TANA FORUM

Essay 2026

THE INSTITUTIONS THAT REMAINED: MUTUAL AID AND THE RECONSTRUCTION OF GOVERNANCE IN SUDAN

Lita Wanjiru Ngure

Summary

Sudan's present war and humanitarian collapse are rooted in colonial land regimes, export-oriented development, structural adjustment, and militarised dispossession that weakened subsistence and social reproduction. Centring women's undervalued agrarian and care labour, the essay shows how land registration, migration policy, and mechanised agriculture narrowed meaningful agency. It further argues that Emergency Response Rooms and Resistance Committees are not merely humanitarian substitutes for a failed state, but durable democratic institutions that recast sovereignty as communities' capacity to sustain life, build legitimacy, and collectively shape just post-war governance.

Background

April 2026 marked three years since the outbreak of Sudan's devastating counter-revolutionary war in April 2023 (Campbell & Serekberhan, 2023; Weaving Our Worlds, 2025; Abbas et al., 2024; Attard, 2025; Serekberhan, 2025; Awad & Erhadt, 2024; Khalafallah, 2025). The conflict has exposed a profound breakdown of the post-colonial state (Abbink, 2025; de Waal, 2024): a country once promoted as the Arab world's potential breadbasket now depends overwhelmingly on international food aid.

Sudan is often described as the "world's worst humanitarian crisis" (WFP, n.d.). Infrastructure supporting essential services such as education, power, and transportation, as well as basic human rights like food and water, remains in total collapse (de Waal, 2024). This has been compounded by mass violence perpetrated by the different military factions, including the threat of bombing, incarceration and ongoing ethnic genocide, particularly in Darfur (El Tayeb, 2024). Meanwhile, Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs) and Resistance Committees (RCs) in Sudan exemplify popular democracy in practice (Elkreem & Jaspars, 2024; Elamin, 2025; Kuka, 2025; Mustafa, 2026; Bishai, 2023; RCEPP, 2023). The war has precipitated widespread displacement and dispossession across Sudan, with land acquisition interests of Emirati and Gulf-state corporations (Hamdi, 2024; Elamin, 2025).

Grassroots, horizontal, and decentralised networks of support groups and committees have taken responsibility for meeting these basic needs, keeping people safe, and providing asylum. Despite the informality of the infrastructure created by the ERRs and RCs and their "limited recognition" (ACAPS, 2025, p. 2), our understanding of the conflict-intervention dynamics will remain incomplete if we overlook their institutional capacity.

Prescriptive policies by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have often, arguably, facilitated large-scale agricultural schemes and land acquisitions that prioritise productivity and foreign exchange over subsistence. Sudan is an example, and in 2017, protests broke out in response to austerity

measures imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to phase out fuel and wheat subsidies (Elamin & Mampilly, 2018). Overall, this raises the need to question traditional notions of successful resource governance when they undermine, rather than enhance, agricultural reproduction. On this note, sovereignty should encompass the capacity to reproduce life on the continent, as it is an existential issue at the intersection of micro- and macro-economic living.

The 2023 war brought violence historically concentrated in Darfur, South Kordofan, and Blue Nile into Khartoum, exposing the connections among land alienation, extractive development, displacement, and militarised rule. Examining this shift through gendered social relations reveals that war operates not only through territorial conquest but through the reorganisation of households, kitchens, cultivation, and community networks. Mollett and Faria's (2013) account of men's orchard farming undermining women's gardens in the Gambia demonstrates how states and markets devalue subsistence labour; in Sudan, the same logic redirects cultivation toward military, corporate, and commercial control. The current crisis therefore makes social reproduction central to understanding both dispossession and political resistance.

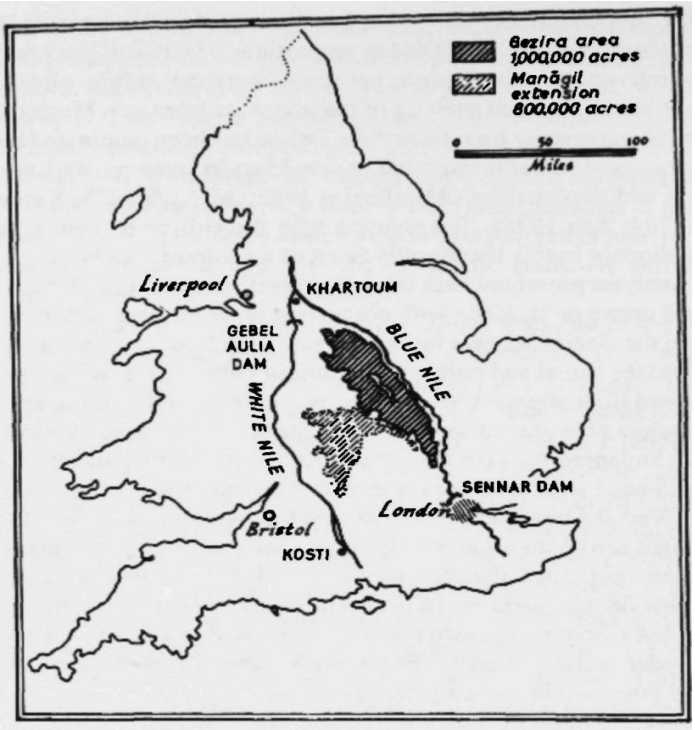
As land is leased to Western-allied states and conflict devastates the country, many people, including farmers, face displacement and dispossession. This leads to a spatial reorganisation that sustains food distribution and mutual aid, helping communities stay united amid decades of divisionist wartime rhetoric. The durable infrastructure of the ERRs and RCs exemplifies, both before and during war, how spatial reorganisation focused on feminised labour practices conflicts with the aims of liberalism and global capitalism systems (Pepper & Alneel, 2023; Mustafa, 2026; Olson et al., 2024). These aims produce development schemes that sideline social reproduction. Notably, therefore, a commitment to an Africa characterised by economic (and resource) sovereignty that values social reproduction, which development schemes so heavily sideline, requires that our conception of sovereignty includes the capacity to reproduce life on the continent.

