



From War Economies to Predatory Peace: How Peace Settlements Legitimise Extraction

Matthew Sterling Benson-Strohmayer



THE UNIVERSITY
of EDINBURGH



PeaceRep
Peace and Conflict
Resolution Evidence
Platform



Matthew Sterling Benson-Strohmayer

PeaceRep: The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform
School of Law, Old College, The University of Edinburgh
South Bridge, Edinburgh EH8 9YL

Tel. +44 (0)131 651 4566

Fax. +44 (0)131 650 2005

E-mail: peacerep@ed.ac.uk

PeaceRep.org

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/peacerep/>

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About the author:

Dr Matthew Sterling Benson-Strohmayer is Research Director for Sudan and South Sudan in the Conflict and Civiness Research Group at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and Affiliate Staff in the Department of Economic History. An economic historian of war and peace, his research examines how taxation, extraction, and off-budget finance structure conflict, predatory rule, and civic resistance across Africa and the wider Global South. His book *Of Rule Not Revenue: Predation, State-Unbuilding, and Conflict in Sudan and South Sudan, 1821-2023* is currently invited for peer review with Cambridge University Press. He has published across economic history, political economy, and conflict studies – including in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* and the *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* – and contributes to debates on fiscal fragmentation, war finance, and civic statecraft.

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Executive Summary

Across conflict-affected settings, peace agreements and post-war reform programmes are commonly expected to dismantle wartime institutions and inaugurate more accountable forms of governance. This brief argues that, in practice, peace processes often stabilise authority by reorganising access to revenue without confronting the coercive mechanisms through which power was exercised during war. I term this dynamic predatory peace – a pattern in which settlement stabilises elite coalitions by reorganising fiscal access to rents while leaving coercive wartime revenue systems intact, and often legitimising them under the guise of statebuilding.

In South Sudan, for instance, the Ministry of Finance publishes annual budgets and engages in IMF reviews, yet the de facto fiscal system flows through opaque oil-backed loans, military-owned enterprises, and checkpoint economies that bypass legislative oversight – arrangements enabled, not disrupted, by successive peace agreements.

The observation that peace agreements can entrench the power of victors is not new. What this brief identifies is the specific fiscal mechanism through which this occurs, and why it matters for programming. The peace settlement itself transforms wartime extraction into internationally recognised components of state authority, embedding coercive fiscal practices within the architecture of the post-war state.

Predatory peace is most visible in resource-dependent, aid-saturated contexts where external rents substitute for domestic taxation and ruling coalitions sustain loyalty through distributed access to extraction rather than public service delivery. Predatory peace does not imply that peace settlements inevitably entrench predation; rather, it highlights a recurring institutional risk when fiscal power is excluded from settlement design. This differs from ordinary state predation in three ways:

- (1) extraction that would be condemned during war becomes 'governance' after settlement;
- (2) international recognition enables access to finance – aid, loans, commodity markets – that sustains predatory systems;
- (3) civic opposition confronts not just local elites but internationally backed institutions.

Drawing on 210 interviews across South Sudan, archival research, systematic analysis of peace agreements through the PA-X Peace Agreements Database, and comparative engagement across conflicts, the brief identifies five recurring dynamics: peace agreements as fiscal bargains that redistribute access to revenue among elites; strategic fiscal fragmentation, where overlapping revenue points sustain loyalty and diffuse accountability; off-budget and para-fiscal finance that operates outside legislative oversight; service substitution, where donor-funded delivery reduces pressure on rulers to convert domestic revenues into public goods; and fictive fiscal orders, where formal institutions perform reform for international audiences while the real political budget operates through opaque networks. Similar patterns are traced illustratively in Somalia, Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, Myanmar, Syria, and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

For practitioners and policymakers, the brief carries three core implications:

- (1) Revenue and extraction must be treated as constitutive components of conflict analysis and political settlement design, rather than downstream governance issues to be addressed after agreement. Fiscal arrangements are the material foundation of political order, and programming that ignores them risks stabilising rather than transforming predatory systems.
- (2) Interventions should map actual revenue flows – including off-budget military enterprises, checkpoint economies, oil-backed lending, and commodity prepayment deals – before designing reform. Formal budgets and transparency frameworks can create fictive fiscal orders that perform reform while coercion persists.
- (3) Civic actors documenting and contesting fiscal power should be supported as peace infrastructure, not treated as governance add-ons. In Sudan, the Regime Dismantling Committee demonstrated how civic-led investigations into revenue flows and parastatal finance can disrupt entrenched fiscal power. Peacebuilding interventions should fund and protect comparable initiatives.

Key Findings

This brief identifies a recurrent pattern in post-conflict governance in which peace settlements reorganise wartime systems of extraction rather than dismantling them. Drawing on field research in South Sudan and comparative evidence across conflict-affected contexts, the analysis shows how fiscal arrangements embedded in peace agreements can stabilise predatory elite coalitions while leaving coercive revenue practices intact.

