1 Introduction

The twentieth century was the worst ever in terms of famine mortality, yet it was also the historical moment when the technical capacity to eradicate famine was first achieved, and when famine was seemingly ended in many historically famine-prone countries – Russia, China, India, Bangladesh. Depressingly, at the start of the twenty-first century, famine persists. It remains endemic in the Horn of Africa – Ethiopia and Sudan have both suffered mass mortality famines within the last five years – it seems to be spreading to parts of Africa that were previously famine-free and it remains to be seen whether the North Korea famine during the 1990s was an aberration (the last ever 'central planning' famine) or the harbinger of something new.

Why does famine persist? Are the 'new famines' more 'political' than historical famines, or are we simply recognising the centrality of political factors more than before? What do recent food crises in Ethiopia, Iraq, Madagascar, Malawi and Sudan tell us about the future trajectory of famine? What lessons can we draw from recent successes in containing or averting famine – in Bangladesh, Bosnia, Mongolia – for a new famine prevention policy agenda? These are some of the questions that this *Bulletin*, through an analysis of these and other case studies, tries to address.

This Introduction sets the context for the articles that follow. It starts with an overview of twentieth century famines, considering both trends in mortality and trajectories in terms of causal triggers. Next we examine recent 'hidden' and 'unexpected' famines, and argue that our evolving thinking on famine has failed to adequately incorporate the 'globalisation' of famine processes and actors. Finally, the contributed articles to this *Bulletin* are introduced.
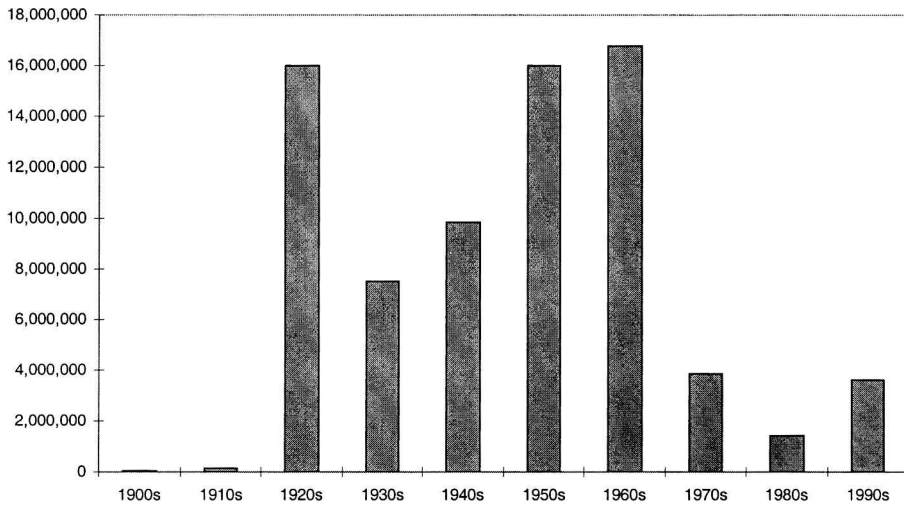
2 Famine mortality[1]

'Excess mortality' is the most severe consequence of famine, and is a generally accepted indicator of a famine's severity. Figures 1 and 2 present summary famine mortality estimates for the twentieth century, by decade and region. These figures are often contested and are subject to both overestimation and underreporting errors, so should be regarded as indicative rather than definitive. For instance, the figures of 30 million and 3 million, respectively for

Introduction

The 'New Famines'

**Stephen Devereux,
Paul Howe and
Luka Biong Deng**

Figure 1: Twentieth century famine mortality by decade

the China 'Great Leap Forward' famine (1959/62) and North Korea (1990s) are based on very limited data, and may be overestimates. Conversely, for many famines, no mortality estimates are available – e.g. drought famines in northern Nigeria (1927 and 1942/3) – while deaths in many 'war famines' (Angola 1974/6, 1993/4, 2001/2; Zaire 1977/8, 1997; Liberia 1992/3; Sierra Leone 1995/8) are impossible to attribute to either conflict or famine. Given these reservations, available estimates suggest that between 70 million and 80 million people died in famines during the twentieth century – certainly the highest total for any century in history (though global populations were considerably smaller in the past).

Striking patterns can be deduced about the pattern of twentieth century famine mortality, both geographically and over time. First, three distinct periods can be identified (Figure 1). In the first two decades of the century mortality was very low and confined to Africa (following the enormous famines in China and India of the late nineteenth century). Over 85 per cent of famine deaths were clustered in the middle five decades, predominantly in China and the Soviet Union, and a further 12 per cent occurred since the 1970s, all in Africa and South/Southeast Asia.

