International Journal of Innovative Social Sciences & Humanities Research 14(2):125-141, April-June, 2026

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doi:10.5281/zenodo.19642531

Armed Conflict, Fragile Institutions, and Sustainable Development in the Global South: A Political Economy Analysis

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ABSTRACT
Armed conflict remains a significant challenge to institutional stability and sustainable development in the Global South. Guided by Political Economy Theory and State Fragility Theory, this study investigates how armed conflict contributes to institutional fragility, how fragile institutions affect development outcomes, and the political economy factors that sustain instability. The research also identifies policy pathways for strengthening institutions in conflict-affected contexts.A mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews with 150 purposively selected respondents, including government officials, civil society representatives, and community leaders. Secondary data from international reports and development agencies were also utilized. Findings reveal that armed conflict significantly undermines institutional functionality, legitimacy, and resource allocation, while fragile institutions constrain access to education, healthcare, infrastructure, and effective policy implementation. Political economy factors, including elite capture, resource competition, corruption, and political exclusion, were found to perpetuate conflict and weaken development efforts. Respondents emphasized governance reform, inclusive participation, anti-corruption mechanisms, and conflict-sensitive development planning as critical pathways for institutional strengthening and sustainable development. The study concludes that breaking the cycle of conflict and underdevelopment requires integrated strategies informed by political economy and state fragility perspectives, ensuring both institutional resilience and socio-economic progress in the Global South.
Keywords: Armed conflict, Institutional fragility, Sustainable development, Political economy, State fragility, Global South

1. INTRODUCTION

Armed conflict has emerged as one of the most persistent and damaging challenges to development in the Global South. While the end of the Cold War was expected to usher in a more peaceful global order, the opposite has occurred in many low- and middle-income countries. Civil wars, insurgencies, communal violence, and armed rebellions have continued to spread across regions of Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. Unlike conventional wars between sovereign states, most of these conflicts are internal, long-lasting, and deeply rooted in domestic political and economic structures. As a result, they have had devastating consequences not only for peace and security but also for governance, economic performance, and long-term development outcomes.

The Global South is home to the majority of the world's fragile and conflict-affected states. Many of these countries inherited weak political and administrative institutions from the colonial period, which

were often designed to extract resources rather than promote inclusive governance or development. After independence, these institutional weaknesses were compounded by poor leadership, authoritarian rule, corruption, and unequal distribution of power and resources. Over time, these conditions created fertile ground for grievances, social exclusion, and violent contestation over state control. Scholars argue that where institutions fail to manage diversity, allocate resources fairly, or resolve disputes peacefully, armed conflict becomes more likely (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012; North, Wallis & Weingast, 2009).

Fragile institutions are central to understanding the persistence of conflict in the Global South. Institutions refer to the formal and informal rules, organizations, and norms that shape political, economic, and social interactions. These include government agencies, legal systems, security forces, electoral bodies, and public service institutions. In fragile states, these institutions lack capacity, legitimacy, or both. They often fail to enforce laws, protect citizens, deliver basic services, or regulate economic activities effectively. When citizens lose trust in state institutions, they may turn to informal authorities, ethnic militias, or armed groups for protection and access to resources, thereby deepening instability and violence.

Armed conflict and institutional fragility reinforce each other in a vicious cycle. Weak institutions increase the likelihood of conflict by failing to manage political competition and economic inequality, while conflict further erodes institutional capacity by destroying infrastructure, displacing skilled personnel, and diverting public resources toward military spending. The World Bank (2017) notes that conflict-affected countries typically experience a sharp decline in state capacity, making post-conflict recovery particularly difficult. In many cases, even when fighting subsides, fragile institutions remain unable to prevent the recurrence of violence.

The consequences of armed conflict for sustainable development are profound. Sustainable development goes beyond economic growth to include improvements in human wellbeing, social equity, and environmental protection. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasize the importance of peace, justice, and strong institutions as a foundation for development. However, countries affected by armed conflict consistently perform poorly across multiple SDGs, including poverty reduction, education, health, infrastructure, and environmental sustainability (UNDP, 2022).

Economically, armed conflict disrupts production, trade, and investment. Agricultural activities are abandoned due to insecurity, markets collapse, and infrastructure such as roads, electricity, and communication networks are destroyed. According to Collier et al. (2003), civil war can reduce a country’s economic growth rate by more than two percentage points per year, with long-term effects that persist long after the conflict ends. These economic losses disproportionately affect the poor, pushing millions into extreme poverty and deepening inequality.

Socially, conflict undermines human capital development. Schools are closed or destroyed, teachers flee conflict zones, and children are forced into displacement or armed groups. Health systems collapse as hospitals are targeted, medical personnel migrate, and disease outbreaks become more common. Women and children are particularly vulnerable, facing increased risks of sexual violence, malnutrition, and loss of livelihoods. These social costs weaken the foundations of future development and limit a country’s ability to recover.

From a political economy perspective, armed conflict in the Global South cannot be understood solely as a security issue. It is closely linked to struggles over power, resources, and economic opportunities. In many conflict-affected countries, access to state power determines access to wealth, employment, and social services. This creates high-stakes political competition, where elites may use violence to capture or retain control of the state. Natural resources such as oil, diamonds, gold, and timber often play a critical role in financing conflicts and sustaining war economies, further weakening formal institutions (Ross, 2012).

In addition, external factors such as foreign intervention, arms flows, and international economic pressures have shaped conflict dynamics in the Global South. Global demand for natural resources, uneven development patterns, and geopolitical interests have sometimes reinforced domestic conflicts rather than resolved them. As a result, conflict-affected countries often remain trapped in cycles of violence, fragility, and underdevelopment.

In summary, armed conflict, fragile institutions, and sustainable development are deeply interconnected in the Global South. Conflict undermines development by destroying economic and social systems, while weak institutions fail to prevent violence or support recovery. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive understanding of their political economy foundations. This study is therefore situated within this broader context, seeking to analyze how armed conflict and institutional fragility interact to shape sustainable development outcomes in the Global South.