Asphyxiated capabilities: colonial land regimes and the production of agrarian agents

To understand how we arrived at our current dominant understandings of resource sovereignty, we must trace the genealogy of historical processes that made certain forms of land use, production, and agrarian agency legible as economically valuable. This shows how colonial ideas became institutionalised through development policy and resource governance.

After several experimental rounds, the Gezira Scheme was officially implemented in 1925 (Beshir, 1961). Characterised by a harmonious tripartite amalgamation of Sudanese state, British colonial, and corporate actors, the Gezira Scheme represents a later phase in Britain's imperial strategy to secure cotton supplies after the vulnerabilities exposed by slave-based production systems in the Atlantic world (Yildiz, 2024). In a practice often used to make colonial exploits legible to British audiences, the condominium projected the Gezira scheme onto a map of England (Bernal, 1997; Yildiz, 2024):

Figure 1: Gezira Scheme superimposed onto a map of England (Bernal, 1997)



By stripping the land of its social, cultural, and ecological context, we see a visual representation of the commodification process that rendered Sudanese land legible as an empire-building asset to the British then and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) today.

In her book War-making as Worldmaking, Al-Bulushi (2025, p. 12) asks us to interrogate the "shifting configurations of imperial warfare." In characterising the UAE's role in arming the RSF's war efforts as a form of empire-making, I am echoing "calls to decolonise the study of world politics by pluralising our subjects of inquiry" (Al-Bulushi, 2025, p.8), to see that what was once an imperial project of British colonialism is today reconstituted through transnational alliances between Gulf states and Sudanese elites (Elamin, 2024; RCEPP, 2023). Both the Gezira Scheme and war efforts today are practices negotiated with local elites actively participating in the destruction of both life and land. Using the image in Figure 1, which renders all life in and around the scheme legible exclusively as a vessel for commodity conveyance, the British produce a post-colonial vision in which land can be valued and managed only through imperial cartographic imaginaries. This Gezira mapping cultivates post-colonial agents as figures whose capacity to act is cultivated through, and constrained by, the spatial abstractions of imperial rule. Addressing the first Tricontinental Conference in 1966, Bissau-Guinean freedom fighter Amilcar Cabral remarked that,

> *There are at least two forms [of colonialism]: the first is direct domination, by means of a power made up of people foreign to the dominated people (armed forces police, administrative agents and settlers); this is generally called classical colonialism or colonialism is indirect domination, by a political power made up mainly or completely of native agents; this is called neocolonialism… the so-called policy of 'aid for undeveloped countries' adopted by imperialism to create or reinforce native pseudo-bourgeoisies*

> *which are necessarily dependent on the international bourgeoisie … which have led some recently independent states whose internal economic and political conditions are favourable to revolution to accept compromises with the enemy or its agents. (Cabral, 1966, p. 9)*

In the Sudan context, empire-building meant the Gezira Scheme reorganised elites within neocolonial systems, so their agency served imperial accumulation. Spatially, this reorganisation of the pseudo-bourgeoisie and proletariat is facilitated by a clear rural-urban divide, largely because the population is sparse. Resultantly, today's colonial land-grab efforts that are fashioned through war and genocidal campaigns differ from their Gezira predecessors in that the outbreak of war in the capital city destabilises the distinction between managers of extraction and those subjected to it. Juxtaposing 2019 realities with colonial-era policies shows Cabral's distinction between colonialism and neo-colonialism in full effect.

The 2019 revolution began with protests in 2017 demanding an end to President Al-Bashir's brutal dictatorship, elevated in part by IMF austerity measures, characterised by "decades of penned-up political frustration… finding release, which even a reintroduction of bread subsidies is unlikely to solve" (Elamin & Mampilly, 2018). This is thought-provoking when we consider how condominium policy was in large part dictated by a concerted effort to prevent popular uprisings against colonial domination through keeping taxes low and "[t]o forestall further unrest, land alienation was prevented by limiting foreign ownership" (Boddy, 2018, p. 53; Bassil, 2020). Cabral's (1966) analysis of colonialism in the classical sense as operating through direct rule, through which stability is managed administratively and neocolonialism as rule mediated through local elites who, as Al-Bulushi (2025) reminds us, are at the behest of global finance imperatives, highlights that what was once a form of counterinsurgency imposed through fiscal policy is today a reflection of the fragility of the relationships between the international bourgeoisie and the pseudo-bourgeoisie. Whereas colonial administrations often calibrated policies such as taxation to mitigate the risk of rebellion, contemporary governments operate within a framework in which maintaining financial credibility with international institutions can take precedence over responding to domestic unrest.