Second, famine was steadily rolled back over the decades, from the northern hemisphere and Asia to sub-Saharan Africa, where it remains firmly entrenched – indeed, since the 1980s, famine appears to have taken up permanent residence in the Horn. The last famine in Europe occurred in the Soviet Union immediately after the Second World War, the last famine in China was a by-product of the Great Leap Forward of 1958/62, and the last famine in South Asia (to date) occurred in Bangladesh in 1974. Occasionally famine strikes in Southeast Asia (Cambodia in the 1970s, North Korea in the 1990s), but famine as an endemic problem in Asia and Europe seems to have been consigned to history. The grim label 'land of famine' has left China, Russia, India and Bangladesh, and since the 1970s has resided in Ethiopia and Sudan.

Third, this shift has been associated with a dramatic drop in famine mortality, mainly because vulnerable populations are much smaller in Africa than in Asia. Deaths in the worst African famines are counted in the hundreds of thousands rather than the millions. All 11 of the twentieth century famines that claimed more than a million lives occurred in Asia and Europe. The biggest of all twentieth century African famines – Ethiopia in the mid-1980s – killed less than 1 million people, and total mortality in all 19 African famines listed in Figure 2 amounted to just over 4 million. By contrast, just three Soviet Union famines claimed 18–19 million lives and five Chinese famines killed over 40 million. Most sobering, though, is the

Figure 2: Twentieth century famine mortality by region
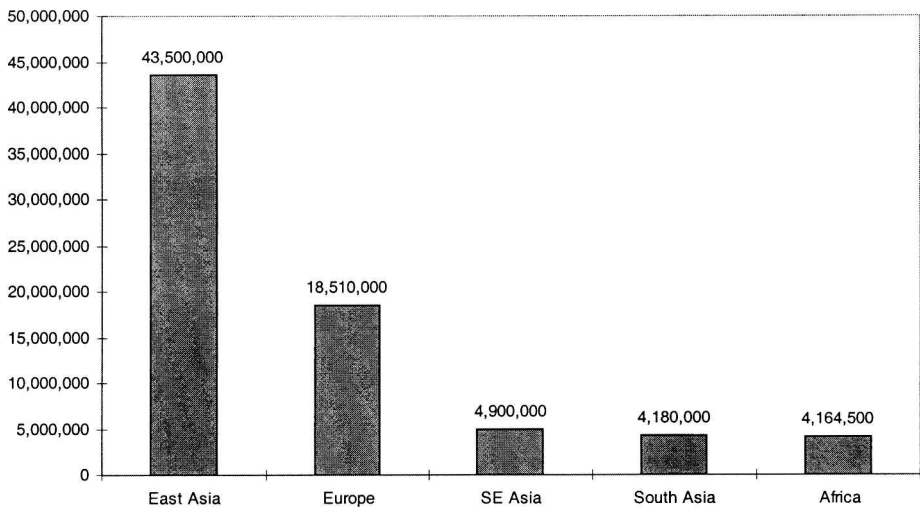
finding that *millions* of people have died in famines every decade since the 1920s.

The twenty-first century started with famines whose death toll is counted in the thousands (Malawi 2002) or tens of thousands (Ethiopia 2000). This might suggest that the scale of mortality in famines is continuing to fall, but within the last decade alone 70,000 southern Sudanese and up to 3 million North Koreans died in famines. As of mid-2002, Angola is emerging from a protracted conflict-related famine, southern Africa is entering its second year of food crisis, Mongolia stands on the brink of disaster (see Siurua and Swift, in this *Bulletin*) and vulnerability in the Horn of Africa is as high as it ever was. Moreover, given that the nature of famine appears to be shifting and new sources of vulnerability are emerging, there is no empirical basis for extrapolating trends – either optimistic or pessimistic – for the unfolding century.

3 Famine trajectories

Most twentieth century famines were triggered by one (or a combination) of three factors: (1) *natural disasters* – severe droughts (mainly in Africa), floods (South Asia) or frozen winters (Eastern Europe and Central Asia); (2) malevolent exercise of *state power* – the Soviet Union and China being paradigmatic; (3) *conflict* – especially in sub-Saharan Africa, since the 1960s. These threats to food production or availability were usually compounded by poverty ('entitlement failure') and by market and relief/intervention failures, such that generalised or localised declines in food availability were not compensated by trade or aid flows.

