FAMINE IN AFRICA
CAUSES, RESPONSES, AND PREVENTION

by Joachim von Braun, Tesfaye Teklu, and Patrick Webb

A famine is a catastrophic disruption of the social, economic, and institutional systems that provide for food production, distribution, and consumption. Famines have long been considered anomalies—crises that must be remedied by short-term relief activities so that the normal processes of development can be resumed. We now know differently. Famines destroy life today, as well as the hope of development.

While acute famines may appear to be similar across continents, their causes, their victims, and the policies needed to respond effectively to famines differ immensely. The book Famine in Africa: Causes, Responses, and Prevention, by Joachim von Braun, Tesfaye Teklu, and Patrick Webb, seeks to fill in empirical and conceptual gaps that continue to hinder analysis of famines in Africa. The book, recently published by Johns Hopkins University Press, presents analyses from detailed studies of country policies as they affect markets, communities, and households in the context of famine.

The analysis in Famine in Africa is based on three main premises. First, famine is largely a function of the failure of institutions, organizations, and policies, not just the failure of markets and production. Central, local, and community governments play key roles in causing famine as well as preventing it, and the absence of effective systems of government can be both a cause and a consequence of famine.

Second, famines in Africa must be explained in a long-term context. They occur where and when poverty, often concentrated on a fragile, degrading resource base, interacts with economic, agricultural, social, and demographic policies. These interactions make certain segments of society and regions vulnerable to even minor climatic and man-made shocks.

Third, just as the causes of famine are diverse, there is immense diversity in potential policy responses to famine. There is no one optimal solution. Generalizations must take into account the wide range of famines in African settings. This book emphasizes that the protracted debate over famine concepts can be overcome by concentrating on empirical study that allows constructive feedback among theory, concept, and policymaking.

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO FAMINE

The triangular relationship among famines, economic disaster, and political regime behavior must be kept in mind when famine prevention and mitigation strategies are designed. When the failure of famine prevention policies threatens the security of a political regime, famine prevention can be expected to move to the top of the political agenda. Participatory government makes it harder for politicians to ignore
concerns about famine. In other words, governments can and should be held accountable for famine.

The issue of national sovereignty must be reviewed by the international community when that principle protects regimes more than people. Even in the presence of violent conflicts in famine-prone countries, effective relief is possible, but typically at a high cost. The foundations for famine prevention under nonwar conditions must be laid early on with the establishment of a strong administrative and legal base for emergency relief.

An isolated drought is rarely a dangerous drought; only when a poor year follows others do droughts take on unmanageable proportions. However, the relationship between drought and famine is strong where the resource base is poor, poverty is endemic, and public policy for famine prevention and mitigation is lacking. When these conditions apply, even a single drought may well be dangerous.

The behavior of markets for food, assets, and labor is critical in determining famine outcomes. Often, emerging food shortages coincide with increases in the sale of assets, the supply of labor, and the buying of food by marginal farmers. Sudden increases in food prices harm the poor because of their limited resources and income and their high budget shares devoted to food and other essentials. Ethiopia and Sudan, for example, experienced huge increases in food prices during the famines of the 1980s and 1990s.

Famines in Africa remain largely rural phenomena, but their consequences are increasingly spilling over into urban areas. Past famines have accelerated urban food and health crises as famine refugees poured into urban areas. Policymakers need to consider these problems in efforts to prevent and mitigate famines, but they must not lose sight of the root causes of famine and the potential for sustainable famine prevention through rural growth promotion.

LESSONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

_Famine in Africa_ offers a number of conclusions with implications for policy: First, famines in Africa today are largely the result of military conflicts arising from oppressive, unaccountable, and nonparticipatory government. Lasting peace and more rural participation in government are essential. Yet viewing conflict as the primary cause of famine is misplaced. In many cases, inappropriate domestic and international economic policies have contributed to the political climate in which conflicts emerge.

Second, famine in Africa is inseparable from chronic poverty and risk. High population growth in areas with a low resource base plays an important role. Although famines differ by country, the underlying conditions that contribute to famine are similar: lack of employment opportunities, limited assets of households, isolation from major markets, low levels of farm technology, constraints to improvement in human capital, and poor health and sanitation. Although factors such as political and military conflict and drought contribute to famine, they do so mainly where people are vulnerable in the first place and where resilience to external shocks has already been worn thin.

Third, famines do not happen suddenly. They result from an accumulation of events and policies that progressively erode the capacity of countries and households to deal with short-term shocks to the economy. These shocks often take the form of environmental extremes, but the conditions that promote household vulnerability to such extremes develop over long periods. Misguided macroeconomic and trade policies have been part of the problem in most famine-prone countries.
Fourth, one of the main constraints in turning knowledge into action is countries’ failure to create and maintain essential legal and administrative frameworks. No long-term progress can be made against food insecurity without mechanisms to record and diagnose stress signals and to organize swift and effective responses. Relief organizations and systems in famine-prone countries need to be strengthened, and employment programs and basic social security systems for the most vulnerable need to be put in place.

Fifth, for success in the fight against hunger and famine, cooperation among international development agencies and institutions must be strengthened. Coordination among agencies and ministries (for example, ministries of agriculture and health) must also be reinforced.

There is no excuse for the continued occurrence of famine in today’s world. Public actions based on partnership between communities and public agencies can and do effectively overcome famine. The citizens of famine-prone countries have a right to expect measurable progress toward such a goal. It is not just an abstract human right—it is the basis of all functioning society, and hence the basis for sustainable development.

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