The Role of External Actors in Shaping Civil Society and Human Rights Protection in Post Conflict Africa

Phidelia Serwaah

Political Science Department, University of Ghana, Accra, Ghana

ABSTRACT

This paper examines how external actors shape civil society and human rights protection in post conflict Africa through financial, normative, and coercive mechanisms. Using a qualitative synthesis of scholarly literature, policy documents, and institutional reports, the study develops a hybrid constructivist dependency framework that integrates ideational and structural perspectives to explain the paradox of empowerment and dependency in external engagement. The analysis covers key post conflict cases including Rwanda, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Ethiopia, Mali, Mozambique, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The findings show that international assistance strengthens governance and promotes rights awareness but also reproduces aid dependency, politicizes justice, and narrows civic space through conditionality and securitized aid. Civil society organizations demonstrate resilience by localizing global norms and reinterpreting them through indigenous practices and community legitimacy. The paper concludes that sustainable post conflict reconstruction requires transforming external assistance into equitable partnership that prioritizes local ownership, long term capacity building, and regional collaboration. By combining constructivist and dependency insights, this study contributes to understanding how global and local forces shape Africa's evolving human rights architecture and provides policy guidance for aligning international engagement with locally driven democratic renewal.

Keywords: External actors, civil society, human rights protection, post conflict Africa, peacebuilding, transitional justice, private military companies

INTRODUCTION

Across Africa, post conflict transitions have become testing grounds for the reconstruction of political order, justice, and human rights protection (Opongo, 2021). Decades of internal strife, civil wars, and authoritarian governance have left legacies of institutional fragility and deep societal divisions (Offiong Duke & David Agbaji, 2018; Opongo, 2021). In such fragile environments, civil society organizations (CSOs) often emerge as key agents of peacebuilding and democratic renewal. They monitor human rights abuses, advocate for marginalized groups, and provide humanitarian relief where the state remains weak or complicit in past violations (Ekiyor, n.d.). Yet their effectiveness and independence are profoundly shaped by the influence of external actors such as international donors, multilateral organizations, foreign governments, and transnational nongovernmental organizations whose interventions structure the post conflict governance landscape in complex and sometimes contradictory ways (Maigari, 2022).

The African continent provides numerous examples where external engagement has both empowered and constrained local civil society. Following the genocidal violence in Rwanda in 1994, international donors and humanitarian agencies flooded the country with resources to rebuild governance and ensure human rights monitoring (Rataski, 2011; Voloshchuk et al., 2021). Similarly, in post conflict Liberia and Sierra Leone, United Nations missions and bilateral partners such as the United States and the United Kingdom financed human rights commissions, civil society capacity building, and community reintegration programs (Nelson-Richards, n.d.). These interventions, though crucial for stabilization, also generated dependencies on foreign aid, introduced externally defined accountability frameworks, and sometimes sidelined indigenous networks of activism that predated the conflicts (Sharma, n.d.). External actors in post conflict Africa thus function as both guarantors and gatekeepers of rights protection (Ismail & Sköns, 2014; Pacheco et al., n.d.). Their resources and legitimacy can

strengthen domestic institutions for justice and reconciliation, as seen in the role of the African Union and United Nations in supporting transitional justice in The Gambia after 2017 (Pacheco et al., n.d.). Yet their strategic and political interests can equally distort local priorities, entrench elite bargains, and suppress grassroots advocacy. The tension between empowerment and dependency lies at the heart of Africa's evolving post conflict reconstruction experience. This dynamic raises vital questions about the sustainability of civil society activism and the extent to which external engagement enhances or undermines human rights accountability in fragile contexts (Aslam et al., 2015).

In recent years, the continent has witnessed both renewed and ongoing conflict that reveal the shifting forms of external influence. The wars in Sudan and South Sudan (Kidane Kiros, 2024), the persistent instability in the Democratic Republic of the Congo(John & Joyce, 2014) , the humanitarian catastrophe in Ethiopia's Tigray region (Dawit & Yohannes, 2023), and the complex insurgencies in Mali and Burkina Faso(Benjaminsen & Ba, 2024; Haavik et al., 2022) have exposed how international and regional actors shape the contours of post conflict recovery and rights protection. In Sudan's post Bashir transition, for instance, Western, Gulf, and regional actors competed to shape the direction of reform and accountability for mass atrocities, a contest that influenced the outbreak of renewed conflict in 2023 (Kurtz, 2024). In the Sahel, counterterrorism cooperation and military partnerships have redefined the security landscape, with external military aid affecting the operational space of civil society groups documenting abuses by both state and non-state actors (Jalale, 2024). Similarly, Ethiopia's recent internal conflict illustrated how humanitarian access, international mediation, and donor conditionality intersect with national sovereignty in contested ways.

The growing complexity of these interventions reflects broader transformations in global governance and international relations. Traditional models of post conflict assistance that emphasized liberal peacebuilding have increasingly been replaced by hybrid arrangements that blend security cooperation, counterterrorism priorities, and selective human rights promotion (Karlsrud, 2023). As a result, the boundary between humanitarian aid, peacekeeping, and geopolitical competition has blurred. For example, the presence of private military companies in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado province and in parts of the Central African Republic (ISS Today, 2021) has introduced new forms of coercive external involvement that challenge existing accountability mechanisms. Reports by international observers and human rights bodies have documented serious violations linked to such actors, raising questions about the regulation of external coercive power and its impact on civilian protection (Fentahun, 2023; Mohamed, 2025). These patterns complicate the ability of local CSOs to operate freely, maintain credibility, and pursue justice in politically sensitive environments.

Across these cases, external actors influence post conflict societies through three principal mechanisms: financial assistance, normative frameworks, and coercive power. Financial assistance from international donors and multilateral institutions sustains critical governance and rights protection programs but also risks creating dependency and donor driven agendas (Browne, 2012). Normative influence operates through the diffusion of global human rights norms, transitional justice models, and good governance benchmarks that may not always align with local political cultures or needs (Och, 2018). Coercive power, exercised through military interventions, peacekeeping mandates, or security partnerships, directly affects the balance between state authority and civil liberties (Duursma et al., 2023; Ismail & Sköns, 2014). The interplay of these mechanisms determines whether external engagement reinforces or undermines local agency and the rule of law.

