

## 1 Introduction

In reviewing the history of twentieth century famines, Devereux (2000: 4) notes that until recently, most English definitions characterised famine as 'a discrete event that is triggered by food shortage and results in mass death by starvation.' As several authors have demonstrated (cf. de Waal 1989; Edkins 2000), this understanding of famine evolved out of a particular set of intellectual circumstances and reflected the pervasive influence of the views of Thomas Malthus. In 1798, Malthus argued that since populations grew at a faster rate than their food supplies, there would necessarily be times when the food needs of a population exceeded its resources. In such cases, famine would act as a natural 'check' on population levels (Malthus 1976).

In the 1980s however, a series of landmark studies challenged some of the assumptions underlying the Malthusian view.<sup>1</sup> In *Poverty and Famines* (1981), Amartya Sen elaborated an alternative approach to famine that described food crises as failures of 'entitlements'. In so doing, he shifted the analysis from an exclusive focus on food shortages to an emphasis on people's inability to access food, whether or not a shortage was a contributing factor. In a series of articles critiquing Sen's approach, Rangasami (1985) went further and argued that famine should be viewed as a process with distinct phases, rather than an isolated, aberrant event. In another seminal work, *Famine that Kills* (1989), Alex de Waal contested the definitional association between famine and mass death by starvation.

While these studies challenged Western *conceptualisations* of famine, there was an increasing recognition of the role of conflict in newly emerging crises in the 1990s, and a perception that the very *nature* of famine had changed, from essentially 'natural' to predominantly 'political' phenomena.<sup>2</sup> A number of studies of the newly identified 'complex political emergencies' (CPEs), emphasised the socio-political dimensions of famine (cf. Duffield 1994; Keen 1994), demonstrating how some groups actually garnered benefits from the creation and perpetuation of famine conditions. But as the focus of analysis shifted from nature-induced famines to multi-dimensional crises involving conflict, there was little critical reflection on whether these

# Reconsidering 'Famine'

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### Box 1: Some definitions and perceptions of famine

- 'Famine is a socio-economic process which causes the accelerated destitution of the most vulnerable, marginal and least powerful groups in a community, to a point where they can no longer, as a group, maintain a sustainable livelihood. Ultimately, the process leads to the inability of the individual to acquire sufficient food to sustain life' (Academic and practitioner, who studied the East African famines of the 1980s (Walker 1989: 6)).
- 'If we see stick people, it's a famine. Otherwise, [it's] hunger' (Journalist, Nairobi Bureau, who covered the crises in Sudan in 1998 and Ethiopia in 2000).
- 'When there was no *cok*, you used to play, sometimes to go for dancing, or to visit friends. But in *cok*, all that is limited' (14-year-old boy, who experienced the crisis in southern Sudan in 1998).
- 'It is a horrible thing. You [the affected person] just feel helpless. You don't have energy to do anything' (Aid worker, who worked in southern Sudan in 1998).
- 'Famine is a process over time whereby harmful social, economic, environmental and political factors (normally in combination) lead to a population increasingly physiologically vulnerable to any single or series of negative events' (WFP, Regional Office for East Africa).
- '*The F-word*': a punning epithet used in some East African aid agencies to convey the dread of the political implications associated with the use of the term.

phenomena – with such different evolutions and causalities – were even comparable. Most authors (cf. de Waal 1997; Duffield 1994; Edkins 1996; Macrae and Zwi 1994) tacitly subsumed discussions of complex emergencies into the famine discourse, rather than questioning the relevance and applicability of the concept of famine to the context of complex emergencies.

As we move into a new decade, there is increasing awareness of the global dynamics of famine and the greater variety of situations to which the term may be applied (cf. Introduction to this *Bulletin*). In this collection alone, at least four articles – on Malawi, Iraq, Ethiopia and Madagascar – examine food crises that blur the boundaries of what constitutes a 'famine'. Yet currently, there is no agreed definition or set of conceptual parameters on which to base judgements. As we widen our consideration to include the views of non-academic stakeholders, the differences in perspectives become even more pronounced (see Box 1). Although some academic insights have permeated into the policy discourse (note, for instance, the similarities between Walker's and WFP's 'working definition'), by and large there has been a tendency for academic definitions to become more complex and encompassing, while those of other stakeholders have remained more 'reductionist' and practical (e.g. the journalist in Box 1) or personal (e.g. the aid worker) in their focus.

