civil society representatives in Sudan, one that prioritizes legitimacy, diversity, and functionality. The Juba Peace Agreement institutionalized the imbalance: parties and armed movements took the lead in participation arrangements, and grassroots committees and independents were excluded



from formal participation in the absence of clear and accepted criteria of how civil society representatives should be chosen. This vacuum allowed politicization and tokenism, which weakened the validity of the negotiation processes and their results.

In general, when discussing civil society representation in Sudan, three descriptive problems recur: (1) a narrow and fractured civic space raising questions about how to verify mandates and avoid cherry-picking; (2) multiple centers of authority raising questions about procedural rights (access to drafts, written responses within set deadlines, recording reservations, and presence in technical committees); and (3) the necessity of an institutional connection between civil society outputs and legal/constitutional drafting via published follow-up channels. These are only mentioned as context for any future design of representation mechanisms.

### **Problem Statement**

The legitimacy gap in civil society representation in Sudan has been increasing over two and a half years of war, the proliferation of power centers, mass displacement, and the extreme limitation of access to decision arenas. Grassroots, women, and youth actors have increased, but there are no clear, verifiable eligibility criteria, no plausible mandate processes, and no explicit procedural rights for them to participate in Peace talks. This paper discusses the lack of a viable, acceptable process to identify who is civil society and how they can effectively engage in Peace talks, and connect their outputs to legal/constitutional drafting in situations where resources are limited, security is threatened, and the civic space is limited.

### **Research Goals**

1. To examine the structural and political issues that restrict effective representation of the Sudanese civil society in the peace talks.
1. To study theoretical sources and cross-national experience regarding the selection mechanisms of the civil society in the process of peace negotiations.
2. To draw the most important lessons from the national and regional case studies in which inclusive representation frameworks were implemented.



3. To suggest a feasible, criteria-oriented process of selecting civil society representatives in Sudan, which is based on legitimacy, diversity, and functionality.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the key structural, political, and institutional obstacles that deny various civil society actors, especially youth, women, and grassroots movements, a meaningful role in the peace talks in Sudan?
2. How can we come up with criteria and procedural steps that will make the selection of civil society representatives in future Sudanese peace negotiations transparent, credible, and equitable?

### **Literature Review**

This review approaches the literature not as a recipe, but rather as a testable map. The aim is to investigate what comparative experience may indicate in terms of transforming civil society between symbolic presence and effective representation, where base-level demands are carried into agreement texts and implementation structures via definite, quantifiable procedural rights. The analytic lens is concerned with legitimacy, the process of selection, how the inputs are translated into drafting channels, and openness to field testing in Sudan by using interviews.

First, international and regional normative frameworks appear as a set of testable hypotheses. The UN Guidance for Effective Mediation provides a list of basic procedural rights for civil participation, such as reviewing drafts, deadlines for written responses, the possibility of recording reservations, and involving civil society experts in technical committees<sup>1</sup>. IGAD complements the document with practical guidelines on eligibility criteria, nomination paths, and transparency and accountability mechanisms<sup>2</sup>, while the OECD-DAC adds detail for supporting civil society in peace processes with applicable verification tools. Flexible tools like the Better Peace Tool serve as a practical reference for reducing selectivity and enhancing designed inclusivity. In the Sudanese context, UNITAMS

<sup>1</sup> United Nations Department of Political Affairs (2012). *Guidance for Effective Mediation*. New York: UN DPA.

<sup>2</sup> Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) Mediation Support Unit (2020). *Lessons Learnt from South Sudan Peace Talks 2013–2015*. Djibouti: IGAD MSU.



and RVI reports monitor gaps in legitimacy and representation and the weak institutional linkage between civil society contributions and decision-making paths, which supports the direction of testing but does not conclusively determine it<sup>3</sup>.