Over the past two decades, external engagement in Africa has therefore evolved from humanitarian response toward a more comprehensive and often securitized approach to peacebuilding (Dzinesa & Curtis, 2012). The shift is evident in donor emphasis on stabilization, countering violent extremism, and migration management areas that frequently overshadow long term support for democratic accountability and human rights. Consequently, civil society organizations face mounting pressures to align with donor priorities, navigate security constraints, and compete for limited funding, often at the expense of autonomy and sustainability (Banks et al., 2015; Kumi et al., 2025; Parks, 2008). Yet despite these challenges, African civil society continues to demonstrate resilience through innovative forms of advocacy, coalition building, and localization of global norms.

This study investigates the role of external actors in shaping civil society and human rights protection in post conflict Africa, focusing on both historical and contemporary cases. It situates the discussion within broader

debates about sovereignty, global governance, and the localization of peacebuilding agendas. The study argues that understanding the mechanisms of external influence including financial, normative, and coercive is essential for assessing the resilience and autonomy of African CSOs in transitional contexts. The key research questions guiding the study are the following: How do distinct categories of external actor influence the capacity of civil society organizations to monitor and protect human rights in post conflict settings? Under what conditions does external funding support local autonomy as opposed to creating dependency and delegitimization? How do security related external interventions affect the safety and operational space of rights defenders? Finally, how do local political actors mediate the effects of external engagement on accountability for past abuses?

By addressing these questions, the paper contributes to understanding how the interplay between external assistance and local agency shapes Africa's evolving human rights architecture. The next sections review theoretical debates on external intervention and civil society development, outline methodological approaches, and analyze case studies from Liberia, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Sudan, and Ethiopia. Through this multi layered exploration, the paper aims to clarify how global and local forces converge to redefine the meaning of post conflict justice and democratic reconstruction in contemporary Africa.

This paper makes a distinct contribution to the literature on post-conflict reconstruction and human rights protection in Africa by integrating constructivist and dependency perspectives within a unified analytical framework. While existing scholarship often examines external intervention through either normative (constructivist) or structural (political economy) lenses, this study bridges these approaches to reveal how ideas, power, and resources interact in shaping civil society outcomes. It advances the field by offering a comparative, multi-country synthesis that traces how financial, normative, and coercive mechanisms of external influence are localized and contested across African contexts. Empirically, the paper broadens understanding of African agency in post-conflict governance by highlighting adaptive strategies through which civil society actors reinterpret, resist, or hybridize external norms. Conceptually, it proposes a hybrid "constructivist–dependency" model that explains the paradoxical coexistence of empowerment and dependency in post-conflict engagement. This dual-level analysis linking global governance dynamics with localized civic agency offers a nuanced framework for both scholars and policymakers seeking to reconcile international support with sustainable local ownership

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review synthesizes the major strands of research that explain how external actors influence civil society and human rights protection in post-conflict Africa. It integrates theoretical, empirical, and methodological perspectives to map the complex interplay between international engagement, local agency, and post-conflict governance. The review covers five interrelated debates liberal peace and its critics; aid effectiveness and donor dependency; civil society and transnational advocacy; the security–development nexus; and geopolitical and normative contestation while situating them within broader theoretical frameworks, including liberal institutionalism, constructivism, and postcolonial critique.

Across these debates, scholars agree that post-conflict transitions are deeply contested spaces where domestic and external actors negotiate the meaning of peace, justice, and sovereignty (Kobayashi et al., 2025). The literature highlights both enabling and constraining effects of external engagement, emphasizing that outcomes depend on the interaction between financial, normative, and coercive mechanisms.

Liberal Peace and Its Critics

The liberal peace paradigm has long framed international engagement in post-conflict contexts. It assumes that democratization, rule of law, market liberalization, and institutional reform supported by international actors can stabilize societies emerging from violence(Finkenbusch, 2021; Richmond, 2006) . Under this model, external actors such as the United Nations, bilateral donors, and international NGOs promote elections, human rights education, and governance reforms as universal templates for peace.

However, critics argue that liberal peacebuilding often operates as an externally imposed project that neglects local ownership and fails to address the political roots of conflict (Craig et al., 2015; PARIS, 2010). Roland Paris

and others note that top-down liberal reforms can inadvertently reproduce dependency and exclude grassroots voices (COOPER et al., 2011). Empirical work from Liberia, Mozambique, and Sierra Leone demonstrates that externally mandated institutional designs frequently overlook indigenous conflict resolution traditions, thereby producing fragile peace and limited legitimacy (Atkinson, 2008; Bindi & Tufekci, 2018; Sambo, 2024) .

Constructivist scholars deepen this critique by showing that peacebuilding is not just a technical enterprise but a social process of norm diffusion and identity formation (McCandless & Donais, 2020). From this lens, external actors socialize domestic elites into new understandings of legitimacy, human rights, and citizenship, often reproducing Western normative frameworks. Meanwhile, critical and postcolonial scholars argue that liberal peacebuilding perpetuates structural inequalities and dependency reminiscent of colonial governance (Kristoffer, 2015). Table 1 shows the major theoretical perspectives on external actors and post-conflict civil society.

Table 1: Major Theoretical Perspectives on External Actors and Post-Conflict Civil Society

Theoretical Lens	Core Assumptions	Mechanisms of Influence	Implications for Civil Society and Human Rights
Liberal Institutionalism	Peace and rights can be secured through externally supported institutions and governance reforms.	Conditional aid, capacity-building, electoral support.	Strengthens institutions but risks superficial compliance.
Constructivism	International norms and identities shape domestic governance behavior.	Norm diffusion, socialization, legitimacy framing.	Promotes global values but may marginalize local justice norms.
Dependency/Postcolonial Theory	External engagement reproduces structural inequality and dependency.	Donor conditionalities, elite capture, and aid reliance.	Constrains autonomy and reinforces external dominance.
Hybrid Peace Framework	Peace emerges from interaction between external and local actors.	Adaptation of global norms to local contexts.	Generates context-sensitive but fragmented governance models.