1. Predatory peace emerges when coercive extraction is legitimised through post-war institutions

The concept of predatory peace captures a situation in which wartime systems of extraction are reorganised and embedded within internationally recognised state institutions. In this context, practices that would be condemned during conflict, such as checkpoint taxation, security-linked commercial activity, or off-budget military finance, can become incorporated into formal governance structures following a peace settlement.

2. Peace settlements frequently function as fiscal bargains among elites

Peace agreements are typically understood as political or security settlements. In practice, they also redistribute access to revenue streams, public offices, and economic rents among armed and political actors. Rather than transforming extraction systems, settlements often reallocate control over them. As a result, wartime revenue practices can persist under the institutional cover of post-war governance arrangements.

3. Peace processes often stabilise rather than dismantle fragmented revenue systems

Across multiple conflict settings, five recurring fiscal dynamics can be observed:

- ▶ Peace agreements as fiscal bargains, reallocating access to rents among elites.
- ▶ Strategic fiscal fragmentation, where overlapping revenue authorities distribute extraction rights across security actors, ministries, and local authorities.
- ▶ Off-budget and para-fiscal finance, including military enterprises, commodity prepayment deals, and checkpoint economies operating outside legislative oversight.
- ▶ Service substitution through external finance, where donor-funded service delivery reduces pressure on rulers to convert domestic revenues into public goods.

- ▶ Fictive fiscal orders, where formal institutions perform fiscal reform for international audiences while the real political budget operates through informal networks.

These dynamics allow predatory governance systems to persist even as peacebuilding interventions promote institutional reform.

4. External rents can weaken incentives for fiscal accountability

Predatory peace is often reinforced by external sources of revenue such as oil exports, mineral rents, or international assistance. When rulers rely heavily on these income streams rather than domestic taxation, they face fewer incentives to bargain with citizens over public goods provision or fiscal transparency. In such contexts, peace settlements may stabilise elite coalitions without transforming coercive extraction practices.

5. Ignoring fiscal power risks stabilising conflict economies

Peacebuilding and statebuilding programmes often prioritise institutional reform, political representation, or service delivery while treating revenue systems as a technical governance issue. This brief demonstrates that revenue architecture is instead constitutive of political order. Interventions that fail to analyse how extraction actually occurs risk reinforcing the fiscal foundations of predatory governance.

6. Civic actors play a crucial role in contesting predatory fiscal systems

Grassroots actors, including investigative bodies, civil society organisations, and local networks, often play a key role in documenting and challenging opaque revenue systems. Supporting such initiatives can strengthen accountability and help shift fiscal governance away from coercive extraction.

7. Predatory peace is most likely under specific political-fiscal conditions and is not inevitable

The dynamics described in this brief are most visible in resource-dependent and aid-saturated settings where external rents substitute for domestic taxation and fiscal authority is fragmented across security actors and informal networks. They are less likely to emerge where governments depend on broad-based domestic taxation, where revenue authority is centralised and transparent, and where civic actors possess the institutional capacity to monitor and contest extraction.

Introduction: Why Revenue Matters for Peace

Revenue is not a technical backdrop to post-war recovery. Fiscal systems determine who can sustain armed authority, buy loyalty, and maintain coalitions. They therefore constitute the material infrastructure of political settlements, not merely a technical domain of governance. It is a core site where authority is exercised, contested, and stabilised. In many conflict-affected states, taxation, fees, licensing, and resource extraction are experienced not as civic obligations but as coercive encounters with armed actors, security agencies, or delegated intermediaries.¹ Peace agreements routinely address governance, security, and representation – and PA-X data show that fiscal provisions overwhelmingly focus on institutional design and allocation mechanisms rather than on how extraction is enforced or experienced on the ground.² This creates a recurring tension between the stabilising logic of institutional reform – which prioritises allocation, representation, and procedural order – and the everyday coercive practices through which revenue authority is actually exercised. Instead, peace processes seek to stabilise political order without directly confronting the distributive and coercive struggles through which fiscal authority has historically been exercised.³

Rather than constraining predatory rule, such agreements often reconfigure and legitimise it. The result is a form of settlement that can endure institutionally while leaving everyday relations of extraction largely untouched. Consider a concrete example from South Sudan. The Ministry of Finance publishes annual budgets and submits to International Monetary Fund (IMF) reviews, constructing an appearance of fiscal normalcy. Yet off-budget oil-backed loans, military-owned companies, and checkpoint fees operate in parallel, eclipsing formal revenue systems. This is what I term a fictive fiscal order – one that performs reform while predation endures. Donors engage with the formal budget; elites extract through parallel systems of oil-backed loans, military enterprises, and checkpoints, which structure actual political authority and loyalty. Both systems are 'real', but they operate according to different logics: one performs accountability for international audiences, the other sustains domestic power.