Even in earlier centuries, famines always had political dimensions, but most were triggered by natural disasters that operated in contexts where local economies were weak (subsistence oriented, locally based, unintegrated with wider markets) and the political will and logistical capacity to intervene were lacking. Some writers have highlighted the strength of pre-capitalist communities in buffering weaker members against livelihood threats – through 'moral economy' redistribution (Watts 1983) – but it is now recognised that these informal insurance mechanisms provided limited resilience against severe covariant shocks.

During the colonial period in Africa and Asia, natural triggers persisted and 'political vulnerability' to famine initially increased, a result of violent resistance in many countries in response to which the colonisers often used famine as a weapon (Davis 2001). Thereafter, macroeconomic and political vulnerability to famine gradually diminished, due to the development of communications and transport infrastructure, together with the initiation of early warning systems and relief intervention mechanisms by colonial administrations which recognised the need to ameliorate food crises to

achieve some political legitimacy. As a result of this combination of 'effective government, good transport, wider markets and some increase in average wealth' (Iliffe 1987: 158), the late colonial period in Africa and Asia saw a decline in the number of mass mortality famines and a reduction in the scale of mortality following natural disasters. Before the Second World War, there had been no mass mortality famines in South Asia since 1900 and only one in Africa between 1917 and 1957.

The development of transport and communications infrastructure did much to reduce vulnerability to famine, even if 'natural triggers', such as droughts or floods persisted. In northern China, where 9–13 million people died during a protracted drought in the 1870s, similar conditions prevailed in the early 1920s, but thanks to greatly improved communications and the construction of 6,000 miles of railway in the interim, relief intervention was prompt and mortality was restricted to half a million (Mallory 1926). Similar processes of infrastructure development and integration of historically famine-prone regions with the national economy are credited with reducing vulnerability to 'natural disaster' famines in India and the Soviet Union. The Soviet famines of the 1920s to 1940s were entirely attributable to punitive economic policies (agricultural collectivisation, grain seizures by the state), war, and Stalin's genocidal policies against the Ukraine. Similarly, China's 'Great Leap Forward' famine of the early 1960s and North Korea's famine of the late 1990s were products of an authoritarian, unaccountable centralised state. Some African famines share this characteristic, such as those occurring in Ethiopia under the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie and the Marxist Dergue regime that succeeded him.

In Africa, the development of transport infrastructure was slower and patchier than in Europe and parts of Asia – indeed, poor roads remain a contributory factor in several recent famines, exacerbated during conflicts by landmines and attacks on bridges and vehicles, including relief convoys. Nonetheless, the lorry has been described as 'a vital weapon against famine', in Africa. Microeconomic vulnerability due to household-level poverty and fragmented markets persisted, however, with a shift in famine causation being attributed to a shift from 'food availability decline' to 'exchange entitlement decline'. Marxist writers of the 1970s (cf. Meillassoux 1974) pointed to the penetration of capitalism into subsistence-oriented economies during the colonial period – the commodification of food, the expansion of cash cropping – as heightening the vulnerability of peasants to natural disasters or economic shocks, but with hindsight these vulnerabilities now appear to have been transitional and the benefits of incorporation into national and global markets are regarded as generally outweighing the risks – at least in terms of reducing vulnerability to famine.[2]

After independence, historically famine-prone countries took one of two routes. Some, like India, continued to make progress in reducing vulnerability factors, specifically in the category of political vulnerability. Following the colonial administration's gross failure to prevent the Bengal famine in 1943, India's 'political contract' (discussed below) made the government accountable for famine prevention, while improvements in food production associated with Green Revolution technologies reduced household food insecurity, culminating in the apparent eradication of famine in India by the early 1970s. On the other hand, microeconomic vulnerability to famine associated with the incorporation of the poor into weak markets persisted, and a catastrophic famine triggered by a minor natural disaster (floods) combined with major market failure (speculation in and hoarding of rice) occurred in Bangladesh in 1974.

In stark contrast to Asia's success in eradicating 'famines that kill' during the twentieth century, in many African countries independence was associated with increased political instability and the emergence of famines where militarisation, counter-insurgency and civil war played major roles. These countries saw a rise in political vulnerability and a radical shift in the nature of famine. After a lengthy period of low famine incidence between the 1920s and 1950s, military dictatorships replaced the colonial administration in much of Africa, conflicts over the post-colonial settlement developed in many countries, and the modern era of war-triggered famines began, the first significant case being Biafra – a region of Nigeria which had not previously been vulnerable to famine, and has not been since – in the 1960s. During the 1980s and 1990s a number of African countries that were not historically 'famine-prone' suffered conflict-triggered food crises (Angola

and Mozambique, Liberia and Sierra Leone, Zaire), while others that had been susceptible to drought-triggered famines experienced 'complex emergencies' (Ethiopia and Sudan) in which the roles of drought and civil instability were difficult to disentangle.

