



Famine: Lessons Learned

Stephen Devereux, Lewis Sida and Tina Nelis

August 2017



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Summary

Famine: Lessons Learned was produced as the world was responding to four potential famines simultaneously – in Nigeria, South Sudan, Yemen and Somalia. Much has been written and researched on famine, and many lessons on how to best prevent and respond to famine have been learned the hard way. This paper therefore draws on lessons learned from the last 30-plus years of famine crises and response, going back to famines in Ethiopia and Sudan in the 1980s, up to the most recent famine in Somalia in 2011.

BEFORE: The causes of famine

Lesson 1. The causes of famine

Drought causes crop failure, but it is vulnerability to the impacts of drought on livelihoods and food systems that causes famine. Famine follows a sequence of failures in the food system: first in production; then in the markets, consequently affecting employment opportunities; and finally in humanitarian relief such as food aid. In conflict-triggered famines food production, employment, trade and food aid can all be deliberately targeted or compromised. Famines can be prevented by intervening at any point in the food system: by boosting food production, strengthening rural food markets, providing employment opportunities (including labour-intensive public works), introducing 'shock-responsive' social protection, or providing timely famine relief.

Lesson 2. Marginalisation

Children and young infants are at the greatest risk during famine, but adults and adolescents can also die in large numbers and should not be overlooked. Social, economic and political marginalisation can be at the root of vulnerability, but are easy to miss. This can be doubly compounded if humanitarian operations and aid flows are captured by elites or dominant groups. Poverty is closely linked to famine, and most often it is the poorest who are at highest risk. However, in certain cases – especially in conflict-related famines – the socioeconomic profile of vulnerability is more complicated. Careful analysis of the causes of famine vulnerability, and who is likely to be most vulnerable, should inform targeting.

Lesson 3. Timeliness

High-quality early warning systems and food security and nutrition information systems exist in many countries and regions that are vulnerable to food crisis and famine. However, early warning must be complemented with early action. Mechanisms need to be found that provide incentives for early action by governments, donors, and implementing agencies, and build accountability for failures to prevent future famines. Early warning systems must better incorporate and analyse data on markets, political context (e.g. conflict) and nutrition, and disseminate their analysis and findings to policymakers in more accessible ways, for better informed decision-making. The IPC protocols are a good example of this.

DURING: Response – management and type of response

Lesson 4. Camps

Camps can become 'aid magnets'. Rather than setting up camps, reduce the necessity for people to migrate in search of food by scaling up social protection in rural communities and distributing food aid in famine-affected villages. Provide safe water and sanitation facilities in famine zones: supply clean drinking water either by protecting and deepening existing wells, digging more boreholes, or using water tankers; and install toilets or improved latrines and waste disposal, especially in refugee camps but also wherever famine-affected people are concentrated. Immunise children against communicable diseases, especially measles, which was the major killer of children during the Darfur and Somali Region famines, due to the lack of vaccines.

Lesson 5. Response

There has historically been a 'food first' bias in famine response, with crucial sectors such as water, sanitation and especially health being relatively neglected. Responding to the health causes of famine mortality saves lives. Communicable diseases such as Acute Watery Diarrhoea (AWD) and measles are major killers. Good surveillance, an ability to respond rapidly, having a reliable supply of ready-to-use therapeutic food (RUTF) and mass immunisation in situations of famine migration are essential if mortality is to be prevented. Innovative practices such as the distribution of cash in Somalia 2011 can save lives, although cash is not a panacea.

Lesson 6. Conflict

Famine can be used as a deliberate strategy during times of conflict. It is important to think about the function of famine, which often has a political, economic or military rationale. Famines can be caused by acts of omission or acts of commission. In conflict, manipulation of aid is common, with warring parties denying access and diverting aid to their supporters. Geopolitics are often involved in supporting one side in the conflict, adding to the way in which aid can be manipulated. Gaining access to famine zones is political and requires advocacy and quiet behind-the-scenes diplomacy. Ultimately, agencies must be prepared to withdraw if they consider their aid has become part of the problem.

Lesson 7. Safety nets

The best antidote to famine is an 'anti-famine political contract', meaning that the state acknowledges its duty to prevent famine, and mechanisms exist for citizens to hold the state accountable if a famine occurs. Such a contract can be secured through the institutions of multi-party democracy, but democracy is not essential and might not always be sufficient. Although this is not an area that international agencies can directly influence, they are able to support civil society advocacy to promote the right to food, which most governments have ratified in international law. Social protection programmes have been shown to be effective in reducing food insecurity. 'Shock-responsive safety nets' are emerging as a potential anti-famine intervention – not in isolation, but as a complement to traditional famine responses.

Lesson 8. The media

Traditional media reporting has often misrepresented famine, favouring an uncomplicated, over-simplistic narrative at the expense of historical, political, social and economic accuracy. Exercising 'media social responsibility' through encouraging journalists and broadcasters to work closely with aid agencies to understand the complexities of the situation before, during and after would promote a more informed discussion around longer-term solutions to recurrent famines. Aid agency involvement with local as well as foreign media would inform local affected populations and give them voice, which is imperative to encourage change. Social media, user-generated content (UGC) and citizen journalists can all contribute to disrupting convenient narratives and expand campaign networks.

AFTER: Post-famine recovery

Lesson 9. Recovery

Famine can lead to destitution and permanent livelihood changes. Recovery efforts should support new livelihood options as well as trying to recover old ones. Action in advance of famines such as commercial destocking, and installing the trade infrastructure to facilitate this, can both preserve assets and help people to cope. Access to employment and social capital are extremely important, and public works projects are an excellent way of providing additional labour opportunities. The aftermath of a famine is the best time for reflection and to put in place mechanisms, institutions and resources to 'famine-proof' vulnerable communities.

Lesson 10. Accountability

Where there is political will, famines – even deliberate famines – can be prevented. Public pressure and advocacy on political leaders is the most effective way to trigger this. When famine is used deliberately as a method of war all efforts should be made to hold those responsible accountable. The body of law surrounding the use of famine as a method of war needs development so that eventually mass starvation is considered a war crime.

Acknowledgements

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Abbreviations

AWD	Acute Watery Diarrhoea
CMR	Crude Mortality Rate
GAM	Global Acute Malnutrition
HSNP	Hunger Safety Net Programme
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IDP	internally displaced person
IPC	Integrated Food Security Phase Classification
MGNREGS	Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme
PSNP	Productive Safety Net Programme
RUTF	ready-to-use therapeutic foods
UGC	user-generated content
WFP	World Food Programme

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BEFORE: The causes of famine

Lesson 1. Famine is not caused by a shortage of food, but usually by a combination of entitlement failure, market failure, and often conflict.