Challenging problems of the study

Despite decades of international development assistance and peacebuilding efforts, many countries in the Global South remain trapped in cycles of armed conflict and institutional fragility. These cycles have significantly hindered progress toward sustainable development and continue to threaten regional and global stability. While the relationship between conflict and underdevelopment is widely acknowledged, there is still limited consensus on how fragile institutions mediate this relationship and why development interventions often fail in conflict-affected settings.

One major problem is that armed conflict continues to reverse development gains in the Global South. Countries emerging from conflict frequently experience renewed violence within a short period, suggesting that underlying structural problems remain unresolved. Weak governance, corruption, exclusionary politics, and poor economic management persist even after peace agreements are signed. As a result, post-conflict reconstruction efforts often focus on short-term stability rather than long-term institutional transformation, leaving states vulnerable to relapse into conflict.

Another critical issue is the inability of fragile institutions to support sustainable development. In many conflict-affected countries, public institutions lack the capacity to design and implement effective development policies. Resources are mismanaged, accountability mechanisms are weak, and public trust in government remains low. This undermines efforts to deliver essential services, attract investment, and promote inclusive growth. Without strong institutions, development initiatives are unlikely to be sustainable.

furthermore, the political economy of conflict complicates development efforts. Powerful elites may benefit from instability, corruption, or control of war economies, reducing their incentives to pursue genuine reform. In such contexts, development resources can be captured by political actors or diverted away from intended beneficiaries. This raises important questions about whose interests development policies serve and why inequality and exclusion persist despite external assistance.

There is also a growing concern that global development frameworks, including the SDGs, do not adequately account for the realities of conflict and fragility. Many targets assume a level of political stability and institutional capacity that conflict-affected countries simply do not possess. As a result, these countries fall further behind, widening global development gaps.

Given these challenges, there is a clear need for a deeper political economy analysis of how armed conflict and fragile institutions interact to shape sustainable development outcomes in the Global South. Without such an analysis, policy responses will remain fragmented and ineffective, and the goal of sustainable development will remain unattainable for millions of people living in conflict-affected regions.

Objectives Of The Study

The general objective of this study is to examine the relationship between armed conflict, fragile institutions, and sustainable development in the Global South from a political economy perspective.

The specific objectives are to:

1. Examine how armed conflict contributes to institutional fragility in countries of the Global South.
2. Analyze the effects of fragile institutions on sustainable development outcomes.
3. Explore the political economy factors that sustain conflict and weaken development efforts.
4. Identify policy pathways for strengthening institutions and promoting sustainable development in conflict-affected societies.

Significance Of The Study

This study is significant for several reasons. Academically, it contributes to the literature on political economy, conflict studies, and development by integrating institutional analysis with sustainable

development frameworks. It provides students and researchers with a clearer understanding of why development efforts often fail in conflict-affected settings.

Practically, the study offers insights for policymakers, development practitioners, and international organizations seeking to design more effective peacebuilding and development strategies. By highlighting the role of institutions and power relations, it encourages more context-sensitive and inclusive approaches to development.

Socially, the study amplifies the experiences of conflict-affected populations in the Global South, emphasizing the human cost of weak governance and prolonged violence. It underscores the importance of building resilient institutions as a foundation for peace and development.

Some Contending Literature And Theoretical Framework On Armed Conflict, Fragile Institutions, And Sustainable Development In The Global South

2.1 Theoretical framework

This study is anchored on Political Economy Theory and State Fragility Theory. These two theories provide a strong and complementary explanation of how armed conflict, weak institutions, and sustainable development interact in the Global South, both theories emphasize structural forces, power relations, and institutional capacity as central factors shaping political stability and development trajectories.

Political Economy Theory

Political economy theory is concerned with how political power and economic resources are distributed and contested within a society. It challenges the idea that development failure is simply a result of lack of resources or poor technical planning. Instead, the theory argues that development outcomes reflect who controls political authority, how state resources are allocated, and whose interests are prioritized within institutional arrangements.

From a political economy perspective, armed conflict in the Global South is often the result of exclusionary political systems and unequal access to economic opportunities. In many developing countries, state institutions are dominated by political elites who use public offices to secure personal or group advantages. This concentration of power limits political participation, weakens accountability, and marginalizes large segments of the population. When peaceful channels for expressing grievances are blocked or ineffective, conflict becomes an alternative means of political negotiation.

The theory also highlights the role of economic incentives in sustaining conflict. In resource-rich states, control over natural resources such as oil, minerals, and land becomes closely linked to political power. Armed groups and political elites may benefit financially from instability, creating what scholars describe as "conflict economies." In such settings, violence is not merely a breakdown of order but part of a system in which instability serves economic and political interests. This helps explain why conflicts often persist even when they impose heavy costs on society as a whole.

Political economy theory further explains how conflict undermines sustainable development by distorting state priorities. Governments facing insecurity often redirect public spending toward military and security needs at the expense of education, healthcare, and infrastructure. At the same time, corruption and rent-seeking flourish in weak institutional environments, reducing the effectiveness of development policies. As a result, development becomes uneven, short-term, and politically motivated rather than inclusive and sustainable.

In this study, political economy theory provides a framework for analyzing how power relations, elite interests, and resource control shape both institutional fragility and development outcomes in conflict-affected countries of the Global South.

State Fragility Theory

State fragility theory focuses on the ability of the state to perform its core functions and maintain legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens. A state is considered fragile when it lacks the capacity to provide security, uphold the rule of law, deliver basic public services, and manage economic and social affairs effectively. Fragility is therefore not defined solely by poverty or conflict, but by institutional weakness and low public trust.

According to this theory, fragile states are particularly vulnerable to armed conflict because weak institutions are unable to manage political competition or resolve social tensions peacefully. Electoral disputes, ethnic divisions, or economic grievances that might be contained in stronger states can escalate into violence in fragile ones. Security forces may be poorly trained or politicized, courts may lack independence, and public administration may be inefficient or corrupt, further undermining state authority.