Aid Effectiveness, Donor Dependency, and the Political Economy of Reconstruction

A large body of literature examines how foreign aid shapes governance, political incentives, and institutional resilience in fragile and post-conflict states. Optimists highlight its role in funding essential services, supporting truth and reconciliation commissions, and enabling CSOs to promote accountability(Faust et al., 2015; Fitriani, 2024; Kristoffer, 2015). In Rwanda, for example, donor aid was central to rebuilding administrative capacity and promoting reconciliation (Uwaliraye et al., 2024).

Yet, other scholars warn that aid can entrench elite capture, distort domestic accountability, and foster dependency (Elnour, n.d.; Uwaliraye et al., 2024). Peter Uvin's work on Rwanda demonstrates how well-intentioned aid, when entangled with local politics, may exacerbate inequality and marginalization. More recent analyses extend this critique to stabilization funding and security assistance, showing that resources are often diverted from human rights programming toward short-term counterinsurgency objectives (Uvin, 1999).

The political economy literature thus calls for detailed tracing of how financial incentives and conditionalities influence the behavior of state and non-state actors. Constructivist insights complement this view by suggesting that aid is not only a resource but also a carrier of norms and values that reshape political identities and expectations.

Civil Society, Localization, and Transnational Advocacy

Civil society occupies a central position in the discourse on post-conflict democratization and rights protection. CSOs serve as watchdogs, service providers, and advocates for marginalized communities. However, their autonomy is often shaped by donor structures and global advocacy networks.

Transnational linkages through international NGOs, funding partnerships, and advocacy coalitions can strengthen local capacity, provide legal expertise, and amplify domestic voices at the global level (Andonova & Piselli, 2022; Gabel & Ningning Yang, 2022). Conversely, overreliance on foreign funding can "crowd out" grassroots activism and shift local agendas toward donor-driven priorities. The localization literature stresses that sustainable post-conflict reconstruction requires partnership models that transfer leadership to local actors (McGrath et al., 2025).

Empirical studies from Liberia, Sierra Leone, and The Gambia show both sides of this equation. In some cases, external partnerships enabled effective transitional justice and reparations programs. In others, they weakened local legitimacy and constrained autonomous mobilization. These findings underscore that the type, duration, and governance of external partnerships significantly influence the health of civil society ecosystems.

The Security–Development Nexus and Coercive External Actors

Recent research has highlighted the increasing convergence between humanitarian, development, and security agendas in post-conflict Africa, a process described as the security–development nexus (Chandler, 2007). As international and regional actors seek stability, human rights objectives are often subordinated to counterterrorism and state security priorities.

This shift has been evident in contexts such as Mali, Burkina Faso, and Somalia, where external military assistance, peacekeeping, and counterterrorism programs dominate the reconstruction agenda. The rise of private military companies, including Russian-linked mercenary groups, further complicates accountability and transparency. Their involvement in states like Sudan and the Central African Republic has been linked to both tactical regime survival and human rights violations.

The militarization of external engagement can shrink civic space and reconfigure power dynamics. Scholars argue that without strong oversight and multilateral accountability mechanisms, coercive external actors risk undermining the very human rights norms they claim to protect (Chandler, 2007; Roggeband & Krizsán, 2021; World Peace Foundation, 2024).

Geopolitics, Normative Contestation, and the Changing Architecture of Global Civil Society

The global distribution of power has become increasingly multipolar, introducing new forms of competition over governance norms and models. Non-Western actors such as China, Turkey, and Gulf states offer alternative modalities of engagement that challenge traditional Western liberal norms. This has created normative contestation over sovereignty, intervention, and human rights (Brice et al., 2025; Karim, 2025).

In Africa, this competition manifests through shifts in external partnerships and domestic alignments. For instance, Sahelian states that have turned toward new security patrons have simultaneously withdrawn from multilateral rights commitments, reshaping civil society's operating environment. The framing of international justice institutions as "biased" or "neocolonial" further influences how governments regulate CSOs and restrict external funding flows.

Constructivist and postcolonial scholars interpret this shift as a struggle over the meaning of global legitimacy and justice, where African states assert sovereignty but also risk insulating themselves from rights-based scrutiny(Alaka, 2025; Nyirenda, n.d.) . The table 2 shows the Post-Conflict cases and external actors influences.

Table 2: Selected African Post-Conflict Cases and External Actor Influence

Country	Conflict Period	Key External Actors	Forms of Engagement	Impact on Civil Society and Human Rights
Rwanda	1994 genocide aftermath (Voloshchuk et al., 2021)	UN, EU, USAID, World Bank	Reconstruction aid, human rights programs	Strengthened governance but limited pluralism.
Liberia	1989–2003 civil wars (Woldetsadik, 2019)	UNMIL, USA, ECOWAS	Peacekeeping, institution building, civil society grants	Promoted stability yet fostered aid dependency.
Sierra Leone	1991–2002 civil war (Bindi & Tufekci, 2018)	UK, UN, DFID	DDR programs, truth commission support	Enhanced rights awareness but elite capture persisted.
Sudan	2003–present (Darfur, transition) (Kidane Kiros, 2024)	AU, EU, Gulf States	Peace mediation, humanitarian aid	Improved dialogue but politicized justice.
Ethiopia (Tigray)	2020–2022 conflict (Dawit & Yohannes, 2023)	UN, EU, US	Mediation, sanctions, human rights monitoring	Encouraged reforms yet limited sovereignty perception.
Mali and Burkina Faso	2012–ongoing insurgencies (Benjaminsen & Ba, 2024; Haavik et al., 2022)	France, EU, AU	Counterterrorism, governance support	Restricted civic space amid security operations.

Methodological Gaps and Directions in the Literature

Despite extensive debate, significant methodological gaps remain. Much of the existing research is case-specific and qualitative, limiting comparative generalization. Scholars call for mixed method approaches that integrate mechanism tracing, funding databases, and conflict event data to capture how external interventions operate across time and scale.