The term 'predatory' describes extraction oriented toward elite enrichment rather than public welfare, while 'coercive' (as defined above) refers to the enforcement mechanism – compliance secured through armed authority or threat. Predatory peace emerges when such coercive extraction is reorganised and legitimised through internationally recognised institutions. This brief focuses specifically on the fiscal mechanisms through which such arrangements are materially sustained.⁴ The peace agreement enables both. Crucially, this is not simply state weakness or corruption persisting despite peacebuilding efforts – it is a governance strategy embedded within the peace settlement itself, one that gains legitimacy precisely through the international recognition granted to post-war institutions.⁵

Research Methodology

This policy brief builds on research published in the *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 'Predatory Peace: Fiscal Fragmentation and Coercive Statebuilding in South Sudan and Beyond' and *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 'Of Rule, Not Revenue: South Sudan's Revenue Complex from Colonial, Rebel, to Independent Rule, 1899 to 2023' which together examine how coercive systems of revenue extraction have been sustained across colonial, rebel, and post-war governance in South Sudan — and how peace agreements have reconfigured rather than dismantled them.⁶ The analysis forms part of a wider research programme on fiscal governance, war economies, and peacebuilding, including a forthcoming monograph and an ongoing historical-comparative project.

The findings presented here draw on a mixed-methods research design combining qualitative fieldwork, archival analysis, and systematic review of peace agreements. Empirically, the research is grounded in 210 semi-structured interviews conducted between 2020 and 2024 across eight of South Sudan's ten states by the Bridge Network in South Sudan. The analysis of predatory peace is supplemented by 205 interviews conducted between 2019 and 2023 across nine states for the historical analysis published in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*. Interviewees included local traders, tax collectors, customary authorities, civil servants, soldiers, customs officials, and community leaders, capturing both how revenue is extracted in practice and how it is experienced by those subject to taxation. Interviews were conducted in English and local languages, transcribed, and triangulated to mitigate risks associated with researching public finance in conflict-affected environments.

These interviews were complemented by archival research in South Sudanese, Sudanese and British colonial archives, and documentary research, including budget speeches, finance ministry reports, donor assessments, UN Panel of Experts investigations, and financial analyses. Given the opacity of South Sudan's oil sector and the prevalence of off-budget and oil-backed financing, particular attention was paid to tracing revenue flows that sit outside formal fiscal institutions.

A further layer of analysis draws on the PA-X Peace Agreements Database, a global dataset of formal peace agreements, which enabled systematic examination of fiscal, revenue-sharing, and economic governance provisions across peace agreements affecting South Sudan since 1990.⁷ This made it possible to track how fiscal clauses have been included, reinterpreted, or omitted over successive settlement cycles, and to assess the extent to which peace processes have addressed, or bypassed, coercive revenue systems.

While South Sudan serves as the anchor case, the research situates these findings within a broader comparative landscape. Similar patterns, where peace settlements stabilise authority by reorganising access to revenue while leaving wartime extraction practices intact, have been identified in other conflict-affected settings, including Somalia, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Afghanistan, Iraq, Myanmar, and Bosnia-Herzegovina. In this policy brief, these cases are used illustratively to highlight portable mechanisms rather than to offer full comparative analysis. The comparative examples draw on existing scholarship and policy analysis rather than original fieldwork and are intended to open analytical questions for practitioners rather than provide definitive country assessments.

The purpose of this brief is therefore diagnostic rather than exhaustive: to identify recurring fiscal dynamics that shape peace outcomes across conflict-affected contexts, and to surface revenue and extraction as central, yet often neglected, dimensions of peacebuilding and political settlement design.

A Recurrent Pattern Across PeaceRep Contexts

Research across a range of conflict settings suggests a set of recurring dynamics in how peace processes engage, and avoid, fiscal power. These are not instances of state weakness or institutional failure that peace agreements fail to resolve, but systematic patterns through which peace settlements reorganise wartime fiscal systems, granting them formal recognition and international legitimacy while leaving their coercive revenue practices largely intact. This is what distinguishes predatory peace from ordinary predation: wartime extraction is not dismantled but re-embedded within post-war institutions – federalism arrangements, power-sharing deals, decentralisation frameworks, and reconstruction finance – that acquire legitimacy precisely through the international support they receive.

Unlike the ideal of post-conflict statebuilding, where armed actors are integrated into new institutions while coercive practices are transformed, predatory peace reorganises fiscal extraction without dismantling coercion. It embeds extraction within internationally recognised governance structures that confer legitimacy while shielding it from both domestic and donor reform pressure. This occurs most systematically in resource-dependent, aid-saturated contexts where external rents (oil, minerals, donor aid) substitute for domestic taxation, enabling ruling coalitions to sustain loyalty through distributed access to extraction rather than through public service delivery or fiscal bargaining with citizens. In such settings, peace settlements reorganise who controls revenue streams and under what institutional cover, but leave the coercive mechanisms through which extraction occurs and the external revenue base that sustains it intact.