Given the rapid shifts in thinking about these crises over the last few decades of the twentieth century and the lack of consensus on a definition, this article asks some fundamental questions about our understanding of 'famine'. Drawing on research conducted in East Africa, it explores: how we determine when a famine starts and ends; how many people must be affected, and to what degree, in a given area for a crisis to qualify as a famine; and to what extent a crisis can involve sectors other than food and still be labelled a 'famine'.

## 2 The temporal question: when does a famine start and end?

The literature offers two seemingly contradictory perspectives on this question, which are associated with those who view famines as 'events' and 'processes', respectively. (As will be seen, this representation of two distinct positions is a bit misleading, but it serves as a useful way to frame the discussion, at least at the outset.) Those who view famines as time-bound 'events' tend to believe that they begin, as the journalist in Box 1 suggests, when people become emaciated from starvation. This perspective reflects the pragmatic constraints facing journalists, donors, and emergency aid workers, who must prioritise their interest in crises by clear evidence of suffering. They may recognise that famine is the result of longer-term processes, but

their interest cannot be fully engaged until a crisis of mass starvation is imminent or occurring. (As one interviewee said: 'One way you know it is a famine is when the journalists from Spanish TV show up.')

The public, as a result, also perceives famine as an event that emerges almost without warning in horrific images on front-pages and television screens. While emaciation is the rough visual gauge of the start of the event, nutrition and excess mortality data are considered more objective indicators. Although some organisations such as the World Food Programme (WFP) have cut-off points for implementing feeding programmes (WFP 2000), there are no widely accepted criteria of what rates of malnutrition or mortality indicate that a famine has begun.<sup>3</sup>

In *Poverty and Famines* (1981), Sen argued, in a slightly more sophisticated formulation of the same view, that a person 'can be plunged into starvation' by a collapse of entitlements (Sen 1981: 47). This phrasing, and the assumptions that underlie it, were criticised by other academics, because it seemed to imply that famines were exogenous events that suddenly befell a population. Such a representation, it was argued, de-contextualised the crisis, removing it from the social and political processes that generated it (cf. Devereux 2001; Edkins 1996).

On the other hand, there was a growing consensus among researchers over the course of the 1980s that famines were more appropriately viewed as linear processes that progress in distinct phases, rather than sudden unforeseeable events (Walker 1989). Rangasami (1985) maintained that it was possible to distinguish 'three distinct periods' in a famine: dearth, famishment, and starvation. Other

researchers (cf. Corbett 1988) tried to detail and sequence the specific coping strategies employed by affected populations at various stages in the crisis. From this perspective, a famine is not the outcome of a process, but rather is the process itself. Thus, even in the early stages, before any starvation has occurred, a crisis could qualify as a famine.

Many aid agencies and information systems adopt a 'hybrid' view, combining both the process and event perspectives. Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF), for instance, explicitly conceptualises food insecurity as a linear process with discrete stages that culminates in famine, health crisis, and death (Oxfam 2001). Many early warning systems, such as USAID-funded FEWSNET, are premised on the assumption that there is a process that can be monitored to signal the approach of a famine. But whether an agency takes the 'purist' view that famine is the process, or a more 'hybrid' perspective that it is the *result* of a process,<sup>4</sup> these approaches suffer from important problems.

In practice, they do not adequately account for the uncertainties inherent in the evolution of famines. Most of the famine process research focused on rather predictable slow-onset, drought-induced crises. It was assumed that, in the absence of outside intervention, the process would inevitably lead to mass mortality. But famines do not evolve according to a single identifiable scenario and may involve a complex mix of conflict and natural shocks.

In a village that experienced the 1998 famine in southern Sudan, shocks occurred at various points during the evolution of the crisis and were both 'positive' and/or 'negative' in effect (see Box 2).

### Box 2: Shocks during the evolution of famine in a village in southern Sudan

- The raids of pro-government militias (PDFs) began in the mid-1980s and continued through 1998.
- The raids by Kerubino's forces took place over a period of years in the 1990s (1994–7).
- A particularly bad raid displaced almost all the villagers from their homes (1997).
- Peace between Kerubino's militia and the largest rebel movement caused the sudden return of the displaced to their home area without adequate provisions in early 1998.
- The aid intervention in 1998 was a 'positive shock' that nevertheless had some negative consequences, as it congregated groups in unsanitary conditions around Ajiep.
- The rains in July 1998 increased deaths, in part due to exposure.
- October floods, after the peak of the famine, washed out a feeding centre and exacerbated the poor sanitation conditions.