Moreover, many studies treat civil society as a homogenous entity, overlooking internal diversity among service-oriented NGOs, advocacy groups, legal aid networks, and grassroots movements. Differentiating among these categories is critical for understanding how various actors respond differently to external funding and influence. Finally, there is a need to analyze how financial, normative, and coercive mechanisms intersect to produce distinct outcomes for human rights protection and civic autonomy.

Synthesis and Implications for This Study

The reviewed literature converges on several key insights. First, external actors matter through multiple and interdependent channels financial, normative, and coercive and their effects are highly context-dependent. Second, the balance between empowerment and dependency determines whether external assistance strengthens or undermines local ownership. Third, the rise of multipolar geopolitics has complicated the traditional donor landscape, introducing alternative patronage systems that both expand and constrain civil society.

This study builds on these insights by adopting an integrated analytical framework that combines constructivist and political economy approaches. It aims to map the specific mechanisms through which external actors shape civil society and human rights protection across a comparative set of African cases, illuminating how global norms are localized and how local agency mediates external influence.

In summary, while external engagement has the potential to advance post-conflict democratization and human rights protection, its outcomes remain uneven and deeply embedded in the structural, normative, and geopolitical contexts of African societies. The next sections employ comparative analysis and mechanism tracing to examine these dynamics empirically and propose pathways for aligning external engagement with locally led, sustainable rights protection.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Theoretical Anchoring

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretivist research design (Wiesner, 2022) situated within a constructivist epistemological framework. Constructivism asserts that social realities are not objective or fixed but are constructed through social interactions, shared meanings, and the interplay of norms and identities (Nyirenda, n.d.; V & A, 2016). In post-conflict Africa, this approach enables a deep exploration of how external actors such as international organizations, foreign governments, and non-governmental entities-construct and reshape the meaning of civil society, human rights, and governance in fragile states. Constructivism is particularly relevant because post-conflict reconstruction is not purely a technical process of rebuilding institutions; it is a deeply political and normative project that involves defining what peace, democracy, and rights mean within specific cultural and historical contexts.

In addition to constructivism, this study integrates insights from liberal peace theory, dependency theory, and the security-development nexus framework to develop a comprehensive and multidimensional analytical model. The liberal peace paradigm, rooted in liberal internationalism, assumes that lasting peace emerges through democratization, market liberalization, and the protection of individual freedoms. External actors operating in Africa such as the United Nations, the European Union, and bilateral donors often base their post-conflict interventions on this model. However, this framework has been criticized for universalizing Western governance templates and overlooking local agency and indigenous peace mechanisms.

To balance this view, the study employs dependency theory, which foregrounds the structural economic inequalities that persist between global North and South. Dependency theory emphasizes that external interventions often reproduce patterns of dependency and underdevelopment, rather than achieving sustainable autonomy. Within post-conflict reconstruction, this theoretical perspective reveals how donor-driven agendas and conditionalities shape the policy priorities of African governments and civil society organizations, often constraining their ability to define independent developmental and human rights strategies.

Lastly, the security-development nexus provides a critical bridge between the ideational and material dimensions of intervention. It highlights the growing trend of merging humanitarian assistance, security operations, and development programming within fragile states. This framework helps contextualize how external actors, while promoting peace and human rights, also advance strategic security and geopolitical interests. Together, these four frameworks constructivism, liberal peace, dependency, and security-development nexus create an analytical triangulation that allows this study to interpret the complex power relations and normative exchanges shaping civil society and human rights protection in post-conflict Africa.

Research Questions

Based on this theoretical synthesis, the study is guided by the following central research questions:

1. How do external actors shape the formation and functioning of civil society in post-conflict African states?

2. To what extent do external interventions enhance or constrain human rights protection frameworks in these contexts?

3. How do ideational (constructivist) and structural (dependency) factors interact in defining the relationship between external actors and domestic institutions?

4. How does the liberal peace paradigm align with, or diverge from, the realities of post-conflict societies in Africa?

5. What are the implications of the security-development nexus for the autonomy and sustainability of civil society in fragile states?

These questions ensure theoretical and empirical coherence by linking the normative, institutional, and material dimensions of external influence in post-conflict reconstruction.

Research Approach and Methodological Rationale

Given the exploratory and interpretive nature of the research questions, a qualitative approach is the most suitable methodological path. Quantitative designs, though valuable for measuring specific indicators, are insufficient to capture the complex discursive and relational dynamics underpinning post-conflict interventions. Instead, this study focuses on contextual interpretation, meaning construction, and the power of discourse in shaping post-conflict realities. The emphasis is not on measuring the extent of influence but on understanding how influence is enacted, legitimized, and internalized across different actors and settings.

This interpretive orientation aligns with constructivist methodology, which privileges meanings, perceptions, and narratives as units of analysis. It also resonates with critical realism, recognizing that material structures such as economic dependencies and aid conditionalities constrain agency, even as social actors construct meaning within them. By synthesizing interpretivist and critical perspectives, this study provides a nuanced analysis that captures both the ideational construction and the structural reproduction of power.

Data Sources and Sampling

The study draws exclusively from secondary qualitative data, combining scholarly, institutional, and policy sources to achieve analytical depth and triangulation. Data sources include:

- Peer-reviewed academic journals in political science, international relations, and development studies (e.g., *African Affairs, Journal of Peacebuilding and Development, and Human Rights Quarterly*).

- Policy reports and evaluation documents from major international actors, including the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), African Union (AU), World Bank, European Union (EU), USAID, and the International Crisis Group (ICG).

- Archival and historical materials from transitional justice institutions and post-conflict commissions (e.g., Truth and Reconciliation Commissions in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and South Africa).

- NGO publications and human rights documentation from Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and regional advocacy networks.

A purposive sampling strategy is applied to select texts that explicitly address the intersections of post-conflict reconstruction, civil society development, and human rights. Priority is given to materials published between 2010 and 2025 to capture current patterns, with selective historical references to foundational cases such as Rwanda, Sierra Leone, and Liberia for comparative grounding.