The political effects of this recognition – insulating predatory actors from accountability, enabling access to international finance, and constraining civic opposition – are explored through the case studies that follow. These dynamics do not appear uniformly in every case, nor do they produce identical outcomes. Rather, they constitute a pattern of risk that peace and statebuilding interventions should take seriously, particularly when interventions risk stabilising rather than transforming extractive governance.

1. Peace agreements as fiscal bargains

Peace settlements frequently redistribute access to offices, rents, and revenue streams among armed and political elites. While framed as political or security compromises, these arrangements also function as fiscal bargains, reallocating control over resources without transforming extraction itself. Formal institutions, reform language, and transparency frameworks then perform the ideal type of fiscal normalcy – presenting the appearance of centralised, transparent, rule-based revenue collection – even as everyday revenue practices remain coercive and fragmented. The appearance of reform coexists with entrenched informal networks, producing a fictive fiscal order in which official architectures satisfy international donors while the real political budget continues to operate through opaque and negotiated systems of control.

South Sudan: The [2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement](#) allocated 50% of oil revenues to the Government of Southern Sudan, yet left extraction and expenditure mechanisms largely opaque. Rather than transforming fiscal governance, oil revenues funded patronage networks and military expenditure, including the rapid expansion of army and civil service payrolls to accommodate armed groups, embedding rather than disrupting predatory rule. Subsequent settlements reproduced this logic. Today, the Ministry of Finance produces annual budgets and engages in IMF Article IV consultations, but these formal processes bear little relationship to actual revenue and expenditure. The de facto fiscal system flows through opaque oil-backed loans and commodity prepayment deals that bypass legislative oversight. Agreements such as the [Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in Republic of South Sudan](#) (R-ARCSS) have entrenched this dynamic by establishing oversight bodies with limited enforcement power, allowing the state to perform the rituals of sovereignty while sustaining a predatory peace in which revenues are diverted toward the security apparatus rather than public services.⁸

Afghanistan: The [2020 Doha Agreement](#) between the United States and the Taliban focused on troop withdrawal and counterterrorism commitments while sidestepping Taliban revenue practices. By 2017, the Taliban already controlled major border crossings generating significant customs revenue, distinct from their taxation of poppy cultivation and mining extraction.⁹ Post-settlement, the Taliban formalised and centralised these border and customs revenues under their governance.¹⁰

While the Taliban banned poppy cultivation in April 2022 – dramatically reducing cultivation by an estimated 85% by 2023 – the trade in existing opium inventories continued, and the ban inflated the value of these assets, benefiting landed elites.¹¹ The underlying fiscal infrastructure of extraction remained intact and was legitimised domestically through state capture, though without the international recognition that characterises predatory peace in other settings. Afghanistan thus represents a partial variant: fiscal extraction reorganised through peace settlement design (the Doha process) but formalised through state seizure rather than internationally recognised institutional reform.

Somalia: Federal agreements between Mogadishu and regional administrations have repeatedly redistributed access to port revenues (Mogadishu, Kismayo, Bosaso) and livestock export taxes without addressing Al-Shabaab's parallel taxation system or the proliferation of 'checkpoint polities'. Because Federal Member States and district administrations often lack access to port rents, they operate unaccountable checkpoint authorities to sustain themselves. Each settlement creates new fiscal access points, using checkpoints to fold clan militias into nominal state structures without dismantling coercive extraction.¹² Al-Shabaab's efficient taxation system continues to operate alongside the state, often proving cheaper cumulatively and more predictable than government collection; while Al-Shabaab levies a standardised one-time transit fee valid across its territory, government-controlled routes force traders to negotiate unpredictable payments at multiple stops.¹³

2. Strategic fiscal fragmentation

Revenue authority is often practically dispersed across ministries, security actors, local authorities, and para-statal entities. I term this strategic fiscal fragmentation: the deliberate multiplication of overlapping revenue points that sustain loyalty and diffuse accountability through off-budget networks. These arrangements are visible not only institutionally but materially in the multiplication of revenue checkpoints, delegated taxation rights, and parallel budgeting practices, where authority over collection rather than formal office becomes the primary currency of political loyalty.¹⁴ Demonstrating that fragmentation is 'strategic' does not require proving individual intent, but rather showing that it persists despite capacity for centralisation.

Evidence includes explicit delegation of revenue authority to military units or local officials (as documented in South Sudan interviews); ceasefire agreements that formalise armed group control over revenue streams (Myanmar, Syria); and peace settlements that create new fiscal access points (Somalia's checkpoint proliferation). Rulers maintain fragmented systems not because they lack control, but because fragmentation itself serves political functions — distributing extractive authority to sustain coalitions when central budgets fail.

