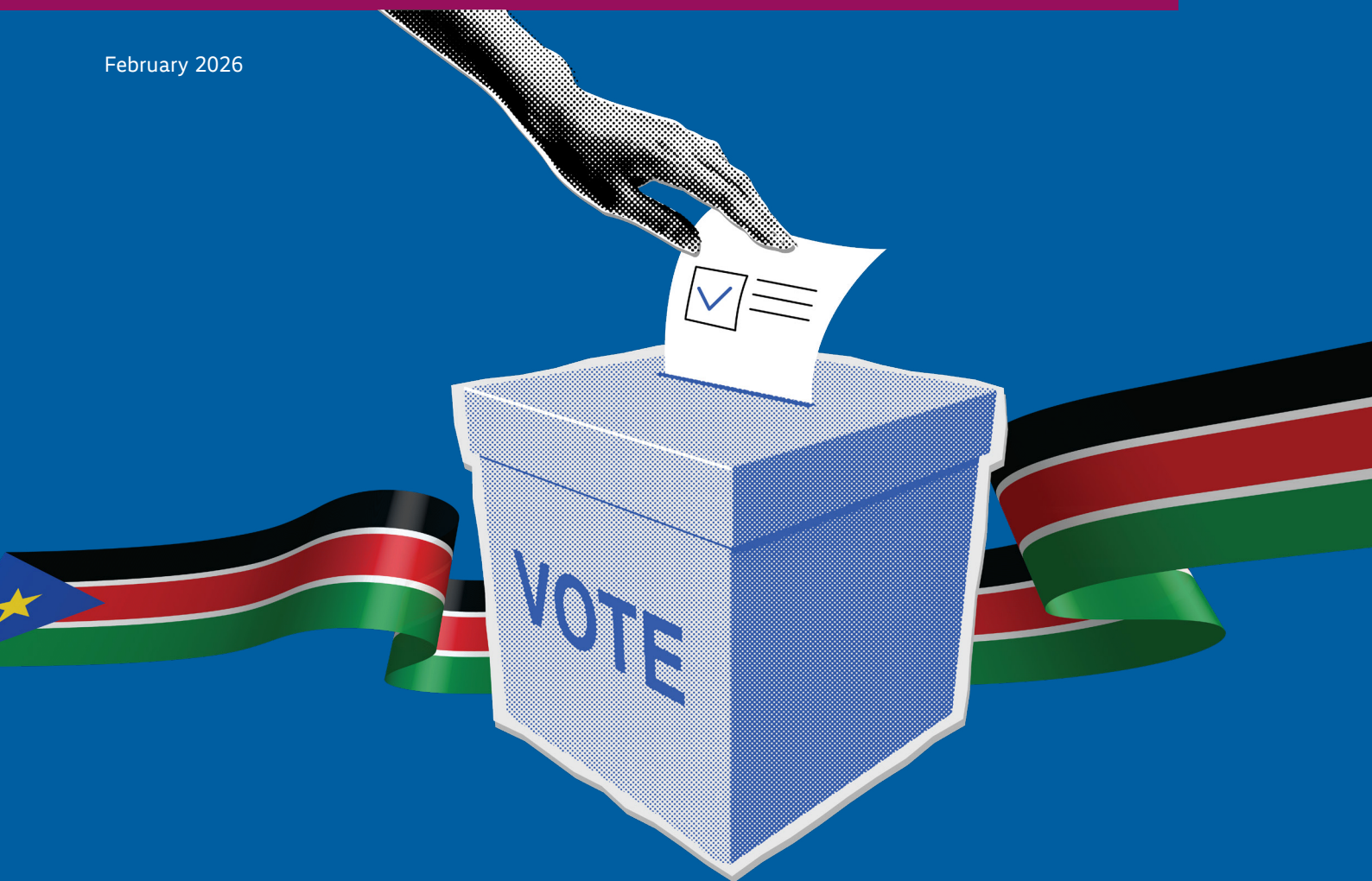


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How to Hold Inclusive Elections in South Sudan

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Nic Cheeseman and Arol Dut

How to Hold Inclusive Elections in South Sudan

Foreword

This discussion paper is the third publication in the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's series *How to Hold Elections in South Sudan*, which forms part of FES's broader commitment to supporting inclusive, credible and peaceful elections in the country. It follows two earlier papers: *How (Not) to Hold Elections in South Sudan (2023)*, which examined structural weaknesses and risks inherent in South Sudan's electoral landscape, and *How to Hold Peaceful Elections in South Sudan (2024)*, which set out a range of possible strategies to reduce violence and strengthen conflictsensitive electoral planning.

This third paper in the series takes another step: examining how South Sudan can deliver elections that are genuinely inclusive, ensuring that women, youth, older people, persons with disabilities, displaced citizens, refugees and diaspora communities all see themselves reflected in the country's democratic processes. Drawing on comparative insights from the continent and existing legal frameworks and takes into account the challenging situation on the ground, it provides practical options that can be pursued even under tight timelines and in a fragile security environment.

As South Sudan moves toward the 2026 elections, we hope that this report, together with its predecessors, supports constructive dialogue among political decision-makers, state institutions, political parties, civil society and international partners. Strengthening inclusion is not only a democratic aspiration; it is instrumental to building trust and laying the foundation for a peaceful transition.

Ulrich Thum

Country Director

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Abbreviations List

AU	African Union	RTGoNU	Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity
BRIDGE	Building Resources in Democracy, Governance and Elections	SGBV	Sexual and Gender-Based Violence
CEPO	Community Empowerment for Progress Organisation	SPLM-IG	Sudan People's Liberation Movement in Government
CPA	Comprehensive Peace Agreement	SPLA-IO	Sudan People's Liberation Army – In Opposition
CSO	Civil Society Organisation	SSNAP-2	South Sudan National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (Second Generation)
DFID	UK Department for International Development	SSPDF	South Sudan People's Defense Forces
GBV	Gender-Based Violence	TCRSS	Transitional Constitution of the Republic of South Sudan
HEC	High Elections Committee	TNLA	Transitional National Legislative Assembly
ICAN	International Civil Society Action Network	UN	United Nations
IDMC	Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre	UNCDF	United Nations Capital Development Fund
IDP(s)	Internally Displaced Person(s)	UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
IIAG	Ibrahim Index of African Governance	UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
MP	Member of Parliament	UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees
NEA	National Elections Act	UNMISS	United Nations Mission in South Sudan
NEC	National Elections Commission	USAID	United States Agency for International Development
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation	WIPC	Women's International Peace Centre
OPD(s)	Organisation(s) of Persons with Disabilities		
PPC	Political Parties Council		
POC	Protection of Civilians (site)		
PR	Proportional Representation		
R-ARCSS	Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan		

Executive summary

South Sudan's planned 2026 elections represent a critical opportunity to renew political authority, enhance public trust and create a representative political system. Yet the country's fragility – marked by ongoing violence, displacement, economic hardship and weak institutions – means that elections also carry significant risks.

South Sudan enters this electoral cycle amid renewed concerns over the risk of national civil conflict, widespread poverty, rising displacement and uncertainty over institutional preparedness. While the constitution and the R-ARCSS lay out broad commitments to inclusion and participation, including of specific groups such as women, many provisions remain unimplemented. Meanwhile, the National Elections Commission and the Political Parties Council face funding gaps and capacity constraints.

In this environment, inclusion is not only a democratic principle – it is essential for stability. Groups that feel ignored or marginalised may disengage, resist electoral outcomes or be vulnerable to political manipulation.

Strengthening inclusion is therefore a core part of preventing electoral violence and building trust in state institutions.

This report examines **how South Sudan can deliver inclusive elections** within tight timelines and resource constraints. It focuses on five dimensions

of inclusion that are particularly significant in the South Sudanese context: **Ethnic and geographic inclusion; Women and girls; Young people and older citizens; People living with disabilities;** and, **IDPs, refugees and the diaspora.**

The conclusions presented in this report are based on South Sudan's legal framework and the experience of what has (and has not) worked in other relevant countries. They also draw on evidence concerning the challenges that citizens from various backgrounds face when it comes to political inclusion and participation. Rather than prescriptive recommendations, it aims to set out a range of policy options for key actors – civil society groups, South Sudanese governance institutions and leaders, and international donors – to consider. One reason for this approach is that

it is critical that the elections, including the wider electoral process, are fully owned by the people and government of South Sudan.

Another is that the inclusion of historically marginalised and vulnerable groups can never be complete unless they enjoy meaningful participation in processes that enable their own experiences and leadership to serve as the driving force of policy design. A critical step ahead of implementing any policy option is therefore genuine engagement with the communities concerned.

Key Findings and Policy Options

1. Ethnic and Geographic Inclusion. Perceptions of unequal access to resources, services and political representation remain a major source of mistrust from some communities in the subnational and national governments. Ambiguity over the scope of the 2026 elections and limited outreach from key electoral and political bodies risks deepening these concerns.

Priority areas include:

- ⊗ Using sub-national elections to promote inclusion while reducing national-level tensions.
- ⊗ The equitable deployment of registration and polling stations, including mobile teams for hard-to-reach areas.
- ⊗ Developing transparent, community-based mechanisms to address disputes.

These steps can help counter fears that elections will reinforce existing inequalities.

2. Inclusion of Women and Girls. Despite the adoption of a formal 35% quota for legislative representation, women face violence, intimidation, financial barriers and limited support from political parties. These challenges need to be understood through an intersectional lens, and the different experiences of women and girls from different communities, regions and classes.

Priority areas include:

Mainstreaming a gender and intersectional lens into all programming areas, reflecting the distinctive experience of young and old women, of those who are minoritised, and those who are displaced or living with disabilities.

- ⊗ Implementing the 35% quota in practice as a minimum not maximum threshold, with women placed in winnable positions in some non-quota seats.

- ⊗ Strengthening protection and accountability for violence against women in politics.

- ⊗ Voter education that emphasises women's right to vote and contest for office.

A more enabling environment is essential for meaningful participation beyond symbolic representation.

3. Young People and Older Citizens. Young people form more than 70% of the population but remain politically marginalised, polarised and vulnerable to manipulation. Older people face mobility, security and access challenges. In both cases, experiences and challenges vary between rural and urban areas, and for the youth between those who have and have not been recruited as "foot soldiers" for political leaders/armed groups.

Priority areas include:

- ⊗ Structured youth consultations to feed into and strengthen electoral planning.
- ⊗ Developing youth-sensitive electoral security frameworks to reduce risks of exploitation.
- ⊗ Expanded civic education delivered through radio, community networks and peer educators to reach younger and older demographics.
- ⊗ Polling-day measures to support elderly voters, such as priority queues and shaded areas.

Targeted, low-cost approaches can significantly improve participation for both groups.

4. People Living with Disabilities. Although legal commitments exist, persons with disabilities face physical, informational and attitudinal barriers that hinder participation in both every day and political life.

Priority areas include:

- ⊗ Co-designing an election accessibility plan with persons living with disabilities.
- ⊗ Making polling stations physically accessible while providing information in multiple formats (Braille, audio, Easy Read, and so on).

- ⑤ Training election officials on disability inclusion and related issues.

These measures translate legal guarantees into practical rights.

5. IDPs, Refugees and the Diaspora. Millions remain displaced within South Sudan or across borders, creating particular challenges for political inclusion. Many even lack clarity on whether or how they will be able to participate.

Priority areas include:

- ⑤ Conduct a feasibility assessment on IDP and refugee voting options, while engaging in a structured dialogue with displaced communities and diaspora networks.
- ⑤ Improve security guarantees and information access for IDPs.

- ⑤ Explore external voting in major refugee-hosting countries if funding is available.

Proactive engagement can reduce disenfranchisement and distrust among displaced populations.

A central message of the report is that while legal quotas and regulations represent an important starting point, implementation gaps mean that they have so far had limited impact on how citizens experience the political system. Through community-level engagement, accessible polling arrangements and targeted civic education, civil society groups, South Sudanese governance institutions, and international donors can ensure that citizens who have long felt excluded have a stake in shaping the country's future.

1. Introduction: Building a more inclusive South Sudan

Credible and inclusive elections are widely understood to be a cornerstone of political legitimacy and stability (Udochukwu and Aideloje 2024). After a number of delays, South Sudan's general elections, which will represent the country's first nationally delivered poll since independence, are currently scheduled for 22 December 2026.

Recent surveys indicate **strong public support** for elections to be held as planned (Deng et al 2025), reflecting a widespread **desire for political renewal through peaceful and democratic means**.



Yet past experience in countries such as Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Kenya reveal that holding elections is not sufficient to confer legitimacy on the government and the wider political systems. Elections must also be seen to be credible and inclusive (Cheeseman 2015).