Analytical Framework and Procedure

Data were analyzed using a thematic synthesis approach combined with discourse analysis and comparative case study analysis, allowing both conceptual depth and empirical breadth. The objective was to trace how external actors influence civil society and human rights protection across different African post-conflict contexts through financial, normative, and coercive mechanisms.

Data Composition and Selection

The study drew on a purposively selected dataset of approximately ninety-five documents, including peer-reviewed journal articles, policy briefs, institutional reports, and human-rights assessments published between 2010 and 2025. Texts were included if they explicitly addressed at least one of the study's central themes post-conflict reconstruction, external intervention, civil-society development, or human-rights protection in African settings. Sources lacking analytical depth, empirical evidence, or clear thematic relevance were excluded. This sampling ensured that the analysis captured both academic and practitioner perspectives, enabling triangulation between theoretical discourse and applied policy experience.

Analytical Stages

The analytical procedure unfolded in four interrelated stages:

1. Thematic Coding:

Each document was read line-by-line and coded according to the study's four theoretical lenses.

- Constructivist codes included "norm diffusion," "identity reconstruction," and "legitimacy narratives."

- Liberal-peace codes captured "democratization," "institutional reform," and "rights promotion."

- Dependency codes identified "donor dominance," "conditionality," and "economic asymmetry."

- Security-development codes highlighted "stabilization," "militarization of aid," and "peacebuilding-security overlap."

2. Interpretive Clustering:

Related codes were organized into broader analytical categories such as external legitimization, civil-society instrumentalization, and rights localization to reveal recurring mechanisms of influence across contexts.

3. Discourse Mapping:

Drawing on interpretive discourse analysis, the study examined how external actors frame their interventions, how African states and civil-society actors internalize or resist these narratives, and how such discourses evolve over time in policy and practice.

4. Cross-Case Comparison:

Findings from individual cases-South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, Mali, and Ethiopia were compared to identify both shared structural patterns and context-specific deviations. This stage provided vertical depth (within-case understanding) and horizontal comparability (across-case synthesis).

Reliability, Validity, and Reflexivity

To ensure methodological rigor, the study employed data triangulation, cross-checking insights from academic, institutional, and NGO sources. Reflexive memos were maintained throughout the analysis to document interpretive decisions and minimize researcher bias. Conceptual validity was strengthened through transparent linkage between theoretical categories and empirical illustrations, while reliability was supported by the systematic and replicable coding sequence described above. Although the design is qualitative and interpretive rather than statistical, its credibility rests on consistent procedures, explicit theoretical anchoring, and critical reflection on the researcher's positionality and epistemic standpoint.

Integration of Theory and Method

The study's analytical design explicitly links theoretical constructs to methodological tools, as summarized in the following table 3 and table 4.

Table 3: Theoretical Framework and Analytical Dimensions

Theoretical Lens	Key Concepts	Analytical Focus	Expected Contribution
Constructivism (V & A, 2016)	Norms, identities, legitimacy, discourse	Examines how meanings of peace, democracy, and rights are socially constructed in post-conflict settings	Reveals how external norms shape domestic narratives
Liberal Peace (Gonzalez-Vicente, 2020)	Democratization, market reforms, institutionalism	Investigates donor-driven governance and liberalization processes	Highlights the normative tension between universalism and localism
Dependency Theory (Harvold Kvangraven, 2023)	Structural inequality, conditionality, core-periphery dynamics	Analyzes economic dependency and policy conditionalities	Exposes how interventions reinforce asymmetrical relationships
Security-Development Nexus (Walton & Johnstone, 2024)	Stabilization, humanitarian-security overlap	Explores integration of security, development, and peacebuilding	Shows the securitization of aid and policy priorities

Table 4: Methodological Integration

Methodological Tool	Theoretical Connection	Data Source	Analytical Output
Thematic Coding (Ahmed et al., 2025)	Constructivism, Liberal Peace	Policy documents, scholarly texts	Identification of recurring normative themes
Comparative Case Study (do Amaral, 2022)	Liberal Peace, Dependency Theory	Multi-country case analysis	Cross-contextual comparison of intervention dynamics
Discourse Analysis (Saul, 2024)	Constructivism, Security Nexus	UN resolutions, donor narratives	Mapping power and legitimacy discourses
Triangulation (Carter et al., 2014)	All frameworks	Scholarly and policy synthesis	Validity and reliability of findings

Validity, Reliability, and Reflexivity

To enhance validity and reliability, the study employs data triangulation by cross-verifying findings from multiple data types and cases. Conceptual validity is strengthened by grounding empirical interpretation within well-defined theoretical constructs. The researcher's positionality is critically examined through reflexive engagement, acknowledging potential interpretive biases that may arise when analyzing donor narratives or African policy responses. Reflexivity ensures that the analysis remains sensitive to epistemic power relations between Western and African sources of knowledge.

Ethical Considerations

Although the research relies on publicly available secondary data, ethical diligence is maintained by accurate citation, transparent representation, and intellectual fairness to all perspectives. The study consciously integrates African scholarly voices to avoid epistemic marginalization and challenges Eurocentric biases that often dominate post-conflict discourse.

Limitations of the Study

Although this study provides a comprehensive analysis based on secondary qualitative sources, it is limited by its reliance on published literature, policy reports, and institutional documents. The absence of primary field data, interviews, or direct observation restricts the ability to verify how theoretical insights translate into on-the-ground practices. Future research could strengthen empirical depth by triangulating secondary evidence with qualitative interviews involving policymakers, civil society leaders, and community actors in selected post conflict states. Such mixed method approaches would enhance contextual validity and allow for more nuanced understanding of how external influence is experienced, negotiated, and internalized at the local level.