In South Sudan, this logic overlaps with what has been described as 'payroll peace': a settlement formula that secures elite and armed-group buy-in by expanding access to material rewards, particularly through salaries, positions, and allowances on the state payroll.¹⁵ However, as this research shows, payroll peace operates alongside, and is often sustained by, broader fiscal arrangements that extend beyond formal payrolls, including control over taxation, fees, checkpoints, customs, and resource rents. Strategic fiscal fragmentation thus generalises payroll peace across the revenue system, embedding wartime extraction practices directly into post-war governance.

South Sudan: Payroll peace, or the expansion of the civil service and army to buy loyalty, operates alongside a broader 'revenue complex' of licensed extortion. With central salaries often unpaid, the state effectively authorises soldiers, wildlife officers, and local commissioners to levy their own de facto taxes on checkpoints and households. This replicates wartime rebel logistics under the banner of the state, creating a system described by locals not as taxation, but as 'organised robbery' where citizens pay multiple, contradictory demands to sustain the security apparatus rather than public services.¹⁶

Syria: Local ceasefires and 'reconciliation agreements' negotiated between 2016–2019 did not merely freeze conflict but functioned as 'coercive statebuilding' tools. While these agreements often formalised militia control over checkpoints and smuggling routes, the regime used them to reassert sovereign power over property and citizenship. 'Soft reconciliations' allowed the state to retain populations for conscription and taxation, while elite military units (like the 4th Division) and pro-regime militias were granted license to generate their own resources through 'criminal ways' at checkpoints to offset the state's inability to pay them.¹⁷

Iraq: Post-2003 governance fragmented fiscal authority across the Kurdistan Regional Government, state-sanctioned paramilitary formations (notably within the Popular Mobilisation Forces), and subnational power brokers controlling local revenue streams. This 'hybrid' authority allows actors like the Badr Organization or Kata'ib Hezbollah to siphon state resources through 'ghost soldier' payroll schemes while simultaneously capturing customs revenue at key border crossings (e.g., Safra, Al-Qaim).¹⁸ These actors operate with one foot inside the state (receiving official salaries) and one foot outside (running illicit checkpoint economies), creating a 'non-state' or al-Dawla (الدولة) dynamic where the central government funds the very actors undermining its sovereignty.¹⁹

3. Off-budget and para-fiscal finance

Significant revenue flows sit outside formal budgets, sustained through security-linked businesses, commodity pre-financing, border trade, and informal levies. These channels are rarely dismantled by peace processes and are often insulated from reform by their political utility, creating a predatory peace where coercion is legitimised under the guise of statebuilding.

South Sudan: Oil revenues increasingly flow through opaque oil-backed loans and commodity prepayment deals with international firms, sustaining a fictive fiscal order that bypasses legislative oversight to fund off-budget military expenditure. In 2012, President Salva Kiir acknowledged that \$4 billion in oil revenue had been 'stolen' – a figure that has likely grown as transparency mechanisms remain absent. Recent peace agreements like the R-ARCSS have failed to disrupt this system, instead engaging in payroll peace that expands the number of elites extracting rents from the state.²⁰

Democratic Republic of Congo: Successive settlements from the [2003 Sun City Agreement](#) to the [2008 Goma Accord](#) prioritised power-sharing and elections while failing to address the economic engines of conflict. While international attention focused on 'conflict minerals' (cobalt, gold), research indicates that armed groups and army units often derive more reliable revenue from a pervasive system of roadblocks. By taxing the circulation of everyday goods, including charcoal, palm oil, beer, and agricultural produce, actors like the Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda (FDLR or the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda) and the Mouvement du 23 mars (M23 or the March 23 Movement) finance their operations through the control of trade routes rather than just mining sites, a dynamic often invisible to standard peacebuilding frameworks.²¹

Myanmar: Ceasefire agreements negotiated between the military and armed organisations in the 1990s and 2000s formalised ceasefire capitalism, granting armed groups access to jade, timber, and border trade in exchange for stability. Since the 2021 coup, this illicit economy has metastasised. While the coup ruptured Myanmar's formal peace process, the underlying pattern of legitimised extraction through ceasefire arrangements persisted and intensified. Alongside traditional resource extraction, pro-regime Border Guard Forces and some armed organisations now generate billions of dollars from cyber-scams and synthetic drug production. These criminal enclaves, often staffed by trafficked labour, provide critical revenue to conflict actors, insulating them from sanctions and further embedding criminality into the country's governance.²²

4. Service substitution and external finance

Donor-funded service delivery and stabilisation support can reduce pressure on ruling authorities to convert domestic revenues into public goods. External finance substitutes for fiscal bargaining, allowing coercive extraction to persist without renegotiation. This is a strategy of 'extraversion', whereby political elites actively mobilise, appropriate, and redirect foreign resources to reproduce their own domestic authority. By relying on international donors for survival needs, rulers are insulated from domestic accountability, transforming internationally-backed statebuilding efforts into a mechanism for capturing foreign rents while also preying on domestic populations rather than forging a social contract.²³