When citizens feel that they have a genuine opportunity to participate – as voters, candidates and organisers – they are more likely to view the system as fair and accept electoral outcomes, even when their preferred side does not win. This is especially important in post-conflict settings such as South Sudan, where mistrust of institutions runs deep and where parts of the population have

experienced displacement, marginalisation or violence at the hands of those who claim to govern in their name. In such contexts, exclusion is not only a democratic problem but a potential trigger for renewed instability. Designing elections that are seen as open, fair and broadly representative is therefore central to consolidating peace.

While recognising that true political inclusion must take place both during and outside of elections, we focus on electoral inclusion given the limited lead-up to the 2026 polls. The report consistently recognises, however, that securing an inclusive political future for South Sudan requires sustained commitment across the broader political system – including in party structures, governance processes and everyday decision-making – if progress made during the electoral period is to be meaningful and long-lasting.

South Sudanese political elites and citizens have repeatedly signalled their support for different forms of inclusion. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) (2005), the Transitional Constitution of the Republic of South Sudan (TCRSS) (2011) and the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) (2018) all contain clear commitments to broad-based participation - as do parts of the National Elections Act (NEA), 2012 (Amendment) Act, 2023. These measures include gender quotas that increased women's formal representation to 35 per cent in public and political institutions, recognition of the rights of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) to return and participate in national life, and, more broadly, an emphasis on the citizenship rights of South Sudanese wherever they reside, including in the diaspora. At the same time, debates around youth engagement, the position of older people, and

the rights of persons living with disabilities (PLWDs) have become more prominent, reflecting popular concern that elections should not simply reproduce existing hierarchies.

Despite these commitments, inclusion remains difficult to achieve in practice.



Women continue to face physical and verbal threats and violence, socio-cultural barriers and limited access to financial resources.



IDPs and refugees are constrained by insecurity, lack of documentation and uncertainty over whether and where they will be able to vote. Meanwhile, the diaspora has no dedicated legal mechanism for participation.



Young people – who make up the majority of the population – often feel excluded from decision-making and are vulnerable to political manipulation, as well as being mobilised into electoral violence.



Older voters and PLWDs encounter challenges accessing polling stations or engaging in campaign processes.

Across all groups, limited public financing, donor budget reductions, weak institutional capacity, poor civic information dissemination and persistent insecurity further complicate meaningful inclusion. These constraints are particularly acute given the compressed electoral timetable and the logistical demands of conducting nationwide polls in a context of conflict-affected infrastructure and limited administrative reach.

Against this backdrop, the report investigates the practical challenges of ensuring electoral inclusion for a wide range of groups: ethnic and regional communities; citizens in peripheral and rural areas;

women and girls; young people and older citizens; people living with disabilities; and South Sudanese who have been displaced within the country, who live as refugees in the region, or who form part of the wider diaspora. Earlier reports in this series have already examined how electoral and political systems can be structured to promote broad and deep ethnic and geographic inclusion, as a means of supporting political stability. This report therefore begins by briefly summarising those findings on political and ethnic inclusion before focusing in greater depth on groups that are often overlooked in electoral design: women and gendered political inequalities, youth and the elderly, PLWDs, and displaced and diaspora populations.

Throughout, the report does not seek to prescribe a single model but instead sets out policy options for those who are interested in strengthening inclusion within the constraints of limited time and resources. For example, it discusses possible steps such as supporting a national dialogue on women's participation to inform the implementation of the 35 per cent quota; assessing the feasibility of different arrangements for IDP and refugee voting; exploring practical ways to improve accessibility for voters with disabilities; and, identifying low-cost strategies to engage youth and older people in civic education and electoral processes. We adopt this approach because it is critical that the elections, including the wider electoral process, are fully owned by the people and government of South Sudan.

It is also essential that efforts to promote inclusion and participation are guided by the individuals and communities concerned if they are to be suitable and appropriate. In each case, we therefore emphasise the importance of listening to and engaging with minorities and historically marginalised groups so that their experiences and aspirations can drive the reform agenda, while also being sensitive to new conflict risks and prioritising interventions that can realistically be implemented in the run-up to the next elections.

2. Holding elections that are ethnically and geographically inclusive

The challenge of ensuring ethnic and geographic inclusion is intrinsic to building legitimacy in South Sudan, and takes on heightened significance in the context of forthcoming elections. Having emerged from a protracted period of conflict, the country continues to be marked by deep mistrust between communities regarding issues of territory, identity and representation.

South Sudan is a highly diverse society, comprising an estimated **64 ethnic groups** – including larger groups such as the Dinka, Nuer, Azande, Shilluk and Bari – as well as **smaller minority communities** whose influence often varies by region.

Although the population is predominantly Christian, along with some traditional religious practices, religious identity tends to be less politically salient than ethnicity. Geographically, divisions between Juba and outlying rural areas reflect longstanding differences in access to political decision-making, infrastructure and services. Communities in the capital and major towns such as Wau and Bor tend to participate more actively in political processes, while those in peripheral regions often feel overlooked or marginalised, reinforcing calls for more tangible inclusion through electoral and governance mechanisms. These disparities have

historically extended to voter registration and access to polling stations, with rural and conflict-affected areas frequently facing delays or limited coverage, contributing to perceptions of structural bias that elections must seek to address.



Earlier work in this series, including the discussion paper *How to Hold Peaceful Elections in South Sudan* by Nic Cheeseman, Luka Biong and Edmund Yakani, emphasised the importance of using institutional design and dedicated policy approaches to foster inclusion.

This is especially important given that rising political competition close to election periods can amplify longstanding grievances (Eifert et al 2010). This makes it vital that electoral arrangements are seen to treat all communities fairly. If groups believe that election outcomes will entrench unequal access to political power or state resources, the incentives to disrupt or reject the process increase.

Several structural and historical factors make achieving ethnic and geographic inclusion particularly challenging in South Sudan.

The absence of a permanent constitution, combined with ambiguity over how new political arrangements will be translated into enduring rules, has left uncertainty surrounding power-sharing frameworks and resource allocation. In addition, boundary delimitation has the potential to become

highly contentious due to unresolved disagreements over administrative boundaries, shifting population distributions, and the special status of administrative areas such as Abyei. Experiences from elsewhere in Africa, including Ethiopia, Kenya and Nigeria, demonstrate that when groups perceive exclusion from local-level political offices or access to devolved resources, tensions can escalate rapidly (Stewart 2016).

Communal anxieties over marginalisation are amplified by longstanding legacies of displacement, uneven development and a history of centralised decision-making, which collectively exacerbate these concerns in the South Sudanese context.

In remote areas, limited infrastructure and logistical challenges mean that access to registration centres and polling stations has historically been uneven. This has at times led to allegations that electoral institutions fail to provide sufficient opportunities for all citizens to participate, particularly where insecurity and poor transport links make deployment difficult. In a politically polarised context, such perceived exclusion can deepen mistrust and engender allegations of deliberate marginalisation if not proactively mitigated. The lack of clarity over which elections will take place in 2026 – particularly whether local, state-level and legislative polls will be held – further complicates strategic planning by parties and communities and risks creating space for conjecture and manipulation.

These considerations have become increasingly important as the country has moved closer to a return to full-blown conflict.

In the past ten months, South Sudan has experienced a notable escalation in violence, with UNMISS reporting a significant rise in conflict-related incidents, including hundreds of fatalities, numerous injuries and widespread abductions (UNMISS 2025). More recently, episodes such as the bombing of a hospital in Fangak County in May 2025, which resulted in multiple civilian casualties (BBC 2025), have fuelled growing concerns that instability may be resurfacing despite the 2018 peace agreement. Against this backdrop, the recent arrest and detention of senior opposition figure Riek Machar has further heightened tensions, reinforcing fears that political grievances could spill over into electoral contestation if not carefully managed (United Nations 2025).

Given these challenges, it will be essential to get both institutional design, electoral communication, and funding and logistical planning right. At present, a number of organisations with a mandate related to the elections continue to face significant capacity deficits, including limited resources, incomplete staffing and delayed operational planning due to the late reconstitution of the National Elections Commission (NEC) and the Political Parties Council (PPC). Anxiety regarding exclusion – both political and economic – remains high across different regions, and fears that some parties may dominate national politics at the expense of others has further heightened sensitivities ahead of the polls.

Since the government has yet to clarify how local and national political authority will interact, there is significant risk that electoral competition will fuel tensions between “indigenous” and “outsider” communities unless inclusive arrangements are agreed and communicated clearly and in advance.

2.1 How to strengthen ethnic and geographic inclusion in South Sudan

To build confidence ahead of elections, it will be important to focus on designing and communicating political arrangements that allow different communities to see a viable stake in institutional outcomes. In particular, ensuring that sub-national contests take place – and that these are structured in ways that encourage participation – can help balance national-level competition. International experience suggests that systems that allow national “losers” to be “winners” at lower tiers of government are more likely to mitigate election-related tensions (Cheeseman et al 2016). This is particularly pertinent in South Sudan, where fear of marginalisation is pervasive and often linked to concerns over future distribution of resources and authority.

At the same time, reducing ambiguity around the roles and responsibilities of each tier of government is crucial for managing expectations and minimising the risk of misinformation. Voters and candidates require certainty to structure their campaign strategies and to communicate with their communities in ways that promote peace rather than fear. Clarifying how decisions will be made at national, state and local levels well ahead of the polls, and what resource flows are anticipated, could help counter rising anxiety and build trust in the process. Where full clarity is not feasible in the available timeframe, even interim guidance may help reduce speculation and provide a basis for constructive political dialogue.

Given South Sudan’s logistical constraints and uneven access to infrastructure, proactive measures will also be needed to ensure that electoral processes – particularly voter registration and polling – are seen to be conducted fairly across all regions. Failure to do so could reinforce perceptions that marginalised areas are being deliberately excluded. Early planning, transparency, and robust communication efforts can reduce these risks significantly.

In addition, electoral arrangements must be seen to translate inclusion into meaningful influence rather than symbolic representation. This requires sustained engagement with community leaders, political parties and civil society to ensure that practical implications of institutional choices are understood. Transparency in decision-making – especially with regard to boundary delimitation and the scope of elections – will be critical to reducing the risk that decisions are viewed as favouring one community over another. Ultimately, fostering ethnic and geographic inclusion will depend not only on formal provisions but on consistent implementation and early communication. If done effectively, this can help manage fears of exclusion, reduce political tensions and provide a stronger foundation for peaceful elections.

These considerations suggest the following six policy options:



A) Clarify the scope of elections and roles of different levels of government. Provide explicit guidance on which elections will take place in 2026 and clarify the powers and responsibilities of national, state and sub-national authorities to reduce uncertainty ahead of the polls.

Clear, early communication by the government, National Elections Commission (NEC) and relevant ministries would help parties, candidates and communities plan effectively and reassure those who fear being sidelined. International experience suggests that when the distribution of authority is ambiguous – particularly in post-conflict settings – political actors often revert to exclusive strategies. Reinforcing clarity does not require major reform but could significantly reduce

speculation, limit space for manipulation and promote more constructive engagement ahead of elections.



B) Strengthen communication and engagement with community leaders on electoral arrangements. Facilitate regular dialogue with community representatives, political parties and civil society organisations to explain electoral decisions – particularly on boundary delimitation, the type of elections to be held, and access to electoral services.

Concerns over territorial exclusion and unequal representation are deeply rooted and often tied to historical grievances. Engaging trusted local leaders in structured discussions can help dispel rumours and create space for peaceful negotiation. This does not necessarily require new mediation structures but could build on local peace committees, state-level political forums, and the network of faith-based organisations. Prioritising transparency and consultation may help reduce tensions linked to identity and geography and increase the legitimacy of decisions relating to electoral design and administration.



C) Use sub-national elections to promote inclusion while reducing national-level tensions. Ensure that, where feasible, state or other sub-national elections are held alongside national ones to provide opportunities for communities to gain representation even if they do not prevail in national contests.

Given the risk that communities in South Sudan feel excluded from central decision-making, enabling participation at multiple tiers may help diffuse pressure at the national level. This does not require constitutional change if aligned with existing provisions, but careful communication is needed to avoid unintentionally raising expectations beyond what can be delivered.



D) Establish credible and transparent dispute resolution mechanisms. Put in place a clear and credible process to resolve electoral disagreements peacefully, particularly given the absence of a permanent constitution, ensuring that all parties understand and accept the procedures before voting takes place.