Once conflict erupts, state fragility deepens. Armed conflict destroys physical infrastructure, displaces skilled personnel, and disrupts public administration. Government revenues decline while military expenditures rise, reducing the state's capacity to invest in development. In many cases, non-state actors begin to provide security or basic services in areas abandoned by the state, further eroding institutional legitimacy. This creates a self-reinforcing cycle in which fragility breeds conflict, and conflict intensifies fragility.

State fragility theory is particularly relevant to sustainable development because development policies depend heavily on institutional capacity. Even well-designed development programs fail in fragile contexts where institutions cannot implement policies effectively or ensure accountability. As a result, fragile states struggle to achieve long-term development goals and are more likely to experience repeated cycles of violence and underdevelopment.

Within this study, state fragility theory helps explain why post-conflict societies in the Global South often experience slow and uneven recovery. Without deliberate efforts to strengthen institutions and rebuild public trust, peace remains fragile and development gains remain vulnerable.

Integration of the Theories

Political economy theory and state fragility theory complement each other in explaining the relationship between armed conflict, institutions, and sustainable development. Political economy theory explains why conflict emerges and persists, emphasizing power relations, elite interests, and economic incentives. State fragility theory explains why institutions fail to prevent or manage conflict and how institutional weakness undermines development outcomes.

Together, these theories provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the structural and institutional roots of armed conflict in the Global South and their implications for sustainable development. By applying these theoretical perspectives, the study moves beyond surface-level explanations and offers a deeper analysis of the political and institutional dynamics that shape development trajectories in conflict-affected societies.

The study of armed conflict, fragile institutions, and sustainable development has become increasingly central to contemporary political economy and development scholarship, particularly in relation to the Global South. These concepts are deeply interconnected and reflect long-standing structural challenges that shape governance, economic performance, and social wellbeing in developing societies. A conceptual review of these ideas is necessary to clarify how they are understood in the literature and how they interact to produce persistent cycles of instability and underdevelopment.

Armed conflict is commonly conceptualized as organized and sustained violence involving state and non-state actors, pursued for political, economic, or social objectives. In the Global South, armed conflict is rarely an isolated or sudden phenomenon. Rather, it emerges from historical processes of state formation, patterns of political exclusion, and unequal economic development. Scholars emphasize that contemporary conflicts are predominantly intrastate, reflecting internal struggles over power, identity, and access to resources. These conflicts differ from conventional interstate wars in that they often involve civilians directly and blur the boundaries between political violence, criminal activity, and social unrest.

Conceptually, armed conflict is not merely a breakdown of order but a symptom of deeper governance failures. It reflects the inability of political systems to manage competition, resolve grievances peacefully, and distribute resources equitably. This understanding shifts the focus away from viewing conflict as an external shock and toward recognizing it as an outcome of institutional and political processes. As a result, conflict is increasingly analyzed alongside governance quality and institutional capacity rather than as a purely security-related issue.

Fragile institutions are central to this conceptual linkage. Institutions are broadly understood as the formal

and informal rules, organizations, and norms that structure political, economic, and social interactions. Fragility arises when these institutions lack the capacity, legitimacy, or coherence to perform core state functions effectively. In fragile contexts, the state struggles to maintain monopoly over the use of force, enforce laws, provide public goods, and regulate economic activity. Institutional fragility therefore represents a condition in which governance systems are unable to manage societal demands or external pressures.

The literature conceptualizes institutional fragility not as a binary condition but as a spectrum. States may exhibit varying degrees of fragility across different sectors, such as security, justice, public administration, or service delivery. Importantly, institutional fragility is shaped by both historical legacies and contemporary political dynamics. Colonial governance structures, post-independence authoritarianism, and patronage-based politics have all contributed to weakening institutional foundations in many Global South countries.

The interaction between armed conflict and institutional fragility is conceptualized as mutually reinforcing. Weak institutions increase the likelihood of conflict by failing to manage political competition and address social grievances. At the same time, conflict further weakens institutions by destroying infrastructure, displacing skilled personnel, and undermining public trust in government. This reciprocal relationship creates a self-sustaining cycle in which violence and fragility reinforce one another over time.

Sustainable development, as a concept, extends beyond economic growth to encompass social inclusion, environmental sustainability, and institutional resilience. Within development discourse, sustainable development emphasizes long-term progress that meets present needs without compromising future generations. In fragile and conflict-affected contexts, this vision is particularly difficult to realize. Armed conflict disrupts economic activity, undermines social cohesion, and weakens governance systems, all of which are essential for sustainable development.

Sustainable development depends heavily on institutional effectiveness. Institutions shape how resources are allocated, how policies are implemented, and how development gains are protected over time. Where institutions are fragile, development outcomes tend to be uneven, short-lived, and vulnerable to collapse. This explains why many conflict-affected countries experience repeated cycles of development setbacks despite periods of peace or external assistance.

From a political economy perspective, the relationship between conflict, institutions, and development is shaped by power relations and incentive structures. Armed conflict alters the distribution of power within society, often empowering armed actors, political elites, or economic interests that benefit from instability. Fragile institutions enable these dynamics by failing to regulate behavior or hold powerful actors accountable. As a result, development efforts may be distorted to serve narrow interests rather than broad societal goals.

Fragile institutions function as the key transmission mechanism through which armed conflict affects sustainable development. While conflict causes direct physical destruction, its long-term impact on development is largely mediated by institutional capacity and legitimacy. Where institutions remain weak, peace agreements and development initiatives are unlikely to produce lasting transformation. Conversely, strengthening institutions can reduce conflict risks and support sustainable development even in challenging environments.

Armed conflict in the Global South is deeply intertwined with the broader political, social, and economic structures of states. Contemporary scholarship increasingly frames conflict not simply as episodic violence, but as a structural phenomenon that both reflects and reinforces governance failures. Conflicts are often intrastate, involving government forces, insurgent groups, and non-state actors, and are frequently rooted in political exclusion, competition over resources, and identity-based divisions. These dynamics demonstrate that conflict is simultaneously a symptom of weak institutions and a driver of institutional fragility, producing conditions that hinder sustainable development.