Second, comparative cases provide directional signals. In Tunisia, a wide-legitimacy civil coalition (the Quartet) served to overcome political stalemate and design a roadmap that was to be remembered in the Nobel Peace Prize discourse, yet it also displayed elite-centric tendencies that should not be blindly transferred<sup>4</sup>. In Yemen, formal components such as civil society, women, and youth, along with a downstream constitutional pathway, established explicit referral pathways. However, loopholes in execution subsequently undermined the effectiveness of these procedures<sup>5</sup>. In South Sudan, a broad consultative platform was late and had no procedural rights of binding textual influence<sup>6</sup>. Consultation was increased in Syria, but without a binding referral route, impacts were intermittent<sup>7</sup>. In Libya, the reduced civic space and institutional disintegration implies that unless the basic environmental protection is in place, representation cannot make a lasting impression<sup>8</sup>. These are direction-supporting pointers, not definitive judgments.

Third, returning to Sudan, initial interview experiences indicate a more complex reality than normative evidence assumes; most Sudanese CSOs seem politically infiltrated or to be proxies, and independent, fully compliant organizations are uncommon. There is also extreme polarization and fear that make any direct measure of the public opinion difficult. As a result, an additional legitimacy marker, specifically, the stance and perspective of an entity regarding the war, may be necessary to serve as a proxy for independence and social acceptability in the current context. This paper views best practices as modifiable design hypotheses, not as fixed preconditions.

<sup>3</sup> United Nations Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS) (2023). *Report of the Secretary-General on Sudan/UNITAMS* (S/2023/644; S/2023/861). New York: United Nations. <sup>4</sup> Nobel Foundation (2015). *National Dialogue Quartet – Nobel Peace Prize Lecture*. Oslo: Nobel Prize. <sup>5</sup> Republic of Yemen (2014). *National Dialogue Conference Outcomes Document*. Sana'a: NDC. <sup>6</sup> UN Women (2020). *Women's Experiences in the South Sudan Peace Process: Participant, Advocate, and Influencer*. New York: UN Women.

<sup>7</sup> Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria (OSSES) (2016–). *Civil Society Support Room (CSSR): Overview*. Geneva: United Nations.

<sup>8</sup> United Nations Country Team Libya (2022). *UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework 2023–2025 (Libya)*. Tripoli: UNSDCF/UNSMIL.



Fourth, the state-building literature serves as a framework of support. Post-conflict nation-building research identifies the stabilizing effects of intermediary institutions with social legitimacy and early transparency/accountability as instruments of stabilization, rather than cosmetic add-ons. This requirement in our application translates to publicly visible participation rights, referral calendars, and basic performance indicators that must be checked in the Sudan fieldwork<sup>9</sup>.

Working synthesis. We do not choose a ready-made model. We compile working hypotheses to be tested in Sudan: verifiable eligibility, multi-channel nomination with quick mandate checks, written procedural rights on day one, and a formal referral to drafting with published response schedules. The interviews will confirm, amend, or reject these hypotheses to fit a Sudan-specific mechanism.

### **Research Methodology**

This research employs a qualitative methodology grounded in policy analysis and a critical review of institutional frameworks to gain an in-depth understanding of the mechanisms and obstacles defining civil society representation in Sudan's peace negotiations. The study's design is informed by the recognition that normative international frameworks often fail to capture the complex, highly polarized, and resource-scarce realities of the Sudanese context. Therefore, to test, amend, and ultimately build a Sudan-specific representation model, the methodology employs a multi-layered approach that combines secondary data analysis with primary data collection.

### **Data Collection Strategy:**

The study integrates both primary and secondary data to ensure a comprehensive analysis.

1. **Secondary Data Analysis:** An extensive review of existing literature and policy documents provides the theoretical and comparative foundation for this research. This includes:

<sup>9</sup> Dobbins, J., Jones, S., Crane, K., & DeGrasse, B. (2007). *The Beginner's Guide to Nation-Building*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation.