South Sudan: Since 2005, international donors have funded most education, health, and infrastructure services, providing over US\$1 billion annually in bilateral assistance. This arrangement allows the government to act as a revenue extractor without providing services – practically outsourcing the state's fiscal-social contract to international agencies. Because donor aid substitutes for absent public services, the government faces almost no domestic pressure to allocate its oil revenues to welfare or public goods, diverting them instead to opaque patronage networks and off-budget military expenditure.²⁴

Afghanistan (2001–2021): The US-led reconstruction effort created a deeply aid-dependent rentier state.²⁵ Prior to the Republic's collapse, international assistance contributed to approximately 40% of Afghanistan's GDP and funded roughly 75% of total public expenditures.²⁶ This massive influx of external finance allowed successive Afghan governments to steadily increase expenditures while tolerating extraordinary levels of unofficial spending, which did not contribute to a sustainable domestic revenue base. Because the licit economy was fundamentally uncompetitive and reliant on foreign subsidies, the withdrawal of donor funding and military support caused the immediate collapse of the government and its fiscal basis.²⁷

Somalia and the Somaliland Contrast: Humanitarian assistance and stabilisation funding have covered essential services in Somalia for decades, turning international aid into one of the primary economic and political prizes in a resource-scarce country. Somali political elites have frequently engaged in statebuilding as an end – creating largely fictitious or 'ceremonial' ministries to attract and absorb donor aid. Formal state structures are utilised to capture foreign resources and dispense patronage, while domestic revenues generated from port fees, telecommunications, and a pervasive system of checkpoints are primarily used to enrich elites and buy the loyalty of local security forces.²⁸

The corrosive effect of this external financing is starkly illustrated by the contrasting case of Somaliland. Because it lacks international recognition, Somaliland has been ineligible for foreign assistance and was forced to rely on domestic tax revenues to survive. This dependency forced the government into a process of revenue bargaining, where it had to offer genuine political concessions, peace, and representative institutions to the local business community in exchange for tax compliance – suggesting that the absence of donor substitution can, under specific conditions, create pressure for fiscal accountability.²⁹

5. Fictive fiscal order

Peace settlements often establish formal fiscal institutions that satisfy donor requirements while leaving coercive extraction practices intact. Budgets are published, transparency frameworks adopted, and IMF consultations conducted – yet these procedures bear little relationship to how revenue is practically extracted and allocated. The result is a fictive fiscal order where official architectures perform reform for international audiences while the real political budget operates through opaque, unaccountable networks.

South Sudan: The Ministry of Finance produces annual budgets and engages in IMF Article IV consultations, yet these documents bear a tenuous relationship to actual revenue and expenditure. The de facto fiscal system flows through opaque oil-backed loans, commodity prepayment deals, and military-owned enterprises that bypass legislative oversight. This arrangement allows the state to perform the rituals of sovereignty for international audiences while maintaining a predatory peace where oil revenues are diverted to buy loyalty and fund the security apparatus rather than public services.³⁰

Bosnia-Herzegovina: Post-Dayton reforms created formal tax administrations, yet the economy remains characterised by 'over-institutionalisation' and a grey economy estimated at over a quarter of GDP. While formal institutions exist, political parties treat public enterprises and procurement contracts as patronage fiefdoms. This 'system without a system' allows elites to capture resources through informal channels while the formal economy stagnates, effectively forcing the formal sector to subsidise the informal networks of the ruling parties through higher taxes.³¹

Iraq: The Ministry of Finance publishes budgets and coordinates with the IMF, but this formal veneer masks a condition of al-Dawla, where the state lacks a monopoly on violence or revenue.³² Actual fiscal power is held by hybrid actors: militias control key border crossings (such as Safra, reportedly generating ~\$15 million monthly) and run ghost soldier schemes that siphon public salaries to paramilitary commanders. These groups operate with one foot inside the state (receiving official PMF/Popular Mobilisation Forces salaries) and one foot outside (engaging in smuggling and extortion), rendering the official budget a mechanism for funding the very actors undermining state sovereignty.³³

Cross-Country Reflections: Questions, Not Templates

Revenue is not simply one governance domain among many; instead, it is constitutive of political order. Unlike rule of law, service delivery, or representation, fiscal power determines who can sustain armed force, buy loyalty, and maintain political coalitions in the absence of democratic legitimacy. This makes revenue arrangements particularly resistant to reform: they are not downstream governance issues but the material foundation through which power is exercised and reproduced. Moreover, the source of revenue shapes political relations: point-source resources like oil enable highly centralised, off-budget predation insulated from citizens, while border trade and checkpoints create distributed networks of extraction that buy loyalty through delegated coercion. This fiscal specificity — how extraction is enforced, who controls it, and what it funds — helps explain why peace agreements that ignore revenue architecture often reproduce wartime power relations even while creating formal institutions.