Famines may seem like simple tragedies, terrible in their impacts but easy to explain. Most famines affect vulnerable rural communities in poor countries and are triggered by natural disasters, such as droughts or floods that cause crop harvests to fail. If there is not enough food to feed the population, mass starvation must inevitably follow. In Africa, it is true that most famines, even recent ones, are triggered by drought. But the 'drought causes famine' narrative is no longer adequate – if it ever was. The pathway to contemporary famines is much more complex, and several famines have occurred despite there being more than enough food in the country, sometimes even without any decline in food availability.

Drought is not the only trigger factor. In a 2017 article for the *London Review of Books*, Alex de Waal notes, 'Mass starvation as a consequence of the weather has very nearly disappeared: today's famines are all caused by political decisions, yet journalists still use the phrase "man-made famine" as if such events were unusual.'¹ Often civil war or insecurity is the trigger, sometimes in conjunction with drought, as in Somalia in 2011. Conflict and insecurity can undermine agricultural production, disrupt trade, and obstruct humanitarian relief. 'Conflict famines' are usually a byproduct of war; but sometimes famine conditions are deliberately created by one group using starvation as a weapon against others – as with 'siege famines', when people are denied access to available food.

Any comprehensive analysis of a famine must explain why the entire food system fails. Food production failure is only the first of a series of failures in access to food. In *Poverty and Famines*, Amartya Sen identified four legal sources of food, which he called 'entitlements': people can either grow their own food ('production-based'); buy food ('trade-based'); work for food ('labour-based'); or be given food – for example, food aid ('transfer-based').² For a harvest failure to escalate into a famine, all four sources of food must fail, either sequentially or simultaneously.

What about '**trade-based** entitlements' – if food production is inadequate, why don't those affected simply buy the food they need in local markets? There are two possible explanations – market failure, and poverty. Fragmented markets are common in remote rural areas. Traders might decide not to bring food into famine zones, because transport costs are high and demand is limited and temporary, so incentives for traders are insufficient.³ In conflict-related famines, traders might stay away because of security concerns. This is one reason why people migrate out of famine zones – to search for food – because local markets are empty, just like their own granaries.

The second explanation is poverty. Even if food is available in local markets, farmers who are already poor and have zero savings simply cannot afford to buy that food, especially when prices start to rise. Sen explained the mechanism of ‘exchange entitlement failure’: during a food crisis, food prices rise due to excessive demand, while prices for assets such as livestock fall due to excessive supply. A falling grain/livestock price ratio is often used as an early warning indicator of famine, especially in pastoralist communities.

What about ‘**labour-based**’ entitlements? A related problem is what Sen called ‘derived destitution’. When farmers lose their crops, there is no work for agricultural labourers, or even for services like barbers – starving farmers will spend any money they have on food, not haircuts – so rural wages and employment opportunities also collapse during famines.

Finally, famines occur because of a lack of ‘**transfer-based**’ entitlements – there is either no humanitarian intervention, or famine relief arrives too late to save lives and livelihoods. The reasons for this failure are discussed in these Lessons, but can include lack of early warning information, conflict that prevents access to famine-afflicted communities, or lack of political will to prevent famine.

LESSONS LEARNED

- 1 Drought causes crop failure, but it is vulnerability to the impacts of drought on livelihoods and food systems that causes famine.
- 2 Famine follows a sequence of failures in the food system: first the production of food, then in markets and employment opportunities, and finally humanitarian relief such as food aid.
- 3 In conflict-triggered famines, food production, employment, trade and food aid can all be deliberately targeted (if food and animals are seized or destroyed) or compromised (if security concerns restrict human mobility and flows of food).
- 4 Famines can be prevented by intervention at any point in the food system: by boosting food production, strengthening rural food markets, providing employment opportunities (including labour-intensive public works), introducing ‘shock-responsive’ social protection, or providing timely famine relief.

Key resources

Sen, A. (1981) *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*, Oxford: Clarendon Press

Devereux, S. (1993) *Theories of Famine*, London: Harvester Wheatsheaf

Lesson 2. Marginalisation is often at the root of why people become famine stricken.

When famine kills, it does so unevenly. Understanding who is most vulnerable to starvation, disease and death, and who is being excluded or left out of relief efforts can help us target aid more effectively.

Except in rare exceptions,⁴ famines do not affect the urban middle classes; they are wealthy enough to purchase food and influential enough to enjoy political protection against disasters. As Amartya Sen pithily explained in *The Political Economy of Hunger*: 'In the food battle the devil takes the hindmost'.⁵ So famines typically afflict low-income countries rather than high-income countries, poor people rather than the rich, remote rural areas rather than urban centres, smallholders or agricultural labourers rather than commercial farmers, and ethnic minorities more than dominant ethnic groups. In short, famines afflict groups of people who are geographically, economically, socially and politically marginalised.

Demographically, children – especially infants – are the group at greatest risk. In the Somalia famine of 2011, 52 per cent of those who died (133,000 people) were under five years old.⁶ The vulnerability of young children is in part due to their greater energy requirements vs energy stores, meaning that children die earlier. However, in both the 1992 Somalia famine and in Angola in 1993, over two thirds and three quarters respectively of those who died were adults and adolescents (although this may well have been because the infants had died before recording started).⁷ Peter Salama and Steve Collins reported in *Field Exchange* that by the time of the 1998 famine in South Sudan, this lesson had been forgotten and there was no specialist provision for malnourished adolescents or adults. Research into famine mortality amongst the aged hardly exists. In the *IDS Bulletin*, Jeremy Swift suggested that in extreme cases households facing famine abandon old or particularly vulnerable people as a way of reducing consumption.⁸ Although gendered inequalities generally work against women and girls, there is consistent evidence of female mortality advantage (lower death rates for women than men) during famines, for a combination of biological and sociocultural reasons.⁹

Aside from age and gender, social, economic and political factors determine who are most at risk. In an IDS Research Report, Stephen Devereux concluded that in the Somali Region of Ethiopia, 'Drought triggers livelihood crises, but the underlying causes of vulnerability in Somali Region are social and political, not natural.'¹⁰ Somali pastoralists are 'living on the margins' in almost every sense, but their 'marginalisation comes at a cost – inadequate service provision, high vulnerability and lack of protection against livelihood shocks'.¹¹ The Somali Region famine of 1999–2000 occurred while the Ethiopian government was preoccupied with its border war against Eritrea in the north; too little attention was paid to signals of food crisis from this politically marginalised part of southeast Ethiopia. Even within Somali Region, marginalisation is multi-layered: pastoralists dominate

over crop farmers, gendered hierarchies leave women more vulnerable than men, elite capture favours powerful clan leaders in aid distribution, and prejudice between ethnic groups leaves the interests of ethnic Bantu relatively neglected.