In summary, the methodology combines theoretical pluralism and interpretive rigor to capture the complex, multilayered roles of external actors in post-conflict Africa. Through the integration of constructivist, liberal, dependency, and security-development paradigms, the study achieves a balanced analytical framework that transcends simplistic dichotomies of "donor versus recipient" or "North versus South." Instead, it offers a holistic, relational understanding of how external engagement both empowers and constrains civil society and human rights protection in the fragile aftermath of conflict.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Overview of Emerging Patterns

The empirical analysis identifies four interrelated patterns through which external actors shape civil society and human rights protection in post-conflict African contexts. These are normative diffusion and local contestation grounded in constructivist understandings of global norm transmission; institutional engineering and aid dependency influenced by liberal peacebuilding and dependency paradigms; securitization of development and peacebuilding arising from the security development nexus; and resilience and adaptive agency of African civil society reflecting the dynamic negotiation between external influence and local ownership.

These patterns interact simultaneously, often producing hybrid outcomes. Gains in human rights promotion coexist with constraints on local autonomy, illustrating that external engagement in Africa's post-conflict reconstruction is neither wholly emancipatory nor entirely coercive but an ongoing process of negotiation. Across the case studies, three overarching mechanisms emerge as the main channels of influence: financial, normative, and coercive. These mechanisms work together to shape how civil society operates, adapts, or resists external involvement. The sections that follow discuss each of the four analytical patterns in detail, drawing on comparative evidence from Liberia, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Sudan, Ethiopia, Mali, Mozambique, and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Constructivist Dynamics: Norm Diffusion and Local Contestation

From a constructivist perspective, external actors influence post-conflict African societies not only through material resources or coercion but through the power to define legitimate forms of governance, justice, and citizenship. Organizations such as the United Nations, the African Union, and the European Union often act as promoters of universal frameworks of democracy, gender equality, and human rights.

In South Sudan, the United Nations Mission and international non-governmental organizations introduced rights-based governance programs that emphasized gender inclusion and civic participation. Yet these frameworks frequently clashed with traditional reconciliation practices such as the Beny-bith and Wunlit systems, forcing local actors to reinterpret imported norms in culturally meaningful ways. This illustrates that global norms are

rarely adopted in a uniform way. Instead, they are adapted, contested, or blended with indigenous systems to create a locally legitimate form of practice.

A comparable process took place in Rwanda's post-genocide reconstruction, where international donors supported the Gacaca courts as a hybrid mechanism of justice. Although initially celebrated as a model of restorative justice, the courts were later used by the state to consolidate political control and silence dissenting voices. These cases show that while external engagement introduces universal ideas of rights and justice, their success depends on how well they resonate with domestic traditions and power structures. Normative diffusion therefore becomes a negotiated process where global standards are localized through reinterpretation and resistance.

Liberal Peace and the Political Economy of Institutional Reconstruction

The liberal peace paradigm remains one of the most influential frameworks guiding international interventions in Africa. It assumes that democratization, market reform, and civil society expansion will jointly produce peace and stability. However, evidence from Liberia, Sierra Leone, and the Democratic Republic of Congo shows that such interventions often lead to the establishment of fragile, donor-dependent institutions.

In Liberia, the period after 2003 saw a large expansion of civil society organizations and non-governmental actors, most of which relied heavily on donor funds. These organizations contributed significantly to civic education and human rights awareness but their priorities gradually shifted to align with donor interests rather than community needs. When donor funding declined, many of these organizations collapsed, revealing the fragility of externally sustained civil society.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, donor support for governance reforms led to a situation where non-governmental organizations effectively replaced state institutions in delivering services. This created parallel systems that weakened public accountability and encouraged dependency on foreign assistance. These experiences illustrate the core weakness of the liberal peace model: it focuses on institutional form rather than local legitimacy. Elections and policy reforms have been introduced across several post-conflict states, but they have not always produced inclusive participation or social cohesion.

The evidence from Liberia, Sierra Leone, and the DRC confirms that donor-driven liberalization can increase civic activity in the short term but fails to ensure sustainable, autonomous institutions. Liberal peacebuilding achieves stability only when local ownership and long-term capacity building are prioritized.

Dependency and Donor Conditionalities in Civil Society Development

Dependency theory offers a critical lens for understanding how external interventions can reinforce asymmetrical relationships between donors and African states. In Sierra Leone, Rwanda, and Mozambique, civil society organizations depend heavily on financial support from agencies such as USAID, DFID, and the European Union. Donors frequently determine project priorities and accountability mechanisms, which leads local organizations to focus on donor visibility rather than genuine community empowerment.

This project-based funding model replaces long-term social movements with short-term, quantifiable initiatives, thereby fragmenting collective action. Accountability often shifts upward to donors instead of downward to local constituencies. In Ethiopia, for instance, donor conditionalities led to a political backlash. The 2009 Charities and Societies Proclamation restricted foreign-funded organizations from human rights advocacy, effectively shrinking the civic space. This law, justified as a measure to protect national sovereignty, demonstrates the paradox of external engagement. Efforts to promote human rights through conditional assistance can provoke resistance from recipient governments and contribute to authoritarian consolidation.

Across Rwanda, Mozambique, and Ethiopia, dependence on foreign aid has made civil society vulnerable to financial instability. Once donor cycles end, many organizations struggle to continue their operations. Empirical studies in these countries indicate that over two-thirds of civil society budgets are externally sourced, leaving limited room for domestic accountability or independent agenda setting. This confirms that aid dependency not

only constrains autonomy but also depoliticizes activism by aligning it with technical donor frameworks rather than grassroots struggles.

The Security–Development Nexus and the Militarization of Humanitarianism

A notable trend across recent African conflicts is the merging of security and development agendas. This process, often referred to as the security–development nexus, has redefined post-conflict intervention. International actors increasingly link humanitarian assistance with counterterrorism and stabilization objectives.

In Mali, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission and France's Operation Barkhane combined military and development mandates. This overlap blurred the neutrality of humanitarian aid and limited the operational space for civil society organizations. Reports from human rights groups show that rights defenders faced increasing risks as security operations intensified.

In Mozambique's Cabo Delgado region, security assistance from international partners and private military contractors was intended to contain insurgency but led to widespread human rights violations by both state forces and insurgent groups. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch documented numerous cases of abuse, illustrating how militarized assistance undermines the very protection it claims to advance.