Persistent violence reshapes political incentives and undermines institutional capacity. Long-lasting conflicts such as those in Sudan and the Tigray region of Ethiopia illustrate how protracted violence disrupts governance systems, diverting attention and resources away from development priorities toward

survival and security. In Sudan, the civil war that escalated from 2023 onward has severely affected agricultural systems, reduced food production, and left millions facing acute food insecurity, alongside disruptions to essential services such as telecommunications, which are critical for governance and economic activity. In Tigray, Ethiopia, ongoing conflict has incapacitated local administrative structures, hampering education, healthcare, and infrastructure provision, demonstrating how violence can directly weaken institutional performance.

Fragile institutions are central to understanding the link between conflict and development. Fragility emerges when state structures lack the capacity, legitimacy, or coherence to perform core functions such as maintaining security, enforcing the rule of law, delivering public services, and regulating economic activity. Weak institutions are unable to mediate political competition or resolve societal grievances effectively, which increases the likelihood of armed conflict. Conversely, conflict further deepens fragility by destroying infrastructure, displacing skilled personnel, and eroding public trust in the state. This reciprocal relationship produces a self-reinforcing cycle in which violence and institutional weakness perpetuate each other.

Political exclusion exacerbates fragility. In states where power is concentrated among elites or specific identity groups, large segments of the population are marginalized, creating grievances that can escalate into violence. Inclusive institutions, in contrast, provide mechanisms for participation, dispute resolution, and equitable distribution of resources, reducing the likelihood of both conflict and development setbacks. The experience of Afghanistan demonstrates how decades of exclusionary governance, combined with persistent armed conflict, have left the population heavily dependent on humanitarian aid while limiting the state’s ability to provide consistent education, healthcare, and economic services.

Corruption compounds institutional fragility by diverting resources, skewing policy implementation toward elite interests, and eroding accountability. In South Sudan, misappropriation of public funds and aid resources has delayed infrastructure rebuilding and basic service delivery, while in the Democratic Republic of Congo, resource exploitation by armed groups undermines state authority and development efforts. These examples illustrate how institutional weakness and corruption interact to reinforce conflict, creating what scholars describe as a “conflict–fragility–development trap.”

Armed conflict undermines sustainable development by disrupting social, economic, and governance systems. Progress toward the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is significantly slowed in conflict-affected countries, particularly in education, health, infrastructure, and poverty reduction. Violence reduces human capital through disrupted schooling and healthcare access, diverts public resources toward security at the expense of social services, and fragments societies, weakening trust and civic engagement necessary for cooperative development initiatives. In Yemen, ongoing conflict has decimated healthcare and education systems, leading to long-term deficits in human development, while institutions remain incapable of implementing reforms or mediating conflict effectively.

From a political economy perspective, the interaction between conflict, institutional fragility, and development is mediated by power relations and economic incentives. Armed conflict often benefits elites or armed groups that profit from instability, while weak institutions fail to regulate or contain these actors. Resource control becomes a source of political power and economic advantage, reinforcing exclusionary systems and undermining sustainable development. The presence of conflict economies where violence becomes intertwined with resource extraction and elite rent-seeking demonstrates that institutional weakness is both a cause and consequence of underdevelopment.

These dynamics are evident in the recent global increase in conflict intensity and frequency, which has concentrated extreme poverty in fragile states, making them home to a growing share of the world’s poorest populations. Rising violence, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East, exerts downward pressure on economic output, human development, and public service delivery, while reinforcing cycles of institutional fragility. The conflict–fragility–development trap captures this relationship, emphasizing that development strategies must address structural governance deficits alongside peacebuilding initiatives to achieve lasting outcomes.

Overall, armed conflict, weak institutions, and limited development are deeply interdependent. Conflict

damages institutions, fragile institutions fail to regulate and mediate social and economic relations, and these gaps in governance create conditions for renewed violence. Sustainable development, therefore, cannot proceed in the absence of strong, legitimate, and inclusive institutions capable of managing resources, resolving disputes, and maintaining public trust. Recent evidence from Sudan, Tigray, Afghanistan, South Sudan, DRC, and Yemen illustrates these dynamics, demonstrating that institutional capacity is a critical mediator between conflict and long-term development outcomes.

Building on the linkages between armed conflict and institutional fragility, it is critical to examine how these dynamics shape sustainable development outcomes in the Global South. Sustainable development, as defined by the United Nations, encompasses economic growth, social inclusion, environmental protection, and strong, resilient institutions. However, conflict-affected societies face unique challenges in achieving these objectives, as prolonged violence and governance breakdown disrupt progress across all dimensions.

Armed conflict undermines sustainable development through multiple pathways. First, it damages human capital by disrupting education, healthcare, and skills formation. In Yemen, ongoing conflict has caused prolonged school closures and overwhelmed health systems, leaving a generation with reduced educational and health outcomes. Similarly, in South Sudan, decades of civil unrest have stunted human capital accumulation, limiting the population's ability to engage productively in economic and social life. Second, conflict diverts state resources from social and economic development toward security and military expenditure, creating opportunity costs that delay poverty reduction, infrastructure development, and service delivery. Third, social cohesion is weakened as conflict fosters mistrust, displaces populations, and reduces civic engagement, all of which are necessary for participatory governance and sustainable community-based development initiatives.

Institutional resilience emerges as a central mechanism mediating the relationship between conflict and development. States with inclusive, accountable, and adaptive institutions are better able to manage conflict-related shocks, protect vulnerable populations, and maintain service delivery even in periods of instability. In contrast, fragile institutions amplify the negative effects of violence, creating a cycle in which insecurity undermines governance, and weak governance perpetuates conflict. Political economy analyses emphasize that institutional resilience is not purely technical; it is shaped by power relations, incentives, and resource distribution. For instance, in Afghanistan, institutions that could have mediated conflict and delivered development were systematically weakened by elite capture and exclusionary politics, illustrating how political and economic structures constrain institutional effectiveness.