We should not lose sight of the fact that, across different colonial administrations globally, people may refer to what happened as collaboration, either for communal survival or an individual leader's personal gain. In fact, when we consider the efforts taken by the condominium to quell dissent, we see the deliberate attempt to construct the colonised Sudanese agent to be one who complies with British rule (Boddy, 2018). Because Sudan was not a settler colony and labour was scarce, the condominium was primarily concerned with producing the agent itself.

Boddy (2018, p. 53) confirms that "[t]he occupiers came to civilise, to subdue but also transform. Fanatical barbarians were to become diligent workers who contributed to and consumed the products of a global economy that Britain oversaw… Making Sudanese productive and the administration secure was what officials now set out to do." We see this in the administration of indirect rule in the rural parts of Sudan during the colonial period in which rural and southern Sudan were seen as a liability, hence the need for the Power of the Nomad Sheikhs Ordinance of 1922 and the Power of the Sheikhs Ordinance of 1928 (Salman, 1983), which was less concerned with the idea of preserving Indigenous governance structures and even far less concerned with the idea of

buying in elites as collaborators, but instead, was aimed at the "'the creation of a new hierarchy of tribal administrators' aimed at regulating and regularising tribal identities and boundaries in Darfur" (Bassil, 2013, p. 68).

The British sought to "regard the chiefs as members of the natural aristocracy" (Salman, 1983, p. 69), catalysing the ethnicisation process; tribal authority was actively elevated into a colonial governing apparatus rather than an autonomous Indigenous institution. Cabral's speech would aptly confer on these intermediaries the status of "native agents", whose capabilities were (and are) derived from the colonial administration and whose function was to manage populations and maintain social order within a territorially bounded "tribal" domain, producing and codifying "tribal" identities.

Understanding the distinctions between these intermediaries offers an analysis "that moves beyond US-based racial and gender hierarchies to acknowledge the way patriarchy and racialised processes (including whiteness) are consistently bound up in national and international development practice" (Mollett & Faria, 2013, p. 117). Interrogating the spatial cultivation of the agentic agrarian subject reveals these racial distinctions as markers of power, in which ethnicisation and subsequent racialisation become technologies for spatialising governance.

Bread-basket and other development pipe dreams

In postcolonial African politics, local elites serve as conduits through which the international bourgeoisie manages markets and resources within a global system, resulting in a political landscape where platforms are undeliverable (Herbst, 1990). Consequently, to maintain power, elites funnel funds and resources into regions with the voting power to keep them in office. If political power depends on spatially uneven patron-client relationships, this invites scrutiny not of the politician's agency, but of how these distinctions shape what counts as a constituency, and thus an agent. From a governance perspective, Herbst (1990, p. 952) tells us that the austerity measures of the 1970s and 1980s in the form of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) functioned "to eliminate, or at least significantly curtail, governments' ability to offer" jobs, subsidise food, maintain infrastructure and carry out government projects. However, rather than simply weakening the state, these policies actively reconfigured its spatial and social priorities.

In 1956, as the state inherited a system critically dependent on cotton exports for more than 70% of its revenue, land governance became central to state survival and capital accumulation; food security and subsistence were already outside state priorities (Woertz, 2013). One can pinpoint the historical moment when agricultural concessions emerged as a central mechanism of land restructuring in Sudan with the Development Act of 1972 and the Development and Encouragement of Industrial Investments Act of 1974, which led to a concerted effort to attract foreign capital and increased land privatisation (Prendergast, 1989; World Bank, 1975).

In Sudan, an agrarian economy which aspired to be the breadbasket of Africa and the Middle East, the IMF's focus on macroeconomic stabilisation and other mechanisms used to attract foreign capital indirectly but decisively reshaped land use and access. David Harvey (2003, p. 96) reminds us that "[s]patial location always confers a certain monopolistic advantage" and that "[p]rivate property

in land entails at its very basis a certain monopolistic power." These development acts tasked the Industry and Mining Ministry with positioning the state as a mediator between international capital and national territory (World Bank, 1975). We see the inherent contradiction: capitalism moves across space to resolve crises and, upon securing the Nile's fertile banks, requires that advantage to be fixed through monopolistic control. This "uniqueness of location" produces monopolistic rents, creating a spatial monopoly mediated through IMF policy (Herbst, 1990; Harvey, 2006).

After defaulting on an Extended Fund Facility in 1984, Sudan reached a standby credit arrangement with several goals, most relevant to this essay being increased agricultural exports, reduced import growth, and incentivising Sudanese people to take jobs abroad (Ibrahim, 1996).

