



SOUTH SUDAN

Citizen Trust in South Sudan's Transition

Findings from the 2024 Public Perceptions of Peace Survey

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Acronyms

FES	Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
PeaceRep	Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform
PoC	Protection of Civilian Site
R-ARCSS	Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan
R-TGONU	Revitalized Transitional Government of National Unity

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Summary

- ▶ The success of transitions in South Sudan is tied to the level of public trust. If trust remains too low, the process risks failure. The transitional period has been extended four times, with the latest extension pushing it to February 2027, nearly a decade since the original peace agreement was signed.
- ▶ While South Sudanese have tolerated delays in the peace process, scepticism is growing. Continued failure to progress on issues such as security arrangements, constitution-making, transitional justice and elections risks undermining the legitimacy of the transitional government.
- ▶ Perceptions of safety have marginally improved since 2021, with urban and rural areas showing better outcomes than IDP camps and the UN-administered protection of civilians site (PoC) in Malakal. These camps report higher feelings of insecurity due to reduced humanitarian support and increased lawlessness.
- ▶ Respondents remain divided on whether South Sudan is currently at peace. Although scepticism has decreased since 2021, significant regional disparities exist, with Greater Equatoria reporting the highest levels of doubt.
- ▶ More than half of respondents believe that parties to the peace agreement work well together at the national level, but concerns remain about inclusivity, especially in Greater Equatoria, where many feel their communities are underrepresented in the transitional government.
- ▶ Respondents who feel their communities are not adequately represented in the transitional government are more likely to distrust the peace process and see poor prospects for peace in the next three years.
- ▶ The transitional government must urgently restore public trust by proactive political communication and demonstrating progress in key areas, particularly security arrangements and credible preparations for national elections.

Introduction

Transitions succeed or fail based on the trust citizens have in the process. If public confidence remains too low for too long, the process risks collapse. In September 2024, the Transitional Government of South Sudan announced another two-year extension of the transitional period, pushing it to February 2027. This marks the fourth extension since the revitalized peace agreement was signed in 2018, turning what was originally planned as a three-year transition into one lasting nearly a decade.

Up to this point, South Sudanese have been remarkably tolerant of the delays and gaps in implementation in the peace process. However, scepticism and doubt are becoming increasingly apparent among some segments of the population. If the parties are not seen to be making more substantial progress on key aspects of the agreement, including security arrangements, constitution-making, transitional justice and national elections, there is a risk that the process may lose credibility in the eyes of the people, raising fundamental questions about the legitimacy of the transitional government.

This policy brief presents data on citizen trust in the transitional process from a series of opinion polls that Detcro, the Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform (PeaceRep), funded by UK International Development from the UK government, and the Raising Civil Voices program by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), funded by the European Union, have collected from 2021-24. Respondents were asked about their daily experiences of safety, drawing on indicators of everyday peace developed through qualitative research during the project's inception phase.¹ They also shared their views on a wide range of governance and security topics. The fifth and most recent poll, conducted between March and June 2024, collected the views of 4,769 people in 15 locations across all ten states and one administrative area, encompassing urban, rural and IDP camp environments.² Since 2021, the research has gathered the views of a total of 18,039 South Sudanese.

Trends in Perceived Safety

The polling data shows marginal improvements in perceptions of safety between 2021 and 2024 (see Figure 1).³ Almost all locations show a general upwards trend with the exception of Bor South, which has fluctuated up and down over the years in response to security incidents associated with the conflict among Dinka, Nuer and Murle groups in Jonglei and Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA), and Yambio, which experienced declines in perceived safety in 2023 and 2024 (see Figure 2). Conflict affected areas such as Yei and Pibor have consistently recorded some of the lowest levels of perceived safety among the surveyed locations, although noticeable improvements have been recorded in recent years.