Since the drought-triggered African famines of the mid-1980s, information systems and international response capacity have improved exponentially, to the point where 'natural disaster' famines should be entirely preventable. But both Ethiopia and Malawi have suffered food crises recently that were triggered by bad weather and resulted in heavy loss of life (see Maxwell and Devereux, in this *Bulletin*). And it will always remain the case that famines where war is a factor are extremely difficult to predict and even more difficult to prevent (see Deng on Sudan and Watson on Bosnia, in this *Bulletin*).

We have argued above that the evolution of famine in recent centuries has varied in different parts of the world. While improvements in infrastructure and political accountability have contributed to its prevention in Asia in recent decades, famines have occurred more frequently in Africa because of increasingly complex negative synergies between natural triggers (drought, flood), economic vulnerability (poverty, fragmented markets) and political culpability (war, government policies, failures of international response). Future famines may continue to evolve in ways that reflect the increasing complexity of the contemporary world, or they may be different from famines of the past – or (ideally, but unlikely) they may soon be consigned to the dustbin of history. The next section examines the potential implications of globalisation processes for these trajectories.

4 'Hidden' famines, 'unexpected' famines, and the changing global context[3]
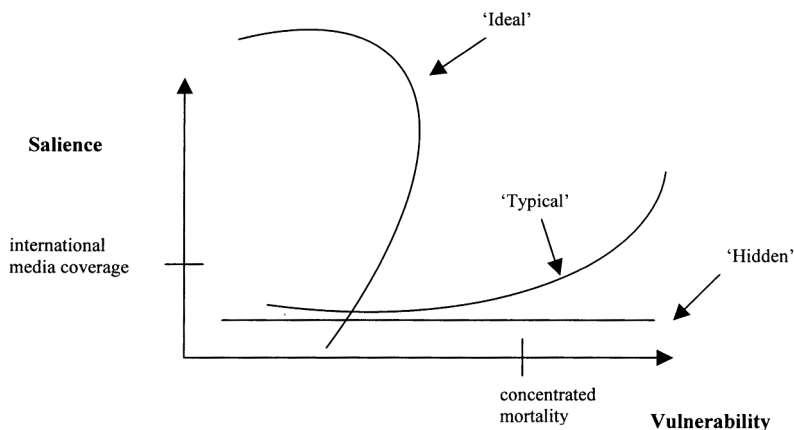
In the 1990s, in the aftermath of the Cold War and amid a seeming proliferation of civil conflict, the complex political emergency (CPE) approach to famine analysis gained increasing prominence. By identifying civil conflict or war as a principle cause of famines, the CPE approach directed attention to places of endemic civil strife (and Africa in particular) as the most likely location of famine. This focus, however, may have led us to overlook other possible

scenarios that diverge from this one, in either causation or geographic location. Several case studies in this *Bulletin* describe famines (or near famines) that occurred in unusual places (Mongolia), for unprecedented reasons (Iraq), or without receiving substantial or even any international attention (Ethiopia, Madagascar). These 'unexpected' and 'hidden' famines raise important questions. Why are crises happening in unexpected places and for unexpected reasons? Does current theory adequately explain their occurrence? How and why have the hidden famines been overlooked? In trying to answer these questions, we argue that famine theory has not fully come to terms with the rapidly changing global context in which contemporary famines occur. Several events and trends may have particular relevance to the way we understand the famine process.

4.1 The rise of international humanitarianism

Globalisation has produced an array of supranational, international, and local actors that are increasingly appropriating the authority of the state in the South, both from 'above' and 'below' (Duffield 2000). The proliferation since the Second World War, of humanitarian agencies – the United Nations, bilateral and multilateral donors and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) – means that in virtually all poor countries the international community has taken on itself the role of food security guarantor. While this broadens the range of actors involved in famine management, and increases the available resources, it has also resulted in a diffusion of responsibility for famine prevention – 'there is a "black hole" of unaccountability at the heart of the international relief system' (IDS 2002). If it is true that 'famine is caused by failures of political accountability' (de Waal 1997: 85), then national governments, international governments and humanitarian organisations must share responsibility for the persistence of famines (see Maxwell on Ethiopia, in this *Bulletin*). In Africa, where the post-independence state has generally been too strong or too weak to respond effectively to its citizens' needs, the limitations of the 'diffused accountability' model are all too clear: in most cases when famines happen, no government is thrown out of power, no politician is tried for genocide, no donor agency officials lose their jobs.