Similarly, during the Somalia famine of 2011, two 'marginal' groups made up the greatest proportion of those who died. The Rahanweyn and Bantu, agro-pastoralists and riverine farmers respectively, have historically lacked power and were the target of looting and violence during the previous Somalia famine. In *Global Food Security*, Nisar Majid and Stephen McDowell show that the areas that suffered the worst famine conditions were precisely where these groups were most heavily concentrated, and that they comprised the majority of the poorest, who were also worst affected. These groups were also the majority of internally displaced persons (IDPs) who had distress migrated due to famine.¹²

Even forearmed with such knowledge, targeting aid is not straightforward. The problem of elite capture is well documented,¹³ so is the manipulation of aid for political, economic or military means (see Lesson 6). Community-based targeting is one way of attempting to ensure that marginalised groups are not excluded, as this approach typically contains a significant element of participation and transparency. However, dominant groups can still manipulate the process such that socially and politically marginalised households are not included, as in the example above.

Nor is poverty alone a sufficient indicator of vulnerability. Helen Young and Susanne Jaspars showed that in Darfur in 1984,¹⁴ poor and rich were equally likely to be malnourished. In the *IDS Bulletin*, Luka Biong Deng showed that in the South Sudan famine of 1998 the opposite was in fact true – there was a strong correlation between initial wealth and famine mortality¹⁵ – as the richer were targeted for their asset wealth.

LESSONS LEARNED

- 1 Children and young infants are at the greatest risk during famine. In many situations, however, adults and adolescents also die in large numbers. Specialist provision should also be made for these two groups.
- 2 Social, economic and political marginalisation can be at the root of vulnerability, but is easy to overlook. This can be doubly compounded if humanitarian operations and aid flows are captured by elites or dominant groups.
- 3 Poverty is closely linked to famine, and most often it is the poorest who are at highest risk. However, in certain cases – especially in conflict-related famines – the socioeconomic profile of vulnerability is more complicated.
- 4 Careful analysis of the causes of famine vulnerability, and who is likely to be most vulnerable, should inform targeting of pre-famine interventions and humanitarian relief.

Key resources

Majid, N. and McDowell, S. (2012) 'Hidden Dimensions of the Somalia Famine', *Global Food Security* 1.1: 36–42

Swift, J. (1993) 'Understanding and Preventing Famine and Famine Mortality', *IDS Bulletin* 24.4: 1–16

Lesson 3. Early response is key to saving lives in famine, but is too often hampered by political and technical constraints.

One major reason why famines are not prevented is because humanitarian relief arrives too late to save lives. Early warning systems have improved dramatically, thanks to the technological revolution, so famines are easier to predict, but early warning does not always lead to early response. Why not?

Several sources of delay are built into the architecture of the humanitarian response system. First, a famine must be identified, but the information needed for this to happen might be inadequate, late or concealed. Second, a famine must be officially declared, but some governments have incentives to deny that a crisis exists, and in other cases donors might suspect that governments are exaggerating. Third, a response must be mobilised, but it takes time for pledges to be made and acted upon – political will might be deficient, there could be ‘donor fatigue’, or donors could face ‘competing imperatives’.¹⁶ Finally, food aid must be delivered to famine-affected populations, but this can take several weeks, especially if the epicentre of the crisis is an inaccessible area with poor roads, transport and communications infrastructure, and if there are security threats. Alternatively, if conditions are favourable, local purchase or cash transfers can significantly shorten the response time.

Famine early warning systems have been codified since the Indian Famine Codes in the 1880s, which identified criteria for declaring ‘near-scarcity’, ‘scarcity’ and ‘famine’, based on indicators such as low crop yields and rapid food price rises.¹⁷ More recently, the development of ‘famine intensity and magnitude scales’¹⁸ and the operationalisation of ‘Integrated Food Security Phase Classification’ (IPC) protocols allowed the United Nations to make the first ever ‘official’ declaration of an ongoing famine (IPC Phase 5) in two regions of southern Somalia on 20 June 2011.¹⁹ (The second declaration of famine was made in South Sudan in February 2017.) The declaration in Somalia required survey evidence that the Crude Mortality Rate (CMR) was above two deaths/10,000/day and the Global Acute Malnutrition (GAM) rate was above 30 per cent. However, by this point, even an immediate response was already too late to prevent loss of life, and the international community did not react seriously to the crisis until the famine was declared. Encouragingly, it looks as though that lesson was learned by 2017 with a significant early response in South Sudan that may have prevented the worst from happening.

Even when timely and reliable information is available, it does not necessarily lead to effective action if institutions are weak, if political accountability is absent, and if relations between governments and donors are poor or antagonistic.

In the 1990s, an analysis of several famines and averted famines revealed that the main reason why famines were not prevented was not lack of information, but lack of political will to intervene. During the 1980s and 1990s, famines were prevented in

Botswana, Kenya and Zimbabwe – all democracies and ‘friends of the West’, who received food aid promptly and in generous quantities when food crises threatened.

By contrast, Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan and North Korea did not prevent famines that claimed millions of lives, and the humanitarian response was late in all these cases. None of these countries had democratic governments at that time, and none were on good terms with the donor community at the critical moment. In *Famine Early Warning and Response*, Margaret Buchanan-Smith and Susanna Davies concluded that ‘it is not the severity of the crisis, but relations between international donors and national governments which tends to be the single most important determinant of the timing and scale of the international response’.²⁰

One way to understand this differential treatment is ‘priority regimes’,²¹ where responsible actors might not prioritise famine prevention ahead of other political imperatives. Examples are if a regime is distracted by fighting a war, or if those affected are politically marginalised and not protected by an ‘anti-famine political contract’, or if the international community is hostile towards the national government.²²

Related to this is lack of accountability, which follows from lack of consequences for failing to prevent famine, either at national government or international agency level. For instance, in her chapter in *The New Famines*, Jenny Edkins argued for ‘the criminalisation of mass starvations’, as a crime against humanity.²³

Chris Hillbruner and Grainne Moloney’s analysis of why early warning was ‘not enough’ to prevent the Somalia famine of 2011 generated several lessons for improved early warning and response in future (see ‘Lessons learned’ box).²⁴

LESSONS LEARNED

- 1 High-quality early warning systems and food security and nutrition information systems should be installed in countries and regions vulnerable to food crisis and famine.
- 2 The IPC protocols should be adopted as a universal language for describing levels of food insecurity and declaring future famines.
- 3 Early warning systems must better incorporate and analyse data on markets, political context (e.g. conflict) and nutrition, and should improve the development of scenarios.
- 4 Early warning systems need to disseminate their findings to policymakers in more accessible ways, for better informed decision-making.
- 5 Early warning needs to be complemented with early action. Mechanisms need to be found that provide incentives for early action by governments, donors, and implementing agencies, and build accountability for failures to prevent future famines.

