

# BOOK REVIEW

**Susanne Jaspars. *Food Aid in Sudan: a history of power, politics and profit*.** London: Zed Books, 2018. xiv + 249 pp. Maps. Charts. Bibliography. Index. \$84.00. Cloth. ISBN: 978-1-78699-209-3.

The 2019 political crisis that ended Omar al-Bashir's thirty years of rule in Sudan was precipitated in part by his government's removal of subsidies on wheat the previous December. The popular uprising that led to demonstrations and riots all over the country pushed bread off Khartoum's tables as the national priority in favor of freedom. Susanne Jaspars's *Food Aid in Sudan: a history of power, politics and profit* is a densely detailed study of power not directed at improving the lives of the poor, but rather at manipulating food aid in order to maintain that power. Jaspars "looks at food aid practices as a way of governing" (xiii) that for fifty years in Sudan increased inequality between Sudan's center and periphery. In the Darfur case, perhaps where these policies saw their greatest devastation, people refer to their erstwhile fellow Sudanese who dominate them to the east as "*nas a-sabah*" ("people of the morning").

Jaspars's focus in the book is on three regimes of food aid practices in Sudan, which she refers to as "the state support regime, the livelihoods regime and the resilience regime" (15). She expands the discussion of these three periods of Sudan food aid history into a multidisciplinary consideration of recent Sudan history and politics through a food aid lens. The state support regime took place during the Numeiry presidency (from a coup in 1969 to his overthrow in 1985's popular *intifada*). This type of regime assisted the state in the modernization and industrialization of agriculture, along with urbanization in central Sudan. I remember earnest small-scale innovations in this period as well, such as the Centre for Food Studies in the University of Khartoum's Faculty of Agriculture projects to make *dhurra* (sorghum, a grain more suitable to Sudan's climate) as palatable to urban consumers as the ever-popular *gamhiah* (wheat).

Jaspars then describes the "livelihoods regime" during the Islamist phase of Omer al-Bashir's rule, when the state resisted external aid as long as it could as it tried to consolidate its power. This period is also when Bashir's government began its assault on Darfur, the region where the author has her

longest Sudan experience. Darfur's food struggles, along with the Bashir government's exacerbation of the famines there, are woven throughout the book, making *Food Aid in Sudan* an important contribution to that literature as well; Chapter Four is focused on North Darfur. The author describes people essentially "abandoned to permanent state of emergency" (152).

The fieldwork tone of the book is useful as well, as the author reports interview data from Sudanese aid workers in Darfur and elsewhere. Their perspectives are not often apparent in works of this nature, and we hear their articulate frustrations here—reported in focus groups—as well as the frustrations of those who transport food aid across the country. Jaspars relates her NGO and other working experiences in Sudan from the 1980s forward, giving a long-term perspective to her insider's view of development assistance.

Under the resilience regime, Jaspars describes the ideology underlying responses to "climate change, critical infrastructure protection, natural disasters, pandemics and terrorism" (46). The definition of food security changes during this regime, where stability and nutrition are foregrounded in policy circles. She puts it this way: "These two regimes of truth allow for Sudan's 'actually existing development' in which there are indirect benefits of food aid to the Sudan government and private sector but which abandons conflict-affected populations to become resilient in a context of permanent emergency" (180).

*Food Aid in Sudan* offers an excellent review of Sudan's deeply troubled post-independence history as it is entwined with the provision of food. The struggle over food looms larger than the civil wars, coups, extremist violence, and large-scale development mistakes which are more commonly central to studies of Sudan.

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### For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

Mirzeler, Mustafa Kemal. 2009. "Sorghum as a Gift of Self: the Jie Harvest Ritual Through Time." *History in Africa* 36: 387–419. doi:10.1353/hia.2010.0017.

Reeves, Eric. 2011. "Humanitarian Obstruction as a Crime Against Humanity: The Example of Sudan." *African Studies Review* 54 (3): 165–74. doi:10.1353/arw.2011.0050.

Schoepf, Brooke G. 2010. "Assessing Aids Research in Africa: Twenty-Five Years Later." *African Studies Review* 53 (1): 105–42. doi:10.1353/arw.0.0252.