The IMF's focus on externalising production by relying on diaspora remittances to ensure foreign capital inflows, often from Southwest Asia and Europe, trapped Sudanese migrants in a cycle that fragmented farming households (Reumert, 2022). Martín Arboleda (2016, p. 237) explains that this labour becomes part of the "global metabolic exchanges of energy, food, people, metals", inserting Sudanese people and natural resources into upscaled metabolic networks. Notably, legal restrictions limited women's ability to migrate because, for capitalism to function in its most violent proficiencies, it must subsume the "extra-economic supports" it needs to survive, specifically care work (Fraser, 2023, p. xiv).

In discussing the oscillatory male migrant labour system underpinning South Africa's gold mining industry under apartheid, Gay (1980, p. 19) remarks that the "prevention of female migration appears to be a necessary condition for the preservation of circulatory male migration under conditions which threaten to dissolve the subsistence mode of production and the rural social system, hence undermining the continuing reproduction of cheap male labour."

Sudan's entanglement in capitalism's search for cheap, racialised labour requires a system bound to overburdened social reproduction, unstable land access, weakened rural economies, and exposure to market vulnerability (RCEPP, 2023; Abbas, 2019). Within Sudan, migration was encouraged from rural to developed regions (Young, 2006; Elkreem & Jaspars, 2024, p. 2). Al-Gezira, home to the Gezira scheme, and the capital, Khartoum, are seen as sites of "high production potential," providing "a livelihood for almost two million tenant farmers and seasonal labourers" (Young, 2006; Elkreem & Jaspars, 2024). Accordingly, domestic food production worsened, and by the 1983 famine, farmers faced starvation and were left to rely on "US taxpayer subsidised commodity aid programs" (Prendergast, 1989). The effort to incentivise Sudanese and foreign elites to buy tracts of land for irrigation schemes for cash-crop exports contributed to the ever-growing class of landless peasants who laboured for a state with the capabilities to produce an abundance of sorghum, cotton and oilseeds exclusively for export while over one million farmers faced starvation (Prendergast, 1989; Brown, 1988). Furthermore, in a display of capitalism's monopolistic proclivities, the World Bank's conditionalities put the Gezira Scheme in the hands of foreign nationals exempt from taxes and import duties, placing all market risks on the government (Prendergast, 1989).

Tellingly, after the 1983 famine, President Nimeiri worked to conceal the looming famine from foreign audiences to dispel uncertainty about the government's ability to maintain the breadbasket dream (Elamin, 2025). Reading Nimeiri's actions within the context of structural adjustment constraints

reveals how the post-colonial state is responsible for stability yet stripped of the capacity to achieve it, resorting to the discursive suppression of local adversity (Herbst, 1990). Crucially, colonial policies such as the Closed Ordinances Act had already segregated Darfur as a peripheral and administratively isolated region. At the same time, processes of ethnicisation rendered its predominantly African populations politically marginal (Bassil, 2020). Structural adjustment thus brought these historical geographies to the forefront, producing a form of selective abandonment, whereby crises in peripheral regions could be obscured or ignored without immediate threat to regime stability. In this sense, famine in Darfur manifested a broader reconfiguration of state power under neocolonial conditions. The attraction of Western customers that Nimeiri so urgently sought sharply increased the cost of domestic subsistence production, and when local farmers were paid off or forcibly displaced for said customers, it led to the erasure and, in some cases, the criminalisation of Indigenous crop rotation and other agricultural practices (Prendergast, 1989).

Beyond resource access: gender, social reproduction and economic sovereignty

As in many agrarian societies, women make up the majority of subsistence farmers (Badri, 1986; Moore, 2017). Women accounted for 87% of the non-market-oriented economy at the time of the Darfur famine. In 1973, in areas of the country with mechanised agricultural schemes, namely, the Gezira Scheme, White Nile Pump Scheme of Kasti and Al Diem, women's land ownership was 11.7%, 3% and 9%, respectively, while women made up a meagre 10% of land tenancies in Darfur (Badri, 1986). In what may seem like an optimistic statistic, the 1973 census in Kutum, Darfur, shows that while women make up 80% of agricultural economic participation, their farmland ownership is 46.4%, roughly on par with their male counterparts (Badri, 1986). However, after state-led land registration, only 10% of gardens are registered in women's names. The Unregistered Land Acts of 1970 and 1979 effectively demanded that women's access to land exist only socially or customarily, ensuring that the entire system of food provisioning and social reproduction rests on insecure ground (Elhadary & Abdelatti, 2016).

In South Darfur particularly, where land was often seasonally cultivated, communally managed or used through pastoral systems, the Acts rendered entire modes of inhabiting land illegible to the state (El Amin, 1999). Mobility itself became evidence of non-ownership. Conditions that deny women legal recognition of land ownership leave their access to land under constant threat. In 1973-74, in northern Sudan, where women's economic participation was the lowest in the country at 1.4%, private pump schemes accounted for 62% of land ownership, with one company owning 25% and local elites owning the rest. In almost a textbook example of the "free play within a space economy to the capitalistic preference for monopoly control as opposed to open competition" (Harvey, 2006), we see how competition produces monopoly or oligopoly control over space. The consolidation of control over the most productive land left women's cultivation concentrated on less than 4% of the overall land in the region, with a focus on subsistence; however, with the rise of pump schemes, many were forced into systems of wage labour (Badri, 1986; Sugden, 2019).