Comparative evidence from Mali and Mozambique shows that securitized development programs often correspond with declines in civil liberties. Data from regional human rights observatories reveal that countries receiving large volumes of security-linked aid tend to experience a measurable contraction in civic space. These findings suggest that when aid is tied too closely to security objectives, it weakens civil oversight and erodes public trust in both domestic and international institutions.

Adaptive Agency and Local Ownership

Despite structural and political constraints, African civil society continues to demonstrate remarkable resilience. The 2019 revolution in Sudan provides an illustrative example. Professional associations, youth groups, and women's movements worked together to organize peaceful protests that pressured the transitional regime toward reform. These movements skillfully combined domestic mobilization with support from international advocacy networks while maintaining their local legitimacy.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Catholic Lay Coordination Committee mobilized religious authority and community credibility to demand electoral accountability. By merging faith-based moral principles with international human rights advocacy, the movement achieved both local resonance and global attention.

These examples highlight a broader reality: civil society in Africa is not a passive recipient of external norms but an active participant in shaping them. Local actors reinterpret and adapt global human rights ideas to fit their cultural contexts. Their success demonstrates that sustainable human rights advocacy depends on a balance between external support and indigenous legitimacy. When external norms are localized and rooted in community structures, they become more resilient and socially acceptable.

Comparative Insights and Theoretical Integration

A comparative synthesis across all examined cases reveals that the influence of external actors is complex and multidimensional. Civil society in post-conflict Africa is simultaneously empowered and constrained by external engagement. The constructivist and dependency dimensions often intersect: civil society actors are normatively influenced by global discourses while remaining materially dependent on donor resources.

In Rwanda and Ethiopia, externally guided peacebuilding achieved administrative stability but reduced political pluralism. In contrast, Liberia and Sierra Leone experienced expanded civic participation but continued financial dependency on external donors. These outcomes demonstrate that neither external imposition nor complete autonomy alone guarantees sustainable rights protection. The key lies in negotiated partnerships that combine international support with local ownership as discussed in the Table 5.

Table 5: The interaction of theoretical perspectives (Summary)

Relationship	Analytical Insight
Constructivist and Liberal	External norms are most effective when localized through inclusive dialogue and institutional adaptation.
Liberal and Dependency	Donor funding intended to empower civil society often reproduces structural inequality and dependency.
Dependency and Security	Militarized aid amplifies dependency and undermines accountability for rights violations.
Constructivist and Agency	Local actors reinterpret external norms to create hybrid governance models that align with domestic legitimacy.

To illustrate these patterns more concretely, Table 6 presents a comparative summary of how different external mechanisms have shaped civil society outcomes in selected African post-conflict states.

Table 6. External Mechanisms and Civil Society Outcomes in Post-Conflict Africa

Country	Dominant Mechanism	Positive Impact	Limiting Effect	Overall Outcome
Rwanda	Normative diffusion (UN, EU, World Bank)	Governance rebuilding, justice reform	Restricted pluralism, limited NGO autonomy	Stable but tightly controlled civic space
Liberia	Financial assistance (UNMIL, USA, ECOWAS)	Peace consolidation, civic expansion	Donor dependency, limited sustainability	Empowered but externally reliant civil society
Sierra Leone	Liberal peacebuilding (UK, UNDP, DFID)	Rights awareness, reconciliation	Elite capture, short project cycles	Moderate progress, fragile autonomy
Sudan	Hybrid engagement (AU, EU, Gulf States)	Civic mobilization, transitional dialogue	Politicized justice, fragmented coordination	Transitional gains under pressure
Ethiopia	Donor conditionality (UN, EU, USA)	Institutional reform, early liberalization	Repressive NGO laws, restricted advocacy	Narrowed civic space
Mali	Security–development nexus (France, EU, AU)	Stabilization, governance support	Militarized aid, human rights abuses	Security prioritized over rights
Mozambique	Coercive power (Private contractors)	Short-term security, international attention	Civilian abuse, weak oversight	Humanitarian compromise

This synthesis shows that external engagement produces both opportunities and constraints. While external actors can enable post-conflict recovery and human rights protection, they can also deepen dependency and undermine autonomy when interventions prioritize external visibility over local participation.

Implications for Policy and Theory

The evidence presented in this study demonstrates that the sustainability of human rights protection and civil society strengthening depends on local ownership, long-term partnership, and contextual legitimacy. Theoretically, the findings support a hybrid constructivist and dependency model of post-conflict reconstruction, suggesting that peace and rights are co-produced through unequal but interactive relationships between domestic and external actors.

For external engagement to contribute meaningfully to lasting peace, several measures are necessary. Funding should be directed to local organizations rather than intermediary agencies to ensure genuine participation and sustainability. Human rights oversight must be built into all security and peacekeeping operations to prevent abuse. Rights programming should integrate traditional and formal justice systems to reflect local values. Regional organizations such as the African Union and ECOWAS should play stronger coordinating roles to promote Africa-led solutions.

Collectively, these findings indicate that post-conflict reconstruction is most effective when international actors act as facilitators rather than directors. External engagement should support, not substitute, local agency. When global norms are grounded in local realities, civil society becomes both autonomous and resilient, transforming external assistance from dependency into partnership.

CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Conclusion

The study concludes that the role of external actors in shaping civil society and human rights protection in post-conflict Africa is both transformative and paradoxical. External engagement has contributed significantly to rebuilding governance institutions, strengthening rights discourse, and empowering civic participation. Yet it has also entrenched financial dependency, reproduced asymmetrical power relations, and limited local agency.

The research demonstrates that the influence of external actors unfolds across four interdependent dimensions: constructivist norm diffusion, liberal peace institutionalism, aid dependency, and the security–development nexus. Each dimension affects civil society and human rights outcomes in distinctive ways, but their combined effect determines whether post-conflict reconstruction strengthens or undermines sustainable governance.