- **Normative Frameworks:** Policy documents from the African Union, IGAD, the United Nations (e.g., UN Guidance on Effective Mediation), and OECD-DAC were analyzed to extract testable hypotheses regarding procedural rights, eligibility criteria, and nomination pathways.

- **Comparative Case Studies:** The experiences of Tunisia (National Dialogue Quartet), Yemen, South Sudan, Syria, and Libya were examined to draw directional signals on the successes and failures of civil society inclusion in peace processes. These cases highlighted the importance of early inclusion, binding referral routes for civil society outputs, and a secure civic space.

- **Sudan-Specific Reports:** Publications by organizations like UNITAMS and the Rift Valley Institute (RVI) were reviewed to understand the documented gaps in legitimacy and the weak institutional links between civil society and decision-making bodies in past Sudanese processes.

2. **Primary Data Collection:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders to gather nuanced, context-specific insights that challenge or confirm the hypotheses derived from secondary sources. The interviewees were strategically selected from three distinct categories:

- **Civil Society and Grassroots Actors:** This group included Participants, but not representatives of youth and women's networks, Resistance Committees, and Emergency Response Rooms. A focus group with eight individuals from these entities provided a baseline understanding of their internal structures, capacities, and perceived obstacles to participation.

- **Negotiators and Peace Process Experts:** This category included an individual with direct experience in past negotiations, such as the Juba Peace Agreement process, providing insights into the practical challenges of implementing inclusive frameworks.



- **Policy Advisors and Think Tank Experts:** Experts on Sudanese civil society and peace-building offered analytical perspectives on potential models for selection, verification,



and funding, helping to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

### **Data Analysis:**

The collected data was subjected to a rigorous thematic analysis. This process involved identifying recurring themes, patterns, and contradictions across the interviews and documents. The analysis focused on synthesizing the diverse viewpoints to build a coherent understanding of the central challenges - legitimacy, capacity, polarization, and funding - and to formulate practical, actionable recommendations. This approach allowed for the development of a model that is not a "ready-made" import but is instead tailored to Sudan's unique political and social landscape.

### **Interview Insights**

The interviews revealed a deep crack between the normative ideals of civil society participation and the harsh realities on the ground. A strong consensus emerged that Sudan's civic space is not only fractured and under-resourced but is also profoundly shaped by intense political polarization, a crisis of leadership, and the security dynamics of the ongoing war.

### **Key Finding 1: A Profound Crisis of Leadership and Legitimacy**

**Discussion and Contribution of Data:** A "**severe leadership deficit**" dominates the civic space. Interviewees perceived established civil society leaders (pre-war figures) as "burned out" and having severely diminished public credibility due to their political allegiances during the conflict. This vacuum has led to a situation where many established bodies, including certain professional committees and Resistance Committees, are seen as "fake entities" or have "fizzled out" (or disintegrated/failed). These compromised entities are often perceived as serving as political proxies rather than genuine grassroots representatives.



The crisis is exacerbated by the logistical limitations of grassroots entities. Most lack formal documentation, verifiable membership lists, or clear, established mechanisms for mandate delegation or withdrawal. As an expert noted, leadership failure resulted in leaders being produced during the war who have now "burned out" and face "high non-acceptance" due to their recent political stances, further intensifying the crisis. Ultimately, this creates a legitimacy gap where the ability to verify popular support for traditional civil society structures is almost impossible.

### **Key Finding 2: The Pervasiveness of Political Polarization**

**Discussion and Contribution of Data:** The conflict has created a deeply polarised civil society landscape, mirroring the allegiances of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF). This division is considered the single greatest obstacle to forming a unified civil society delegation.

Interviewees categorized actors primarily into factions aligned with Tasis, Samoud, or the SAF, leaving very few genuinely independent voices. Navigating this reality requires specific ethical standards. An ethical threshold was proposed, stipulating that participants must possess a **clear record of not supporting or justifying human rights violations** committed by any warring party. Furthermore, a critical nuance emerged regarding neutrality: some interviewees framed a stance on **ending the RSF's rebellion** not as a political bias, but as a **"natural" national position**. This insight highlights the difficulty in establishing a purely neutral political ground for selection, necessitating clear, objective criteria related to conduct rather than political orientation.