Examining this list, even in retrospect, it is hard to choose an appropriate starting point for the famine process (the PDF raids? Kerubino's raids? the peace? the aid? the rains?), if one adopts the purist's perspective. It is equally difficult to apply meaningfully the phases of dearth, famishment, and starvation, or to use MSF's stages of food insecurity, food crisis, and famine, if one adopts a 'hybrid' view. Overall, the process was more complex and heterogeneous than presented in the models, with the circumstances of individuals and households improving and deteriorating in an unpredictable manner. At the time of the crisis, it must have been even more difficult to make accurate prognostications about whether this was a process leading inevitably to mass mortality.

This variability undermines any attempts to identify clear starting and ending points for the crisis. The resulting ambiguity causes confusion among people who are sincerely trying to understand what is occurring. It also creates the space for actors to achieve their own interests, by moving forward or delaying the declaration of famine. A persistent fear of people involved in early warning is that they will be accused of 'crying wolf,' i.e., making unfounded alarmist claims about the imminence and severity of a crisis. This concern reflects the uncertainties of making forecasts as well as the suspicions surrounding the motivations of various actors.

In southern Sudan in late 1997, several agencies warned of a potential crisis (though with varying conviction and with differing assessments of the likely magnitude). Well into 1998, however, there were serious divisions among various donors, aid agencies, and journalists about whether the crisis they were witnessing was in fact a famine. Representatives based in Nairobi tended to view the situation as more serious than did their counterparts located in Khartoum. There was suspicion that those working in the south were overly sympathetic with the rebels, while conversely some thought that the northern sector was too deferential to the Government of Sudan. As a result of these divisions, as well as the confusion surrounding the use of the term, the UN did not declare the situation a 'famine' until 11 June 1998 (BBC 1998), which was after the peak of mortality in April (Deng 1999).

### **3 The scale question: how many people must be affected, and to what degree, within a given area for a crisis to be a famine?**

Unpacking this question requires addressing three elements, which are often confused and conflated in discussions of scale: absolute numbers, severity, and geographic spread. In popular Western conceptions, famine has been associated with what Sen called 'a particularly virulent manifestation of [starvation] causing widespread death' (Sen 1981: 40). While the number of deaths were not precisely quantified, there was a presumption that they would be on a massive scale. To many academics, this emphasis on large-scale mortality is an outdated view, closely allied with an understanding of famines as time-bound events. But it is an understanding that is entrenched in Western thinking and continues to be a source of contention. Box 3 offers two different interpretations of whether the most recent (1999–2000) food crisis in Ethiopia, where it is estimated that at least 10,000 people died (IDS 2002), constituted a famine.

On the surface, the position of the WFP spokesperson appears somewhat puzzling, even inhumane. She seems to be implying that the deaths of several thousand people, with all their attendant suffering, are not significant enough to qualify as a famine, and to be justifying her position on the apparently trivial grounds of not 'debas[ing] the coinage'. Yet, her view is informed by a rational logic. WFP is well aware of the emotive nature of the term and the expectations associated with its use in the West, and is worried about applying it lightly. There is clearly a difference in scale between the Ethiopian famine of 1983–5, where it is estimated that between 590,000 and 1 million people died (Devereux 2000), and the crisis that occurred in 1999–2000.<sup>5</sup> Practitioners working in southern Sudan expressed similar concerns about 'cheapening' the term, by expanding its use to a wide variety of situations.

Meanwhile, the statement by the epidemiologists, supported with estimates and confidence intervals, highlights another dimension of the problem with absolute numbers: in practice, it is very hard to establish accurate figures for mortality. In this case, the team conducted a survey in one district, and

### Box 3: Scale issues – Ethiopia, 1999–2000

*A WFP spokesperson:* ‘Our position has been in WFP that this was a very serious food crisis and because of the response, didn’t slide over into famine. ...Our feeling is we should save that term [‘famine’] for those very, very severe, severe situations. Otherwise, we are debasing the coinage’ (IDS 2002).

*A team of epidemiologists:* ‘We estimate that approximately 19,900 (95 per cent CI, 14,500–25,000) excess deaths occurred across the Gode zone. ...A prolonged and severe famine occurred in Gode district and the surrounding area from December 1999 or earlier and continued at least until July 2000.’ (Salama *et al.* 2001: 568–9).

extrapolated their findings to the surrounding zone, thereby arriving at a figure of 19,500 deaths. (Further extrapolation produced an upper limit of 98,000 deaths for the five affected zones.) While this was an experienced and highly qualified team, and their methodology is carefully documented in the article, the precision of the figures and the scientific language tend to disguise the uncertainty surrounding the numbers from the lay person. These retrospective uncertainties point to the even greater difficulties of establishing how many people have died or are expected to die while the crisis is in progress.