Key resources

Buchanan-Smith, M. and Davies, S. (1995) *Famine Early Warning and Response: The Missing Link*, London: Intermediate Technology Publications

de Waal, A. (1997) *Famine Crimes: Politics and the Disaster Relief Industry in Africa*, Oxford: James Currey

DURING: Response – management and type of response

Lesson 4. Agencies can do more harm than good if they attract large numbers of people into relief camps where there is potential for communicable disease outbreaks.

Humanitarian relief during famines is often described as being ‘too little, too late’. Even worse, badly designed or badly timed interventions can exacerbate the crisis rather than help with solving it.

In *Famine that Kills*, Alex de Waal identified two models of famine mortality.²⁵ First is the familiar ‘starvation model’: logically, people starve during famines because of lack of food. Second is the ‘health crisis model’: most people die during famines not of starvation but disease. These are not necessarily hunger-related diseases that hungry people are susceptible to (such as diarrhoea), but waterborne and communicable diseases to which famine-affected populations are exposed (like cholera or measles). De Waal argues that many African famines are health crises as much as food crises, and the majority of deaths result from a failure to understand this crucial fact. Moreover, humanitarian responses that focus on delivering food can inadvertently create the ideal conditions for killer diseases to spread rapidly.

The reasons for heightened exposure to communicable diseases are because famines are not only food crises, they are also water and sanitation crises and social crises. Drought-triggered famines reduce the quantity and quality of water available for drinking, cooking, washing and cleaning. Poor water quality and unsafe sanitation facilities heighten the risk of public health crises. Populations on the move are vulnerable to the rapid spread of communicable diseases.

De Waal found evidence for the ‘health crisis model’ of famine mortality from the 1984/85 famine in Darfur, Sudan, where cases were recorded of famine migrants dying of disease even though they still owned livestock and had money in their pockets. Also, child undernutrition rates in Darfur during the famine were high, but was almost entirely classified as ‘moderate’, which is not life-threatening.

More evidence for the ‘health crisis model’ comes from the Somali Region famine in Ethiopia in 1999/2000. Because the government and donor agencies were slow to respond, famine mortality had peaked by the time relief camps were established and food aid arrived. Analysis by Salama and colleagues in *JAMA* found two peaks in famine mortality.²⁶ The first peak was before humanitarian interventions arrived and the second peak was afterwards, when people congregated in relief

camps, where hygiene and sanitation conditions were poor. Crucially, the drivers of mortality were different before and after: in the pre-intervention phase, wasting was the single main cause of death, but in the post-intervention phase the single main cause of death was one of four communicable diseases, mainly measles. The reason was that the agencies adopted a 'food first' response: vaccinations arrived later. Salama *et al.* recommended decentralised food distribution to minimise population displacement, and that immunisation of children against measles should be prioritised in refugee camps.

Paul Howe explains in the journal *Disasters* how famine relief camps function as 'aid magnets' by attracting people desperate for food and other aid, but with ambiguous consequences: on the one hand, 'aid magnets' raise the visibility of the crisis, which increases public awareness and the humanitarian response; on the other hand, they can accelerate mortality if they provide too little aid or the wrong kind of aid.²⁷

De Waal proposed several measures for minimising health-related deaths during famines, which provide a useful checklist of lessons (see 'Lessons learned' box).

LESSONS LEARNED

- 1 Reduce the necessity for people to migrate in search of food, by scaling up social protection in rural communities and distributing food aid in famine-affected villages rather than setting up camps that become 'aid magnets'.
- 2 Supply clean drinking water in famine zones, either by protecting and deepening existing wells, digging more boreholes, or using water tankers.
- 3 Provide safe sanitation facilities, such as toilets or improved latrines and waste disposal, especially in refugee camps but wherever famine-affected people are concentrated.
- 4 Immunise children against communicable diseases, particularly measles, which was the major killer of children during the Darfur and Somali Region famines, due to lack of vaccines.

Key resources

de Waal, A. (1989) *Famine that Kills: Darfur, Sudan, 1984–1985*, Oxford: Clarendon Press

Howe, P. (2010) 'Archetypes of Famine and Response', *Disasters* 34.1: 30–54

Lesson 5. Famine is commonly thought of as ‘slow onset’, but the response often needs to be very fast.

Famine mortality is both starvation- and disease-related. Each pathway to mortality requires specific but differentiated responses. While the process from hunger to death by starvation takes several weeks or months, the process from infection to death by disease can be extremely rapid.

Mobilising and delivering emergency food aid can take several months, and often arrives too late to prevent all loss of life, even if it is early enough to save some lives. Where food aid cannot be delivered quickly enough, recent experience suggests that cash distributions can be effective. In Somalia in 2011, because the World Food Programme (WFP) was stopped by al-Shabaab from distributing food in their areas, agencies distributed cash under a programme managed by UNICEF. Talks were held in advance by UN leaders with merchants in Dubai to ensure that sufficient supplies of food would be available on the ground, and over US\$100 million cash was distributed.²⁸ The operation was successful, with very little diversion recorded. Where the right infrastructure is in place, local purchase can be another good option.

Even if cash can be disbursed more quickly than food, cash is not a universal panacea, or necessarily effective. A careful analysis of the cause of the crisis is needed (food availability decline or entitlement failure?) as is a market assessment (will traders respond to additional demand by trucking in additional supplies?). In Ethiopia in 2015, cash distributions were of limited value because of the unavailability of food stocks, which required massive importation of food.²⁹ Interestingly, and under-reported, almost half of this purchase was undertaken by the government of Ethiopia.³⁰

As argued under Lesson 4, preventing famine migration is hugely preferable,³¹ but doing so can require massive food distributions. In 2015, the Ethiopian government arguably prevented famine through a massive scale-up of its already impressive food, cash and nutrition distributions.³² However, food aid often arrives too late, especially where there is a need for complex procurement and logistics, or where access is hampered.