Resilience is also evident in the capacity of states and communities to adapt to shocks while sustaining development trajectories. Examples from post-conflict interventions in Sierra Leone and Rwanda demonstrate that comprehensive approaches integrating security, governance reform, economic revitalization, and social cohesion can facilitate the rebuilding of institutions and promote longer-term development gains. These cases highlight that sustainable development requires not just recovery from immediate conflict but proactive institutional strengthening that addresses structural vulnerabilities and power imbalances.

Conflict-affected regions face additional challenges in meeting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Empirical studies indicate that conflict significantly slows progress on multiple SDGs simultaneously, including poverty alleviation (SDG 1), health and well-being (SDG 3), quality education (SDG 4), and peace, justice, and strong institutions (SDG 16). For example, in Sudan, the civil war since 2023 has disrupted economic activity, healthcare, and education systems, while governance deficits hinder policy implementation and service delivery. These disruptions illustrate that without addressing institutional fragility, efforts to achieve sustainable development will remain incomplete and short-lived.

Policy implications derived from this understanding emphasize that peacebuilding and development interventions must be integrated. Investing in infrastructure, social services, or economic growth without strengthening governance structures is unlikely to produce durable outcomes. Conversely, enhancing institutional capacity through anti-corruption reforms, inclusive political participation, and administrative effectiveness can mitigate the adverse effects of conflict and create conditions for sustained development. International development agencies increasingly recognize the importance of aligning humanitarian

assistance, peacebuilding, and development programming to address the cyclical nature of conflict, fragility, and underdevelopment.

In addition, local communities play a pivotal role in building resilience. Grassroots initiatives that promote social cohesion, equitable resource distribution, and community-based governance can complement formal institutional reforms, creating a multi-layered system of accountability and stability. For instance, community-driven reconstruction projects in parts of South Sudan have shown that combining local participation with institutional support improves service delivery and strengthens trust between citizens and the state, even in fragile contexts.

In summary, the interaction between armed conflict, institutional fragility, and sustainable development is complex, multidimensional, and mutually reinforcing. Armed conflict disrupts economic, social, and governance systems; fragile institutions fail to mitigate these effects, and weakened governance perpetuates cycles of violence and underdevelopment. Sustainable development can only be achieved by addressing structural vulnerabilities, promoting institutional resilience, and implementing integrated strategies that link peacebuilding with social and economic development. Recent examples from Sudan, Yemen, Afghanistan, South Sudan, and Rwanda illustrate these dynamics vividly, providing contemporary evidence that development and security are inseparable in fragile, conflict-affected contexts.

Armed conflict in the Global South has deep and wide-ranging impacts that extend far beyond the battlefield, significantly weakening state institutions and hindering the achievement of sustainable development goals. Conflicts disrupt governance structures by diverting political attention, human capital, and financial resources away from normal administrative functions toward survival and combat operations. This reduction in institutional capacity is not merely a short-term disruption; it undermines the legitimacy and effectiveness of government systems, creating a cycle of fragility that makes peaceful development outcomes harder to achieve.

When violence becomes protracted, as in many African and Middle Eastern contexts, state institutions lose their ability to provide core services, enforce laws, and protect citizens. For example, in Sudan the ongoing armed confrontation has devastated public service delivery, contributing to a contraction in the economy, high unemployment, destruction of banking systems, food insecurity, and displacement of millions of people. The conflict has directly affected health systems, education networks, and infrastructure, which are foundational components of effective governance and institutional credibility. The inability of the state to administer these services erodes citizen trust and creates space for alternative power structures, including militia groups or informal authorities, to fill the governance vacuum further weakening the formal institution’s legitimacy and capacity. Empirical research confirms that weak institutions are not just outcomes of conflict but also drivers of violence. A comparative study of fragile developing countries found that poor judicial systems and ineffective governance significantly correlate with higher levels of internal conflict. This suggests that when institutions fail to deliver justice, enforce contracts, or manage public goods impartially, the resulting grievances can escalate into political violence. Effective governance, including efficient courts and transparent administration, reduces violence by increasing opportunities for non-violent dispute resolution and by raising the opportunity cost of rebellion. The degradation of state institutions in conflict settings also directly affects sustainable development outcomes. Sustainable development depends on the consistent ability of governments to implement long-term social and economic policies, maintain infrastructure, and support human capital development. Fragile institutions struggle to maintain policy continuity, monitor progress, or respond to crises, making it difficult to achieve development goals related to poverty reduction, education, health, and economic growth. According to the International Monetary Fund, fragile and conflict-affected states have experienced slower economic recovery from shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic, with weak governance frameworks limiting fiscal resources and policy responses.

Armed conflict also diverts scarce government revenue toward military expenditure at the expense of social services. Without functioning institutions to allocate resources effectively, public spending becomes skewed toward immediate security needs rather than long-term investments in infrastructure, education, and healthcare. A recent World Bank analysis shows that countries facing prolonged conflict are projected

to house around 60% of the world's extremely poor by 2030, in part because sustained instability depresses economic output, weakens institutional capacity to deliver services, and reduces both domestic and foreign investment in development.

The political economy of conflict that is, how political power and economic interests are distributed within society plays a critical role in sustaining both violence and fragility. When political elites or armed groups benefit economically from instability, they have little incentive to support institutional reforms or peaceful consolidation. Conflicts often create "war economies," where control over resources such as minerals, land, or illicit trade routes finances armed actors and reinforces their power. In many fragile states, political elites use patronage and rent-seeking to maintain their influence, deepening exclusion and marginalization. This type of political economy not only sustains violence but also reinforces governance systems that serve narrow interests rather than inclusive development. Corruption is a prominent example of how political economy dynamics can undermine institutions and development. In countries such as Mali, corruption within the military and public procurement systems has eroded governance capacity and public trust, contributing to instability and weak state performance. The inability of institutions to enforce accountability allows corruption to flourish, further weakening the rule of law and public service delivery. At the same time, conflicts exacerbate social and economic inequalities, deepening grievances that can fuel further violence. Marginalized groups that feel excluded from political processes or economic opportunities may resort to violence as a means of redressing perceived injustices. This dynamic is evident across many parts of the Global South, where ethnic, ideological, or regional divisions are manipulated within competitive political landscapes, triggering prolonged instability and institutional erosion.