The premise underlying this discussion of absolute numbers is that famine implies deaths. However, there are some who argue that no-one has to die in order for a famine to have occurred. In *Famine that Kills*, de Waal (1989) points out that, in local conceptions in Darfur, Sudan, different severities of famine are recognised, and ‘famine that kills’ is only one of these. Other types cause hunger and destitution, as well as social breakdown. De Waal is fully aware that this usage does not conform to our preconceptions of the meaning of famine, and that his approach is open to the criticism that it risks ‘cheapening’ the term.<sup>6</sup>

But de Waal argues for an expansion and deepening of meaning on several grounds. Most significantly, he points out that this usage is more consistent with the experiences of famine-affected populations, who currently ‘live (and die) under an alien definition’ (1989: 30). Unfortunately, at this point the argument becomes murkier and harder to follow, because there are some translation difficulties. He indicates that the Arabic word *ju* means ‘hunger’; *maja’a* involves ‘hunger’ as well as ‘destitution and social breakdown’; and *maja’a al gatala* includes ‘hunger’

‘destitution and social breakdown’ and ‘death’. The implication seems to be that the same word *maja’a* is involved in some way with all these concepts (since *ju* and *maja’a* share the same root), and that English should likewise use ‘famine’ for all equivalent levels of food crises. Yet, he also indicates in a parenthetical remark that he has and will continue to translate *maja’a* ‘loosely as ‘famine’, though it is better translated as ‘famine and/or dearth’ (de Waal 1989: 77).

The translation difficulties seem to confuse two separate points. First, and most convincingly, he is suggesting that the words for food crises in Darfur have ‘richer’ connotations than their equivalent terms in English. The Western emphasis on the extremities of malnutrition and death fails to capture the central features of the experiences, which revolve around destitution and social breakdown. Second, and less convincingly, he seems to be suggesting that ‘famine’ should be applied to all the different categories of food crises. This second point does not follow from the first. It is possible to enrich our notion of ‘famine’ to emphasise destitution and social breakdown, and still reserve it for the equivalent of food crises that cause deaths (e.g. *maja’a al gatala*, in Darfur). Other terms such as ‘dearth’ could also acquire greater connotations and be applied to less severe crises (e.g. *maja’a*). Elsewhere, he argues that if we restricted ‘the use of the word “famine” to events that involved mass starvation unto death [we] would effectively reduce the number of famines in the modern world to very few, if any’ (de Waal 1989: 24), but this seems to be changing the terms of the debate. I am not sure that I have fairly represented de Waal’s argument, but my confusion over the translations may be suggestive of the difficulties facing its wider acceptance.<sup>7</sup>

Most academic writers do not discuss how large a geographic area must be affected by a crisis in order for it to qualify as a famine. Yet for practitioners, lay people, and those affected, it can be an integral part of their assessment of the scale of the crisis. The East African regional office of the World Food Programme, faced with the dilemma of how to label the 1998 crisis in Sudan, at one point came up with the phrase 'pockets of famine' to convey the sense that the most severe areas of hunger were geographically isolated from each other and to distinguish that situation from the 'normal' conception of famine, in which starvation conditions are more widespread. At a more local level, one of my interpreters in southern Sudan, in trying to clarify to an interviewee that we were discussing the most serious type of crisis, pointed to each of the nearby houses in turn, declaiming: 'there is no food in that house, or that house, or that house.'

#### **4 The sectoral question: to what extent can a crisis involve sectors other than food and still be called a famine?**

Much of the academic and grey literature on famine starts from the theoretical premise that famines, in their onset and evolution, are food crises that necessitate trade-offs between consumption and the preservation of essential assets (cf. Corbett 1988; Walker 1989). By narrowing its focus in this way, the literature (with some important exceptions) consistently filters out certain aspects of the affected population's experiences. These include the ways that they deal with requirements for water, health, shelter and physical security during the crisis, as well as the role of emotions, culture and religion in their perceptions of and responses to the famine.