The treatment of acute malnutrition is regarded as one of the areas where humanitarian response has consistently saved lives, with good practice evolving significantly in the last decades. The implementation of community-based management of malnutrition and the use of ready-to-use therapeutic foods (RUTF) are now considered standard. A blanket supplementary ration should ideally be in place to protect therapeutic rations. Securing a reliable supply of RUTF is an essential part of emergency planning.

But food aid is not enough – and sometimes should not even be top priority. Writing in the *IDS Bulletin*, Jeremy Swift concludes that, ‘If disease is the main cause of famine mortality, anti-famine policies need to be more concerned with the conditions which determine disease transmission and with ways of controlling disease spread.’³³ Acute Watery Diarrhoea (AWD), which includes cholera, has been a major killer in

famines, at least from Bangladesh in 1974 to Somalia today.³⁴ Putting in place plans for responding to AWD is lifesaving in such situations. A combination of epidemic disease surveillance and rapid action teams is the optimal response. Clean water and adequate sanitation are key to preventing outbreaks, and drought conditions and the accompanying lack of water are often the cause. In a 2003 report for USAID, Sue Lautze and colleagues talked about a 'food first' bias in the Ethiopian response that meant the water, sanitation and health sectors were neglected.³⁵ John Graham documents a notable improvement in Ethiopia for 'non-food' responses during the 2015 emergency, as a result of better financing and good coordination.³⁶

In 2017, the protracted conflict in Yemen created famine conditions, displaced three million people, and compromised water supplies, sanitation systems and health services. All this left people highly susceptible to communicable diseases. By July 2017, over 1,500 people had died from the cholera outbreak. The disease affected isolated rural communities where people often depend on stagnant ponds for drinking water. But it also spread rapidly in hospitals, where malnourished children were being treated for AWD, which has very similar symptoms so patients could not be easily separated.³⁷

In mass migration situations, communicable diseases – especially measles and AWD – are often the main cause of death, with measles killing Somalis in large numbers as they fled to Ethiopia in 1992, and again in 2011.³⁸ Shelter too can become critical if conditions are adverse, as also happened in Ethiopia in 2011. Mass immunisation is essential and time critical. Emergency response to famine migration needs to be fast and effective to prevent mass mortality. Interventions to prevent the spread of communicable diseases need to be delivered within days of people arriving, including the basics such as clean water, adequate sanitation, shelter and medical and nutritional services.

LESSONS LEARNED

- 1 There has historically been a 'food first' bias in famine response, with important sectors such as water, sanitation and especially health being relatively neglected.
- 2 Famine is always a complex crisis that requires a comprehensive, coordinated and integrated response.
- 3 The treatment of acute malnutrition in emergency situations requires a reliable supply of RUTF and protective rations.
- 4 Preventing famine migration is hugely preferable to responding to it. Mass food distributions usually require government political will. Innovative practices such as the cash distribution in Somalia 2011 can save lives, but is not a panacea.
- 5 Responding to the health causes of famine mortality saves lives. Communicable diseases such as AWD and measles are major killers. Good surveillance, an ability to respond rapidly, and mass immunisation in situations of famine migration are essential.
- 6 Context analysis is critical, i.e. understanding the causes of the famine, the pathways to mortality and the operating space.

Key resources

The World Health Organization has a website on cholera: www.who.int/cholera/en/ and on measles: www.who.int/immunization/diseases/measles/en/ both of which are highly informative, with lots of good resources.

Collins, S.; Dent, N.; Binns, P.; Bahwere, P.; Sadler, K. and Hallam, A. (2006) 'Management of Severe Acute Malnutrition in Children' *The Lancet*, 25 September. This article is the definitive piece on the management of severe acute malnutrition in children.

Lesson 6. In famine-affected conflict zones, gaining access is always the most complicated factor.

Conflict is a major cause of famine. Throughout history, famine has been used as a method of war, with siege the most obvious manifestation of this. In *Complex Emergencies*, David Keen argues that famine can be a deliberate strategy on the part of powerful local groups for political, economic or military reasons.³⁹ Quoting Indian economist Rangasami, he asserts that it is important to understand the *function* of famine. Rangasami studied Indian markets in times of famine and concluded that merchants colluded to push prices higher, benefiting financially from the hunger. In *The Benefits of Famine*, Keen recounts a Sudanese businessman during the late 1980s telling him the famine had been ‘sent by god’, it had so enriched him.⁴⁰

In his book *Famine Crimes*, Alex de Waal extensively documents the trajectory of the 1984 famine in northern Ethiopia.⁴¹ He attributes the principal cause of this famine to the counter-insurgency campaign by the Ethiopian army and air force. A comprehensive strategy of bombing markets, limiting trade, forcibly displacing populations, requisitioning surpluses and manipulating aid led directly to the famine.

Examples of famine as a result of conflict and the pursuit of politico–military strategies are sadly abundant. In Biafra’s secessionist war in the 1960s, the government attempted to starve the population into surrender; the secessionists in turn used the famine as a way of mobilising overseas support and flew arms in on aid planes at night.⁴²

International geopolitical concerns are rarely absent in famine. The Somalia famine of 2011 provides an instructive case study. A severe drought in the preceding year had led to poor harvests in the Shabelle river valley, the most fertile and densely populated part of rural Somalia. The Al-Qaeda-linked Islamist group in control, al-Shabaab, compounded this by banning WFP and several other major aid organisations from distributing food. But this was made worse by the US government (up to that point the largest food aid donor) restricting where agencies could work to avoid food falling into the hands of al-Shabaab.⁴³

Today it can be argued that famine conditions in both Yemen and South Sudan have political origins with internationalised elements. Both the Saudi–Emirati coalition and the Houthi ‘rebels’ have been criticised for the conduct of war, as have their backers in the USA/UK and Iran.⁴⁴ The government of South Sudan is heavily aid dependent, but also a belligerent with clear responsibilities for the welfare of populations under its ostensible control.

In Somalia the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has talked about conflict and climate uncertainty combining to cause ‘double vulnerability’.⁴⁵ This has perhaps intensified the cycle of food insecurity with people unable to recover fully following the 2011 famine.

In the journal *Disasters*, Joanna Macrae and Anthony Zwi categorise famines as caused by acts of omission or acts of commission.⁴⁶ Acts of omission are where governments or belligerents block relief aid, as in several of the examples above. Sudan in 1991 exported its grain reserve whilst people were starving, a different type of act of omission. Acts of commission include scorched earth policies of the type de Waal describes in Ethiopia: forcible displacement, siege or economic blockade.

