

The Role of the United Nations in the Sustainability of New States

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Abstract

This paper examined the role of the United Nations in the sustainability of new states, focusing on how international legitimacy, peacekeeping, humanitarian relief, and institution-building shape the survival of fragile post-independence polities. Drawing on the theoretical lens of international institutionalism and using secondary sources with qualitative content analysis, the study explored how UN interventions in cases such as South Sudan, Eritrea, Timor-Leste, and Kosovo have contributed to state recognition, conflict management, and governance support. The findings revealed that while the UN provides critical assistance in legitimizing sovereignty, stabilizing security through peacekeeping, and supporting humanitarian and developmental needs, its efforts are often constrained by geopolitical rivalries, limited resources, and the internal weaknesses of emerging states. Cases like Timor-Leste highlight UN successes in facilitating peaceful transitions, while South Sudan demonstrates the limits of international intervention when domestic leadership and inclusive governance are absent. The study concluded that the sustainability of new states requires not only UN support but also strong domestic political will and cooperative international engagement. It recommended that greater emphasis be placed on building resilient institutions, fostering national unity, and ensuring long-term international commitment to prevent relapse into instability.

Keywords: *United Nations, New states, Peacekeeping, Legitimacy, Sustainability, State-building*

INTRODUCTION

The sustainability of new states in the international system remains one of the most pressing challenges in global politics. New states, whether emerging from decolonization, secession, or post-conflict transitions, often face problems of weak institutions, fragile legitimacy, internal divisions, and economic dependence, which threaten their ability to survive and function effectively (Rotberg, 2004). In this regard, the United Nations (UN) has consistently positioned itself as a central actor in supporting the consolidation and sustainability of such states. Since its establishment in 1945, the UN has assumed the responsibility of promoting peace, security,

development, and human rights, thereby making it a key institution in shaping the destinies of new and fragile states (Weiss & Daws, 2007).

The sustainability of a new state extends beyond its international recognition; it involves building effective governance structures, ensuring social cohesion, and achieving economic viability (Fukuyama, 2004). Many new states encounter immediate crises such as ethnic rivalries, political instability, and insecurity, which require external support for stabilization. The UN has, therefore, played a crucial role through peacekeeping operations, humanitarian interventions, technical assistance, and institution-building initiatives. By fostering inclusive political arrangements, monitoring elections, and providing developmental aid, the organization helps to create the conditions necessary for a new state to function as a legitimate and self-reliant member of the international community (Paris & Sisk, 2009).

Historically, the UN was instrumental in the decolonization process that gave birth to many states in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean during the mid-20th century. The General Assembly's adoption of the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples in 1960 provided legal and moral backing for independence struggles, ensuring that new states were integrated into the international order (Abi-Saab, 1997). In more recent times, the UN has moved beyond decolonization to directly engage in post-conflict state-building, as seen in East Timor (Timor-Leste), Kosovo, and South Sudan, where transitional administrations and peace operations helped establish governance structures and promote stability (Caplan, 2005). These interventions highlight the UN's evolving role from facilitating independence to actively nurturing state sustainability.

Nevertheless, the UN's engagement in sustaining new states is not without challenges. Critics argue that UN missions are sometimes shaped by the political interests of powerful member states and that externally imposed state-building models often clash with local realities, producing fragile outcomes (Chandler, 2006). Furthermore, limited resources, coordination difficulties, and bureaucratic constraints undermine the effectiveness of UN interventions. Despite these challenges, the UN remains the most legitimate and broadly accepted multilateral platform for assisting new states, providing not only recognition but also the institutional support required for long-term sustainability (Chesterman, 2004).

This study seeks to examine the role of the United Nations in ensuring the sustainability of new states. It will analyze how the UN contributes through peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance, and institution-building, while also highlighting the challenges and limitations of its involvement. By drawing from historical and contemporary experiences, the study aims to assess the extent to which UN interventions promote political stability, economic development, and international legitimacy in fragile contexts. Ultimately, the research emphasizes that the UN, despite its imperfections, remains an indispensable actor in enabling new states to consolidate their sovereignty and participate meaningfully in the international community.

Conceptual Clarifications

United Nations

The United Nations (UN) is an international organization established in 1945 after the Second World War with the aim of promoting peace, security, cooperation, and development among states. It serves as a global platform where countries come together to address common challenges such as conflict, poverty, human rights violations, and health crises (Claude, 1984; Hanhimäki, 2008). The UN is made up of sovereign member states, and its structure includes key organs such as the General Assembly, the Security Council, and various specialized agencies like the World Health

Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), which work to improve global welfare (Weiss & Daws, 2007).