Figure 1: Perceptions of 'everyday' safety (2021-24)

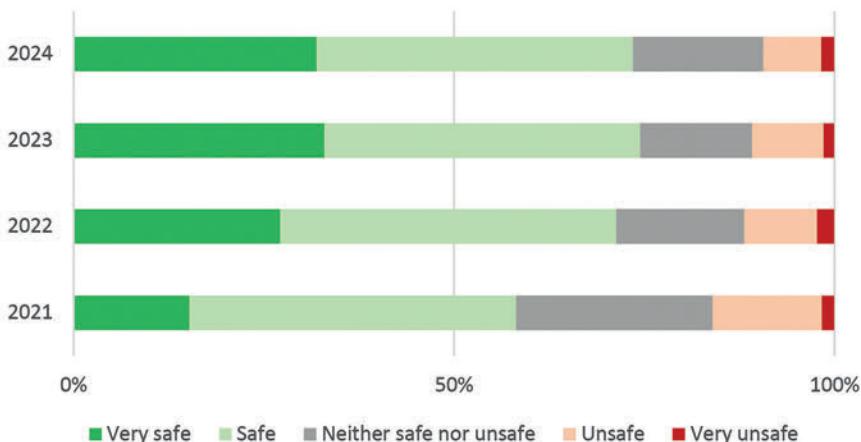
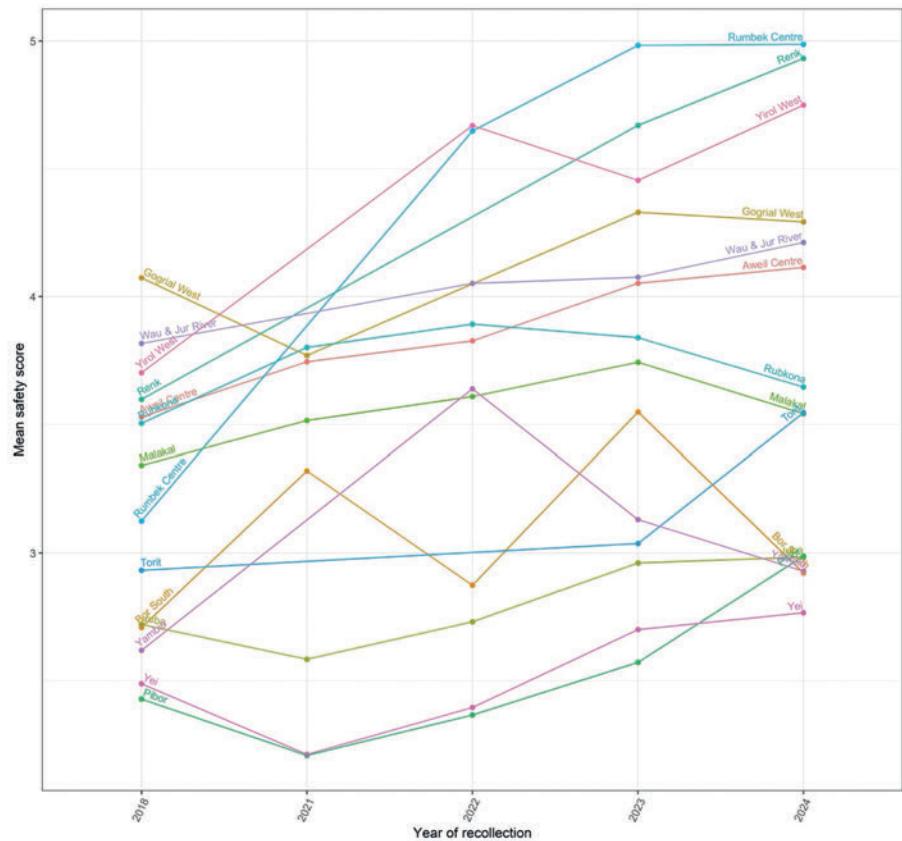


Figure 2: Perceptions of 'everyday' safety – mean score by location (2021-24) (n = 17,092)



* 1 = very unsafe, 5 = very safe

Trends in perceived safety in IDP camps over the years have diverged from those of other survey environments. Unlike urban and rural areas, where the percentage of respondents who reported feeling unsafe has decreased since 2021, respondents feeling unsafe in the PoCs has increased over the same period, rising from 18% in 2021 to 23% in 2024 (see Figure 3). Feelings of being unsafe in urban and rural areas were cut in half over the same period, dropping from 16% to 6% in urban areas and from 14% to 7% in rural areas. While perceived safety increased in all three survey environments since 2021 (alongside the increases in perceived lack of safety in the IDP camps), the percentage of respondents who felt safe in IDP camps in 2024 (53%) were far lower than those who felt safe in urban areas (78%) and rural areas (79%) (see Figure 4).