How should aid be delivered in such politically and militarily contested situations? Unfortunately, there are few easy answers. In Ethiopia in 1984, only one twentieth of the aid went to Tigray (where the rebellion was), despite it having one third of the famine victims.⁴⁷ The same was true in Sudan in the later 1980s. At the same time, aid was diverted to government soldiers and to enclaves or populations loyal to governments.

Faced with a lack of access – or often just as bad, partial access – aid agencies have very difficult choices to make. Should they speak out against those denying access and causing famine? Or should they work quietly behind the scenes, gaining what limited access they can? In Ethiopia in 1984, media exposure of the famine, against the government's wishes, enabled aid agencies to deliver relief to some famine victims. The international shame was enough to push the government into allowing response. However, the government's subsequent forced resettlement programme caused further deaths and suffering, and many agencies did not speak out for fear of being denied access by the government. De Waal estimated that a minimum of 50,000 people had died during the forced relocations.⁴⁸

Lack of access is not just about whether relief can be delivered. It is also about people having safe access to the basics they need for life (to avoid starvation and disease): physical access to land, markets, agricultural inputs and basic health and water services. Aid agencies must understand the contested arena in which they find themselves, and that often famine is a deliberate strategy in times of war. They must seriously reflect and make judgements on when trying to help is doing more harm than good, be prepared to withdraw, and constantly update their analysis of how close to their red lines they are.

LESSONS LEARNED

- 1 Famine can be a deliberate strategy. In understanding the causes, it is important to think of the function of famine, which often has a political, economic or military rationale.
- 2 Famines can be caused by acts of omission or acts of commission. Acts of commission are deliberate; omission often relates to blockages of relief aid or simple neglect.
- 3 Manipulation of aid is common in conflict. Access is denied by warring parties, and aid diverted to supporters. Geopolitics are often involved in supporting one side in the conflict, often adding to the way in which aid can be manipulated.
- 4 Gaining access is political and requires advocacy and quiet behind-the-scenes diplomacy. Ultimately, agencies must be prepared to withdraw if they consider their aid has become part of the problem.

Key resources

Keen, D. (2008) *Complex Emergencies*, Cambridge: Polity Press

de Waal, A. (1997) *Famine Crimes: Politics and the Disaster Relief Industry in Africa*, Oxford: James Currey

Macrae, J. and Zwi, A. (1992) 'Food as an Instrument of War in Contemporary African Famines: A Review of the Evidence', *Disasters* 16.4, Oxford: Blackwell: 299–321

Lesson 7. One proven solution to famine is a safety net that prevents catastrophic asset loss and income failure.

India has not suffered a mass mortality famine since the Great Bengal famine of 1943. One reason is that the post-independence government resolved that famines were an unacceptable part of India's colonial history, and would no longer be tolerated. This established an 'anti-famine political contract' between the state and its citizens, that India's democratic institutions have upheld ever since. Numerous large-scale safety net programmes have been put in place, such as the Public Distribution System, the Midday Meals Programme, and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), in order to ensure the realisation of India's constitutional right to food for all.

Based largely on India's success in eradicating famine, Amartya Sen has argued that democracy – opposition political parties, free and fair elections, a vigilant and campaigning media – is the best antidote to famine, and that famines have never occurred in functioning multi-party democracies.⁴⁹ Sen contrasted democratic India's success with communist China's failure to prevent the Great Leap Forward famine of 1958–61. In terms of mortality, this was the worst famine in history, killing an estimated 30 million people. Sen attributed the Great Leap Forward famine to the absence of political freedoms and of the incentives and information associated with democratic regimes. In terms of incentives, China's rulers were not subjected to electoral accountability. In terms of information, China had no free press to expose the famine and compel a humanitarian response.

But democracy is not a guaranteed solution.⁵⁰ Democratic accountability also needs an effective governance system, including a high-level political commitment to prevent famine. Since the turn of the century, four mass mortality famines have occurred – in Ethiopia (2000), Malawi (2002), Niger (2005) and Somalia (2011). Three of these four countries – all except Somalia – were multi-party democracies with regular elections when famine struck, which appears to violate Sen's 'rule'.⁵¹ However, these are very young democracies, and their democratic institutions are not yet deeply embedded. Civil society, including the media, is generally weaker in Africa than in India, and is often suppressed. Ethiopia, Malawi and Niger are also among the world's poorest countries, so their capacity to intervene during food crises is limited, leaving responsibility for famine prevention to the international community. But humanitarian agencies like WFP are not directly accountable to famine-affected people, so there is no 'anti-famine political contract' in place.

Another political incentive is shame. In 2005 the Government of Ethiopia launched the Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP), partly reflecting its genuine commitment to ending famine but also in an effort to end the shame of its dependency on annual emergency appeals for food aid. The PSNP combined cash or food transfers to poor people who are unable to work with public works employment on community infrastructure projects for food-insecure people who

can work. Many environmental public works activities, such as soil and water conservation and hillside terracing, aim at ‘famine-proofing’ rural communities.

Together with household asset packages that support alternative income-generating activities, to diversify livelihood risk in rain-fed agriculture-dependent communities, the PSNP has promoted more resilient livelihoods for millions of smallholder farming families in the historically famine-prone Ethiopian Highlands. Several evaluations have confirmed that the PSNP reduces the annual hunger gap in chronically food-insecure households.⁵² There is also evidence that the PSNP protects households against having to sell their productive assets (e.g. oxen and ploughs) for food in years of rain failure.⁵³

A recent innovation in safety net programming in rural food-insecure contexts is ‘shock-responsive safety nets’, which link relief and development by scaling up regular social protection during the annual hungry season and in bad years, both by registering additional beneficiaries temporarily and by increasing the value of cash or food transfers to existing beneficiaries.⁵⁴ Successful applications of this idea include the PSNP in Ethiopia and the Hunger Safety Net Programme (HSNP) in Kenya.

LESSONS LEARNED

- 1 The best antidote to famine is an ‘anti-famine political contract’, meaning that the state acknowledges its duty to prevent famine, and mechanisms exist for citizens to hold the state accountable if a famine occurs.
- 2 An ‘anti-famine political contract’ can be secured through the institutions of multi-party democracy, but democracy is not essential and might not always be sufficient. Although this is not an area that international agencies can directly influence, they can support civil society advocacy to promote the right to food, which most governments have ratified in international law.
- 3 Social protection programmes have been found to be effective in reducing food insecurity. ‘Shock-responsive safety nets’ are emerging as a potential anti-famine intervention – not in isolation, but as a complement to traditional famine responses.