In low-trust environments, uncertainty over how disputes will be handled can escalate tensions and prompt actors to resort to extra-institutional means. Establishing interim rules – supported through stakeholder dialogue and publicly communicated – can help prevent conflict even if longer-term legal frameworks remain incomplete. While the timeline limits scope for major reform, clearly designating responsibility between judicial bodies and the NEC, setting out timelines, and providing guidance on available channels would enhance confidence that contentious outcomes can be addressed peacefully.



E) Strengthen inclusive liaison mechanisms to build cross-community trust. Support regular engagement platforms such as liaison committees that bring together leaders from different ethnic, regional and political backgrounds, ensuring that women, youth and peripheral communities are actively included.

Where channels for dialogue exist and are used consistently, mistrust is more likely to be addressed before it escalates. Examples from other African countries show that structured, pre-election forums can help identify emerging issues and forge agreement on campaign principles.

For South Sudan, investing in inclusive liaison mechanisms – linked where possible to existing peace structures – would provide a way to build relationships, promote joint problem-solving and reduce the risks associated with polarisation ahead of the polls.



F) Strengthen operational planning and ensure equitable voter registration and polling access. Prioritise early resource allocation, staffing and logistical preparedness to guarantee consistent delivery of voter registration and polling services across all regions, including remote or historically marginalised areas.

Limited institutional capacity within the NEC and associated bodies has previously resulted in uneven implementation, reinforcing concerns around regional and community exclusion. Developing and publicly communicating a decentralised operational plan – supported by early mobilisation of technical and logistical assistance, potentially through existing donor channels – would help mitigate fears of selective disadvantage. Adaptation of existing administrative and humanitarian infrastructure to support deployment, alongside measures such as mobile registration units and transparency over regional rollout schedules, can signal procedural fairness. While systemic challenges cannot be fully resolved ahead of the 2026 elections, demonstrating a commitment to equitable access would help reduce mistrust and strengthen confidence in the inclusiveness of the electoral process, laying foundations for longer-term institutional strengthening.

3. Holding elections that are inclusive of women and girls

Women’s active participation in politics has historically been constrained in South Sudan, despite successive efforts to introduce quotas to address the detrimental impact of years of conflict.

The Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) signed in 2005 in Kenya envisioned an inclusive democratic system as a core principle of governance in Sudan and laid the groundwork for the introduction of a 25% proportional representation for women in both the Sudan’s national legislature and the Southern Sudan National Assembly through the National Elections Act 2008.

During both the 2010 Southern Sudan elections and the subsequent referendum vote, women and girls voted – and in the elections a woman ran for president – although in general, the campaigns were dominated by male voices and candidates (The Carter Center 2010).

Then, in 2011, a commitment to promoting female political participation was institutionalised in the TCRSS which specifically granted women equal rights to participate in public offices and allocated a 25% quota at all levels (both state and national) of government. Chapter I of the 2018 R-ARCSS subsequently increased the quota for women in the

executive, including the presidency and the cabinet, to 35%. Meanwhile, ahead of the 2026 general elections, the NEA 2012 (Amendment) Act, 2023 introduced a 35% quota for women’s representation at all levels of government.

Although these quotas in some ways position South Sudan ahead of many other countries in the region, to date they have at times been undermined by a lack of political will to implement them in earnest. In 2022, for example, UN Women revealed that the 35% threshold was unmet in all states and administrative areas. Furthermore, women constitute 171 of the 550 members (31%) of the Transitional National Legislative Assembly and 26 of the 100 members (26%) of the Council of States (Atem and Lopa 2023). Among the 29 political parties, only 6.5% of the chairpersons are women, with most Secretary General positions also occupied by men (Radio Tamazuj 2025a). At the same time, women and girls face a range of challenges when seeking to run for office, from patriarchal social norms to gendered violence and exclusion from male-dominated patronage resources – which makes it harder to secure scarce campaign funds.

Given the absence of clear enforcement mechanisms in the R-ARCSS and NEA – with the exception of the use of a women-only list in a proportional representation vote to elect female MPs – similar challenges are likely to recur during the forthcoming elections unless stronger mechanisms to practically facilitate inclusion are introduced, and more effort is made to address the barriers women voters and candidates face. This should involve both targeted interventions to tackle the greatest challenges to women’s participation, and the full mainstreaming of gendered and intersectional concerns into all areas of election programming.



The Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) signed in 2005 in Kenya promoted an inclusive democratic system in Sudan and paved the way for a **25% proportional representation quota for women in the national and Southern Sudan legislatures under the National Elections Act 2008.**

3.1 Gendered barriers to political inclusion and participation

Women in South Sudan face a wide range of structural, cultural and socio-economic barriers that significantly undermine their ability to participate in public life. Patriarchy remains deeply entrenched, reinforced by South Sudan's dual legal system, in which customary law allows harmful traditional practices to persist without punishment.

Millet (2016) observes that **patriarchy positions women as passive and powerless**, a dynamic that is especially acute in least developed countries like South Sudan.



A study by Ali (2025) found that many South Sudanese women feel that decision-making spaces are dominated by men, that their views are ignored, and that those who speak out are mocked. Women are discouraged from entering politics by relatives and community members who believe they should “stay in the kitchen” and who claim that women “lack the technical political experience” to serve in leadership roles (Ali 2025: 24). In many South Sudanese cultures, women must also seek permission from male relatives before engaging in politics, which entrenches dependency and limits autonomy.

Socio-economic conditions compound these cultural constraints. Deep poverty, high unemployment and limited access to education severely restrict women's opportunities for political engagement. According to the World Bank (2025), of the 24% of adults who have never attended school, women constitute a disproportionate share. Adult female literacy stands at just 28% (UNESCO 2022), and women educated in languages other than English – the official

language – may struggle to communicate effectively in official institutions. The lack of property inheritance, highlighted by UN Women (2022), further limits women's ability to finance political ambitions independently, pushing them to rely on husbands or relatives for resources and permission. While the Government of South Sudan, through the Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Welfare, has developed policies and capacity-building initiatives, severe economic hardship means that dedicated national budget allocations are lacking, and the ministry often depends on development partner grants to implement programmes on women's economic empowerment.

Alongside these structural constraints, women also face a high level of violence that directly affects their ability to participate in politics. Gender-based violence – including sexual, physical and psychological abuse – is widely used to intimidate women aspirants and political actors. ICAN (2025) notes that women are frequently targeted with coercion meant to force them to withdraw from politics, resign from party roles or remain silent on issues they care about. This aligns with WIPC's (2020) observation that intimidation is often gender-specific, with the explicit goal of deterring women from political life. Militarised conflict further exacerbates these dangers. Across South Sudan, women and girls have been viewed as “collateral damage” and legitimate targets for sexual and physical violence during clashes. According to UN Women (2022), in 2021 there were 193 documented cases of conflict-related sexual violence, 142 of which were against women. The UN Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan similarly noted that women and girls “have borne the brunt of the worst forms of sexual violence, discrimination and marginalisation” (Cowell 2025). These security risks



According to the World Bank (2025), of the **24% of adults** who have never attended school, women constitute a disproportionate share.

make it particularly difficult for women to stand for office in rural constituencies or to campaign safely in remote areas.

Women’s political participation is also limited by the time-intensive demands of campaigning and political mobilisation. Atem and Lopa (2023) found that political engagement requires sustained interaction with formal and informal groups; yet women, whether married or unmarried, lack the time and freedom to travel, socialise and lobby because they are expected to fulfil domestic and care duties. In contrast, male candidates do not face such restrictions. WIPC (2020) further notes that many women “lack the technical skills necessary to participate effectively in technical positions,” reflecting both the country’s education gap and the broader underinvestment in women’s professional development.

These cumulative barriers have shaped women’s electoral participation and representation. South Sudan has ratified important international commitments – including CEDAW (2014) and the Maputo Protocol (2017) — and has introduced national gender policies such as the second-generation South Sudan National Action Plan (SSNAP-2) on Women, Peace, and Security. Yet in practice, women continue to face significant obstacles to gender equality, including sexual assault, domestic violence, early marriage, unemployment and widespread socio-economic marginalisation (World Bank 2025). Lihiru (2024) argues that women’s electoral performance continues to be hampered by socio-economic pressures, harmful cultural practices and the failure of both the R-ARCSS and the 2023 amendments to the National Elections Act to adequately protect women’s rights. Although these frameworks provide affirmative action commitments, the gap between policy and practice remains wide, and South Sudan continues to rank among the worst countries globally for women’s empowerment.

It is important to note that these issues are likely to have particular implications for women who have young children, are carers, or are pregnant. On the one hand, these women may be particularly wary of entering environments that may put them at risk of violence. On the other hand, they may have

specific needs in terms of how polling stations are set up and managed that require dedicated attention from the electoral commission – and clear communication to ensure that they feel included and are aware of the measures being taken to support their participation.

3.2 Intersectional issues and challenges

Women in South Sudan do not experience exclusion in uniform ways. Those who are poor, young, displaced, living with disabilities or from ethnic minorities, face intersectional forms of disadvantage, where multiple layers of inequality – socio-economic marginalisation, cultural norms, insecurity and limited access to resources – reinforce one another. These intersecting barriers shape who is most able, and who is least able, to participate meaningfully in political life. The experiences below illustrate how these overlapping factors deepen inequity and create distinct challenges for certain groups of women.

A World Bank study found that women-led households in South Sudan are more prone to poverty (de Silva 2020), a gap that has widened socioeconomic disparities between men and women. For instance, 57% of female-headed households live in poverty, compared to 47% of those headed by men (African Development Bank 2023). Ali (2025) argues that difficulty in accessing resources leaves small businesses as the only viable alternative source of survival for many women. Combined with the country’s broader economic challenges, this



A World Bank study shows that **female-headed households in South Sudan face higher poverty rates, with 57% living in poverty compared to 47% of male-headed households**, according to the African Development Bank.

situation limits women's ability to engage in other arenas such as politics. Even when they wish to participate, many must rely on patronage networks or family financial support. Such dependence often creates obligations to reciprocate politically, sometimes at the expense of the public good.

This is especially true for young women (Atem and Lopa 2023), while marital status also plays an important role in shaping political engagement, with husbands often reluctant to support their wives to run for office. For those still living in their parents' homes, "their family restricts them from aspiring to or joining politics while unmarried". Some of the women who have managed to enter politics, for example, have done so in the face of strong parental objection.

Furthermore, women in rural areas face many distinctive barriers to electoral participation. Lessons from elections in fragile states, such as the 2018 elections in the Democratic Republic of Congo, highlight the significance of the greater barriers that women often face to accessing legal identification documents required for voter registration, limited access to political information and low levels of electoral awareness of voting processes (International IDEA 2022). In South Sudan, these issues would disproportionately affect women in rural areas. First, national identification documents are processed in major towns. Given women's limited mobility, stemming from difficulties in accessing transport and restrictions on their movement imposed by family members and/or spouses, there is a significant risk that they will miss voter registration and opportunities to stand as candidates. High illiteracy rates, combined with limited exposure to political information and public engagement further prevent them from accessing information that is crucial to the electoral process. Moreover, widespread insecurity in rural areas means that polling centres are likely to be established in designated safe zones, requiring longer travel distances.

Conditions of displacement place women in circumstances that significantly undermine political engagement, including greater exposure to armed violence, sexual violence, and the economic impact of having to leave their homes and livelihoods

behind, as we explore in greater detail below. These different experiences, identities and contexts limit women's freedom to associate and participate in politics in different ways and therefore demand different responses. An electoral process that is not cognisant of the varied challenges that women face, and that lacks a clear implementation plan, is therefore likely to discourage their participation.

3.3 How to strengthen the inclusion of women in South Sudan

Expanding women's inclusion in South Sudan's electoral process is likely to require addressing structural, social and security barriers that continue to restrict meaningful participation, and doing so in ways that are informed directly by women's perspectives and lived experiences. If the goal is to increase inclusion, one option would be to support the practical realisation of gender quotas at all levels of government as part of preparations for the elections, doing so in close consultation with women from diverse backgrounds, including those from rural areas, marginalised communities and conflict-affected locations. With the elections fast approaching, feasible, short-term measures that protect participation and enhance visibility may be particularly helpful – especially those shaped by women themselves and informed by what they identify as the most immediate obstacles to their engagement.

Strengthening women's safety is another way to support meaningful participation. This could include integrating gender considerations into electoral security planning and making use of existing local peace and conflict early warning mechanisms to help mitigate emerging threats. Where possible, signalling that violence or intimidation against women in politics will be taken seriously – and, where appropriate, acted upon – may increase confidence, even if action is initially limited in scope. Experience from other post-conflict environments suggests that visible accountability can help demonstrate that political engagement by women is legitimate and protected. In parallel, it will be important to work with respected female leaders, civil society actors, and community figures

as public role models to counter fear and show that participation is possible in challenging conditions. Significantly, women's rights organisations and networks have already begun doing this important work, and so it will be important to both support this work and enable them to expand it. Given the limited reach of state institutions, and the short time period available, it will also be important to work with traditional leaders, who continue to exert significant influence within South Sudanese society.