### **Key Finding 3: Tangible Contribution as the "Acid Test" for Legitimacy**

**Discussion and Contribution of Data:** Given the difficulty in relying on formal paper trails (such as registration or membership lists) in a war setting, interviewees consistently argued that a group's **proven record of tangible contributions** on the ground is the most reliable measure of its legitimacy. This practical standard is the **"acid test"**.



Data collected identified key activities proving legitimacy, such as: operating community kitchens, working in hospitals, and providing other essential services. Verification protocols should, therefore, focus on securing **verifiable evidence of these activities**. This includes reviewing documentation of their field work, media outputs, and crucially, conducting **random interviews with people on the ground via secure channels**. This approach shifts the focus away from potentially “inflated or nonexistent membership records”, acknowledging that some grassroots bodies like the Emergency Response Rooms lack the formal documentation typical of established non-governmental organizations.

#### **Key Finding 4: Financial Independence and Capacity Gaps are Critical Barriers**

**Discussion and Contribution of Data:** While grassroots entities require significant financial and technical support to ensure effective participation, the **sources of funding pose a major risk of co-optation and conflict of interest**. A key insight reiterated by experts was: **“the Poor cannot produce”**. This emphasises that financial independence is necessary for autonomy and meaningful contribution.

The current funding ecosystem is problematic, as some donors impose tight control over political agendas. One expert warned that these funds risk becoming a **“bridge”** for external states with a direct stake in the conflict. The collected data pointed to the urgent need for a **transparent and neutral funding mechanism**, ideally managed directly by the mediation body or a trusted, neutral international entity, to cover minimum logistical costs like travel, communication, and legal support.

#### **Key Finding 5: An Independent Body is Essential to Oversee Selection**

**Discussion and Contribution of Data:** To overcome the pervasive issues of political bias, polarization, and potential infiltration, a necessary step is the formation of a highly credible, independent **“national committee”**.

This proposal suggests the committee be composed of a small number (5-7) of widely respected Sudanese national figures known for their integrity and independence. Specific examples suggested by interviewees include figures like **Omar Ushari** and **Nazim Sirag**. This



body would be tasked with providing suitability checks for the Sudanese context, finalising selection criteria, vetting nominees, and acting as a trusted intermediary between the civil society candidates and international mediators. This framework is viewed as the **most viable path** to ensure the selection process is perceived as legitimate by a broad spectrum of Sudanese society

## **Recommendations**

Based on the research findings, this paper proposes a feasible, criteria-oriented process for selecting and empowering civil society representatives for Sudan's peace talks. The model is built on the principles of legitimacy, diversity, and functionality and is designed to be adaptable to the fluid context of the conflict.

### **1. Establishment of an Independent National Selection Committee**

The establishment of this body is the most critical step to ensure a criteria-driven and transparent process for selecting civil society representatives.

#### **A. Essential Nature and Mandate of the Committee:**

This body must be defined by its independence, organic nature, and singular focus on selection.

- **Independent and Organic Body:** The committee must be an independent, voluntary body that derives its authority and endorsement primarily from public recognition and the proven integrity of its members (e.g., figures like Omar Ushari, Nazim Sirag). It is composed of highly respected figures who are not themselves seeking a seat in the negotiations.
- **Voluntary and Non-Negotiating Role:** The critical function of this body is strictly to identify the nominated bodies and representatives eligible to participate in the peace processes.
  - The Committee will be responsible for finalizing eligibility criteria, issuing a public call for nominations, vetting candidates, and presenting the final list.



◦ The Committee explicitly will not participate in any of the negotiation processes. Its role is administrative, technical, and legitimacy-enhancing, operating as a gatekeeper to protect the integrity of the civil society track.