This academic approach has helped to shape the policy discourse as well. In the *Oxfam Handbook of Development and Relief* (Eade and Williams 1995), the section on survival strategies during food crises describes only those related to food and income. Likewise, Save the Children (UK)'s Household Economy Approach (formerly the Food Economy Approach), which is based upon Sen's entitlement approach, currently makes little allowance for water, security, or health needs in its assessments. This perspective also pervades the policy discourse

in a subtler way. In describing the experiences and needs of the affected populations, the reports of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) take a largely dispassionate approach. The World Food Programme's 1997 Annual Needs Assessment for southern Sudan (which made forecasts about conditions in 1998) begins in the following manner:

In 1998, emergency food interventions will continue to be required where the accumulated effects of long-term insecurity and heightened current insecurity have eroded normal coping mechanisms and where displaced populations impose additional burdens on already hard-pressed food economies (WFP 1997:1).

This rather dry, professional tone is employed throughout the report. In addition to narrowly focusing on food (which, in fairness, was the brief of the assessment), the report, in its phraseology, strips the emotional, spiritual, and (much of the) cultural content from the presentation of the experience. In part, this approach reflects a deliberate attempt to avoid sensationalising the crisis. It may be believed that in dealing with an issue as potentially highly-charged as famine, it is important to ground decisions in a rational evaluation of the available data, and not to be swayed by emotional arguments. It may also represent a conscious decision to keep the analytical framework simple and focused in order to achieve clearer results. Whatever the legitimate rationale for this framing of the discourse, a side-effect has been to ignore large portions of the experience of food crises and famines.

For instance, many people trace the origins of the 1998 famine in Ajiep, southern Sudan to the attacks of Kerubino Bol, a former rebel commander who switched sides to the government and conducted a series of raids among his own people (Dinka Rek) in Gogrial county starting in 1994. Here is how one man described his experiences (in translation):

Kerubino's forces came at night when people were sleeping. ...When I heard the noise and people crying, I felt trembling fear. ...They shot my elder brother in the leg and he died. They called 'Come out.' When he did, they said 'You just take off your clothes.' And they shot him. I

Table 1: Some coping strategies used in southern Sudan in 1997/98

Village	Water strategies	Health strategies	Psychological strategies	Physical security strategies
Bur Rab	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduced food consumption to avoid using water in cooking</li> <li>• Bathed less frequently</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stopped working to care for the sick</li> <li>• Sold livestock or other assets for medicine</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prayed more frequently</li> <li>• Contributed livestock or money to 'evil-makers'</li> </ul>	No data
Akac	No data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adopted UN hygiene promotion strategies</li> <li>• Contributed livestock or money to witchdoctor</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Received visit from chief that UN was providing assistance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Buried grain to hide it from militias</li> <li>• Moved cattle to another village</li> <li>• Migrated</li> </ul>
Pathian	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Drank flood waters</li> <li>• Built dyke around homestead</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Took over duties of sick member</li> <li>• Prepared traditional remedies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attended church</li> <li>• Prayed more frequently</li> <li>• Sang inspirational songs</li> </ul>	No data

ran with two goats and the children escaped. My mother stayed with the dead body. I came back and buried the body and took my mother away.

Even in this short account, one senses the fear, sorrow, and trauma experienced during a raid.

A wider survey of the ways people dealt with food crises in three southern Sudanese communities presented some surprising results (see Table 1). In one village, Bur Rab, where there was a severe drought in 1997, many people reduced food consumption in order to avoid using water in cooking during the dry season. In another village, Akac, some parents kept up the morale of their children by reminding them that the UN would bring assistance. As the chief in another location, Pathian, said: 'If you are told you will be given food after five days, you will not die.' (Although these are anecdotes, they suggest that the *psychological* impact of aid – both positive and negative – should be more closely studied.)

But as other sectors are incorporated into discussions of famine, it can become difficult to distinguish between different types of crises. The drought that led to the crop failure in Bur Rab also caused the

wells to dry up four months earlier than usual (September instead of January), forcing people at one point to ration water at the expense of food consumption. Was the famine in that area a food crisis, or a water crisis, or both? In the raid near Ajiep described in the passage above, Kerubino's forces not only chased the household from their land, but also burned down their *tokuls*, or huts, and looted their grain and livestock, forcing them to search for food elsewhere. Was the displaced household facing a security crisis, a shelter crisis, or a food crisis?