Figure 3: Salience and famine vulnerability

4.2 The collapse of the Soviet Bloc and the ascendancy of the United States

In the aftermath of the Cold War, two key political developments have been the collapse of Soviet influence and the emergence of the United States as the world's only superpower. North Korea's economic dependence on the Soviet Union was a major contributory factor to the famine that occurred during the 1990s, only a few years after the withdrawal of Soviet transfers and subsidies. The collapse of the socialist system in Mongolia has contributed to the increased vulnerability of pastoralists (see Siurua and Swift, in this *Bulletin*).

The United States' military, political and economic power allows it to exert disproportionate influence in countries where it feels its strategic interests are at stake, whether in the form of economic sanctions, withholding food aid, or even military intervention. In pursuit of its foreign policy goals, the United States has contributed to the famine process in Bangladesh in 1974, Ethiopia in 1984 and Iraq in the 1990s (see Gazdar, in this *Bulletin*), while its military intervention in Afghanistan in 2001–2 very nearly precipitated a famine.

4.3 Globalisation of financial systems and trade

The globalisation of international trade and financial systems has had a number of implications in famine-prone countries. First, international institutions, such as the World Bank and the IMF have a great deal of influence over the economic policies of developing countries, and may prescribe policies which, being driven by macroeconomic concerns and prioritising economic growth rather than household food security, may inadvertently raise vulnerability to famine (see Devereux on Malawi, in this *Bulletin*). Second, the exports of developing countries depend on international markets and the terms of trade agreements, but powerful trading partners seek to negotiate favourable terms for themselves. Third, international corporations may have significant financial interests in a country and contribute, intentionally or not, to policies that may lead to famine. For example, international oil companies that have invested in the Sudan are providing revenue to the government, which is fighting a civil war that has led to famine in the south (see Deng, in this *Bulletin*).

4.4 Information technology and the role of the media

Technological advances that have revolutionised global access to information have accelerated in the last 20 years, with the development of satellite television, mobile phones, the Internet and e-mail. Network media provide live coverage of 'newsworthy' events (the 'CNN factor'), the Internet provides instant access to early warning information, e-mail offers immediate communication to almost anywhere in the world. Since the 'Band Aid' phenomenon in 1984, television has helped to shape a global conscience, in which people far from a famine feel emotionally involved

and even responsible for the suffering they are viewing. However, three caveats are important. First, the flow of information is invariably 'unidirectional' – from 'victims' at the 'periphery' to 'donors' at the 'centre'. Second, journalists edit and package material to reflect the needs and priorities of their employers. Third, media representations of famine tend to reinforce stereotypes rather than advance understanding, because the media instinctively favours simple explanations and narratives over complexity and ambiguity.

4.5 Salience

One emerging dynamic that is increasingly relevant in a globalising world, but not yet well understood, is how and why certain crises achieve 'salience', i.e. international attention and priority, while others do not. The concept is particularly useful for understanding 'hidden' famines. Figure 3 maps the relationship of salience to vulnerability under several simple scenarios. In the 'ideal' scenario, the salience of an impending crisis increases more quickly than the vulnerability of the affected population, and an intervention takes place that reduces (or turns back the curve of) vulnerability before there is concentrated mortality (for examples of 'averted famines', see Eldridge on southern Africa, and Watson on Bosnia, in this *Bulletin*). A more 'typical' scenario is that vulnerability increases to the point of concentrated mortality, which in turn triggers interest and a corresponding increase in salience (for example, Ethiopia in 1984 and southern Sudan 1998). In a 'hidden' famine, by contrast, the onset and evolution of the crisis, even including mass mortality, are not associated with a concomitant rise in the attention given to the affected area, and it remains unknown to the international community (for an example of a 'hidden' famine, see Garenne on Madagascar, in this *Bulletin*).

4.6 Intellectual discourse and the 'academisation' of famine studies

The establishment of 'development studies' as a discipline in Northern universities has led to a proliferation of academic work on food security and famine, and partly explains recent advances in famine theorising. Researchers who write about famine, whether or not they come into direct contact with people affected by famine, frame their theories and shape aid policies by drawing on the dominant intellectual currents of their time. The rights discourse, for example, has achieved particular prominence in recent years and its limitations and strengths are beginning to affect the way food security programs are discussed, designed and delivered. Other relevant paradigms are globalisation, post-modernism, gender studies and situational ethics.