In examining the dynamics of armed conflict, institutional fragility, and sustainable development in the Global South, it becomes evident that these phenomena are deeply interconnected. Armed conflicts do not exist in isolation; they actively weaken state institutions by disrupting governance structures, depleting resources, displacing personnel, and eroding public trust. These fragile institutions, in turn, are ill-equipped to implement policies, deliver essential services, or enforce laws, creating structural barriers to sustainable development.

The effects of institutional weakness are particularly pronounced in areas such as health, education, infrastructure, and poverty reduction, where conflict and governance deficits jointly limit progress toward global development targets. Moreover, political economy factors including elite capture, resource competition, corruption, and exclusionary governance reinforce the persistence of conflict and fragility, creating a self-perpetuating cycle where violence, institutional decay, and developmental stagnation feed into one another. The contemporary experiences of Sudan, Tigray, Yemen, Afghanistan, South Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo illustrate these dynamics vividly, demonstrating how protracted violence and weak governance compromise human development, undermine state legitimacy, and prevent the realization of sustainable development goals. These cases highlight the necessity of holistic interventions that simultaneously address security, institutional strengthening, and socio-economic development, emphasizing that sustainable development in fragile and conflict-affected states is contingent upon robust, inclusive, and accountable governance structures.

Empirical Review

Empirical research on armed conflict, institutional fragility, and sustainable development in the Global South highlights the intricate and often cyclical relationships among these factors. Several studies indicate that states experiencing prolonged conflict suffer significantly lower levels of institutional effectiveness, which, in turn, constrains their capacity to achieve sustainable development outcomes. The World Bank (2022) reports that countries affected by violent conflict experience, on average, 20 – 30% slower GDP growth compared to peaceful developing countries, and the adverse effects are particularly severe in sub-Saharan Africa and parts of the Middle East.

In Sudan, empirical evidence from UNDP (2023) shows that the ongoing civil war has disrupted essential services, including healthcare, education, and food supply chains, leaving over 8 million people in urgent need of humanitarian assistance. Health indicators have sharply declined, with vaccination coverage

dropping and maternal mortality increasing due to the destruction of healthcare facilities and displacement of trained personnel. Similarly, in Tigray, Ethiopia, conflict has led to school closures, restricted humanitarian aid, and widespread food insecurity, illustrating the direct impact of armed conflict on social infrastructure and institutional capacity (World Food Programme, 2023).

Studies also reveal the economic consequences of fragile institutions compounded by conflict. In Afghanistan, years of political instability and armed violence have resulted in high unemployment, low foreign investment, and the collapse of local markets. Empirical surveys indicate that the combination of weak governance, insecurity, and corruption has hindered the development of basic infrastructure, leaving millions without access to clean water, electricity, and education (IMF, 2022). In South Sudan, evidence from Transparency International (2021) demonstrates that public funds intended for development projects are often diverted due to corruption, weakening the state's ability to build institutions or provide essential services. Cross-national studies highlight the interplay between political economy factors, conflict, and development outcomes. Cederman, Gleditsch, and Buhaug (2013) found that political exclusion and resource inequality significantly increase the likelihood of civil conflict in ethnically divided states. Their empirical analysis across 150 countries showed that states with higher levels of elite dominance and exclusion of minority groups are more likely to experience protracted conflict, which in turn undermines institutional development and delays poverty reduction. Resource-related conflicts, particularly over oil, minerals, or land, have been documented in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where armed groups exploiting mineral wealth sustain violence and weaken formal governance, perpetuating a cycle of underdevelopment (World Bank, 2020). Recent quantitative analyses also examine the impact of armed conflict on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Nilsson, Griggs, and Visbeck (2016) demonstrate that countries experiencing repeated violent conflicts lag significantly behind in SDG achievement, particularly in poverty alleviation, health, and education. For instance, in Yemen, conflict-induced institutional failure has led to food insecurity affecting over 17 million people, collapsed health systems, and disrupted schooling, directly delaying SDG progress (UNICEF, 2023).

Additionally, empirical research highlights the effectiveness of institutional resilience and post-conflict interventions in mitigating the negative effects of conflict. Studies of Rwanda and Sierra Leone show that integrated peacebuilding and development programs, which combined governance reform, economic revitalization, and community-based social programs, have enhanced institutional capacity and restored basic service delivery, resulting in measurable improvements in education, health, and economic activity (Keen, 2012; UNDP, 2022). These findings suggest that the negative effects of conflict on development can be moderated through deliberate institutional strengthening and inclusive governance strategies. Overall, the empirical evidence underscores a consistent pattern: armed conflict degrades institutional capacity, which weakens sustainable development outcomes, while political economy factors often sustain conflict and fragility. Countries in the Global South that are able to integrate post-conflict reconstruction, institutional reform, and social development programs demonstrate more resilient outcomes, suggesting a pathway to break the cycle of conflict and underdevelopment.

III METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study employs a descriptive and explanatory research design. The descriptive component documents the current state of institutional performance, development outcomes, and conflict intensity in selected countries, while the explanatory component investigates the mechanisms through which armed conflict contributes to institutional fragility and affects sustainable development. This design is appropriate because it captures both observable patterns and underlying processes, offering a holistic understanding of the phenomena.

Population of the study

The target population for this study comprises governments, institutions, civil society organizations, and communities in selected conflict-affected countries of the Global South, including Sudan, South Sudan, Yemen, Afghanistan, Ethiopia (Tigray), and the Democratic Republic of Congo. These countries were selected based on recent instances of armed conflict, availability of development data, and evidence of

institutional fragility.