There is also great value in ensuring that inclusion extends beyond formal quota fulfilment. In some contexts, allocated seats for women have inadvertently confined their presence to limited parts of the political system. If the goal is genuine gender parity, institutional and party leaders could focus on emphasising the 35% quota as a minimum guarantee rather than a ceiling, and on actively seeking input from women on how they can participate more widely across roles and levels.

These considerations suggest the following nine policy options:



A) Facilitate a national dialogue on women's inclusion to inform policy and practice.

A valuable first step would be to convene a national dialogue or series of structured consultations focused on women's participation in the electoral process, bringing together women politicians, women's groups, civil society organisations, community leaders and others, including those representing intersectional identities such as young women, displaced women, and women with disabilities.

International experience shows that sustainable advances in inclusion are more likely when reform strategies are informed by diverse women's voices, reflecting differences in geography, age, ethnicity, displacement status and physical ability. A national dialogue – implemented using existing coordination structures or networks – could provide a platform for women to articulate key priorities and concerns directly. This could then guide policy interventions by parties, the electoral commission and security actors, ensuring they reflect the realities faced by women across different contexts. If structured in a pragmatic and resource-conscious manner (e.g. through regional consultations), such a dialogue could be both feasible and impactful in shaping practical steps toward more inclusive elections.



B. Fund women candidates, programmes, and organisations. Making a success of the 35% gender quota will require supporting women candidates, women's groups, training programmes and monitoring mechanisms to both empower a new generation of female political leaders are able to transform South Sudan's political system.

Establishing a new electoral and political system will require considerable investment of funds. The government and political parties should reserve a specific proportion of election funding to support women candidates, who are less likely to have good access to campaign finance and may otherwise struggle to pay their registration fees. It will also be important for international donors to step up their support of women's rights organisations, for example supporting groups doing work on GBV to monitor gendered violence around the elections, while empowering organisations that have been providing leadership training to expand their activities in order to offer support to first-time candidates. Along with the NEC, women's organisations should also be funded to conduct gender-sensitive and women-focused voter and civic education.



C. Operationalise the 35% quota as a minimum, not a ceiling. Ensure full implementation of the relevant provisions of the NEA, while reinforcing that point that women have the right to contest any seat. Political leaders and institutions should

emphasise publicly that reserved seats are only a minimum threshold and do not limit women's participation in other areas of the political process.

Quota systems can be progressive, but also risk isolating women in designated "women's seats". Parties could choose to nominate women in viable constituencies beyond reserved allocations and involve them across leadership structures. Reinforcing this norm does not require legal reform but may benefit from public positioning and dialogue at party level.



D. Support parties to adopt transparent, merit-based approaches to selecting female candidates. Parties should be supported to review how internal primaries or informal selection processes operate – particularly in decentralised or unregulated settings – so that some women are not disadvantaged by opaque or patronage-based decision-making.

In contexts like South Sudan, candidate selection often relies on elite networks, loyalty to leadership, or influence within local political structures. This can disadvantage women who may be strong candidates but lack insider access. International experience suggests that structured selection criteria – such as community standing, capacity to represent constituency interests and leadership experience - can lead to broader inclusion. In systems where candidates are chosen through decentralised or informal primaries, women may be especially vulnerable to exclusion. Encouraging parties to assess and adapt their approaches could be facilitated through dialogue, peer learning and technical support.



E. Support parties to design gender-responsive policy platforms. Facilitate discussions with political parties to integrate women's priorities – such as access to services, livelihoods and protection – in their platforms and manifestoes, and to allocate women candidates to winnable "ordinary" seats and high-profile positions both within the party and the eventual government.

Gender-sensitive party platforms can be implemented rapidly using existing dialogues and civil society-led engagement. Rather than requiring formal reform, it relies on persuasion and reputational incentives. Parties already engaged in campaign strategy discussions could adjust platforms with minimal cost. Aligning policies with expressed concerns of female voters may also enhance party popularity, providing an incentive for leaders.



F. Issue clear messaging on women's right to independent voting. NEC, political leaders, civil society groups, traditional leaders and faith-based organisations should issue public statements affirming that women are entitled to choose their vote freely without interference from husbands or family.

In South Sudan's communal voting culture, household or clan-level decisions often override individual choice. If the intention is to safeguard personal agency, explicitly addressing this through tailored messaging – delivered via local radio, churches and community forums – may help challenge these norms. The intervention can be easily scaled by embedding it within existing voter education initiatives.



G. Adopt a zero tolerance approach to both physical and online gendered violence.

The NEC, Political Parties Council and the security forces should adopt a zero tolerance position with respect to gendered violence, with the NEC and PPC requiring political parties to sign up to a code of practice that rejects gendered violence and harassment in all its forms.

Political parties play a critical role in either restricting or exacerbating political and gendered violence around elections. A strong and categorical code of conduct, monitored by the NEC and PPC with clear penalties for failure to comply, would therefore be an important step towards a gender-inclusive election. Given the growing significance of online campaigning, and the fact that women are likely to be subject to gendered violence in digital spaces, this should cover digital abuses including threats, intimidation and disinformation.



H. Prioritise safety and accountability for attacks on women in politics. Integrate women's protection into existing electoral security planning and local peace committees, including fast-track systems to report threats or violence, while publicly committing to investigating and prosecuting perpetrators.

Enhancing women's participation requires not only adopting a zero-tolerance approach and preventive security measures, but also visible consequences for those who target them. Working through established mechanisms avoids the need for new infrastructure. Security actors and justice institutions could, if willing, signal through high-level engagement and public statements that attacks on women are unacceptable. Even a few well-handled cases could help shift expectations and reduce future intimidation.



I. Engage powerful female role models to drive participation. Mobilise respected women in politics, civil society and local communities to champion participation and encourage women to vote and stand.

Visibility matters. When women see others successfully participating, it reinforces both possibility and legitimacy. Leveraging existing media slots, faith-based platforms and community forums to reach a wide audience quickly and affordably can overcome financial and logistical constraints. In fragile contexts, this approach may also support confidence-building and signal endorsement from respected societal actors.

4. Holding elections that are inclusive of the youth and the elderly

Young people under the age of 30 make up over 70% of the population in South Sudan (Sida 2024) and remain the most affected by the consequences of violent conflict, government neglect and corruption (Hersteth 2021).



young people, but unlike for women, provides no formal quotas or inclusion structures for the youth. However, the NEA allocates 15% of seats at the state and national legislature level to be elected on the basis of a closed list made up only of young people and persons with disabilities (Radio Tamazuj 2023a).

The situation is very different when it comes to older citizens, as there are no provisions in the TCRSS and R-ARCSS frameworks that are designed to ensure the inclusion of the elderly in the way there is for the youth. While older leaders tend to dominate leadership positions in government, it is important to note that this often means individuals between 50 and 75. Elderly citizens who are 75 and above may find it very hard to be heard in political debates, and may face greater challenges in terms of participating in elections, such as simply getting to polling stations to cast their ballots when they are located a long way from their homes with no viable roads in between. Although the NEA is cognisant of this reality and requires that the design and placement of polling stations be considerate of groups that include elderly people, limited resources and a constrained timetable mean that there is a serious risk that this will not be the case.

Further steps are therefore required to prevent the youth and elderly citizens from feeling excluded from the democratic process – increasing the risk of political instability, including recognising the distinctive challenges facing male and female youth and older people.

For instance, most of the combatants in past conflicts, and in current warring factions, are young people (ibid.). Additionally, “among the youth, over 95% are unemployed” according to the Executive Director in the Office of Vice President Nyandeng Garang, David Dau (Patrick 2025) – including a majority of those who have managed to get university degrees. These sobering realities lend credence to Hersteth’s (2021: 2) observation that “young people must not be excluded from decisions that will have a direct impact on their present and future.” While Hersteth’s observation was in respect to their involvement in peace dialogues, their inclusion in the electoral process is equally important.

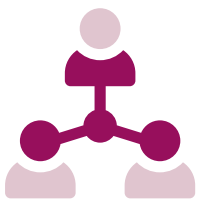
At the level of formal frameworks, the 2018 R-ARCSS broadly mentions the consideration of

4.1 Youth engagement in politics

The lack of formal structures for youth inclusion in the TCRSS and R-ARCSS remains a serious concern. Tumutegyereize and Nhial's (2018) study, drawing on the voices of South Sudanese youth, found that although youth structures and organisations exist outside these formal frameworks, many are politicised or organised along ethnic lines, limiting their ability to represent young people effectively or help build peace. While the study referred to youth participation in peace processes, the same patterns shape their involvement in national elections. Young people reported feeling excluded from decision-making, with policies and political strategies formulated on their behalf rather than through meaningful consultation. For a demographic that constitutes almost three quarters of the population (Noda 2024), being lumped into a 15% proportional representation alongside other groups may appear insufficient and risks reinforcing a sense of marginalisation. If young people perceive that their concerns are systematically ignored, the resulting frustration could contribute to disillusionment, voter apathy, and weakened democratic legitimacy.

In turn, this would increase the risk of election-related violence. Challenging narratives that portray youth as primary perpetrators of conflict, Jalloh (2024: 50) argues that young South Sudanese “were not deliberate perpetrators” but rather victims who were “brainwashed to fight for causes they did not support or were victims of their political and economic circumstances.”

In contexts of worsening economic hardship, where **92% of the population is living in poverty** (African Development Bank 2025), **young people become increasingly vulnerable to manipulation** by political actors seeking to advance their agendas.



Their limited formal inclusion in electoral processes facilitates such exploitation and heightens the risk of mobilisation along partisan or ethnic lines. As Herseth (2021: 2) emphasises, “young people must not be excluded from decisions that will have a direct impact on their present and future.”

Some initiatives exist to engage young people, but their reach remains limited. Programmes such as the African Union Commission's National Training of Trainers and UNDP's Building Resources in Democracy, Governance and Elections (BRIDGE) offer platforms for youth involvement in electoral capacity building and voter education (African Union 2023; UNDP 2025). However, the BRIDGE programme has reached only 1,003 participants nationwide – too few for a country where approximately 9.3 million people are youth. Furthermore, these programmes predominately target literate youth (United Nations Peacekeeping 2025). Given that the majority of South Sudan's population is illiterate, excluding non-literate young people significantly reduces the broader impact of such initiatives on inclusive voter participation.



The BRIDGE programme has **reached only 1,003 participants** nationwide – too few for a country where **approximately 9.3 million people are youth**.

Internal divisions among youth further exacerbate these challenges. Tumutegyereize and Nhial (2018) note that polarised identity politics generate sharp divisions, with some young people perceiving that those from ruling ethnic groups benefit disproportionately from employment and educational opportunities. Such perceptions feed resentment among marginalised youth while simultaneously fostering defensiveness among those who feel targeted because of their affiliations. This fragmentation creates a fertile ground for political actors to exploit grievances from multiple sides, increasing the risk that tensions will spill over into the electoral environment and undermine prospects for peaceful polling.

Legally, youth are entitled to participate in the political process. Article 26 of the TCRSS guarantees all citizens “the right to take part in any level of government directly or through freely chosen representatives” and sets the voting age at 18. In late 2025, the transitional parliament eventually passed the National Youth Policy aimed at empowering young people and allocating 20% of government positions at both local and national levels, alongside a 10% budget allocation to youth initiatives (Radio Tamazuj 2025b). Yet legal entitlement alone does not guarantee effective participation. Fear remains a significant barrier. Kindersley (2025: 22) found that many citizens are reluctant to express their views on elections “in the context of extremely restricted freedoms of expression and repeated disappearances and extrajudicial detentions of potential government critics.” The study highlights that the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement in Government (SPLM-IG) is currently the only party with unrestricted freedom to campaign, creating a highly uneven political landscape. Although these conditions affect the entire population, they are likely to have a particularly chilling effect on youth – who are disproportionately unemployed, politically targeted, and vulnerable to intimidation and exploitation. These pressures discourage young people from standing as candidates, expressing political preferences, or even turning out to vote.

4.2 Young women and socio-cultural barriers to political participation

While the youth face some challenges in common, the barriers they experience are also gendered. Atem and Lopa (2023: 18) note that young women are shaped by socialised and internalised misogyny that teaches girls to believe that boys are superior and more valued. Because young women grow up hearing that their opinions do not matter, they often lack the confidence to speak in public settings, which undermines their political participation. One respondent explained:

“As girls, we do not participate in family decision-making processes, even regarding our marriage. Discussions and decisions about us are made on our behalf, especially by male family members. How we

see ourselves in our homes reflects what roles we believe we can take up outside our homes. If we are not seen as decision-makers at home, how will we be as such outside of homes in a public leadership position?”