There has been considerable debate in the famine literature about whether deaths caused by epidemics (as opposed to starvation) in overcrowded, unsanitary refugee camps should be classified as famine mortality. Many nutritionists argue that these deaths are famine-related, because malnutrition lowers biological resistance and increases the person's susceptibility to communicable disease (Young and Jaspars 1995). De Waal (1989), by contrast, had suggested that in Darfur, 1985, almost all deaths were caused by epidemics, independent of levels of food consumption. Others have pointed out however, that exposure to epidemics in refugee camps resulted from hunger-related migration. Mediating this debate, Devereux (2001: 252) has

written: 'Famine mortality reflects both increased *susceptibility* and increased *exposure* to diseases...but both reflect a common origin in disrupted access to food (epidemics that are not triggered by food scarcity are not, definitionally speaking, famines).' But as we have seen, it is extremely hard, in practice, to disentangle the various sectors in a famine and to say unambiguously that a crisis originated solely 'in disrupted access to food'.

While there are dangers to broadening our conceptions of famine, it is also problematic to maintain the simple association between famine and food. The worry is that a declaration of famine will generate a response that reflects this almost unconscious assumption, rather than a holistic assessment of the evolving requirements in a given situation. In addition, there is a concern that the link between famine and food legitimises the interests of actors who want to privilege food aid (because it is their area of expertise or is easily mobilised). The emphasis on 'food first' may be at the expense of relevant non-food items, with potentially severe consequences. In Ajiep (the 'epicentre' of the famine), mortality increased 4-fold in the nine days after the start of rains in July, due in part, according to observers, to exposure. A senior aid worker recalled becoming frustrated with 'the singular focus on food...as something defining the crisis' and complained that 'people [were] dying in the rain' from lack of shelter.

## Notes

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1. Lipton (2000) points out that Malthus' view, in subsequent writings, became more nuanced. Nevertheless, it is this earlier formulation of his theory that has dominated the discourse.
2. This is a highly debatable point. Clearly, all famines are 'political' at some level. A more balanced view might recognise that while there was an upsurge in conflict-related crises (Masfield *et al.* 1997), there was also a heightened awareness of and focus on the political dimensions of famines in the 1990s.
3. Many organisations use a crude mortality rate  $\geq 1/10,000/\text{day}$  as an indication of an 'emergency' but not necessarily a famine. Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) does have its own internal criteria for identifying a famine, but these are not yet widely accepted (Oxfam 2001).

## 5 Conclusion

While people in various parts of the world continue to experience 'all manners of suffering',<sup>8</sup> it remains uncertain what the most appropriate designation for those experiences (in English) should be. This article has attempted to problematise some of our assumptions about the integrity of the concept of 'famine', by highlighting its temporal, scale and sectoral ambiguities. These ambiguities have consistently undermined attempts to achieve consensus on a definition, have led to confusion over policies, and have been exploited to achieve non-humanitarian ends.

Many people, including the present author, are currently engaged in attempts to devise an operational definition of famine that reconciles these ambiguities (cf. Howe and Devereux 2002). But there is a danger that, in our haste to supply answers, we will fail to listen to the questions: if famines do not have consistently identifiable phases, how should the temporal bounds of the crises be demarcated? If famines are not associated with a threshold level of mortality (or hunger), how do we know that a famine is occurring? If famines are seen to involve issues such as water, health, physical security, emotions, and religion, what makes them fundamentally distinct from other forms of humanitarian crises?

Is it meaningful to speak of 'famine'?

4. The distinction between the 'event' and 'hybrid' views is that the hybrid perspective explicitly incorporates the process into its conceptualisation of famine, whereas the event perspective only maintains a cursory awareness of that process.
5. What is less clear is why WFP should be so reluctant to apply the term 'famine' to a case which, given that thousands of lives were lost in a short time to hunger-related causes, is more clear-cut than many others where the label has been highly controversial (cf. Devereux on Malawi 2002, in this *Bulletin*). IDS (2002) suggests that it was in the interest of agencies, such as WFP to claim in retrospect that a famine did not occur, because it allowed them to congratulate themselves for having averted it. Conversely, conceding that famine had occurred would have been tantamount to an admission of failure (see also Maxwell on Ethiopia, in this *Bulletin*).
6. In this case, the critique is based on the severity of the crises to which he wants to apply the term, while

in the previous discussion, the question surrounded the absolute numbers experiencing a given level of severity, i.e. death.

7. The author is actually sympathetic to the notion of applying the term 'famine' to crises that do not cause deaths. If my community in England experienced a food crisis that forced us to leave our houses and sell our assets, and that impaired the mental and physical

development of young children, we would want to use a term with all the emotive connotations of 'famine' in English, even if it did not result in deaths. (However, if such crises were a regular feature of our lives, would we be more stringent with our gradations?)

8. This phrase is taken from de Waal's *Famine that Kills* (1989: 73).

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