4.7 Advances in biotechnology

Recent scientific developments, pioneered in the North, could have major implications for food security in the South. In this context, claims that genetic modification of crops could revolutionise food production are currently being subjected to critical scrutiny (see Scoones, in this *Bulletin*). The scientists and corporations involved in the development of GMOs have a number of conflicting interests to weigh, before their products have any possibility of either being relevant or being made available to poor farmers in famine-prone areas.

4.8 Global pandemics and global warming

- The HIV/AIDS pandemic has numerous immediate and potential implications for food security at household, national and global levels, all of these negative (see de Waal on 'AIDS-related national crises', in this *Bulletin*).

- The likely consequence of the global warming that is currently occurring include more unstable weather patterns, increasing the likelihood of drought and flooding in famine-prone countries. The causes of global warming appear to be related to worldwide CO_2 emissions, with a substantial proportion coming from wealthy countries that are not famine-prone.

4.9 International justice

The functioning of the International War Crimes Tribunal in the Hague and the recent establishment of the International Criminal Court have set precedents for the use (and, some would worry,

abuse) of international legal systems to enforce accountability for violations of international law. These developments have led to calls for the criminalisation of mass starvation, as a potential way of making governments and other relevant actors answerable when a famine occurs (see Edkins, in this *Bulletin*).

Taken together, these trends and events suggest that a broad range of actors (coming from different intellectual and political environments) may have an interest in and influence on the famine process in countries other than their own. Yet recent theory has largely ignored this global level of analysis. Sen's entitlement approach (1981) focused on the conditions of the affected individual or household. Complex emergency theory, with its emphasis on conflict and winners and losers (Keen 1994), concentrated attention on the failure of the state. Likewise, social contract analyses identified the central problem as inadequate accountability between the government and citizens (de Waal 1997).

To a certain extent, each of these Northern approaches *externalises* the famine process, that is, they locate famine in a 'remote' area and delimit the relevant actors (at least in the onset and perpetuation of the crisis) to citizens of the countries in which they are occurring. Other stakeholders – including the international media, donors, international institutions, corporations, regional traders, academics, scientists, aid workers – are peripheral: sometimes attempting to ameliorate a situation, sometimes inadvertently exacerbating the crisis, but always dealing with a problem caused and developing elsewhere. Perhaps a more appropriate view would be to acknowledge that in an increasingly globalised world, these stakeholders can be – for good or for ill – an integral part of the famine process, interacting in complex ways with local participants.

These approaches also tend to *isolate* the famine process, by analysing it independently of other geo-political priorities and concerns. Famine vulnerability is often an inadvertent (or intentional) outcome of other, more highly prioritised goals (see Devereux on economic liberalisation and bi-lateral relations in Malawi, and Gazdar on international sanctions in Iraq, in this *Bulletin*). Moreover, it is

not often recognised that individual famines have to compete for resources and international attention with other humanitarian crises in the region and around the world.

These limitations suggest that we need another layer of analysis to complement and augment the insights of previous theoretical approaches, in order both to understand the persistence of famine and to explain the emergence of 'new' famines. Several articles in this *Bulletin* attempt to unravel this layer, and thereby deepen our understanding of the global dynamics that are helping to create the conditions for increasing vulnerability to famine in a range of countries around the world.

5 Structure of this *Bulletin*

The contributions to this *Bulletin* are loosely clustered into 'conceptual', 'case study' and 'issues' articles. This Introduction is followed by two conceptual articles. In the first, Jenny Edkins challenges the dominant view of famine as a technical problem amenable to 'technologised responses', arguing instead that famines are 'crimes against humanity', requiring political analysis and politicised responses. In the second article, Paul Howe isolates three sources of ambiguity in definitions of famine – namely, its temporal (when does a famine start and end?), scale (how many people must be affected?), and sectoral (what is the role of non-food issues?) boundaries – and concludes that divergences between 'academic' and 'operational' definitions have stripped the term of any empirical meaning in contemporary usage.