Key resources

Sen, A. (1999) *Development as Freedom*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Rubin, O. (2011) *Democracy and Famine*, New York: Routledge

Devereux, S. (2009) ‘Why Does Famine Persist in Africa?’, *Food Security* 1: 25–35

Lesson 8. The media can play a crucial role in reporting and preventing famines.

Amartya Sen has argued that in countries that enjoy a free press and are able to hold governments to account, famines are less likely to happen.⁵⁵

In the run-up to the 1984 Ethiopia famine, aid agencies, Western governments and the media were all aware that the crisis had already started and the death toll was rising. Despite various attempts by the media to bring attention to the crisis, it was not until Michael Buerk's televised report on 23 October 1984 that the famine was finally publicly acknowledged and aid came pouring in. According to Suzanne Franks in *Reporting Disaster*, in order to make the story newsworthy, Buerk packaged the Ethiopia famine as a 'biblical' and unexpected event caused (simplistically) by drought and food shortage. He used images of emaciated people in Korem, combined with a powerful script, to position the famine as an unforeseen natural disaster, worthy of coverage, and with helpless innocent victims in urgent need of support.⁵⁶

The media, therefore, can act as an early warning system, but it often fails to do so. By the time a story grabs the headlines, it is arguably already too late.⁵⁷ During and after the 1984 Ethiopia famine, by bringing attention to the failure of the government to avert famine and its subsequent resettlement programme, the media also played a role in antagonising the relationship between aid agencies and the national government, and alerting the public to the government's expulsion or threat of expulsion of aid agencies from the country.⁵⁸

Despite Buerk's (partial) success, famines – as opposed to other disasters – often fail to reach the headlines. This is because (1) famines are not dramatic, unexpected events but long-term processes and their causes are often far too difficult to explain in a short news report;⁵⁹ and (2) the causes of famines are complex and are not well served by the media which seeks a clear, uncomplicated narrative of disasters at the expense of well-informed reporting on their historical, social, political and economic context.⁶⁰ (The crucial fact that the Ethiopian government was fighting a war during the 1984 famine against rebel forces in Eritrea and Tigray was largely ignored in media representations of the famine.) Instead, 'short and shrill'-style reporting accompanied by engaging sound bites⁶¹ and 'clichéd'⁶² but arresting images is the recipe for a good disaster story. Alex de Waal warns against 'Over-hyped naively "humanitarian" reporting', devoid of contextual and political analysis, which would 'be as bad as no reporting at all.'⁶³

This criticism is not lost on aid agencies. On the one hand, they want to provide a nuanced understanding of a crisis to the public. On the other, they are aware of their reliance on the media to reach a wider audience and solicit aid. Disasters would not exist without the media⁶⁴ and aid agencies often find themselves in a close and sometimes unhealthy 'symbiotic relationship' with the media, complicit in the construction of over-simplified narratives in return for support in raising funds and promoting their own profiles.⁶⁵ From 1990/99, economic sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council against Iraq created famine-like conditions in the

country with high rates of mortality for children aged under five, an increase in child malnutrition, and food shortage. In *The New Famines*, Haris Gazdar argues that it was the economic isolation and the subsequent breakdown of Iraq's welfare state that brought about a 'policy-induced famine' which saw Iraq experience pre-, modern and post-modern famine 'sequentially and simultaneously'.⁶⁶ Yet, at that time, Iraq did not fit the stereotype of a country experiencing famine and thus the world's media never characterised the situation as such.

In this sense, there is a need for the media to exercise what Glenda Cooper describes in *From their Own Correspondent?* as 'media social responsibility', not only in reporting responsibly and rigorously on disasters, but also in accepting the role the media can and should play before, during and after crises.⁶⁷ With a strong correlation between media coverage of humanitarian crises and global response in the form of public donations, and humanitarian assistance, it is imperative that aid agencies and the media use their combined strengths to work closely to lobby for informed action. This applies not only to foreign media; NGOs should seek to involve local media in order to reach and inform affected populations, and allow local voices to be heard.⁶⁸ Aid agencies also need to collaborate with media initiatives and networks that facilitate debate, provide information and reflect on global stories but from a local perspective.⁶⁹

With the advent of social media, the use of user-generated content (UGC), citizen journalists, and the rise of new donors in Turkey and Islamic NGOs,⁷⁰ users of new digital and mobile technologies are able to challenge previously held 'truths' and call into question the sanitised, simple messages put forward by traditional media. Social media activists are a powerful force to drive forward social change and action.⁷¹ Aid agencies should take advantage of this democratisation of information through investing more resources in developing a strong social media presence and growing their networks internationally but most importantly, in disaster-affected countries.

LESSONS LEARNED

- 1 Traditional reporting has often misrepresented famine. Working closely with aid agencies to understand the complexities of the situation before, during and after famine would improve reporting and help shift the narrative to a discussion around longer-term solutions to recurrent famines.
- 2 In order to lobby for action, aid agencies should involve the local media: informing local affected populations and giving them voice is imperative to encourage change.
- 3 Aid agencies should collaborate more closely with media initiatives and networks that seek to promote better communication and engagement with affected communities to ensure that well-informed messages reach the public. At the same time, they need to maintain their own identity and integrity.
- 4 Instead of over-relying on traditional media for fundraising and publicity, aid agencies should invest more resources in developing strong social media campaigns for humanitarian action and expanding their networks to build a campaign base for action.

Key resources

Franks, S. (2013) *Reporting Disaster: Famine, Aid, Politics and the Media*, London: C. Hurst & Co.

Cooper, G. (2011) *From Their Own Correspondent? New Media and the Changes in Disaster Coverage: Lessons to be Learnt*, Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism

AFTER: Post-famine recovery

Lesson 9. It can take years to recover from asset loss due to famine.

Famine can have a major impact on people's lives for years afterwards, often changing permanently the way they live. Whilst it can never be the major preoccupation, putting in place measures to help people recover quickly from the effects of famine can have major benefits. Often this is framed as saving livelihoods as well as saving lives.

Destitution is a key part of the process from shock to starvation.⁷² It is also an outcome, whereby people have lost key productive assets and the ability to meet their minimum subsistence needs.⁷³ Restoring this capacity is clearly essential to recovery.

In his landmark essay on poverty and famines, Amartya Sen identified several groups who fell into destitution during the 1973–74 famine in the Wollo region of Ethiopia, including pastoralists, farm and day labourers, small land-owning cultivators, tenant cultivators, women in service occupations, weavers and other craftsmen and occupational beggars.⁷⁴ Pastoralists have been particularly hard hit in recent near-famines in Ethiopia, and in Somalia in 2011 the hardest hit groups were marginalised day labourers and small-scale riverine farmers⁷⁵ (see also Lesson 2).