Young women also face greater risks from sexual violence than their male counterparts, and so may be particularly concerned about the security environment. Studies across sub-Saharan Africa show that fear of harassment, intimidation, and sexual assault discourages young women from attending political meetings, protests, or evening events, which are often central to political mobilisation. Survey evidence further suggests that young women are more likely than young men to self-censor in public forums and to avoid leadership roles that expose them to public scrutiny or backlash (Afrobarometer 2024). Together, these gendered risks and norms help to explain why young women’s political participation remains consistently lower than that of young men, even where overall youth engagement appears relatively high.

4.3 Older people and issues of access to polling stations

The African Union Policy Framework and Plan of Action on Ageing “has emphasised the urgent need for the Member States to recognise the fundamental rights of the older persons” (Geng 2019). However, the lack of local or national laws that operationalise this continental framework renders it a textual aspiration without concrete enforcement mechanisms. Article 30 of the TCRSS broadly stipulates “the elderly and persons with special needs shall have the right to the respect of their dignity.” This provision is open to multiple interpretations and does not guarantee that older people will receive such treatment in all aspects, including participation in the electoral process.

What matters most, however, is how left out older people feel. In 2018, the South Sudan Older People’s Organisation demanded representation for the elderly in the Transitional National Legislative Assembly (Hot in Juba 2018). The demand was driven by the need for their voices to be heard and for their issues to receive appropriate attention.

In protest, a 77-year-old Marcelina Denya expressed: “Are they talking anything about older people? Are they talking anything about the problems older people are facing?” Denya’s words highlight the need to involve the elderly in the electoral process not only to participate but also to articulate concerns that could affect their participation.



Furthermore, in urging the United Nations (UN) and other aid agencies, Human Rights Watch (2017) warned that “older people in South Sudan face greater risks of being caught in fighting.” With clashes having resumed this year between the SSPDF and SPLA-IO in parts of the Upper Nile and Equatoria regions, this fear remains highly relevant as the country prepares for the general elections in 2026. In fact, Kindersley (2025: 21) notes that “many people are concerned about whether upcoming elections can be policed and secured by fragmented public bodies, including the supposedly unified armed forces, police and security services as well as local civil servants.” Should electoral violence occur, it would align with Shantha Rau Barriga’s reflection that “people with disabilities and older people are often left behind during attacks and find themselves at much greater risk of starvation or abuse” (Human Rights Watch 2017). These concerns significantly threaten to undermine the inclusive participation of older people.

Moreover, although the NEC claims to be ready, experts have cautioned that the credibility of the scheduled 2026 vote could be undermined due to significant implementation and political obstacles

(Hawari 2025). Given the weak physical attributes of many elderly individuals, such potential logistical nightmares – such as transportation, long queues, etcetera – would complicate access to polling stations. These challenges may be particularly severe for older women, who are often less wealthy and may be concerned about the risk of gender-based violence. In response to these concerns, the NEA requires that polling stations be designed and situated in areas that favour certain groups, including older people. This is an important requirement, but risks remaining an aspiration rather than a solution if the electoral commission is not funded and supported to make the necessary preparations.

4.4 How to strengthen the inclusion of the youth and the elderly

The challenges set out above illustrate why strengthening inclusion cannot rely on legal guarantees alone. Instead, it requires a practical, sequenced approach that reflects the very different needs of youth and elderly populations. International experience suggests that youth engagement is most effective when it is decentralised, participatory and insulated from elite political manipulation, while measures that support older voters tend to focus on accessibility, safety and community-based reassurance. Importantly, both groups need credible channels through which they can directly influence electoral planning, rather than being treated as passive recipients of voter education or security arrangements.

Given South Sudan’s limited institutional capacity and the short timeframe before the elections, reforms will need to be targeted, feasible and embedded within existing structures – such as community networks, universities, churches, county authorities and local peace committees – to avoid creating parallel systems the state cannot sustain. At the same time, strategic investments in youth engagement, civic education, party practices and polling-day accessibility can help reduce tensions, prevent political exploitation and build trust in an electoral process that many citizens currently view with fear or scepticism.

These considerations suggest the following ten policy options:



A) Establish structured national youth consultations to inform electoral decision-making. Create a series of structured consultations or dialogues with young people across regions – including unemployed youth, students, young women, displaced youth, and those outside formal organisations – to identify priority concerns, barriers to participation and proposals for inclusion.

International experience shows that youth engagement is more effective when built through structured, decentralised consultations rather than relying solely on politicised youth wings. A national dialogue—delivered through existing coordination platforms, universities, youth associations and virtual forums—could provide an avenue for young people to articulate their needs directly. Findings could be channelled to parties, the NEC and security actors to guide practical steps for inclusive participation.



B) Integrate youth concerns into electoral security planning and reduce the risk of political exploitation. Embed youth-specific protection measures within electoral security frameworks, and make use of early-warning mechanisms to detect political mobilisation, coercion or exploitation of unemployed young people.

Given severe unemployment, poverty and political manipulation risks, measures to reduce youth exploitation require early preparation. This can be done without creating new bodies: existing local peace committees, early-warning networks and CSO monitoring groups could incorporate youth-specific indicators. A clear message from parties and security agencies that youth should not be used for violence or intimidation—and that such acts will be addressed—can also improve confidence and reduce the likelihood of electoral violence.



C) Expand and decentralise civic and voter education tailored to youth, especially those with low literacy. Scale BRIDGE, AU and UNDP programmes to reach far more young people – including non-literate youth – through community-based, radio-led and peer educator models. Current programmes reach only a tiny fraction of the youth population.

International evidence from contexts with high illiteracy suggests that civic education is more effective when delivered through radio, drama, storytelling, mobile outreach and youth-to-youth peer training. These approaches can be rapidly deployed, are inexpensive, and reduce the exclusion of young people who cannot attend formal workshops or who lack English-language proficiency.



D) Target youth-focused measures explicitly at young women rather than relying on generic youth programming. Design and implement youth interventions that recognise the distinct barriers facing young women, including gendered norms, unequal access to decision-making spaces, and heightened exposure to harassment and insecurity.

Research suggests that generic youth initiatives often reproduce existing inequalities by being more accessible to young men, particularly where participation requires public speaking, travel, or engagement in male-dominated spaces. Targeting can be achieved without creating parallel

structures. Existing youth programmes, civic education initiatives, and political participation platforms should incorporate gender-sensitive design features, such as safe meeting spaces, female facilitators, flexible timings, and explicit protection against harassment. Working through women's organisations, girls' clubs, and trusted community actors can further improve reach and credibility. Clear signalling from political parties, electoral bodies, and community leaders that young women's participation is valued and protected can help to shift norms over time and strengthen the inclusiveness of youth engagement strategies.



E) Promote inclusive youth representation within parties and encourage transparent selection for young candidates. Support parties to adopt clearer criteria for identifying, selecting and promoting young candidates—including those outside political patronage networks—and to widen youth participation within party structures.

Youth wings in South Sudan are often politicised or ethnically fragmented. Parties could be encouraged to adopt transparent processes drawing on international good practice from countries that have widened youth participation through structured interviews, community endorsement mechanisms, or merit-based shortlisting. Light-touch technical support and peer learning could improve internal party democracy, strengthen legitimacy and reduce manipulation of young people by elites.



F) Address youth polarisation by supporting cross-ethnic youth forums and joint initiatives. Facilitate youth-to-youth dialogue across ethnic groups to reduce polarisation, address perceptions of unequal access to resources, and mitigate the risk of grievance-driven mobilisation.

Research shows sharp identity-based divisions among young people, creating a significant risk for elections. International peacebuilding experience demonstrates that cross-regional youth forums, joint public projects and inter-ethnic volunteer schemes can reduce mistrust and build platforms for shared interests (livelihoods, security, education). These initiatives do not require formal institutional reform but can leverage CSOs, churches, universities and county structures to promote cohesion ahead of elections.



G) Improve accessibility and participation for elderly voters through practical, low-cost measures. Prioritise accessible polling arrangements for elderly voters, including transport support, shaded waiting areas, and fast-track queues.

International practice (Kenya, Sierra Leone, Nepal, Timor-Leste) shows that elderly participation increases significantly when polling stations are physically accessible and when elderly voters can avoid long queues or hazardous travel. The National Elections Act already requires accessible design; implementation can be strengthened by mapping areas with elderly populations, using community volunteers, and coordinating with humanitarian agencies in remote areas to facilitate safe access.



H) Establish community-based information and reassurance campaigns tailored to older people. Work with local leaders, faith networks, elder councils and community health workers to deliver clear messaging to older people about their voting rights, safety provisions and available support on polling day.

Older people in South Sudan have expressed feeling ignored and fear being left behind in emergencies or attacks. Community-centred information campaigns, delivered through trusted figures, can reduce fear and misinformation while assuring older voters that their participation is valued and protected. Integrating such communication into existing civic education efforts is cost-effective and builds confidence in a fragile security context.



I) Strengthen security planning for elderly citizens in conflict-affected areas.

Ensure that election security plans explicitly identify elderly voters as a group requiring additional protection, particularly in conflict-affected areas where mobility and safety risks are acute.

Human Rights Watch and AU guidance emphasise that older people face heightened risks in conflict zones, often being the last to flee or the least able to access assistance. Incorporating specific security measures – such as early transport support and safe waiting zones – could protect older people and reduce the likelihood that insecurity prevents them from voting.



J) Address the distinctive barriers faced by elderly women in accessing electoral and political processes.

Design electoral participation and civic engagement measures that recognise the compounded disadvantages faced by older women, who are often affected by limited mobility, poorer health, lower literacy levels, and gendered patterns of social exclusion.

In many contexts, elderly women are less likely than men of the same age to control household resources, access transport, or receive timely information about electoral procedures, which can significantly reduce turnout and participation. Electoral management bodies and local authorities should consider accessible polling station locations, seating, shade, and priority queuing, alongside targeted voter information delivered through trusted community channels. Training polling staff to identify and support elderly women respectfully and working with community leaders and women's associations to facilitate accompaniment or transport where needed, can further reduce barriers. Explicit recognition of elderly women as a group with distinct needs can improve electoral inclusion and help ensure that participation frameworks do not inadvertently privilege younger or male voters.

5. Holding elections that are inclusive of people living with disabilities

Against the background of a post-conflict state with weak infrastructure and limited healthcare, the situation facing people living with disabilities is extremely challenging. As a 2023 report noted, the combination of ongoing instability, a deteriorating economy and environmental hazards such as droughts and floods have “further weakened an already fragile state and limited governance capacity, disproportionately impacting older individuals and those with disabilities” (Protection Cluster 2023: 3). This is particularly acute when it comes to political inclusion and participation. The South Sudan government has recognised this situation, and Article 30 of the TCRSS explicitly mandates the government to: ↓

“Guarantee to persons with disabilities or special needs participation in society and the enjoyment of rights and freedoms set out in this Constitution, especially access to public utilities, suitable education and employment.”

Informed by this provision, the government enacted the South Sudan National Disability Inclusion Policy (2013) under the Ministry of Gender, Child, and Social Welfare. The policy aims to “address and respond to multiple vulnerabilities faced by PLWDs and promote and protect their rights and dignity in an inclusive manner” through measures such as affirmative action and disability mainstreaming. Indeed, the NEA guarantees the right to participate to all eligible South Sudanese citizens and specifically allocates 15% proportional representation at the state and national legislatures to categories that include people with disabilities.

There is limited evidence of progress towards these goals in practice, however. In fact, Mgijima-Konopi et al. (2019) argue that while these policies exist, they fall short in addressing the needs of persons with disabilities and their implementation has stalled. As a result, they are unable to access economic and political opportunities, and continue to face discrimination (Surwumwe 2023). Additionally, many disabled people point out that those born with disabilities often lose out even when policies are implemented, because they tend to be sidelined in favour of war veterans injured in conflict.

Beyond government action, civil society organisations such as the Community Empowerment for Progress Organisation (CEPO) have urged political leaders and the electoral body to ensure that the elections are inclusive of people with disabilities (CEPO 2025). “No one should speak for them or represent them; they will lead their own advocacy and participation,” remarked CEPO’s Executive Director, Edmund Yakani (ibid.). International organisations have also created initiatives that provide platforms for discussions on inclusion. For instance, the United Nations organised a three-day workshop in Western Bahr El Ghazal aimed at raising awareness and building capacity on issues including disability rights and barriers to access on an equal basis (Nkwelle 2024).