Interestingly, Badri (1986) proposes that "[i]n the male-dominant Arab culture… women are not encouraged to work… With the introduction of pump schemes… women [were] forced to stay home." Far from uncommon, this view fundamentally sidelines how capitalist transformation reconfigures the conditions under which cultural norms operate. As society shifted toward large-

scale mechanised agricultural schemes, participation in cultivation through land ownership became contingent on access to start-up capital. With women barred from credit facilities, barred from labour migration schemes and displaced from their land, culture becomes a medium through which exclusion is institutionalised; however, I resist the notion that it may be the root cause. In unpacking the factors that have historically shaped gendered resource sovereignty in Sudan and the African continent more broadly, I resist reducing gendered practices to oppression and assuming that inclusion in capitalist production leads to emancipation.

Wangari et al. (1996) reflect on gendered visions of survival based on land reform in Eastern Kenya, and, as in Sudan, legislation was introduced that legally excluded women from land registration, conferring land-owning status on their husbands. Although not explicitly excluding women, the justification for assigning default ownership to the "head of households" rested on customary law and religion, similar to northern Sudan (Badri, 1986; Wangari et al., 1996).

By comparison, Kenya and Sudan, despite being positioned very differently within global geopolitical imaginaries, exhibit strikingly similar gendered outcomes in land access. This counters the orientalist, Islamophobic assumptions that give rise to the negative connotations, as asserted by Badri's claim that "Arab culture" is in part to blame for Sudanese women's marginalisation from resource ownership. In Kenya, land registration "institutionalised a new form of private ownership… [that] conceptualised the male… as the sole owner", even though customary systems previously allowed women use rights and management roles (Wangari et al., 1996). Similarly, in Sudan, women's exclusion from mechanised agriculture or land registration is often attributed to "Arab culture" or Islam despite their marginalisation coinciding with mechanisation.

Mahmood (2004) argues that bodies materialise through regulatory norms, suggesting that just as gender is not an "addition" to a pre-existing sex, agency does not exist as a precedent to norms but is formed through them. No subject exists prior to norms; thus, agency must be understood as cultivated rather than pre-existing. In a place like Sudan, where land relations have been central to social and political governance, space itself becomes a site of subject formation.

Abusharaf (2009) tells us that "[i]n the Sudan there is no static "before," no golden era of peace and stability that was suddenly interrupted by armed conflict, as many analyses of the impact of war on civilian populations assume." If there is no "golden era" to return to, then land relations have always been implicated in power and differentiation (race, class and gendered difference). If there is no pre-social subject, then there is also no "pre-spatial" subject; projects of dispossession are also projects of subject-making. Thus, if agency is cultivated through norms, and norms are spatially embedded, then informal, communal infrastructures like ERRs are new spatial formations that cultivate new political subjects. As such, neither Sudanese nor Kenyan women are autonomous actors whose capabilities are suddenly "restricted" by culture. Their subjectivities form within land tenure regimes, migration economies, religious and moral expectations, and the ways work is organised as they are absorbed into wage labour economies.

Furthermore, Mahmood (2004) proposes that some Muslim women are not restricted or 'oppressed' by the norms they operate under, nor do they seek to overturn them; they exercise agency by cultivating virtues within those norms. To reiterate, this is not to speak on behalf of Sudanese

women or to romanticise their landless condition, but to look beyond the descriptors of landless and landowner to better understand their lived realities within these conditions. From Mahmood's perspective, situated agency does not align with liberal ideals of property ownership or individual autonomy in either Kenya or Sudan. The comparison shows that women's marginalisation cannot be explained by cultural or religious frameworks alone; it must be understood as the product of convergent processes of colonial land reform and structural adjustment (Wangari et al., 1996). Accordingly, this essay adopts Mahmood's approach to analyse gendered access to land in Sudan, guided by the conviction that integrating women into mechanised agriculture is insufficient.

If dominant institutions recognise agency only when people conform to their definitions of productivity, women's exclusion from land ownership does more than restrict access to property: it shapes who is recognised as an economic and political agent. This framework obscures the labour that sustains the agrarian economy, including maintaining households within circulatory migration systems, raising future generations of farmers, and cultivating within mechanised agriculture. The relevant question, therefore, is how Sudanese women exercise agency while reproducing life without secure control over the resources that make such reproduction possible. The Kenyan study Gendered Visions for Survival offers a useful parallel: women in Eastern Province created cooperative practices around a shared goal "to help each other" (Wangari et al., 1996). Sudanese and Kenyan women have similarly responded to economic shocks and disrupted subsistence by creating food and mutual-aid networks outside formal wage relations.

War as militarised dispossession

> *In the 1980s, Nimeiri's famine denial was politically motivated to ensure the continued flow of foreign investments in Sudanese agriculture. Today, the army's denial of famine amid a war that has produced the world's largest humanitarian crisis appears far less strategic… Both sides have weaponised hunger and food aid in their efforts to starve and turn civilians against their adversary in a battle for legitimacy and power (Elamin, 2025).*

Elamin's account of hunger as a weapon reveals the consequences of decades of agrarian restructuring. In the 1980s, Sudan had to appear food-secure to attract investment in export agriculture; today, after decades of policies that weakened subsistence, war has devastated supply chains without leaving a resilient domestic base to absorb the shock. Hunger is therefore easier to weaponise not simply because conflict interrupts distribution, but because earlier development strategies had already hollowed out the systems through which communities reproduced food and life.