Figure 3: Percentage of respondents reporting feeling 'unsafe' x Survey Environment x Year (2021-24)

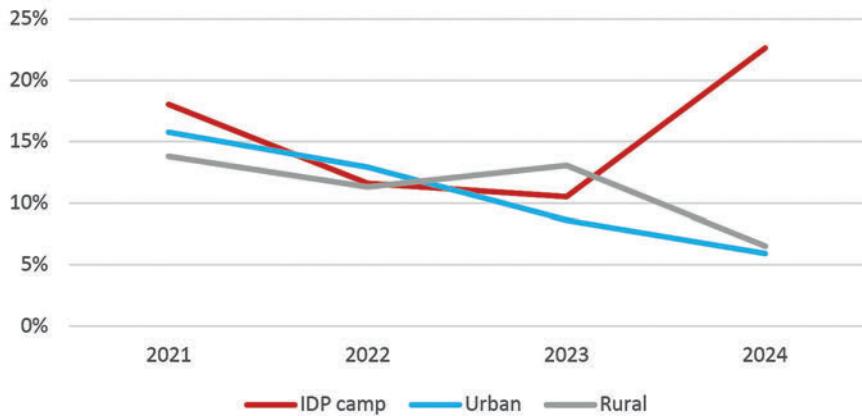
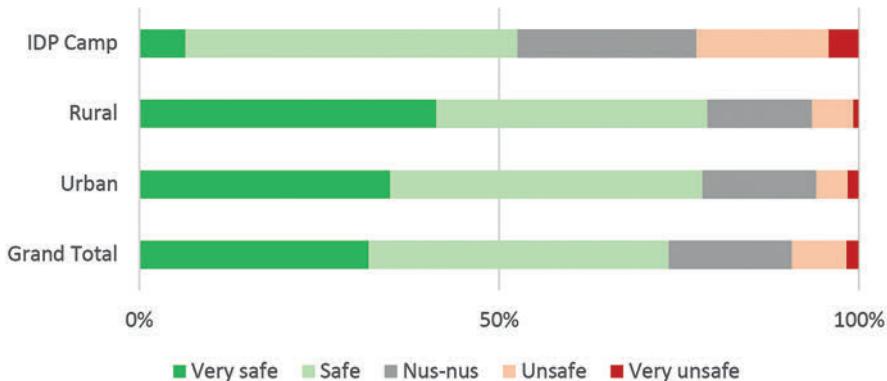


Figure 4: Perceived safety x Survey Environment (2024)



The lower levels of reported safety in the IDP camps coincide with the transitioning of the UN-administered PoCs into IDP settlements under the control of state governments.⁴ The transitioning of the PoCs were accompanied by reductions in humanitarian assistance. In some of the transitioned sites, especially in Bentiu, Unity State, the new situation resulted in an increase in criminality and insecurity. The influx of returnees fleeing the war in Sudan, many of whom have settled in the transitioned PoCs, in addition to the dire economic conditions in South Sudan, have introduced additional challenges for people living in IDP settlements. Any successful transition must account for the impacts that protracted displacement is having on IDPs and returnees and how their experiences affect their trust in the transitional process.

Prospects for Peace

Perceptions of whether South Sudan is currently at peace and prospects for peace in the next three years have been fairly consistent across successive opinion polls (see Figure 5 Figure 6). In 2024, one-third of respondents said that South Sudan was not at peace, which is almost the same as those who said that the country was not at peace in 2023 (32%) and 2022 (35%), but considerably less than the 47% who said it was not at peace in 2021. This suggests that the establishment of the Revitalized Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGONU) in 2020 and appointment of governors and county commissioners in 2021 may have had some short-term impact in terms of bolstering public confidence in the transitional process, but that the failure to implement key provisions of the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) since that time has left a major trust deficit among segments of the population.

Figure 5: Is South Sudan currently at peace? x Year (2021-24)