These are all positive steps, but much more needs to be done. As USAID’s (2014) equal access manual sets out, the implementation of inclusive elections for PLWD in developing countries faces various challenges including societal discrimination, insufficient data on where persons with disabilities

live and how many they are, volatile political environments and limited capacity of electoral management bodies to adopt accessibility-supporting technology. This section therefore considered what further interventions could be employed to empower those living with disabilities to fully participate in the electoral process.

5.1 Physical or mobility disabilities

Access to polling stations is one of the most challenging aspects for persons with physical and mobility disabilities in the electoral process. In general, those who are physically impaired struggle to access services and participate in income-generating activities “because they have no access to assistive devices that would enable them to reach service points and meaningfully engage in community life” (Funke and Dijkzeul 2021: 22).



The USAID (2014) equal access manual recommends that voters with special needs should be able to easily, independently and safely access the polling stations, including those using assistive devices such as wheelchairs. This can be achieved by creating ramps, wide entrances, transportation access and accessible seating. Although the

NEA mandates the Commission to make special considerations to ease access for people with disabilities, limited funding and inadequate electoral planning are likely to stall enforcement (Hawari 2025).

Moreover, as is common during elections with long waiting lines, the lack of infrastructure that accommodates persons with physical disabilities may affect their ability to participate in the electoral process. In addition, “poor transport infrastructure and the cost of transport” make it harder for persons with physical impairments to access service points (Rohwerder 2018). This is especially the case if polling stations are placed in areas that are more central in order to position them in safer parts of the locality, resulting in citizens needing to make longer journeys to reach them.

It is also important to note that poor infrastructure is a limiting factor in the candidacy of persons with physical or mobility disabilities. During a conversation with a Member of Parliament in the state legislature, for example, he described the difficulties he faced while campaigning for the 2010 elections. Some remote areas were inaccessible by car, forcing him to use a non-electric wheelchair, which he called tedious and unsafe. The circumstances in the 2026 election campaign could be even more challenging, as the challenge is no longer just poor roads but also that of increased levels of physical insecurity (Radio Tamazuj 2025c; Reuters 2025; United Nations 2025).

5.1.1 Visual and hearing impairments

Funke and Dijkzeul (2021: 22) note that visually impaired individuals find it hard to identify service points and that

“when they can access these facilities, the lack of tactile signals, railings, Braille markings,



contrasting signage and other design features hamper their free movement.”



Given this and considering existing doubts about infrastructural readiness for the elections – including the availability of user-friendly facilities – such challenges are likely to arise during the electoral period and may negatively affect the participation of persons with visual impairments.

Another related issue is difficulty in accessing information. Rohwerder (2018) points out that most broadcast and print outlets are in formats that do not simplify accessibility for persons with disabilities. Whether as candidates or voters, individuals with visual impairments are likely to struggle to read electoral information, including the content of ballot papers. For instance, these individuals would require campaign and electoral materials in Braille and large print to make it easier to access and read information. Making such provisions is important to both promote access and maintain the rights and dignity of PLWD.

Information accessibility is also a problem for those with hearing impairments. Electoral campaigns, for instance, rely heavily on oral communication and, in many cases, are conducted without a sign-language interpreter. It is equally challenging as a voter, as electoral announcements are often made orally. This is worsened by the low literacy rate in South Sudan, where the majority of citizens do not read (Sida 2024). As Rohwerder (2018) notes, “most children with disabilities don’t go to school in South Sudan because special schools are scarce and mainstream schools are often inaccessible”. For individuals with hearing difficulties, being unable to read makes it harder to access election-related print media. In addition, a study by Funke and Dijkzeul (2021: 22) found that while persons with disabilities have, in some instances, bought materials from the market or on the streets, “they cannot replace quality assistive devices, such as hearing aids.” In the electoral period, these barriers could limit the ability

of persons with hearing impairments to actively participate.

5.1.2 Intellectual and cognitive disabilities

Inclusion International conducted a survey in 2014 among its member states and found that 70% believed it was rare for persons with intellectual disabilities to participate in public or political life (UNDP 2021). Similarly, in the few countries where research has been conducted on this topic, individuals with intellectual disabilities are less likely to vote compared to others in society (ibid.). Despite this, international frameworks such as the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities provide for their unrestricted participation, prohibit discrimination on the basis of disability and mandate governments to ensure that their rights and dignity are preserved.

Nonetheless, those with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities are largely marginalised in South Sudan and do not have dedicated self-advocacy groups to represent their interests (Funke and Dijkzeul 2021). A report by UNDP (2021: 34), for example, observes that several countries have enacted electoral laws that block persons under the “stigmatising and outdated term ‘of unsound mind’” from being voters or aspirants. While the intention is often to ensure that individuals participating in elections are of sound mind, poor handling of such provisions can strip people of their personal agency to make their own public and political decisions. This is where self-advocacy groups are key in keeping the government in check and to ensure that no one is disadvantaged in the process.

The same UNDP report notes that where persons with intellectual disabilities are legally restricted, they also struggle to access information relevant to the electoral process, including the “absence of plain language or Easy Read materials and poorly designed or structured electoral processes and facilities” (UNDP 2021: 34). These barriers illustrate why individuals with intellectual and cognitive disabilities remain among the least able to engage in political life.

5.2 The gendered impact of disability

Research consistently shows that women with disabilities encounter compounded forms of exclusion that go well beyond the barriers faced by men with disabilities or women without disabilities. These intersecting disadvantages stem from gender inequality, ableism, and social stigma, and can manifest in ways that directly affect political and electoral participation. Women with disabilities are substantially more likely to experience gender-based violence, including sexual assault and abuse, at much higher rates than women without disabilities, underpinned by discriminatory social norms and beliefs about their value and autonomy. As a result, compared to men with disabilities, women are more likely to be socially isolated, excluded from information networks, and discouraged from public engagement, while also facing higher risks of abuse, dependency, and paternalistic decision-making by family members or carers. These dynamics can significantly limit their ability to register, access polling stations, or participate meaningfully in civic and political life.

In South Sudan, for example, **women and girls with disabilities are up to ten times more likely than women without disabilities to face sexual and gender-based violence, while also confronting severe barriers to education, communication, mobility, and access to services, which further isolate them from civic life (Caroline 2021).**



The lack of accessible information, physical infrastructure, and interpreter services means that many women with disabilities cannot safely or confidently engage in public political processes, including voter registration, attending civic meetings, or accessing polling stations. These lived realities highlight that without targeted action to address the unique vulnerabilities of women with disabilities, their voices will remain marginalised in efforts to promote inclusive political participation.

5.3 How to strengthen the inclusion of people living with disabilities

Although South Sudan's legal and policy framework contains important commitments to disability inclusion – including constitutional guarantees, proportional representation provisions and the National Disability Inclusion Policy – the gap between these commitments and their implementation remains wide. Strengthening inclusion therefore requires moving beyond broad statements of intent to a set of practical, sequenced measures that address the specific challenges faced by people with mobility, visual, hearing, intellectual and psychosocial disabilities.

A central lesson from comparative experience is that disability inclusion improves when persons with disabilities are recognised as experts in identifying barriers and designing solutions, and when electoral institutions adopt realistic, context-appropriate approaches that can be expanded over time. Given South Sudan's constrained resources, political volatility and infrastructural limitations, reforms will need to be both targeted and feasible – focusing on the most immediate obstacles to participation while laying the groundwork for longer-term institutional change. This includes clarifying how existing legal provisions will be operationalised, improving accessibility in campaign and polling environments, ensuring information is available in multiple formats, and strengthening coordination between the NEC, organisations of persons with disabilities, humanitarian actors and political parties.

These considerations suggest the following nine policy options:



A) Co-design an electoral accessibility action plan with organisations of persons with disabilities. Work with representative organisations of persons with disabilities (OPDs) – including groups of people with physical, visual, hearing, intellectual and psychosocial disabilities – to design a national accessibility plan for the 2026 elections.

International guidance stresses that disability-inclusive elections are most effective when OPDs are involved from the outset in assessing barriers, proposing solutions and monitoring implementation. Building on the existing National Disability Inclusion Policy, the NEC could convene a joint taskforce with OPDs to review polling procedures, campaign rules and complaint mechanisms, ensuring that persons with disabilities themselves shape the priorities and timelines.



B) Operationalise the 15% proportional representation allocation and broaden opportunities to stand as candidates. Translate the 15% proportional representation allocation for categories including persons with disabilities into practical measures that ensure candidates with disabilities are placed in winnable positions on party lists and encouraged to contest non-reserved seats.

Evidence from other countries shows that legal guarantees alone do not secure representation if parties nominate very few candidates with disabilities or place them low on lists. Parties could be supported, through dialogue and peer learning, to adopt internal guidelines on recruiting, selecting and supporting candidates with disabilities, including war veterans and those born with disabilities, so that neither group is systematically favoured or marginalised.



C) Improve physical accessibility of polling stations and campaign environments. Require that polling places be selected and adapted to allow independent access for voters with mobility, visual and other impairments, including ramps, wide doorways, accessible seating, clear signage and priority queues, and explore mobile or satellite polling in hard-to-reach areas.

International manuals on equal access emphasise that voters with disabilities should be able to enter, move around and cast their ballot “easily, independently and safely”, including when using assistive devices. Accessibility audits, conducted with OPDs, could identify high-risk locations and guide simple, low-cost adaptations such as temporary ramps, relocation of stations to ground floors and shade or seating for those unable to stand in long queues.



D) Make electoral information accessible in multiple formats, including Braille, sign language and Easy Read. Ensure that voter education, campaign messages and ballot materials are produced in formats accessible to people with visual, hearing and intellectual disabilities, such as Braille and large print, audio versions, sign-language interpretation, captioned broadcasts, Easy Read/plain language guides and pictorial posters.

Good practice from other jurisdictions highlights that accessibility of information is as important as physical access, and recommends diversified formats and simplified language to reach people with low literacy and different impairments. The NEC website and social media could be adapted to international web accessibility standards, with information hotlines and radio programming used to reach those without internet access.



E) Provide targeted support and reasonable accommodation for voters and candidates using assistive devices. Collaborate with humanitarian agencies, disability NGOs and local authorities to facilitate access to assistive devices needed for electoral participation, such as wheelchairs, white canes and hearing aids, and to provide on-the-day assistance consistent with preserving the secrecy of the ballot.

Studies from African elections show that many persons with disabilities cannot vote or stand because they lack appropriate devices or support to travel to polling stations. Practical steps could include temporary transport support for those with mobility impairments in high-risk areas, guidance to polling staff on how to assist without influencing the vote, and protocols allowing a trusted assistant of the voter's choice where necessary.



F) Strengthen inclusion of persons with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities through legal review and accessible procedures. Review electoral and related laws to ensure that outdated “unsound mind” provisions do not unjustifiably restrict the franchise or eligibility of persons with intellectual or psychosocial disabilities, and develop procedures that support their ability to vote, including Easy Read materials and supported decision-making.

UN and regional guidance stress that denying political rights on the basis of disability is inconsistent with a rights-based approach and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Working with OPDs and mental health advocates, authorities could identify any restrictive clauses, clarify that persons with disabilities retain their voting rights, and pilot simple tools (e.g. plain-language explanations of ballots) to enable informed participation.



G) Build the capacity of electoral officials, party agents and security personnel on disability inclusion. Integrate disability rights and reasonable accommodation modules into NEC training, BRIDGE courses and party agent briefings, using trainers with disabilities wherever possible.

Global experience indicates that attitudes and knowledge among election workers strongly shape whether voters with disabilities feel welcome and are effectively accommodated. Training could cover respectful communication, how to assist voters with different impairments, handling priority queues and managing disputes or complaints involving accessibility, helping to translate policy commitments into practice at the polling-station level.



H) Collect and use data on the participation of persons with disabilities to improve future elections. Develop simple mechanisms—devised jointly with OPDs—to collect data on accessibility arrangements, complaints and participation rates of voters with disabilities, and use post-election reviews to identify gaps and good practice.

Recent guidance from international and regional bodies emphasises the value of disaggregated data and post-election accessibility assessments in improving future polls. In South Sudan, even basic information on where persons with disabilities live and how they experience elections is limited. Low-cost tools such as accessibility checklists for observers, short questionnaires at polling stations and joint debriefings with OPDs could generate evidence to guide incremental, feasible reforms over successive electoral cycles.



1) Address the intersecting barriers faced by women living with disabilities in political and electoral participation. Policies and programmes should recognise that women living with disabilities often face compounded exclusion arising from the interaction of gender norms, stigma around disability, and structural inaccessibility – and develop distinctive responses, including supporting women’s groups with expertise in these areas and targeted training for NEC staff.