The current situation in which food is weaponised rests on the premise that the project of land alienation and subsistence commodification has been so successful that food is legible only as a currency of political authority, making food insecurity and vulnerability strategic assets. Historian and professor Padraic Scanlan (2025) describes the food relief efforts during the Irish famine, remarking that "the bulk purchase of maize, often known as "Indian corn," "Indian meal," or cornmeal shows how ideas about labour and political economy and free trade overlapped in relief policies, and how relief was meant not only to halt starvation but to reform Irish economic life."

Even in Britain's earliest imperial exploits, aid served a dual purpose: feeding civilian populations while disciplining them into a new political economy. Colonial Ireland's relief efforts depended on British officials and the Irish Catholic elite, the "landowning and professional classes of the baronies" (Scanlan, 2025). Similarly, in Sudan, international food aid often arrives through the same "native agents" produced by austerity and war. If food enters only through militarised or donor-controlled channels, then aid reproduces the dependency created by land grabs and dismantles subsistence. In a rapidly unfolding economic landscape amid the revolution and the subsequent outbreak of militarised violence, in which food and care have been conferred the status of currency, and "markets, not communities or individuals, [are] the primary object of relief" (Scanlan, 2025), the Sudanese people, both within and without the country, have learned the rules of this new system and are fighting every day to refuse the terms of its exchange.

In a late-2023 interview, Sudanese writer Muzan Alneel credits the success of the 2019 revolution to the newly adopted horizontal organising structures, the emergence of RCs and ERRs, and the incorporation of rural, peripheral communities in the political struggle (Pepper & Alneel, 2023). Alneel's insight shows how rural communities provided the infrastructural backbone that turned urban protest into a durable political movement rather than a fleeting event.

In 2019, countless Western scholars had their assumptions about rural communities' participation in political organising and dissent challenged (Abbas, 2019). The ERR's organising efforts began in the northeastern state of Atbara and spread nationwide, igniting a general strike that brought the country to a standstill (Pepper & Alneel, 2024). In a practice that Abbas (2019) calls saving Khartoum, sacrificing the countryside, she echoes my earlier sentiment that, in the postcolonial state, agency lay with the constituency that mattered most, the one spatially positioned to threaten power, Khartoum, the capital city. What was once seen as a structural inevitability is being exposed as a political construction. By breaking down the spatially uneven patron-client relationship, we also break down the very mechanisms that defined who a constituency was.

Additionally, the ERRs institutionalise work that was once structurally necessary but politically disavowed by those whose status as a political agent was constantly called into question. Bringing these rural forms of protest and mutual aid into the urban centre- the space the state tried so hard to prevent from feeling the most severe effects of economic austerity in 2018 by "provid[ing] fuel and wheat for Khartoum and … slashing the rations of other states," they collapsed the binaries that created markers that allowed the state to provide for selectively. When the state can no longer selectively provide, it can no longer selectively recognise.

Conclusion

Emergency Response Rooms offer more than an admirable model of political organising: they demonstrate that sovereignty can be exercised through the collective reproduction of life when formal institutions collapse. By providing food, safety, care, and local coordination, they transform practices historically treated as informal or feminised into democratic infrastructure. This is the essay's central intervention. Against a global political climate marked by authoritarianism and deepening crisis, Sudan's grassroots institutions show that political possibility does not begin

with restoring the state as it existed, but with recognising and strengthening the institutions communities have already built.

As peace processes unfold in Geneva, London, and Washington, while regional leaders engage RSF commander Hemedti, the limitations of elite-driven peacebuilding become stark. Sudan's democratic openings have historically depended on the labour of women, neighbourhood networks, trade unions, Resistance Committees, and mutual-aid formations. Peacebuilding frameworks should therefore give these institutions formal roles in constitutional deliberation, local service governance, and the allocation of reconstruction resources. The Revolutionary Charter for Establishing People's Power, developed with Sudanese lawyers as a proposed post-war constitutional framework, offers a basis for testing whether institutional design reproduces internationally recognised models or draws on Sudan's histories of collective survival and revolutionary organising. Refusal and mutual aid should not be treated as temporary responses to collapse, but as democratic capacities through which locally legitimate and durable peace can be built.

Policy Recommendations

- Make recovery and constitutional reform accountable to communities by establishing flexible and transparent funding for ERR's and other grassroots networks and include ERR representatives in humanitarian coordination. Most importantly, developing coordination protocols between ERRs, public institutions, civil society and relief groups would ensure logistical support while ERRs maintain their autonomy.

- Document the ERRs current practices of resource allocation and community governance to build institutional capacity without absorbing grassroots organisations into the state. Participation of the ERRs should work to include decision-making authority.

- Evaluate recovery and reconstruction against measures of substantive capacity to produce life in Sudan. This includes whether people can secure land, access food and water, participate in decisions that affect their community's livelihoods, and care for children.