## **B. Convening Power and Management:**

The **International Mediation Body** (e.g., the US-led quartet or any future international mechanism supporting the peace talks) holds the essential convening power to initiate the establishment and manage the process.

This convening power is vital because:

- I. It ensures the body's independence from the warring factions (SAF and RSF).
- II. It allows the mediation to grant the committee the necessary mandate to oversee selection criteria and vet candidates.
- III. The mediation body, or a trusted, neutral international organization designated by the mediation, must manage the neutral and transparent funding mechanism required to cover the committee's minimum operational costs and the participation costs of the selected delegation, thereby ensuring financial autonomy.
- IV. The mediation body is responsible for endorsing the final list of representatives presented by the committee.

## **C. Selection Criteria and Verification:**

The Committee must apply clear, verifiable eligibility criteria focusing on tangible contributions:

- **Demonstrated Independence:** No organizational or financial affiliation with the warring parties.
- **Ethical Stance on Human Rights:** A clear record of not supporting or justifying violations committed by any side of the conflict.



- **Proven Track Record:** Verifiable evidence of constructive work and tangible contributions on the ground, serving as the primary measure of their popular mandate.
- **No Double Representation:** Individuals already accessing negotiations via a political track (e.g., Sumood, Tasis, Democratic Bloc, etc.) are ineligible for the independent civil society track.

## **2. Secure Foundational Procedural Rights from Day One**

To move beyond symbolic presence towards effective participation, the mediation body must guarantee a set of minimum procedural rights for the selected civil society delegation from the first day of their involvement. These rights should include:

- The right to review and comment on draft negotiation texts within a specified deadline.
- The right to receive written responses to their submissions.
- The right to have reasoned reservations recorded in the official negotiation record.
- The right for their experts to attend and contribute to relevant technical committees.

## **3. Establish a Transparent, Neutral Funding Mechanism.** To ensure the autonomy and operational capacity of the civil society delegation, a small, transparent funding mechanism must be established to cover the minimum costs of participation (e.g., travel, communication, legal support, and digital security).

**Management:** This fund should be managed directly by the international mediation body or a trusted, neutral international organization to prevent financial dependency on any political actor.

**Donor Selection:** Donors should be chosen based on their willingness to accept a policy of minimal intervention in the process's substance and agenda. Multi-donor funding is preferable to reduce the influence of any single entity.



**Transparency:** A summary of the fund's sources and expenditures should be published periodically to maintain public trust.

## **Conclusion**

The conclusion argues that ensuring meaningful and legitimate civil society representation in Sudan's peace talks is essential for achieving a sustainable peace. The research demonstrates that the current civic landscape is crippled by a profound crisis of leadership and legitimacy, coupled with deep political polarization that has rendered traditional representation models ineffective. While the war has highlighted the critical role of grassroots actors, the establishment of Emergency Response Rooms has simultaneously made it almost impossible for individuals to access formal decision-making processes.

The findings show that pre-war civil society structures are widely viewed as co-opted, infiltrated, or lacking public credibility, creating a vacuum that cannot be filled by simply applying international best practices. A key insight from the interviews is that in the current Sudanese context, the most reliable measure of legitimacy is not formal documentation but a **verifiable track record of tangible contributions** on the ground.

Therefore, the paper proposes a practical, Sudan-specific framework. The central recommendation is the formation of an **independent National Selection Committee** composed of widely respected national figures to oversee a transparent and credible selection process. This committee would apply clear eligibility criteria focused on proven independence from warring parties, an ethical stance against human rights violations, and a demonstrated history of community service.

Finally, for participation to be effective, it must be supported by guaranteed **procedural rights from day one** and a **neutral, transparent funding mechanism** to ensure autonomy. By focusing on actors who demonstrably serve their communities, this model offers a viable path to bridge the legitimacy gap and amplify the voices of those most affected by the conflict.

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