



# Stunted

## Panopticism and embedded neoliberalism in African states' food & agriculture policies and the struggle to end Hunger on the continent

Charles Simane (ed)

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Review by Rachael Nyirongo

“**A**frican states are being monitored through the hegemonic institutions of the Global North, to produce a certain type of policies that are meant to favour or to engender certain interests as well as certain outcomes, mainly for the capitalising classes of the Global North producing in Africa, of course, the corporate heist and corporate controlled agri-food system.” – Charles Simane, speaking at the launch of the book in Cape Town in November 2023

*Stunted: Panopticism and embedded neoliberalism in African states' food & agriculture policies and the struggle to end Hunger on the continent*,” presents a compelling and timely exploration of the interconnected challenges facing Africa’s food system. Edited by Charles Simane, the book brings together diverse perspectives to analyse the deep-rooted issues exacerbating the region’s dependency on food imports, especially in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

At the launch of the book, Simane explained the reasoning behind including “Panopticism” in the title. He drew a compelling parallel between Michel Foucault’s concept of the Panopticon and the dynamics of observation and discipline in African societies. They explore how the gaze of hegemonic institutions, primarily rooted in the Global North, influences and disciplines African states, shaping policies that often favour the interests of capital over the well-being of local communities.

The introduction to the book by Simane contextualises it within the broader global challenges, emphasising how the pandemic revealed the vulnerability of the global food supply chain. The subsequent invasion of Ukraine further disrupted the recovery from Covid-19, affecting the availability of fertilizers, food prices and inflation. The book underscores the disproportionate impact on African nations that are reliant on food imports, emphasising the geopolitical and economic consequences.

The contributors engage in analyses to address critical questions about Africa’s food condition. They investigate why African countries are heavily dependent on food imports and dissect the historical, political and economic factors sustaining this reliance. The



negative human impact of the food crisis on the continent is vast, and the book advocates for a systemic transformation of agriculture whilst considering the harsh climate and political instabilities.

The authors delve into the historical development of Africa's agriculture, the impact of Structural Adjustment Programmes and the perpetuation of colonial agriculture. They also explore the intersection of neoliberalism and panopticism in shaping agriculture policies, warning against the dangers of emergency finance without addressing the root issues.

They acknowledge that a failure to address these root causes will only continue to throw the continent into a cycle of similar patterns. A comprehensive breakdown of Africa's dependency on specific food items is presented, accompanied by clear policy solutions to reverse this trend. The book calls for a shift from market-driven fixes to holistic, people-centred solutions that prioritise local consumption, small-scale farmers and indigenous farming methods.

The book examines the increasing frequency of climate shocks and their impact on food systems, emphasising the vulnerability of industrial agriculture. Water-related conflicts are analysed and recognised as a serious threat to global food production, as the climate conditions continue to worsen. The value of the anthropology of food in understanding Africa's ongoing food crisis is emphasised in the book. It explores the cultural dynamics and ethnography of the crisis, offering insights into the biosocial aspects of food as they relate to social justice, social reproduction and identity.

In the concluding chapters, the authors advocate for reclaiming the soil, addressing threats like land enclosures and indigenous seed criminalisation. The book concludes by asserting the importance of social movements, academics and activists in reclaiming a rights-based approach to food, transcending limitations and embracing an anti-capitalist, ecofeminist and decolonial perspective.

*Stunted* is a groundbreaking work that not only provides a comprehensive analysis of Africa's food challenges but also offers tangible solutions grounded in a deep understanding of the political, economic and ecological factors at play. It serves as a vital resource for scholars, policymakers and activists seeking to effect meaningful change in the continent's food systems.