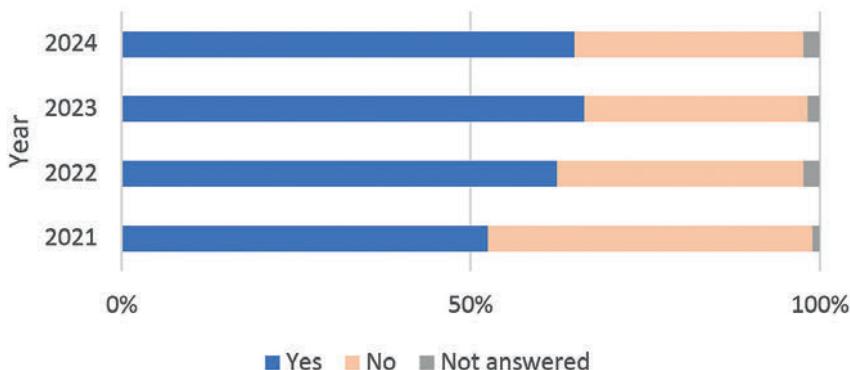
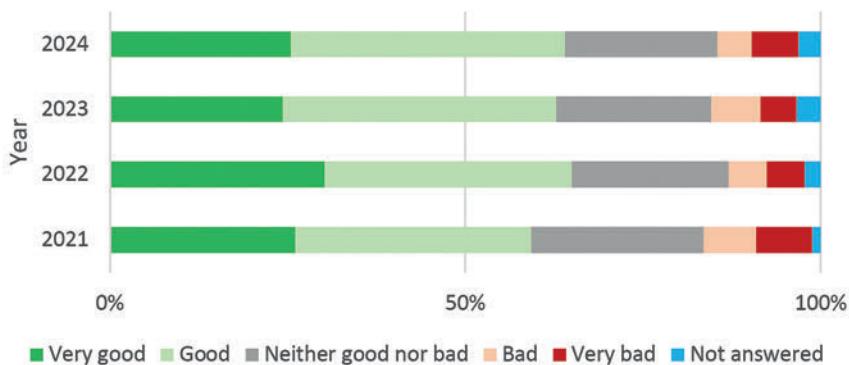


Figure 6: What are the prospects for peace in South Sudan in the next three years? x Year (2021-24)



Perceptions vary greatly across survey locations. The highest levels of scepticism are apparent among populations in Greater Equatoria, where 59% of respondents said South Sudan was not at peace and just 40% said that the prospects for peace in the next three years were 'good' or 'very good' (see Figure 7 and Figure 8).

Figure 7: Is South Sudan currently at peace? x Region (2024)

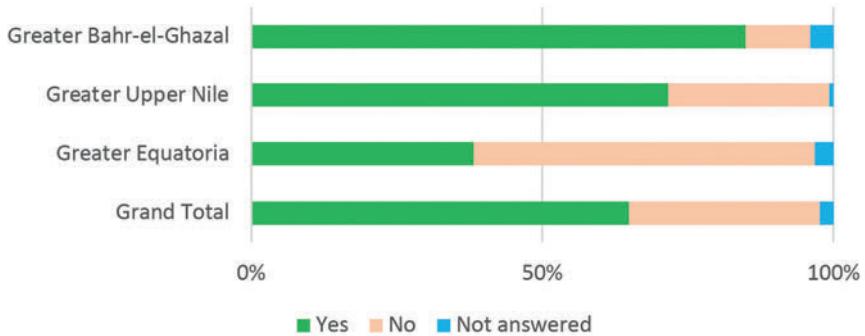
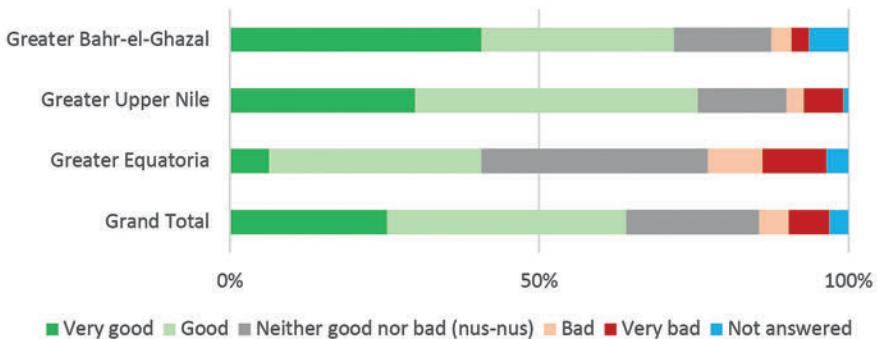


Figure 8: What are the prospects for peace in South Sudan in the next three years? x Region (2024)



There was also a correlation with survey environment. Nearly half of respondents in IDP camps said that South Sudan was not at peace and one in four respondents in IDP camps said that the prospects for peace in the next three years was 'bad' or 'very bad' (see Figure 9 Figure 10).