- Strengthen regional accountability and transparency for cross border resource extraction and land and resource investment IGAD and the AU should work with relevant authorities to investigate and disclose cross border flows of gold, agricultural commodities, land acquisitions and weapons financing associated with Sudan's war economy to identify the relationship between commercial interests.

- Establish a gender-responsive land reform process that addresses contradictions that undermine women's independent rights to cultivate and lease land.

- Create accessible land-dispute mechanisms that allow women and vulnerable displaced communities to challenge dispossession without dependence on male relatives.

References

Abbas, R. (2019, January 28). Sudan's protests: The revolt of the periphery. Al Jazeera. https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2019/1/28/sudans-protests-the-revolt-of-the-periphery/

Abbas, S., Elamin, N., Elnaiem, R., & Omer, A. (2021, season-02). In Sudan, the people's revolution versus the elite's counterrevolution. https://hammerandhope.org/article/sudan-revolution

Abusharaf, R. M. (2009). Transforming displaced women in Sudan: politics and the body in a squatter settlement. University of Chicago Press.

ACAPS. (2025, October 16). Sudan: Challenges and opportunities for Khartoum state emergency response rooms. https://www.acaps.org/fileadmin/Data_Product/Main_media/20251016_ACAPS_Sudan_-_Challenges_and_opportunities_for_Khartoum_state_emergency_response_rooms_.pdf

Al-Bulushi, S. (2025). War-making as worldmaking : Kenya, the United States, and the War on Terror (First edition). Stanford University Press.

Arboleda, M. (2016). In the Nature of the Non-City: Expanded Infrastructural Networks and the Political Ecology of Planetary Urbanisation. Antipode, 48(2), 233–251. https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12175

Attard, J. (2025, November 5). Sudanese Civil War: the devastating consequences of counter-revolution | Communist Revolution. marxist.ca. https://www.marxist.ca/article/sudanese-civil-war-the-devastating-consequences-of-counter-revolution

Awad, B., & Erhadt, L. (2024, December 20). 'The street was covered in dead women and children': Inside Sudan's counter-revolution. The Real News Network. https://therealnews.com/the-street-was-covered-in-dead-women-and-children-inside-sudans-counter-revolution

Badri, B. (1986). Women, Land Ownership and Development in the Sudan. Canadian Woman Studies/les Cahiers de la femme.

Bassil, N. R. (2013). The post-colonial state and civil war in Sudan : the origins of conflict in Darfur. I.B. Tauris.

Bernal, V. (1997). Colonial moral economy and the discipline of development: the Gezira scheme and modern Sudan. Cultural Anthropology, 12(4), 447–479.

Beshir, M. O. (1961). The Gezira Scheme: An Experiment in Socio-Economic Development. Civilisations, 11(1), 63–67.

Bishai, L. S. (2023). Resistance is life: how Sudan's resistance committees perform democratic power. The Journal of North African Studies, 28(6), 1473–1491.

Boddy, J. (2018). Civilising Women: British Crusades in Colonial Sudan. Princeton University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691186511

Brown, R. (1988). On the rationale and effects of the IMF stabilisation programme in Sudan under Nimeiry: 1978 to the April 1985 popular uprising. Geoforum, 19(1), 71–91.

Cabral, A. (1966, January). The weapon of theory. In Address delivered to the first Tricontinental Conference of the Peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America held in Havana in January.

Campbell, H., & Serekberhan, M. (2023, May 9). Sudan's counter-revolution. https://africasacountry.

com/2023/05/sudans-counter-revolution

de Waal, A. (2024, February 2). Sudan is collapsing – Here's how to stop it. Chatham House. https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/the-world-today/2024-02/sudan-collapsing-heres-how-stop-it

El Amin, K. A. (2016). The state, land and conflicts in the Sudan. International Journal of Peace and Conflict Studies, 3(1), 7-18.

Elamin, N. (2025). Landscape Testimonies: Gulf Capital, "Deficient Deserts," and Property Making in Central Sudan. PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review, 48(1), e70002.

Elamin, N. (2025). The Politics of Hunger in Sudan. Transition (Kampala, Uganda), 138(1), 109–127. https://doi.org/10.2979/tra.00077

Elamin, N., & Mampilly, Z. (2018). Recent protests in Sudan are much more than bread riots. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/12/28/recent-protests-in-sudan-are-much-more-than-bread-riots/

Elhadary, Y., & Abdelatti, H. (2016). The implication of land grabbing on pastoral economy in Sudan. World Environment, 6(2), 25–33.

Elkreem, T. A., & Jaspars, S. (2025). Sudan's catastrophe: the role of changing dynamics of food and power in the Gezira agricultural scheme. Disasters, 49(1), e12663. https://doi.org/10.1111/disa.12663

El Tayeb, M. (2024, June 12). The largest displacement crisis in the world: the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Sudan. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2024/06/the-largest-displacement-crisis-in-the-world-the-humanitarian-situation-in-sudan?lang=en

Etefa, T. (2026). The Fall of Khartoum: Understanding the War in Sudan. The Journal of Oromo Studies, 30(1).

Fraser, N. (2023). Cannibal capitalism: how our system is devouring democracy, care, and the planet---and what we can do about it. Verso.