Responding to the distinctive challenges that face women living with disabilities requires both adopting inclusive mechanisms within the electoral system and stepping up outreach work. Electoral management bodies should ensure that polling stations are physically accessible, provide appropriate assistive materials, and train staff to support voters with disabilities in ways that respect autonomy and privacy, with particular sensitivity to gendered power relations. Outreach efforts should work through organisations of persons with disabilities and women’s groups to provide tailored information and accompaniment where requested. Clear commitments by authorities and political actors to protect the rights and dignity of women living with disabilities can strengthen trust, improve participation, and help ensure that inclusion efforts do not unintentionally reinforce existing inequalities.

6. Holding elections that are inclusive of IDPs and refugees

The position of internally displaced people, refugees and the diaspora has historically played an important role in the South Sudanese political mindset. This is due to the vast numbers of people that have been forced to leave their homes as a result of conflict and the ensuing economic challenges. As of mid-2025, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that over 2.3 million people from South Sudan are registered as refugees abroad, and about 1.9 million are internally displaced within South Sudan. As a result, peace deals and associated agreements have historically emphasised the need to promote the inclusion and participation of these people.



As of mid-2025, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that over **2.3 million people** from South Sudan are registered as **refugees abroad**, and about **1.9 million are internally displaced** within South Sudan.

While the CPA (signed in 2005) did not make it a condition for elections, Part I, Section 1.8.5 of the agreement provided for the consideration of displaced Sudanese to take part in the elections through repatriation and resettlement. However, the National Elections Commission “failed to provide clear and specific guidance to protect the civil and political rights of the displaced and ensure they could exercise their right to register to vote” (The Carter Center 2010: 55). In addition to this

shortcoming, several other factors contributed to the IDPs’ low turnout in the elections. First, the Sudanese government refused to visit camps such as Kalma and Kass because it believed that if internally displaced persons (IDPs) were registered in camps, they would have little incentive to return to their original lands. Second, the subsidiary bodies including 25 state high elections committees (HECs) were either reluctant or lacked the capacity to visit the camps.

For its part, the 2018 R-ARCSS reiterated some of the principles that were included in the CPA, and in particular stresses the importance of ensuring the inclusion of IDPs in the electoral process.

Unlike the CPA, where the language could be interpreted as passive, the R-ARCSS mandates the revitalised government of national unity to “expedite the relief, protection, rehabilitation, resettlement and reintegration” of the IDPs.



It is unclear, however, how feasible this is in the absence of an effective national reintegration and resettlement programme. In particular, one challenging issue for IDPs is that it is not clear

where they would vote in any sub-national contest. On the one hand, allowing IDPs to cast ballots for their original constituencies would create a massive challenge for the electoral commission. On the other hand, allowing IDPs to cast ballots for sub-national positions in the areas where they are now living could cause tensions with host communities who might worry that their political influence is being diluted.

The challenges are no less acute when it comes to including South Sudanese outside of the country living as refugees or in the diaspora, given that no mechanism currently exists to facilitate this. The South Sudanese diaspora is an integral part of the country, particularly through the remittances that support their families, relatives and small businesses as the nation continues to struggle with conflict and economic downturn. In 2020 alone, the UN Capital Development Fund (UNCDF) estimated that diaspora remittances accounted for 23.9% of South Sudan's GDP (Reid 2024). However, despite the visible contributions of the diaspora, the R-ARCSS and the NEA are silent on their inclusion in the electoral process.

Conversely, the R-ARCSS is explicit regarding refugees and their return to South Sudan, upon which it tasks the RTGoNU with accelerating their protection, rehabilitation, reintegration and resettlement. Textually, this appears clear. However, in practice, many South Sudanese remain in refugee camps across the region (UNHCR 2025). Given this scale of displacement, the economic instability, renewed clashes and the limited time before the general elections, large-scale repatriation is unlikely. It therefore becomes necessary to consider whether, and how, refugees could be enabled to participate from their host countries and what such an arrangement would require from an electoral management perspective.

This section first outlines the current situation and how it affects the participation of these groups, before suggesting how these particularly difficult issues can be addressed.

6.1 Facilitating IDP voting

6.1.1 The barriers that IDPs face to political inclusion

The main concern for many IDPs heading to the forthcoming elections is the question of security. A survey supported by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung found that 40% of respondents considered security their primary concern – the most common response – as continued insecurity in settlement areas and widespread armed conflict in their places of origin directly affect them (Deng et al. 2025). Prior to the postponed 2024 elections, IDPs residing within the UN-run Protection of Civilians (POC) sites in Bentiu demanded “comprehensive security reforms” as a condition for participation and threatened to boycott the polls if this was unmet (Jock 2023). Similarly, in Eastern Equatoria, IDPs voiced the same concern. According to a news report by Radio Tamazuj (2023b) on a workshop held in Torit, Eastern Equatoria, Mr. Abonga Justine Francis, a returnee who spoke on behalf of returnees and IDPs expressed that: ↓

“We should be well secured. There should be security for the IDPs. Last week some peacemakers were killed in Lafon, so what is that? There should be security so that the IDPs and returnees will participate in elections. You find returnees from Bidi Bidi, Pagirinya, Bweyale want to come back to South Sudan but fear that they will be ambushed and killed, and another thing is awareness on the election process.”

These issues are often particularly acute for women, who often fear returning home due to insecurity and the threat of sexual violence and criminality.

Such calls for security are likely to persist in the build-up to the scheduled 2026 general elections. The United Nations Peacekeeping has warned that “breaking point is becoming visible” (Mishra 2025) as the country continues to face widespread conflict, including between the South Sudan People's

Defense Forces (SSPDF) and Sudan People's Liberation Army in opposition (SPLA-IO) in Upper Nile and Equatoria regions, between the SSPDF and militarised cattle-keeping youth, and among the armed cattle-keeping youth themselves (Reuters 2025; Radio Tamazuj 2025c; United Nations 2025).

Furthermore, the commitment in the R-ARCSS to "expedite" the resettlement, protection and reintegration of the IDPs has not been realised. By June 2024, the United Nations Mission in South Sudan had handed over all but one POC to the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (RTGoNU) (Deng et al. 2024). Although progress in return and reintegration has been positive in places like Wau (Nkwelle 2025), the overwhelming majority of IDPs remain in displacement camps across the country (Stromsta 2025).

Additionally, aside from the broad constitutional provisions granting all eligible South Sudanese citizens the right to vote and contest for elective positions, the NEA is silent on the inclusion of IDPs in the electoral process. This absence of clear guidance for the electoral commission on exactly how to manage this group risks excluding a population that is among the most affected.

As noted above, depending on how IDPs are included, what positions they are allowed to vote for, and how their participation in sub-national elections is designed, it is possible that their electoral inclusion could drive greater tensions with host communities, intensifying security concerns.



6.1.2 Issues of access to documentation and polling stations

One of the main reasons the CPA provisions on the inclusion of IDPs in the 2010 Sudan elections failed to promote IDP participation was that it did not provide clear mechanisms for their participation. The R-ARCSS makes the same mistake as it only mentions them in passing. As noted earlier, the NEA merely recognises the right of everyone to participate but does not stipulate how disenfranchised and disadvantaged groups, such as the IDPs, are able to register to vote or run for seats in the electoral process.

Many of these challenges, and those noted above with regard to insecurity, might be mitigated if the NEC had the capacity to establish registration centres and polling stations within displacement sites. To date, however, no concrete plans have been laid to do this, and there is a risk that the Commission will ultimately feel that it lacks the flexibility and funding necessary to do this (Deng et al. 2024; Hawari 2025). A related issue is the question of awareness among IDPs about the electoral timetable. To date, not enough has been done to educate South Sudanese citizens on electoral processes. This gap is even wider for IDPs who have complained of not "having sufficient access to essential information about what is going on, socially and politically, in South Sudan" (Phumisa and Anderson 2024). They have also expressed scepticism about the motivations of politicians. As Siliwa Ato Akech worriedly asked: ↓

"They ask us to return to our homes, while those in the political elite send their children abroad. How can they say we have secure and safe spaces in this country when they are sending their own families away?" (Phumisa and Anderson 2024).

If IDPs are not provided with adequate information on the importance of elections and the processes involved, there is a serious risk of disillusionment and mistrust which could affect their participation – and their future reintegration into South Sudanese society.

6.1.3 The intersectional dimensions of displacement

Beyond these structural barriers, displacement exposes women to distinctive forms of insecurity that directly undermine political participation in ways that are less pronounced for displaced men. As Buchanan notes, “these concerns are rooted in the current security context of South Sudan, and the lived realities of these women” (2019: 15), a context in which everyday insecurity shapes who can safely appear in public and engage in political life. Women in displacement sites and return areas face heightened risks of sexual and gender-based violence, coercion, and exploitation by armed actors, community leaders, and even service providers. These threats shape daily calculations about mobility, visibility, and participation. Attending voter registration centres, political meetings, or polling stations can involve travelling long distances or waiting in exposed public spaces, activities that carry particular risks for women and are often actively discouraged by families seeking to protect them. In contrast to displaced men, whose political engagement may sometimes be facilitated through male-dominated networks within camps or host communities, displaced women are more likely to be confined to domestic and care responsibilities intensified by displacement, leaving them with less time, fewer resources, and weaker access to political information.

Displacement also weakens women’s already limited political voice by severing the social and institutional ties that underpin electoral inclusion in South Sudan. Women who flee violence frequently lose connections to customary authorities, women’s associations, and local party structures that might otherwise support voter mobilisation or candidacy.

In a political system where participation often depends on patronage, ethnic affiliation, and local recognition, displaced women are therefore doubly marginalised: first as outsiders lacking local legitimacy, and second as women operating within deeply gendered political institutions. Documentation gaps further compound this exclusion, as women are more likely than men to lack identity papers required for voter registration, particularly after repeated displacement.

Beyond gender, displacement also generates distinctive barriers for other marginalised groups, affecting both women and men. Displaced youth often struggle to convert their demographic weight into political influence, facing exclusion from camp governance structures, limited access to civic education, and mistrust from political elites who associate youth mobilisation with insecurity. Persons living with disabilities encounter especially acute physical and informational barriers, including inaccessible registration centres, limited assistive services, and dependence on caregivers who may themselves be displaced or overburdened. Elderly displaced people face declining mobility, chronic health challenges, and social isolation, which can render participation in electoral processes practically impossible even when formal rights exist. Taken together, these intersecting vulnerabilities highlight how displacement interacts with age, disability, and social status to deepen political exclusion, narrowing the scope for meaningful electoral participation well beyond gender alone.

6.2 Facilitating refugee political inclusion

Although 1.7 million people have returned to South Sudan as a result of the R-ARCSS process, the Government of South Sudan has not demonstrated the willingness or capacity to facilitate a comprehensive refugee return and resettlement programme. Moreover, many returnees have talked openly about their concerns for their own safety – a major reason why more people have not come back to the country. Angelina Wael, who spent 26 years in Sudan and then returned to South Sudan, has said that: “This is my first time here since independence. I don’t know if I should feel proud

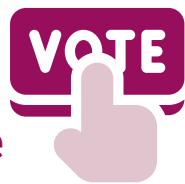


Although **1.7 million people** have returned to South Sudan under the R-ARCSS process, the government has not shown sufficient willingness or capacity to support a comprehensive refugee return and resettlement program.

or scared about what the future holds” (United Nations Peacekeeping 2025). If conditions remain unchanged, it will remain difficult to convince refugees to return home to resettle, reintegrate and participate in the general elections.

Many returnees have also set integration as a condition for participation. This aligns with the expressions of those such as Kerbino Thudan, who suggested that “government should prioritise the resettlement and reintegration of IDPs and refugees before proceeding with the electoral process” (Jock 2023). Moreover, as highlighted by UNHCR (2025), returnees from Kenya were subjected to poor hygiene and sanitation, including limited access to water, pervasive open defecation, high exposure to gender-based violence and a lack of other basic necessities such as reception facilities and operational health facilities.

Given that at this point it is not feasible to repatriate the over 2 million refugees before the 2026 elections, involving them would require exploring options for voting in their host countries.



Such a process would need legal coordination, dedicated resources and voter awareness campaigns – in addition to the construction of new administrative processes. As noted earlier, the NEC faces numerous challenges, including limited resources. It can therefore be argued that managing refugee voting is likely to be an extremely challenging task and one that may prove to be unfeasible if elections are to be held in 2026. Despite this, it is worth considering what mechanisms could be put in place this year, and whether it might be feasible to reach some of the refugee communities in neighbouring countries, and in the process establish new processes that could then be rolled out in a more ambitious set of countries in future elections.