Next are nine case studies of recent famines and 'near' or 'averted' famines. Two articles examine the complex relationship between war and famine. Luka Biong Deng locates the root causes of the 1998 famine in southern Sudan in the British colonial legacy, and highlights the ambiguous roles of contemporary global actors – relief and development agencies, multinational corporations. This analytical approach lifts the focus above the 'local conflict' that is typically blamed for the recurrent famines in Sudan since the 1980s, into the global realm. Fiona Watson asks why no famine struck the besieged areas of Bosnia in 1992–5 – in contrast to several European siege famines earlier in the twentieth century – and finds that the

population's vulnerability was relatively low because of favourable pre-crisis economic, demographic and health conditions, and because of a disproportionately large humanitarian response.

By contrast, a major vulnerability factor in famines that were not prevented is a sluggish donor response, caused either by lack of credible information or by strained relations between governments and donors. Dan Maxwell's analysis of the drought-triggered famine in southern Ethiopia in 1999–2000 suggests that the northern border war with Eritrea, which coincided with the famine, contributed to a climate of mistrust that ultimately led to donor response failure. (A similar deterioration in government–donor relations was partly to blame for Malawi 2002, and also characterised earlier famines such as Bangladesh 1974 and Ethiopia 1984.)

Sometimes a famine occurs without even being noticed by outsiders, due to political isolation and lack of information. As Michel Garenne reveals, the 'hidden famine' in Madagascar in 1986 was 'discovered' through retrospective analysis of demographic data, a decade after the famine occurred. (If this sounds incredible, consider that empirical confirmation of China's 'Great Leap Forward' famine of 1959–62 became possible only after Chinese demographic data were made available for analysis in the 1980s.) It is quite possible that mortality crises have occurred involving mass starvation which have not registered as 'famines', because they do not conform to the refugee camp images that televised famines have imprinted on the public perception. Some famine victims may be misattributed as civilian casualties of wars, or they may, as in Madagascar 1986, be the dispersed victims of economic policies that have undermined food production and market access to food for the poor.

Some recent famines have occurred in unexpected places. Haris Gazdar's analysis of the famine in Iraq during the 1990s, which was constructed by United Nations sanctions, highlights the dangers of global interconnectedness. This was a 'post-modern' famine – one that occurred in a relatively affluent society with strong institutions and functioning markets – as opposed to 'pre-modern' famines that (still) occur in weakly integrated subsistence-oriented economies, or 'modern' famines that follow sudden 'exchange entitlement' declines (Sen 1981). Gazdar speculates that the famine in Iraq, which was created by the exercise of global political leverage against a pariah state, may have given us a glimpse of the 'post-modern' form that many twenty-first century famines will take.

Another 'globalisation' trend evident in recent famines is the exercise of *economic* leverage over poor countries, ostensibly for their benefit but often yielding, at least in the short-term, detrimental outcomes. Three famines or near famines in this collection – in Madagascar, Malawi and Mongolia – followed periods of rapid and radical economic reforms which were partly imposed on these countries through donor conditionalities. In his assessment of the Malawi 2002 food crisis, Stephen Devereux argues that structural adjustment policies which have systematically undermined smallholder agriculture suggest that the diagnosis and remedies of the Washington Consensus are fatally flawed, and that a different model is needed to ensure food security in countries that are economically impoverished, institutionally weak and environmentally vulnerable.

A similar argument could be applied to the Madagascar famine of 1986, as discussed by Michel Garenne, and to Hanna Siurua and Jeremy Swift's analysis of the 'near famine' in Mongolia in 1999–2002, both of which followed a radical break from Soviet-aligned socialism and the adoption of structural adjustment policies. Paradoxically, Siurua and Swift find that the state pension scheme – a relic of the socialist era – was a crucial source of support during the recent livelihoods crises in Mongolia.

Interestingly, Christopher Eldridge's research on the impacts of the 1991/2 drought emergency in southern Africa found that drought-affected people in Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe survived largely on their own resources. Market purchases provided 3–4 times as much food as food aid, putting into perspective donors' claims that their intervention – which was certainly more timely than in 2001/2 – was instrumental in curtailing that drought's progress to full-blown famine. Incomes and asset buffers of all kinds have certainly eroded during the 1990s, heightening vulnerability to shocks. There are other fundamental differences between

Table 1: The 'new famines'

	Processes	Shocks
Political	Geopolitical dynamics; Marginalisation of 'pariah' states (Iran? Iraq? North Korea? Somalia?)	Sudden deterioration in donor–government relations (Zimbabwe?); The 'New Wars'; AIDS-related governance crises
Economic	'Marginalising globalisation' (Ethiopian Highlands?); The 'new Malthusianism' (parts of sub-Saharan Africa)	National or regional economic crises (cf. East Asia 1997–8, Argentina 2002, but in poorer, more vulnerable countries)

southern Africa in 1991/2 and in 2001/2, not least being the spread of HIV/AIDS throughout the region and a series of transformative political and economic policy processes that have had profound but ambiguous results for poverty and livelihood security.