Because revenue structures armed authority and coalition maintenance in ways that other governance domains do not, the analytical questions that follow foreground fiscal power as central to settlement analysis rather than as one sector among many. While similar questions could be asked about justice, rule of law, or service delivery, revenue is distinctive in its direct relationship to coercion, material extraction, and external rents — making fiscal arrangements uniquely resistant to reform and particularly consequential for whether peace settlements stabilise or transform wartime political economies. Rather than offering country-by-country diagnoses, these questions help practitioners trace how revenue architecture shapes political order across contexts:

- ▶ **How do peace agreements and transitional arrangements redistribute access to revenue among armed and political actors – recognising that control over revenue streams determines capacity to sustain armed force and buy loyalty?**³⁴ Map not just formal allocations but de facto control – customs posts, oil marketing authorities, licensing regimes, state-owned enterprises, and border checkpoints – asking who captures actual cash flow rather than who formally holds office.

- ▶ **Which revenue practices are stabilised, rather than transformed, by settlement design?** Identify mechanisms that are formalised or legitimised through peace agreements: checkpoint taxation, delegated customs enforcement, military-owned commercial entities, or resource concessions allocated to armed groups that convert wartime extraction into recognised fiscal authority.
- ▶ **Where does coercive extraction persist beneath formal fiscal institutions?** Look beyond budgets and ministries to para-fiscal channels – security-linked businesses, off-budget procurement, commodity prepayment deals, or informal licensing arrangements – that generate revenue outside legislative oversight yet finance political coalitions.
- ▶ **How do decentralisation or power-sharing arrangements reshape, rather than reduce, extraction points?** Assess whether devolution multiplies sites of extraction (local levies, checkpoint tolls, subnational licensing regimes) or creates mechanisms that genuinely alter how revenue is raised and monitored. Fragmentation can be strategic, not incidental, particularly where rulers retain capacity for centralisation but sustain distributed revenue authority.
- ▶ **To what extent does external finance substitute for domestic fiscal bargaining?** Track how donor-funded service delivery, stabilisation budgets, oil-backed lending, or humanitarian cash flows can reduce incentives to rely on negotiated taxation, allowing rulers to sustain loyalty through externally financed revenue streams alongside or in place of domestic fiscal bargaining.
- ▶ **Where are civic actors contesting fiscal power, and how are these efforts incorporated or marginalised?** Identify grassroots monitoring of customs revenue, oil transparency campaigns, anti-checkpoint mobilisation, or local struggles over licensing and land fees – and examine whether peace processes amplify or marginalise these fiscal claims.

These questions are intended to open analytical space, rather than foreclose it. They point to shared risks while allowing for contextual specificity. Not every peace process will exhibit all five dynamics of peace agreements as fiscal bargains; strategic fiscal fragmentation; off-budget and para-fiscal finance; service substitution and external finance; and, fictive fiscal orders. Some will show them acutely, others as latent risks. The purpose is diagnostic: to help practitioners recognise when agreements are reorganising rather than dismantling predatory fiscal systems.

Implications for PeaceRep Programming

Because revenue structures armed authority, coalition maintenance, and access to external rents, the patterns identified above carry specific implications for peacebuilding, stabilisation, and reform efforts that differ from conventional governance programming. These are not generic governance implications — they flow from revenue's constitutive role in materially sustaining armed authority through cash flow rather than institutional design. Programming that ignores fiscal architecture risks stabilising rather than transforming political settlements. I distinguish between diagnostic and programmatic implications:

Diagnostic Implications

- ▶ **Map revenue flows before designing interventions.** Identify who extracts what, where, and under whose protection – including security actors, para-statal entities, and international commodity firms. Use this mapping to assess how peace agreements redistribute fiscal access.
- ▶ **Trace external financing mechanisms.** Track not just donor aid but also commodity prepayment deals, oil-backed loans, and other instruments that bypass formal budgets and legislative oversight.
- ▶ **Identify off-budget networks.** Map military-owned companies, checkpoint economies, and informal taxation systems that operate in parallel to formal fiscal institutions.
- ▶ **Assess donor complicity.** Examine how service substitution (donor-funded health, education, infrastructure) reduces pressure on rulers to allocate domestic revenues to public goods.