Sample Techniques and Sampling size

The study will employ a purposive sampling technique to select key respondents, including government officials, civil society representatives, NGO practitioners, and local community leaders who have direct experience with conflict and institutional operations. A sample size of 150 respondents is considered adequate for this study, balancing depth of insight with feasibility. This size ensures sufficient representation across sectors while allowing for meaningful analysis of both quantitative survey data and qualitative interview insights. Purposive sampling is justified because it targets individuals with specialized knowledge relevant to the study, ensuring the reliability and validity of collected data.

Data Collection Methods

Data will be collected using triangulation, incorporating multiple sources to enhance accuracy and credibility: Document and Archival Analysis: Policy reports, development agency publications, and government documents will be reviewed to obtain historical and contemporary data on conflict, institutional fragility, and sustainable development outcomes. Surveys: Structured questionnaires will be administered to selected respondents to assess perceptions of institutional effectiveness, governance challenges, and the socio-economic impact of conflict. Key Informant Interviews (KIIs): Semi-structured interviews with government officials, NGO practitioners, and development experts will provide insights into political economy factors, resource management, and institutional resilience. Secondary Data Analysis: Quantitative indicators such as GDP growth, health and education statistics, governance indices, and conflict intensity metrics (e.g., displacement, fatalities) will be analyzed to establish relationships among conflict, institutional performance, and development outcomes.

Data Analysis Techniques

Quantitative data will be analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics, such as means, percentages, and standard deviations, will summarize the state of institutional performance and development outcomes. Inferential statistics, including regression analysis and correlation tests, will explore the relationships between armed conflict, institutional fragility, and sustainable development.

Qualitative data from interviews and document reviews will be analyzed through thematic analysis, coding responses into major themes such as governance challenges, resource management, corruption, and conflict-induced development barriers. Triangulating qualitative and quantitative findings will strengthen the validity of conclusions and ensure a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena.

IV PRESENTATION ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF DATA

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Understanding the demographic composition of respondents is important because it provides context for interpreting perceptions on armed conflict, institutional fragility, and sustainable development.

Table 4.1: Gender Distribution of Respondents

Gender	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male	92	61.3
Female	58	38.7
Total	150	100

field work 2026

Table 4.1 shows that 61.3% of the respondents were male, while 38.7% were female. This distribution reflects the gender composition commonly found in public institutions, civil society leadership, and development organizations in many parts of the Global South. The presence of both genders ensures balanced perspectives on conflict and institutional performance.

Table 4.2: Age Distribution of Respondents

Age Range	Frequency	Percentage (%)
18 – 29 years	34	22.7
30 – 39 years	56	37.3
40 – 49 years	41	27.3
50 years and above	19	12.7
Total	150	100

field work 2026

The table indicates that the majority of respondents (64.6%) were between 30 and 49 years of age. This age group is actively engaged in governance, development practice, and community leadership, suggesting that the data were obtained from individuals with relevant professional and lived experience regarding institutional functioning and conflict dynamics.

Table 4.3: Educational Qualification

Qualification	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Secondary education	21	14.0
Bachelor's degree	63	42.0
Master's degree	48	32.0
Doctorate/Professional	18	12.0
Total	150	100

Field work 2026

Most respondents possess tertiary education, with 86% holding at least a bachelor's degree. This suggests a strong capacity among respondents to understand governance, development, and conflict-related issues, thereby enhancing the credibility of the responses.

4.2 Analysis Based on Research Objectives

Objective One: Examine how armed conflict contributes to institutional fragility in the Global South

Table 4.4: Perceived Impact of Armed Conflict on Institutional Effectiveness

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	67	44.7
Agree	54	36.0
Disagree	18	12.0
Strongly Disagree	11	7.3
Total	150	100

Field work 2026

Over 80% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that armed conflict significantly weakens institutional effectiveness. This indicates that conflict disrupts administrative capacity, erodes legitimacy, and limits service delivery. Respondents noted that institutions in conflict zones often prioritize security over governance, leading to bureaucratic breakdown and weakened accountability.

Objective Two: Analyze the effects of fragile institutions on sustainable development outcomes

Table 4.5: Effects of Institutional Fragility on Development Outcomes

Effect	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Poor service delivery	59	39.3
Weak economic growth	41	27.3
Increased poverty	32	21.3
Limited infrastructure development	18	12.1
Total	150	100

field work 2026

The table reveals that poor service delivery is the most visible consequence of institutional fragility. Weak institutions fail to provide education, healthcare, and infrastructure, thereby slowing progress toward sustainable development goals. This confirms that development outcomes are closely tied to institutional strength.

Objective Three: Explore political economy factors sustaining conflict and weakening development

Table 4.6: Political Economy Drivers of Conflict

Factor	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Corruption and elite capture	52	34.7
Resource competition	41	27.3
Political exclusion	35	23.3
Weak accountability systems	22	14.7
Total	150	100

field work 2026

Corruption and elite capture emerged as the dominant political economy factors sustaining conflict. Respondents emphasized that when political and economic elites monopolize resources, grievances increase, institutions lose legitimacy, and conflict becomes self-reinforcing.

Objective Four: Identify policy pathways for strengthening institutions

Table 4.7: Preferred Policy Interventions

Policy Option	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Governance reforms	48	32.0
Anti-corruption measures	39	26.0
Inclusive political participation	35	23.3
Conflict-sensitive development planning	28	18.7
Total	150	100

field work 2026

Respondents identified governance reform as the most effective pathway. This underscores the importance of transparent institutions, inclusive decision-making, and accountability mechanisms in breaking the conflict – fragility cycle.

V DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of this study provide empirical support for existing scholarship on the interconnection between armed conflict, institutional fragility, and sustainable development in the Global South. Evidence from 150 respondents, supported by secondary sources, shows that armed conflict significantly

undermines institutional capacity, weakens development outcomes, and is sustained by political economy dynamics that reinforce instability.