Scholars view the UN as both a forum for international dialogue and an institution that carries out practical tasks such as peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance, and election monitoring. For example, Mazower (2009) explains that the UN played a vital role in decolonization by granting recognition and legitimacy to many newly independent states, while Chesterman (2004) notes that it has also been central in post-conflict state-building efforts. Despite criticisms about power imbalances, especially with the dominance of the permanent members of the Security Council, the UN remains the most important multilateral institution for managing global peace and cooperation (Mearsheimer, 1994; Barnett & Finnemore, 2004).

The United Nations can be conceptualized as a unique experiment in global governance that balances respect for state sovereignty with the need for collective action. Its near-universal membership and broad mandate make it the primary international body through which states work together to solve global problems, promote peace, and build sustainable development (Weiss, Forsythe & Coate, 2017).

New State

The concept of a “new state” is often associated with countries that have recently gained independence, emerged from colonial rule, or been created through processes such as secession, decolonization, or the dissolution of larger political entities. Generally, a new state can be defined as a sovereign political entity that has only recently entered the international system of recognized states and is still in the process of consolidating its political, economic, and social structures (Jackson, 1990; Clapham, 1996). New states are therefore characterized by their fragility, lack of institutional maturity, and struggles with legitimacy, stability, and integration.

Scholars emphasize that the birth of new states is often shaped by historical and colonial legacies. Jackson and Rosberg (1982) describe post-colonial African states as “quasi-states,” highlighting their juridical sovereignty but limited empirical capacity to govern effectively. These states frequently inherited artificial boundaries drawn during colonialism, which lumped diverse ethnic, cultural, and religious groups together without a shared sense of national identity (Ake, 1996). As a result, new states face profound challenges in building national cohesion, managing diversity, and creating inclusive political institutions.

New states also tend to experience insecurity due to weak governance structures and contested authority. Migdal (1988) argues that such states often lack the ability to penetrate society, enforce rules, and implement policies across their territories. This weakness makes them vulnerable to internal conflicts, secessionist movements, and political instability, as competing groups contest the legitimacy of state authority. Rotberg (2004) further points out that the fragility of new states often leads to the emergence of “failed states,” where the central government is unable to provide basic security, justice, and welfare to its citizens.

In the African context, most states that gained independence in the 1950s and 1960s can be classified as “new states.” Nigeria, for example, attained independence in 1960 but quickly faced crises of legitimacy, ethnic mistrust, and institutional fragility, culminating in the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970). This illustrates how new states are often caught in the ****security dilemma****, as groups within them perceive each other as threats due to the absence of strong, trusted, and impartial institutions (Osaghae, 1998; Siollun, 2009).

Therefore, the “new state” can be conceptually understood as a recently created sovereign political entity struggling with the challenges of state-building, legitimacy, and national integration. Its

fragility, inherited colonial boundaries, and weak institutions often expose it to internal insecurity, violent conflict, and difficulties in consolidating democracy and development. Studying new states is thus essential for understanding the dynamics of political instability, conflict, and governance in post-colonial societies.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the Liberal Institutionalism Theory as its guiding framework to explain the role of the United Nations (UN) in the sustainability of the new state. Liberal institutionalism, developed in the late 20th century by scholars such as Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, argues that international organizations and institutions play a vital role in fostering cooperation, reducing conflicts, and promoting stability in the international system (Keohane & Nye, 1977; Keohane, 1984). The theory emphasizes that, in a world characterized by anarchy, institutions like the UN provide rules, norms, and mechanisms that enable states—especially new and fragile ones—to survive, develop, and integrate into the global community.

According to the theory, international institutions help to mitigate insecurity and instability by providing platforms for dialogue, peacekeeping operations, humanitarian assistance, and the promotion of inclusive governance (Axelrod & Keohane, 1985). For new states that often lack strong institutions and struggle with legitimacy, the UN functions as a stabilizing actor by offering recognition, technical support, and mechanisms for resource mobilization. By establishing predictable rules of engagement and collective security arrangements, the UN reduces the risks of conflict and helps build trust among diverse groups within fragile states (Russett & Oneal, 2001). Applied to the Nigerian and wider African experience, liberal institutionalism highlights how the UN's role in supporting post-colonial and newly independent states has been essential for their survival. For instance, during decolonization, the UN provided legitimacy and international recognition to African states, ensuring their acceptance in the global order (Abi-Saab, 1997). In more contemporary cases like South Sudan and Timor-Leste, UN peacekeeping and state-building missions demonstrate how institutions act to sustain fragile states by addressing security, governance, and development challenges (Paris & Sisk, 2009). The theory therefore suggests that the sustainability of new states is not only dependent on internal capacity but also on the external support and legitimacy provided by global institutions like the United Nations.