Figure 9: Is South Sudan currently at peace? x Survey Environment (2024)

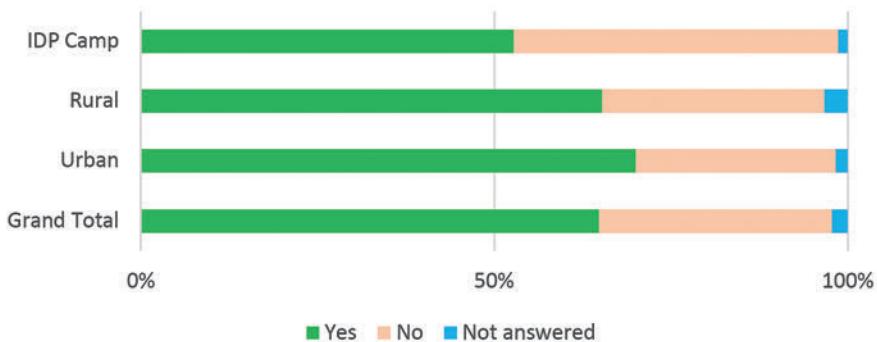
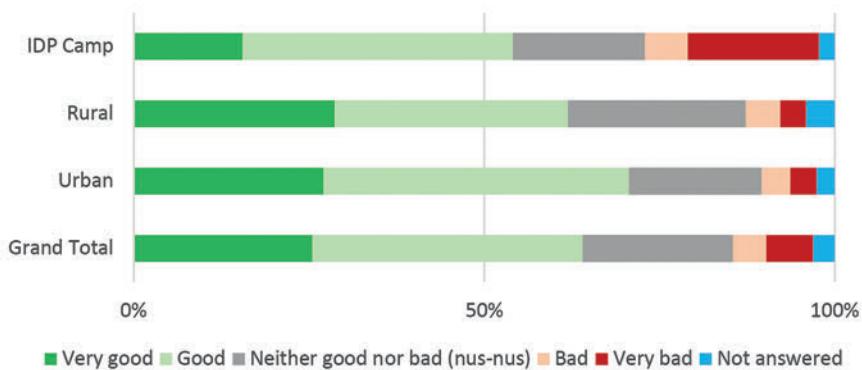


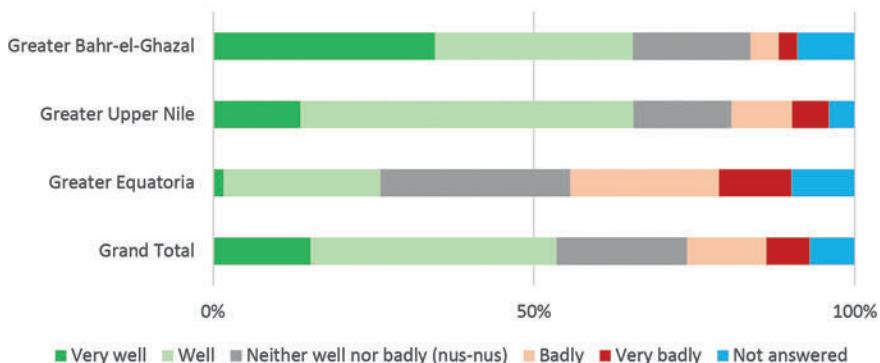
Figure 10: What are the prospects for peace in South Sudan in the next three years? x Survey Environment (2024)



Perceptions of the R-TGONU

Overall, more than half (53%) of respondents thought that the parties to the R-ARCSS work together 'well' or 'very well' at the national level. Again, perceptions varied considerably across survey locations, with just 27% of respondents in Greater Equatoria thinking that the parties work well together compared to 66% in both Greater Bahr-el-Ghazal and Greater Upper Nile (see Figure 11).

Figure 11: How well do the parties to the revitalized peace agreement work together at the national level?
x Region (2024)



A similar trend was apparent with regard to the perceived inclusivity of the R-TGONU. While 23% of respondents overall 'disagreed' or 'strongly disagreed' with the statement, 'My community is adequately represented in the R-TGONU', the number of respondents disagreeing rose to 36% in Greater Equatoria (see Figure 12), with just one respondent in Yambio agreeing that their community was adequately represented (see Figure 13).