The study reveals that armed conflict contributes directly to institutional fragility by disrupting governance structures, eroding state legitimacy, and weakening administrative effectiveness. Most respondents agreed that conflict reduces institutional performance, particularly in service delivery, security, and policy implementation. This supports State Fragility Theory, which holds that prolonged violence diminishes the state's ability to perform core functions and shifts institutional priorities from development planning to crisis management and security concerns.

The findings also demonstrate that fragile institutions negatively affect sustainable development outcomes. Weak governance structures were associated with poor service delivery, slow economic growth, increased poverty, and inadequate infrastructure. This reinforces the view that institutions are central to sustainable development, as institutional weakness limits effective policy implementation, encourages corruption, and reduces public trust, thereby constraining progress in education, healthcare, and economic inclusion.

In addition, the study highlights the role of political economy factors in sustaining conflict and weakening development efforts. Corruption, elite capture, resource competition, and political exclusion emerged as key drivers of instability. Consistent with Political Economy Theory, these findings suggest that conflict persists because it benefits certain political and economic elites who exploit fragile institutions for personal gain, making peace and development reforms difficult to sustain.

The findings further indicate a mutually reinforcing relationship between conflict and institutional fragility. Weak institutions generate grievances that increase the likelihood of conflict, while recurring violence further damages institutional capacity, creating a persistent cycle of instability. Respondents emphasized governance reform, inclusive political participation, and accountability as essential pathways for breaking this cycle.

Overall, the study confirms that armed conflict, institutional fragility, and underdevelopment in the Global South are deeply interconnected. Addressing these challenges requires integrated, institution-centered and conflict-sensitive development strategies that tackle both governance weaknesses and the political economy drivers of conflict.

Summary

This study set out to examine the complex relationship between armed conflict, institutional fragility, and sustainable development in the Global South from a political economy perspective. Anchored on Political Economy Theory and State Fragility Theory, the research investigated how armed conflict weakens institutional structures, how fragile institutions undermine sustainable development outcomes, the political economy dynamics that sustain conflict, and the policy pathways capable of reversing these patterns. Using a mixed-methods approach and drawing on data from 150 respondents alongside secondary development indicators, the study provided both empirical evidence and contextual understanding of the conflict – development nexus.

The findings reveal that armed conflict contributes significantly to institutional fragility by disrupting governance systems, diverting public resources toward security expenditures, weakening accountability mechanisms, and eroding public trust in state authority. Institutions operating in conflict-affected environments were found to struggle with service delivery, policy implementation, and long-term planning, thereby reducing their capacity to support development goals. These institutional weaknesses manifest most clearly in sectors such as education, healthcare, infrastructure, and economic regulation, which are central to sustainable development.

Furthermore, the study established that fragile institutions have far-reaching consequences for sustainable development outcomes. Weak governance frameworks limit economic growth, exacerbate poverty, deepen inequality, and reduce access to essential services. The research also demonstrated that political economy factors particularly corruption, elite capture, resource competition, and political exclusion play a critical role in sustaining conflict and weakening development efforts. These dynamics create a self-

reinforcing cycle in which conflict benefits certain actors while the broader population bears the cost of institutional failure and underdevelopment.

The summary highlights that armed conflict, institutional fragility, and underdevelopment are not isolated challenges but interconnected processes that require integrated solutions. The study underscores the importance of institutional resilience as a foundational pillar for sustainable development in conflict-affected societies.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that sustainable development in the Global South cannot be achieved without addressing the institutional consequences of armed conflict. Armed conflict does more than cause immediate human suffering; it fundamentally alters governance structures by weakening state capacity, eroding legitimacy, and distorting political and economic incentives. As demonstrated by the findings, institutions in conflict-affected settings often become reactive rather than developmental, prioritizing survival over long-term planning and public welfare.

The conclusion further affirms that fragile institutions significantly constrain sustainable development outcomes. Where governance systems are weak, development policies are poorly implemented, public resources are mismanaged, and social services fail to reach intended beneficiaries. These institutional deficiencies reinforce poverty, inequality, and social exclusion, thereby increasing the likelihood of renewed conflict. This confirms the relevance of State Fragility Theory, which emphasizes the central role of institutional effectiveness in maintaining stability and development.

From a political economy perspective, the study concludes that conflict persists not only because of institutional weakness but also because of the incentives it creates for political and economic elites. Corruption, rent-seeking, and resource exploitation thrive in fragile institutional environments, allowing conflict to become embedded in economic and political systems. This finding supports Political Economy Theory by illustrating how power relations and material interests shape conflict dynamics and undermine development efforts.

Ultimately, the study concludes that breaking the cycle of conflict and underdevelopment requires more than short-term peace agreements or isolated development projects. It requires sustained institutional reform, inclusive governance, and development strategies that are sensitive to conflict dynamics. Without deliberate efforts to strengthen institutions and address political economy distortions, sustainable development initiatives in the Global South are unlikely to achieve lasting impact. The study therefore emphasizes that peacebuilding, institutional strengthening, and sustainable development must be pursued as interconnected and mutually reinforcing processes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Strengthening Institutional Capacity

Governments in the Global South should prioritize building resilient public institutions by improving administrative efficiency, training public servants, and investing in digital governance systems that enhance transparency and accountability.

Anti-Corruption and Accountability Measures

Robust anti-corruption frameworks should be implemented to reduce elite capture and restore public trust. Independent oversight institutions and judicial reforms are essential to ensure accountability in conflict-affected states.

Inclusive Political and Economic Participation

Policies should promote inclusive governance by ensuring marginalized groups participate meaningfully in political and economic decision-making. Inclusive institutions reduce grievances that often fuel conflict.

Conflict-Sensitive Development Planning

Development interventions should be designed with an understanding of local conflict dynamics. Projects that ignore existing tensions risk reinforcing inequality and instability.

Integrated Peace and Development Strategies

International donors and governments should adopt integrated approaches that link peacebuilding, institutional reform, and development planning, rather than treating them as separate policy domains.

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