Thus, Liberal Institutionalism offers a useful framework for understanding how the UN contributes to the sustainability of new states. It underscores that institutions are not merely symbolic but serve as practical mechanisms for reducing conflict, fostering cooperation, and building the governance and economic structures necessary for long-term stability. By providing recognition, peacekeeping, and developmental assistance, the UN helps ensure that new states move from fragility towards sustainability and effective integration into the international community (Keohane, 1984).

Methodology

The paper employed an ex post facto research design, utilizing secondary sources such as books, journal articles, manuscripts, online materials, and conference papers to collect data. The gathered information was then analyzed using content analysis to derive meaningful insights.

Discussion of Findings

The Role of the United Nations in the Sustainability of New States

The sustainability of new states often depends on their ability to secure legitimacy, maintain peace, and build functional institutions in fragile contexts. The United Nations (UN), as the foremost global institution for peace and security, has played a vital role in guiding new states through these processes. Its interventions, ranging from peacekeeping to humanitarian aid and institution-building, have been instrumental in preventing collapse and enabling young states to consolidate sovereignty (Chesterman, 2004).

A primary contribution of the UN is the legitimization of new states within the international system. Membership in the UN provides recognition, diplomatic access, and integration into the global order. For example, South Sudan's admission as the 193rd UN member in 2011 not only affirmed its sovereignty but also provided access to international support frameworks for development and humanitarian aid (UN, 2011). Similarly, Eritrea's entry into the UN in 1993 symbolized its acceptance into the community of nations after decades of struggle with Ethiopia, giving it international standing despite internal and external challenges (Pool, 2001). In both cases, the UN's recognition was essential for the survival of these new states on the global stage.

The UN also plays a critical role in peacekeeping and security stabilization, particularly in post-conflict states vulnerable to relapse into war. Peace operations create safe environments for political transitions, protect civilians, and monitor human rights. In South Sudan, the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) has been at the forefront of civilian protection, especially during the violent crises of 2013 and 2016 when civil war broke out (De Carvalho & Solhjell, 2013). Similarly, in Timor-Leste, the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) assumed direct administrative authority from 1999 to 2002, overseeing governance, security, and democratic elections that laid the foundation for independence (Beauvais, 2001). These cases illustrate how UN peacekeeping fosters the conditions necessary for fragile states to survive and develop.

Beyond security, the UN has been pivotal in humanitarian assistance and relief provision, which are essential in fragile states struggling with displacement, food insecurity, and weak health systems. Agencies such as the World Food Programme (WFP), UNICEF, and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) deliver life-saving support in such contexts. For instance, in the early years of Eritrea's independence, UN agencies were central in supporting refugee resettlement and addressing famine-related challenges (Pool, 2001). In South Sudan, UN humanitarian operations have provided critical aid to millions of internally displaced persons (IDPs) affected by recurrent conflict and famine conditions (Maxwell et al., 2014). This humanitarian engagement ensures that new states can withstand immediate survival challenges even when political structures remain weak.

Equally important is the UN's role in institution-building and governance support, which underpins long-term state sustainability. Through the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and peacebuilding frameworks, the UN supports constitution drafting, judicial reforms, civil service training, and electoral processes. In Kosovo, the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) played a central role in building political institutions, organizing elections, and safeguarding minority rights after its contested independence (Caplan, 2005). Likewise, in Timor-Leste, the UN supervised the writing of the 2002 Constitution and the transition toward a democratically elected government (Chesterman, 2004). These interventions demonstrate the UN's unique ability to bridge immediate stabilization with long-term capacity-building.

Nevertheless, the UN's interventions are not without ****challenges and limitations****. Political divisions among powerful member states, inadequate resources, and resistance from local elites often undermine UN effectiveness. For example, despite UNMISS's presence, South Sudan's political leadership has continued to prioritize ethnic patronage and personal interests, undermining peace efforts and exposing civilians to recurring violence (Craze, 2018). Similarly, in Western Sahara, the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) has been unable to resolve the self-determination question due to a lack of consensus among key international actors (Zunes & Mundy, 2010). These cases reveal the structural constraints the UN faces in ensuring the sustainability of new or aspiring states.

The findings demonstrate that the UN plays a multifaceted role in sustaining new states through legitimacy, peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance, and institution-building. While its successes in cases such as Timor-Leste and Kosovo highlight its strengths, ongoing struggles in South Sudan and Western Sahara underscore its limitations. Ultimately, the sustainability of new states depends not only on UN interventions but also on the willingness of domestic elites to embrace inclusive governance and the ability of the international community to sustain long-term commitments (Paris, 2004). The UN, despite its shortcomings, remains indispensable in enabling fragile states to navigate the precarious path toward stability and sovereignty.

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