Programmatic Implications

- ▶ **Treat revenue and extraction as constitutive components of conflict analysis and political settlement work,** not downstream governance issues. Fiscal arrangements are not technical details to be managed after settlement – they are the material foundation of political order and predatory and non-predatory forms of peace

- ▶ **Be cautious of reforms that add institutions without addressing enforcement and everyday extraction practices.** New revenue authorities, fiscal transparency frameworks, and anti-corruption commissions can create fictive fiscal orders that perform reform while coercion persists.
- ▶ **Recognise that decentralisation can multiply extraction points unless accompanied by accountability mechanisms.** Devolution without oversight often fragments fiscal authority in ways that benefit elites, not citizens.
- ▶ **Avoid elite pacts that entrench military autonomy or insulate security actors from fiscal oversight.** Agreements that allocate revenue streams to armed groups (as 'interim governance' or 'security financing') often legitimise predation rather than constraining it.³⁵
- ▶ **Support civic actors documenting and contesting fiscal power as peace infrastructure.** In Sudan, the Regime Dismantling Committee showed how civic-led investigations into revenue flows, asset capture, and parastatal finance can disrupt entrenched fiscal power and generate popular demands for accountability.³⁶ Peacebuilding interventions should fund and protect comparable civic audit, documentation, and oversight initiatives, recognising them as central to political settlement processes rather than as downstream governance add-ons.
- ▶ **Consider conditioning aid on concrete demilitarisation steps,** such as dissolving para-statal military enterprises, ending checkpoint taxation, and bringing security expenditure under legislative oversight. Aid that flows regardless of fiscal reform can subsidise predatory peace.

For PeaceRep: A Call for Vigilance

The central takeaway for PeaceRep programming is that fiscal arrangements are not technical details to be managed after settlement – they are the material foundation of political order. When peace agreements redistribute access to revenue without confronting coercive extraction, they often entrench rather than resolve the fiscal foundations of conflict.

Practitioners should be alert to the five dynamics outlined above: peace agreements as fiscal bargains, strategic fiscal fragmentation, off-budget finance, service substitution, and fictive fiscal order, and use the diagnostic questions to assess how peace processes reshape fiscal power in practice. This does not mean every peace agreement entrenches predatory peace, or that fiscal reform should precede settlement. It means that ignoring fiscal power is a choice with consequences, one that often stabilises elite coalitions at the expense of citizens who continue to experience extraction without accountability.

Recognising predatory peace when it emerges, understanding how international actors become complicit in its reproduction, and supporting civic efforts to contest and reshape fiscal governance are essential if peacebuilding is to move beyond procedural legitimacy toward substantive transformation.

Endnotes

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² Benson, M.S. (2025) 'Predatory peace: Fiscal fragmentation and coercive statebuilding in South Sudan and beyond', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*.

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⁴ The term 'predatory peace' builds on Braithwaite (2023) 'Beyond Predatory Peace', *Annual Review of Criminology*, 6:1–21, which examines how peace agreements across diverse contexts (Indonesia, Cambodia, post-Soviet transitions) can deliver procedural peace while institutionalising extraction and impunity, particularly where separations of powers remain weak. This brief extends that analysis to focus on fiscal architecture – revenue systems, extraction practices, and external finance – as the material foundation of predatory peace.

⁵ The concept of fictive fiscal order resonates with literatures on institutional isomorphism in development (Pritchett et al.), neopatrimonial extraversion (Bayart, Englebort), and bifurcated state authority (Mamdani). The contribution here is to show how peace settlements specifically become the mechanism through which dual fiscal systems acquire international legitimacy, and how the materiality of revenue sources, particularly point-source resources like oil, border trade networks, or checkpoint economies, shapes the political relations and loyalty structures that peace agreements institutionalise. Unlike generic analyses of state weakness or corruption, this framework traces how the physical and economic characteristics of extraction (centralised vs. distributed, licit vs. illicit, transparent vs. opaque) determine which actors gain access, how coalitions are maintained, and why certain extractive arrangements resist reform. For fuller theoretical engagement, see: Benson, M.S. (2025) 'Predatory peace: Fiscal fragmentation and coercive statebuilding in South Sudan and beyond', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*.; Andrews, M., Pritchett, L. and Woolcock, M. (2017) 'Looking like a state: The seduction of isomorphic mimicry', in *Building State Capability: Evidence, Analysis, Action*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 29–52.; Peiffer, C. and Englebort, P. (2012) 'Extraversion, vulnerability to donors, and political liberalization in Africa', *African Affairs*, 111(444), pp. 355–378.; Mamdani, M. (1996) *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.; Bayart, J.-F. (2000) 'Africa in the world: A history of extraversion', *African Affairs*, 99(395), pp. 217–267.

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✉ peacerep@ed.ac.uk

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PeaceRep is a research consortium based at Edinburgh Law School. Our research is rethinking peace and transition processes in the light of changing conflict dynamics, changing demands of inclusion, and changes in patterns of global intervention in conflict and peace/mediation/transition management processes.

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PeaceRep: The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform | peacerep@ed.ac.uk

University of Edinburgh, School of Law, Old College,
South Bridge, EH8 9YL

PeaceRep is funded by UK International Development from the UK government.



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peacerep@ed.ac.uk | <https://peacerep.org>

University of Edinburgh, School of Law, Old College, South Bridge EH8 9YL

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