Figure 12: Agree/Disagree: 'My community is adequately represented in the R-TGONU.' x Location (2024)

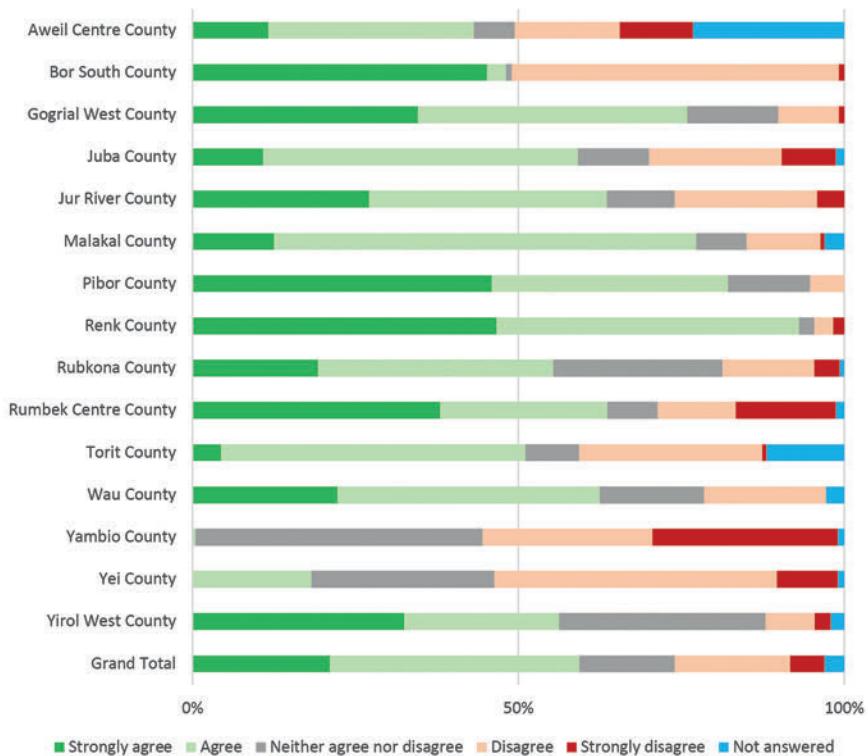
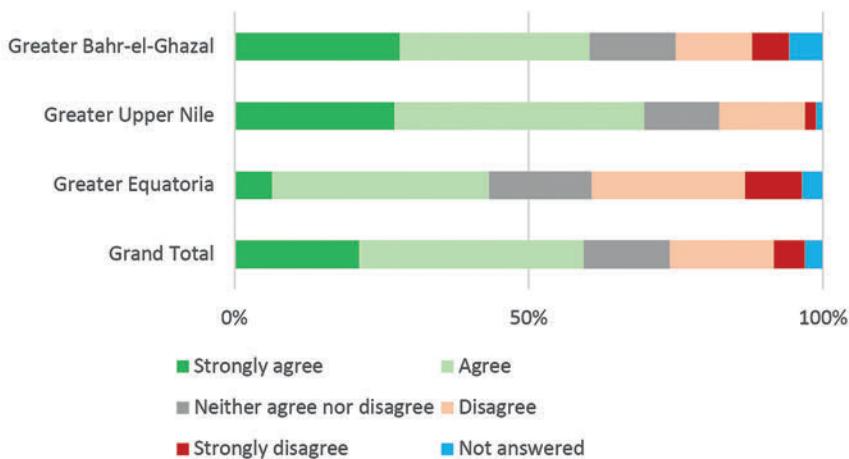


Figure 13: Agree/Disagree: 'My community is adequately represented in the R-TGONU.' x Region (2024)



Respondent views on the inclusivity of the R-TGONU were, in turn, correlated with their views on its functionality. Respondents who thought their community was not adequately represented in the R-TGONU were almost three times more likely to say that the parties do not work well together at the national level as respondents who thought their community was adequately represented (see Figure 14). They were also nearly three times as likely to say the prospects for peace in the next three years were 'bad' or 'very bad' as compared to respondents who thought their community was represented (see Figure 15).