Fisher, M. (2023). Capitalist realism : is there no alternative? (Second edition). Zero Books.

Gay, J. S. (1980). Basotho women migrants: a case study. The IDS Bulletin, 11(4), 19–28.

Khalafallah, H. (2025, April 15). Sudan's counterrevolutionary war: the systematic targeting of Pro-Democracy activists - The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy. The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy. https://timep.org/2025/04/15/sudans-counterrevolutionary-war-the-systematic-targeting-of-pro-democracy-activists/

Kuka, H. (2024). A mutual aid volunteer reflects on a year of war in Sudan. The New Humanitarian.

Mahmood, S. (2011). Politics of Piety : The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject (1st ed.). Princeton University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400839919

March 2025: Sudan's Revolution and Counter-Revolution. (2025, July 27). Weaving Our Worlds. https://www.weavingourworlds.ca/sudan-readings/

Moore, J. W. (2018). The Capitalocene Part II: accumulation by appropriation and the centrality of unpaid work/energy. The journal of peasant studies, 45(2), 237–279.

Mollett, S., & Faria, C. (2013). Messing with gender in feminist political ecology. Geoforum, 45, 116–125.

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2012.10.009

Mustafa, S. (2026). Emergency Response Rooms in Sudan: From Revolutionary Grassroots Organisation to the Management of Life in a Context of Political Collapse. The Journal of Social Encounters, 10(1), 123–133.

Harvey, D. (2001). Globalisation and the "spatial fix." Geographische Revue, (2), 23–30. https://d-nb.info/1217929630/34

Harvey, D. (2006). Spaces of global capitalism : [towards a theory of uneven geographical development]. Verso. http://www.loc.gov/catdir/toc/ecip067/2006002202.html

Harvey, D. (2006). The new imperialism ([Paperback ed.]). Oxford University Press.

Herbst, J. (1990). The structural adjustment of politics in Africa. World Development, 18(7), 949–958. https://doi.org/10.1016/0305-750X(90)90078-C

Ibrahim, E. T. E. (1996). Sudan-adjustment and poverty in the 1980s: a country assessment. Economic Research Forum, Cairo, EG.

Jalal. M. & Hamdi. S (Hosts). (2024, March 9). The UAE's Bloody War in Sudan with Sami Hamdi [Audio Podcast Episode]. In The Thinking Muslim. https://open.spotify.com/episode/3Re3QOzctjWHg9haTj9EVi?si=81c2b7d9763c4f0a

K Olson, S., Dahab, M., & Parker, M. (2024). Key considerations: mutual aid lessons and experiences from emergency response rooms in Sudan.

Pepper, R., & Alneel, M. (2023, October 20). Sudan: from revolution to war. Red Pepper. https://www.redpepper.org.uk/global-politics/africa/sudan-from-revolution-to-war/

Prendergast, J. (1989). Blood Money for Sudan: World Bank and IMF to the "Rescue." Africa Today, 36(3/4), 43–53. http://www.jstor.org.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/stable/4186585

RCEPP. (2023). The Revolutionary Charter for Establishing People's Power. https://migration-control.info/documents/131/The_Revolutionary_Charter_For_January_2023.pdf

Reumert, A. S. (2022). Sudanese Migrants' Labor in Times of Economic Crisis and Revolution. Middle East Report, (303). https://www-jstor-org.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/stable/48849208

Salman, S. M. A. (1983). Lay Tribunals in the Sudan: An Historical and Socio-Legal Analysis. The Journal of Legal Pluralism and Unofficial Law, 15(21), 61–128. https://doi-org.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/10.1080/07329113.1983.10756277

Scanlan, P. X. (2025). Rot : an imperial history of the Irish famine (First edition). Basic Books.

Sekerberhan, M. (2025, October 30). Sudan's counterrevolutionary War: No justice, no peace | Pambazuka News. https://www.pambazuka.org/Sudan-Crisis

Sudan | World Food Programme. (n.d.). UN World Food Programme (WFP). https://www.wfp.org/emergencies/sudan

Sugden, F. (2019). Labour migration, capitalist accumulation, and feudal reproduction: A historical analysis from the eastern Gangetic plains. Antipode, 51(5), 1600–1639.

Wangari, E., Thomas-Slayter, B., & Rocheleau, D. (1996). Gendered Visions For Survival: Semi-arid regions in

Kenya. In D. Rocheleau, B. Thomas-Slayter, & E. Wangari (Eds.), Feminist Political Ecology (1st ed., pp. 127–154). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203352205-9

Woertz, E. (2013). 6. The Sudan Bread-Basket Dream. In Oil for Food. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199659487.003.0007

World Bank. (1975). Sudan: Industrial sector survey (Report No. 2575-SU). https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/110311468303887495/txt/multi0page.txt

Yıldız, A. M. (2024). The Sudan's incorporation into the capitalist world-economy through modern cultivation and trade of cotton. Türkiye Ortadoğu Çalışmaları Dergisi, 11(1), 73–96.

Young, J. (2006). Eastern Sudan: caught in a web of external interests. Review of African Political Economy, 33(109), 594–601.