'Economic liberalisation' famines, such as Madagascar 1986 and Malawi 2002, are associated with breakdowns of co-ordinated mechanisms for pooling food security risks – the withdrawal of *public* institutions (such as marketing parastatals that were mandated to stabilise food prices and supplies), and the simultaneous erosion of *private* mechanisms ('informal social security systems') – as the ideology of individualism spreads through a society, creating new sources of vulnerability for those groups who depended on these support systems. The likelihood of this variant of the 'new famines' spreading and perhaps becoming endemic in southern Africa, the Horn and elsewhere looks, at this point, depressingly high, as is the possibility that anxious donors will react by institutionalising massive safety net programmes that fail to address the root causes of the crisis and have no obvious exit strategy.

A more encouraging narrative is provided by the 'success story' of Bangladesh. Carlo del Ninno, Paul Dorosh and Nurul Islam conclude their comparative analysis of floods and famines in Bangladesh over the past quarter century with the observation that market liberalisation has played a major role in stabilising food supplies and food prices, and that this was a major factor in reducing vulnerability to famine in recent flood events. But how generalisable is this finding? Liberalisation may have worked for Bangladesh – though other

observers remain sceptical – but it caused what might (with hindsight) be described as an 'economic transition' famine in Madagascar, it has left Mongolians extremely vulnerable to livelihood shocks, and it clearly has not (yet) delivered food security to rural southern Africans.

The *Bulletin* ends with three articles that advance positions on major issues affecting famine vulnerability in the twenty-first century: population growth, biotechnology, and AIDS. Tim Dyson and Cormac Ó Gráda consider various demographic impacts of famine, and answer the crucial question – can the world feed itself in the decades ahead? – broadly in the affirmative, while raising serious concerns about food production in sub-Saharan Africa. The final two articles temper this optimism. Ian Scoones critically examines the claims of agricultural biotechnology to meet the rising global demand for food, and is sceptical about the prospects for a 'pro-poor biotechnology'. Finally, Alex de Waal predicts the emergence of 'AIDS-related national crises' in Africa, and warns that the governance impacts of HIV/AIDS on future vulnerability to famine may be even more significant than the pandemic's demographic impacts.

6 Conclusion

The 'new famines' are happening in unexpected places, have unprecedented causes, and are more politicised than ever before. An alternative working title for this *Bulletin* was 'The Paradox of Persistence', reflecting the fact that we now have the technical capacity to prevent famines, yet they continue to occur, because our increasing potential

to eradicate famines goes hand in hand with an increasing potential to cause them. Recent famines have happened because they were not prevented when they could (and should) have been, because bad policies (and bad policy advice) produced famine as an unintended by-product, or because famine was a policy goal, successfully achieved.

Future famines will in all likelihood reflect a combination of political and economic processes and/or shocks (see Table 1), operating either alone or in tandem with conventional famine triggers such as drought.

Every famine that occurs in our globalising world represents either a catastrophic failure or a malevolent exercise of political will. The causes of disrupted *access to food* may or may not be 'technical', but the causes of *famine* are nowadays always political. That a 'drought famine' was allowed to happen in Ethiopia in 2000 is truly – to borrow a soundbite about Africa from Tony Blair – 'a scar on the conscience of the world'. The persistence of such famines, long after they ought to have been eradicated, compounded by the emergence of entirely new famine threats – 'post-modern' famine in Iraq, 'hidden' famine in urban Madagascar, 'liberalisation' famine in Malawi – should motivate new thinking towards an action plan for ending famine in the foreseeable future. On the other hand, if famine is to be eradicated this requires not just technical (food production and distribution) capacity but substantially more political will, at national and international levels, than has been evident to date. The evidence presented in this *Bulletin* suggests that some currents of political will may be flowing in entirely the wrong direction.

Notes

1. This section and the next draws from Devereux (2000), which lists the sources used in compiling mortality estimates and comments on their credibility. See also Dyson and Ó Gráda's contribution to this *Bulletin*, on mortality and other demographic consequences of famine.

2. The spread of capitalism that accompanied colonialism was no panacea for all the problems of food insecurity and hunger that the poor faced. As Iliffe (1987: 81) observes, 'capitalist scarcity replaced pre-capitalist famine' in much of rural Africa.

3. This section is based on Howe (2002).

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