6.3 Facilitating Diasporic political inclusion

While the vast majority of South Sudanese refugees reside in neighbouring countries, including Kenya, Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan and Ethiopia (UNHCR 2025), some have also travelled to North America, Europe, and Australia, either escaping political persecution and civil war or in search of better opportunities (Fanjoy 2013). In a recent Op-Ed, Remember Miamingi (2025) emphasised that this “South Sudanese diaspora forms one of the world’s most far-flung diaspora communities, and one of the most crucial to their homeland’s survival.” When the country was plunged into civil war in 2013, displacing millions and leaving many others in destitution, the diaspora served as a financial lifeline for many families in areas such as education, health and shelter (Rift Valley Institute 2018). South Sudanese diaspora members in Australia remitted between 9.5% and 13.8% of their annual income to relatives in South Sudan (Reid 2024), for example, and their contribution continues to be critical.

Yet despite this, there is no clear legal framework to govern their political inclusion, aside from the constitutional provision that all South Sudanese citizens, including dual nationals, are eligible to vote. Beyond the lack of legal provisions, there are additional concerns such as the tensions that have emerged in some cases between South Sudanese residents, IDPs, refugees and members of the diaspora – and within these groups. One respondent in a study by the Rift Valley Institute, for example, argued that: ↓

“There are those professionals who returned and they want to [be] involved on the basis of their merit. But there are those who returned here, who [were] basically invited to jobs by their relatives in the government. That is a very sad part of it. That they come knowing that they already have positions, while there are those of us who come because we feel we want to be here and find opportunities for us to be involved” (Rift Valley Institute 2018: 14).

Some South Sudanese citizens based in Juba share the sentiment that some diaspora members perceive themselves as elites, and as such, undermine those in South Sudan by claiming to be more educated and better suited to lead (Rift Valley Institute 2018). This mindset risks creating resentment in terms of building consensus on how the diaspora could be more effectively and systematically included in the country’s political processes.

6.4 How to strengthen the inclusion of IDPs, refugees and the Diaspora

Expanding the participation of IDPs, refugees and members of the diaspora in South Sudan’s electoral process will require the identification of concrete steps that can be taken to facilitate participation, which in turn requires a clear understanding of the distinct challenges each group faces. The priorities of these groups often diverge significantly: IDPs frequently stress physical security and fear exclusion from voting beyond the presidential level; refugees

tend to focus on reintegration, safety, and whether it is realistic to participate from displacement; while diaspora communities are more concerned with political voice, long-term representation, and opportunities to contribute from abroad. Addressing these needs separately, rather than treating the groups as a single constituency, may lead to more tailored and therefore more effective approaches.

For refugees living in neighbouring countries, the possibility of participating in elections is often seen as important, but given that the return and reintegration of these groups to South Sudan before the next election is now unfeasible given the tight timeline, it would require new sources of funding and international cooperation. Extending voting rights outside South Sudan is most likely to be feasible where populations are concentrated regionally and could be supported through partnership with host governments and humanitarian actors, if funding allows. For diaspora communities further afield, meaningful engagement is likely to require creative alternatives such as targeted information-sharing or advisory platforms, given limited access to campaign debates and logistical constraints. In some countries – such as Senegal – dedicated parliamentary seats are reserved for citizens living abroad. While such an approach could be considered as part of future reform in South Sudan, it is not permitted under the current electoral legislation and would require substantial legal adjustments and institutional capacity to implement.

Designing possible solutions to IDP inclusion is also challenging. One way that some countries have navigated the challenge of where IDPs vote (i.e. for which sub-national positions) is to establish temporary constituencies for IDPs until reintegration occurs. However, this would necessitate amendments to the legal framework and additional resources that there is precious little time to effect. Given these complexities, it may be useful to conduct rapid feasibility studies of the feasibility of these models in more concrete detail – including security implications, logistical demands and financial requirements – before determining the most appropriate way forward.

These considerations suggest the following seven policy options:



A) Conduct a practical feasibility assessment of IDP and refugee participation options.

One way to inform decision-making would be to commission a light-touch assessment of the technical, financial and security implications of different participation models (e.g. voting in constituencies of origin, place of residence, or temporary special constituencies).

International experience indicates that decisions taken without a clear understanding of operational constraints often result in partial or uneven inclusion. A feasibility exercise – conducted with input from electoral experts, IDP and refugee representatives and financial planners – could help identify which options are realistic in the current context and what support would be required. This would enable actors to balance inclusion with conflict sensitivity and institutional capacity.



B) Facilitate structured dialogue with IDP, refugee and diaspora representatives to inform short- and long-term inclusion strategies.

Once the potential options have been set out and costed, it would be useful to convene a focused dialogue – either nationally or through regional consultations – with representatives of IDPs, refugee communities and diaspora networks to discuss priority concerns, explore feasible participation options, and agree incremental steps towards both immediate inclusion and longer-term strategies.

International evidence suggests that electoral policies designed without direct input from displaced and diaspora populations often fail to address the realities of insecurity, limited access to information, and disrupted community ties. A structured dialogue process – leveraging existing humanitarian coordination platforms, civil society networks or peacebuilding frameworks – could enable these groups to articulate their concerns and preferences directly to electoral authorities, political leaders and technical experts. This would help identify realistic short-term options (e.g. participation for refugees in accessible regional locations), while informing longer-term planning around reintegration, constituency allocation or potential legal reform. By acknowledging the diversity among displaced and diaspora communities and providing space for their voices, this approach can support inclusive and conflict-sensitive planning without imposing significant additional costs if integrated into existing consultation mechanisms.



C) Address the distinctive needs of displaced women, youth, elderly people and those living with disabilities.

Dialogue and engagement with displaced communities must recognise the particular challenges that different kinds of displaced people face, enabling them to speak to their concerns and needs, in order to ensure that plans for reintegration and electoral inclusion are nuanced and well designed.

In practical terms, this requires moving beyond generic consultations toward targeted, resourced, and conflict-sensitive forms of engagement that reflect the fact that many displaced women have directly experienced, or fled from, violence. Ensuring a peaceful and secure environment around registration, consultation, and polling processes is therefore essential to enable their

participation, but this cannot rely solely on a visible security presence. Given widespread distrust of security forces, particularly among women who associate them with past abuse or intimidation, security arrangements should be carefully designed in consultation with women leaders and community representatives. This could include the use of community-based protection mechanisms, clear codes of conduct for security personnel, and the prioritisation of civilian and female staff at electoral sites. By grounding security provision in dialogue with displaced women themselves, authorities and partners can reduce fear, build confidence, and create conditions in which electoral inclusion is not only formally possible but perceived as safe and credible by those most affected by violence. Youth-focused initiatives should balance the need for safe participation with efforts to avoid securitising young people's political engagement, working instead through trusted civic actors and peer networks. For persons living with disabilities and older displaced people, security and access concerns intersect, making it essential to combine protection measures with practical support such as assisted transport, mobile registration, and accompaniment by trusted intermediaries.



D) Strengthen relationships and trust between IDPs and host communities. If the goal is to encourage inclusive participation, one approach would be to use existing peace committees and community dialogue platforms to facilitate engagement between IDPs and local residents, focusing on mutual concerns and shared electoral interests.

Evidence from past elections in fragile settings suggests that tensions between displaced and settled populations often contribute to instability. Facilitated dialogue, co-developed civic messaging and awareness campaigns could help reduce the perception that electoral participation by IDPs disadvantages host communities. This approach builds on established local mechanisms and can be implemented at low cost.



E) Integrate conflict-sensitive planning and early warning to prevent violence around elections. Another option would be to embed conflict sensitivity into electoral preparations, using local peace structures to monitor potential tensions and coordinate rapid response where risks of violence - particularly between displaced and host communities - emerge.

Examples from countries such as Sierra Leone and Liberia show that using existing conflict early warning systems to track election-related tension can support preventive diplomacy and rapid intervention. Applying a similar model in displacement-affected areas could help prevent small disputes from escalating during the electoral period.



F) Improve access to information and civic education for IDPs, refugees and diaspora communities. Where resources allow, targeted civic education could be delivered through community-based organisations, radio networks and diaspora media platforms to ensure displaced populations receive accurate, accessible information on electoral processes and issues.

Studies indicate that lack of trusted information often leads to disengagement and mistrust. Low-cost approaches – such as radio broadcasts in displacement areas or digital briefings disseminated through diaspora associations – can support informed participation even when physical access is limited.



G) Explore incremental participation options for refugees in neighbouring countries.

If funding becomes available and political agreement is reached, participation could initially be limited to major refugee-hosting countries where logistical arrangements are more feasible, supported by host governments and humanitarian actors.

Countries such as Liberia and Afghanistan have previously used phased external voting that prioritised accessible locations. Adopting a similar approach could allow partial inclusion while preserving the option to expand participation in future electoral cycles when conditions improve.

7. Conclusion: Towards elections that build trust, stability and a more inclusive South Sudan

South Sudan's scheduled 2026 elections present a critical opportunity to revitalise political life, restore public trust, and lay the foundations for a more legitimate and representative system of governance. They also offer a key moment for national stakeholders – including the Government, political parties, the National Elections Commission (NEC), and security actors – to demonstrate their commitment to protecting political rights and civil liberties, including women's rights, gender equality, and the rights of displaced persons and persons with disabilities.

Yet the analysis in this report shows that inclusion cannot be treated as a technical add-on to the electoral process. It is central to whether the 2026 polls will contribute to stability or deepen mistrust. Across all groups – ethnic and regional communities, women and girls, young people, older citizens, people living with disabilities, IDPs, refugees and the diaspora – the same overarching lesson emerges: credible elections require practical mechanisms through which all South Sudanese can participate meaningfully and safely, and see a genuine stake in the political future of their country.

The risks of exclusion are real. Deep-seated fears of marginalisation continue to shape political

expectations. Women face entrenched socio-cultural barriers, threats of violence and limited financial or institutional support. Young people – despite forming the vast majority of the population – feel sidelined from decision-making and are vulnerable to political manipulation. Older citizens encounter physical, security and logistical obstacles that risk leaving them behind. Persons living with disabilities confront profound gaps between legal guarantees and the accessible environments needed for participation. IDPs and refugees remain caught between insecurity, displacement and uncertainty over whether and where they can vote. The diaspora – whose remittances sustain families and communities across South Sudan – continue to be recognised economically but not politically.

But the report also highlights important reasons for optimism. South Sudan possesses a constitutional and legal framework that embraces the language of inclusion; a vibrant civil society that has consistently championed broader participation; and a population that continues to express strong support for elections as a pathway to peaceful political renewal. Moreover, many of the policy options identified here are low-cost, feasible and compatible with existing structures. These range from community-based civic education and targeted security measures to structured dialogues with youth, women, elders and displaced communities, and practical steps to improve the accessibility of polling stations. These are not abstract reforms: they are concrete actions that could materially reduce tensions, demonstrate fairness and increase the confidence of groups who have long felt excluded.

If the government, political parties, the National Elections Commission and international partners invest seriously in these measures – communicating clearly, planning early and engaging communities directly – South Sudan can take visible steps towards an election that broadens participation rather than narrowing it.

Inclusive elections will not, on their own, resolve the country's longstanding political and security challenges. But they can help rebuild trust in public institutions, create space for peaceful contestation and send a signal that citizenship carries real meaning beyond legal text.

The 2026 polls represent a critical juncture. A deliberate, inclusive approach can help ensure that this moment strengthens – not fractures – the fragile social contract.

In the end, inclusive elections are not simply about meeting technical benchmarks. They are about demonstrating that every South Sudanese – regardless of gender, age, ethnicity, location, displacement status or disability – belongs to the political community and has a voice in shaping the country's future. Achieving this will require leadership, transparency, and a willingness to learn from those who have been historically marginalised. But if pursued with seriousness and urgency, it offers the best chance of ensuring that the coming elections do not merely mark a procedural milestone, but a meaningful step towards a more peaceful, representative and resilient South Sudan.

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How to Hold Inclusive Elections in South Sudan

South Sudan's 2026 elections present a critical opportunity to renew political legitimacy, strengthen public trust and advance peace in a fragile post-conflict environment. This discussion paper explores how elections can be made genuinely inclusive, ensuring the meaningful participation of women, youth, older persons, people living with disabilities, internally displaced persons, refugees and diaspora communities. Drawing on South Sudan's legal framework and comparative African experience, the authors identify practical, realistic policy options that can be implemented despite tight timelines and limited resources. By emphasizing community engagement, equitable access, gender-sensitive approaches and transparent electoral processes, the report argues that inclusion is not only a democratic ideal but a necessary foundation for stability, accountability and a more representative political future for South Sudan.

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