Figure 14: How well do the parties to the revitalized peace agreement work together at the national level?
x Agree/Disagree: 'My community is adequately represented in the R-TGONU.' (2024)

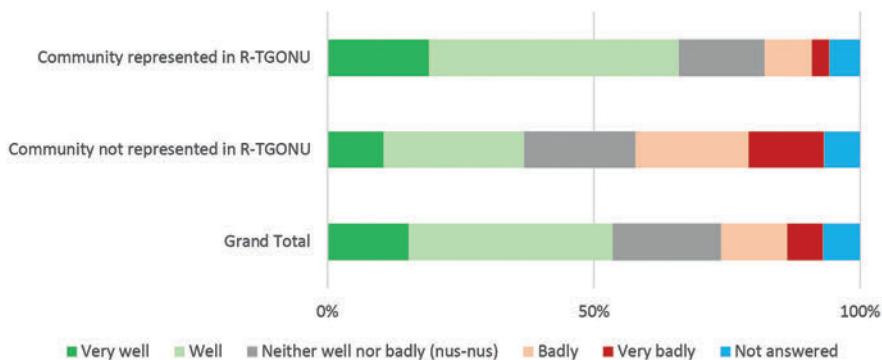
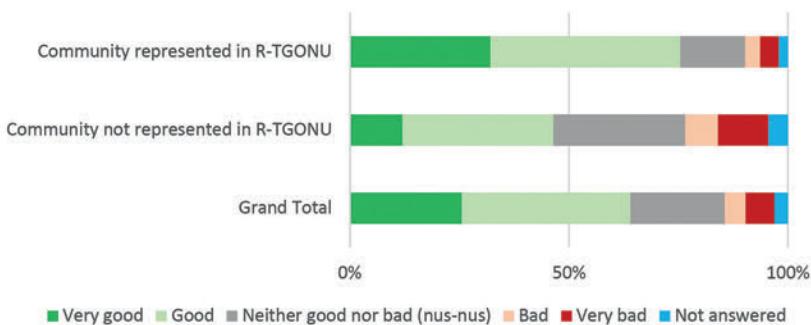


Figure 15: What are the prospects for peace in South Sudan in the next three years? x Agree/Disagree: 'My community is adequately represented in the R-TGONU.' (2024)



Concluding Remarks

The opinion poll findings underscore the important role that public trust plays in determining the success or failure of the transitional process in South Sudan. The people of South Sudan have demonstrated remarkable resilience and optimism despite the failure of the parties to implement the peace agreement. However, confidence is eroding among key segments of the population, and it remains to be seen if the peace process can withstand the most recent extension or if citizen trust will fall below the threshold needed to sustain the process. The transitional government should take urgent steps to restore people's trust, including more effective political communication and engaging people in dialogue about the way forward for the country. Most importantly, the government must demonstrate immediate and meaningful progress in key aspects of the agreement, including those relating to security arrangements, constitution-making, transitional justice and national elections.

Endnotes

¹ The study drew from the Everyday Peace Indicator (EPI) methodology to develop measures of everyday safety through interviews and focus groups across five of the survey locations in January and February 2020. The EPI methodology produced five questions which were asked in each survey. The responses were then translated into an aggregate index of daily safety. See: Pamina Firchow and Roger Mac Ginty, *Measuring peace: Comparability, commensurability, and complementarity using bottom-up indicators*, International Studies Review (2017).

² A convenience sample of 15 counties was selected to represent the principal regions and conflict theatres in South Sudan. The research team used an approximately self-weighting stratified random sampling approach to select households, and then individuals within households. This method centred on a randomization strategy implemented using ArcGIS and the GRID3 South Sudan Settlement Extents, Version 01.01 dataset. For each workday, enumerators began at randomly drawn map coordinates and followed a random walk guided by smartphone apps. Enumerators recorded responses using KoboToolbox smartphone software. See: Center for International Earth Science Information Network (CIESIN), Columbia University and Novel-T. 2021, GRID3 South Sudan Settlement Extents, Version 01, Geo-Referenced Infrastructure and Demographic Data for Development (GRID3), available at: <https://doi.org/10.7916/d8-khpa-pq09>.

³ The research team identified five indicators of 'everyday peace' through focus group discussions in five locations across South Sudan in 2020. Respondents were asked: (1) How safe do you feel using the main roads between towns? (2) How safe do you feel moving in the countryside? (3) How safe would you feel leaving your house at night to tend to a neighbour who needs something urgently? (4) How safe do you feel going to buy goods in the market? (5) How safe do you feel participating in cultural activities, such as dances or other celebrations? Respondents could answer: 'very safe', 'safe', 'neither safe nor unsafe (nus-nus)', 'unsafe', or 'very unsafe'. In some figures, the responses appear as numeric scores ranging from 5 = very safe, to 1 = very unsafe. For each respondent, the mean score across the five questions represents an aggregate safety score.

⁴ The only remaining PoC as of this writing is Malakal, though there are plans for the PoC there to transition as well once conditions are deemed conducive.



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