Through a constructivist lens, the study shows that norms of democracy, human rights, and rule of law are not simply transmitted but are localized through negotiation and adaptation. In contexts such as South Sudan, Rwanda, and Sierra Leone, global frameworks were accepted selectively, reshaped through domestic institutions, and embedded within local social practices. The liberal peace framework demonstrates that although democratization and civil society promotion are vital to peacebuilding, externally engineered institutions often lack contextual legitimacy. Cases from Liberia and the Democratic Republic of Congo reveal that procedural democracy without inclusive governance risks reproducing the inequalities that caused conflict in the first place.

From the perspective of dependency theory, post-conflict aid regimes frequently perpetuate structural inequality. Donor agendas and funding conditionalities constrain the autonomy of civil society, transforming many organizations into extensions of foreign policy objectives. In Ethiopia and Rwanda, donor pressure for reform provoked restrictive legislation that narrowed civic space and weakened human rights advocacy.

The security development nexus further complicates this picture. The merging of humanitarian and counterterrorism objectives, observed in Mali and Mozambique, has blurred the boundary between peacebuilding and militarization. Civil society independence and human rights accountability are often subordinated to stabilization priorities, reducing public trust in both international and domestic institutions.

Overall, the findings indicate that post-conflict reconstruction in Africa is a process of co-construction between global and local actors. Sustainable peace and human rights protection emerge not from external blueprints but from negotiated partnerships grounded in mutual accountability, contextual legitimacy, and local agency.

Policy Recommendations

Drawing on both theoretical insights and comparative evidence, the study proposes several policy directions that can strengthen the legitimacy and effectiveness of external engagement in post-conflict Africa. The recommendations are summarized in Table 7 and elaborated below.

Table 7. Policy Areas, Key Recommendations, and Intended Impacts

Policy Area	Recommendation	Intended Impact
Civil Society Empowerment	Provide direct funding to grassroots and community-based organizations instead of channeling resources primarily through large intermediaries or international NGOs.	Enhances sustainability, strengthens local legitimacy, and ensures community participation in reconstruction.
Human Rights Protection	Integrate customary and indigenous justice systems within national human rights and transitional justice frameworks.	Promotes cultural resonance and improves long-term institutional acceptance.
Governance and Aid Dependency	Reorient donor programs toward co-creation partnerships that emphasize capacity exchange and mutual accountability rather than conditionality.	Reduces dependency and fosters shared ownership of development outcomes.
Security and Peacebuilding	Incorporate human rights monitoring and civic oversight mechanisms within peacekeeping, stabilization, and counterterrorism operations.	Prevents securitized aid from undermining civil liberties and civic participation.
Regional Ownership	Strengthen the mandates and resources of African-led mechanisms such as the African Union Peace and Security Council and ECOWAS mediation frameworks.	Promotes context-specific, continent-driven peacebuilding agendas.

These recommendations converge on one principle: external engagement must shift from short-term project cycles to long-term, participatory partnerships. Development partners should adopt adaptive programming that evolves with local priorities rather than imposing fixed templates. Donors and African governments should jointly establish participatory monitoring frameworks involving civil society, state actors, and regional bodies to ensure transparency in the use of external assistance.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The study advances a hybrid constructivist–dependency model of post-conflict reconstruction. This model acknowledges that peace and human rights are co-produced through the interaction of ideas and resources in contexts marked by asymmetry. It challenges the binary view of "external imposition versus local ownership" by revealing how both are continually negotiated.

Theoretically, the research contributes to the growing literature on norm localization, hybrid peacebuilding, and postcolonial international relations. It demonstrates that post-conflict transitions in Africa cannot be understood solely through Western frameworks but require recognition of African agency and epistemic diversity.

Practically, the findings call for a paradigm shift in international engagement. External actors should invest in building long-term institutional capacity and local knowledge systems rather than focusing exclusively on short-term stability. Donors should also prioritize participatory evaluation, ensuring that communities influence how success is defined and measured.

Directions for Future Research

While this study provides an integrated analysis across multiple African cases, further empirical research is needed to deepen understanding of how external and local dynamics evolve over time. Future studies could pursue the following directions:

1. Comparative longitudinal analysis to assess how external influence changes over different phases of post-conflict reconstruction and peace consolidation.

2. Network mapping of donor–civil society relationships to identify funding patterns and dependencies at both regional and national levels.

3. Ethnographic research exploring how local activists, community leaders, and traditional institutions interpret and apply human rights norms in everyday life.

4. Regional institutional studies examining how African Union and ECOWAS frameworks mediate the balance between sovereignty and external engagement.

5. Impact evaluations of security-sector reform and peacekeeping operations to measure their long-term effects on human rights protection and civic participation.

Such research would contribute to refining theoretical debates around norm diffusion, dependency, and hybrid governance while providing practical insights for designing inclusive and accountable peacebuilding strategies.

Final Reflection

Africa's post-conflict transitions reveal that sustainable peace cannot be externally imposed. It must grow from within through inclusive governance, equitable participation, and legitimate institutions. External actors remain essential partners, but their greatest contribution lies in facilitating rather than directing change.

The future of peacebuilding and human rights protection in Africa depends on the continent's ability to balance external assistance with local agency. When international engagement supports rather than substitutes local ownership, civil society can evolve from dependency into empowerment. In this transformation, Africa's diverse traditions of resilience, reconciliation, and justice provide not only the foundation for durable peace but also valuable lessons for global peacebuilding practice. Ultimately, Africa's post-conflict reconstruction will succeed when external assistance evolves from conditional aid into equitable partnership rooted in African agency.˙

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Ethical Considerations

- **Ethical Approval:** This study relied solely on secondary sources, including published academic works, policy reports, and institutional documents. Therefore, it did not involve direct human participation and did not require formal ethical approval. Nevertheless, the research adhered to the highest ethical standards of integrity, proper citation, and intellectual honesty.

- **Conflict of Interest:** The author declares that there is no conflict of interest related to this research. The study was conducted independently, without any external influence on its design, analysis, or conclusions.

Data Availability

The data supporting this study consist of publicly available academic literature, policy reports, and institutional documents cited within the manuscript. No proprietary or confidential data were used. Additional reference materials or synthesized datasets generated during the analysis can be made available upon reasonable request.

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