For pastoralists, the traditional recovery response has been restocking. Much better is to put in place measures to help pastoralists before animals become worthless, such as animal camps or schemes to support prices. In the *Journal of Humanitarian Assistance*, Andy Catley and Adrian Cullis estimate the cost of commercial destocking in the Somali Region of Ethiopia at 29 times less than relief and restocking.⁷⁶

In the journal *Disasters*, Alison Pyle found that the resilience of households to famine in El Fasher in North Dafur, Sudan during the 1982–89 drought was not dependent on assets as the drought was severe enough to overwhelm and deplete the resources of even the wealthiest in the villages.⁷⁷ Factors that helped were access to labour, social networks and prior experience of coping with drought (especially knowledge of labour opportunities in the provincial capital). Food aid in Turkana County in Kenya led to a downward trend in sales of livestock in 1995, leading Jennifer Bush in *Disasters* to conclude that people could preserve their assets if relief supplies were sufficient.⁷⁸

In the *IDS Bulletin*, Jeremy Swift notes that as early as 300BC the Indian book of statecraft *The Arthashastra* was recommending the setting up of 'Food-for-work public works programmes "such as building forts or irrigation works"'.⁷⁹ Evidence from numerous responses in South Asia demonstrate that access to work during famine and emergency can help prevent asset loss, or help people recover faster. Access to credit may also be a factor.

More recently, there has been a lot of policy work in the area of resilience.⁸⁰ This broadly looks at whether famine and food insecurity can be prevented through helping with coping strategies, or achieving transformative changes in people's ability to withstand shocks. This forms part of a longer tradition of looking at the linkages between relief and development.⁸¹ Scalable 'shock-responsive safety nets' (such as Ethiopia's PSNP) and basic services are part of this new line of thinking.

In the *IDS Bulletin*, Susanna Davies cautions that what appear to be short-term coping strategies can in fact be longer-term, more permanent adaptations to a deteriorating food security situation.⁸² Johan Pottier and James Fairhead demonstrated in their work on the 1984 famine in Bwisha, North Kivu, Democratic Republic of Congo, that permanent changes in cropping, diet, trade and social relations had resulted.⁸³ Recovery, if it could be called such, was as difficult for some groups as the famine itself.

Whilst there is less evidence on the impact of policy measures, it is clear that some relaxation of rules takes place in times of great hardship to allow people more coping opportunities. This ranges from allowing tree cutting for charcoal sales to turning a blind eye to contraband, or the tacit facilitation of migration.

LESSONS LEARNED

- 1 Famine can lead to destitution and permanent livelihood changes. Recovery efforts should support new livelihood options as well as trying to recover old ones.
- 2 Action in advance of famines such as commercial destocking, and the trade infrastructure to facilitate this, can both preserve assets and help people cope.
- 3 Asset holdings may not be the only factor in surviving famine, or even the most relevant. Access to employment and social capital are as – if not more – important.
- 4 Public works projects are an excellent way of providing additional labour opportunities.
- 5 Policy measures – either on an emergency basis or the relaxation of certain prescriptions – may also have significant benefits in helping people cope and recover faster.
- 6 Finally, perhaps the most crucial lesson is the one that always seems to be forgotten most quickly: the aftermath of a famine is the best time for reflection on (a) why the famine happened, (b) what went right and what went wrong in the humanitarian response effort, and (c) putting in place mechanisms, institutions and resources to 'famine-proof' vulnerable communities in order to ensure that the famine cycle is not repeated again a few years later.

Key resources

Catley, A. and Cullis, A. (2012) 'Money to Burn? Comparing the Costs and Benefits of Drought Response in Pastoralist Areas of Ethiopia', *Journal of Humanitarian Assistance*, Boston MA: Feinstein International Center, Tufts University

Devereux, S. (2003) *Conceptualising Destitution*, IDS Working Paper 216, Brighton: IDS

'Resilience Scan' on ODI website (www.odi.org)

Lesson 10. Preventing future famines requires strengthening accountability mechanisms.

Famines in the twenty-first century are sociopolitical crises rather than natural disasters. In most cases famine can be prevented through timely action, either on the part of national authorities or by international actors. When famine is used deliberately as a method of war, prevention may not be possible, but arguably those responsible can be held to account.

Joanna Macrae and Anthony Zwi categorise famines as acts of commission or acts of omission – they are either deliberately created, or no action is taken to prevent them.⁸⁴ In both cases there is an inherent notion of responsibility. In her chapter in *The New Famines*, Jenny Edkins proposes re-politicising famine, or mass starvation as she prefers it to be called, ‘from natural disaster to crime against humanity’.⁸⁵ She suggests the question, ‘Who committed the famine?’ should be asked, and ‘Who were the victims?’⁸⁶ Amartya Sen has argued that famines do not happen in democracies, or rather that leaders can almost always afford to stop people starving should they choose to do so.⁸⁷ It is only when people in positions of power have lost touch with those who might starve (and have no political stake in their wellbeing) that acts of omission can occur.

Alex de Waal has written extensively on this subject, including in his book *Famine Crimes*. In a 2017 article for the *London Review of Books*, he argues that various efforts to create the crime of ‘faminogenesis’, or deliberate mass starvation have failed due to complexity and lack of political will.⁸⁸ Proving a deliberate act of mass starvation is complex because of the other factors that might be involved – crop failures, market failures, actions of various sides in conflict, and so on. Political will is lacking because the great powers wish to reserve weapons such as blockades and sieges, and thus are loathe to criminalise them. USAID administrator Andrew Natsios famously declared there would be no ‘famine on my watch’, which there was not, despite famine conditions existing in Ethiopia during that period.

Paul Howe and Stephen Devereux have proposed a ‘famine accountability matrix’ that identifies who is responsible at each stage of the famine process, including prediction and prevention.⁸⁹ They propose a graded approach whereby famines caused by acts of omission would incur lower sanctions than acts of commission, with mass starvation the most serious. Adopting such an approach might begin to disentangle the inevitable post-crisis blame game where responsibility is never established and accountability is never enforced.

Dan Maxwell and colleagues reached a similar conclusion in a special issue of *Global Food Security* following the 2011 Somalia famine: the one underlying cause of the Somalia famine was accountability failures, a deficit that must be addressed to prevent future famines.⁹⁰ Writing in the same journal, Peter Salama and colleagues argued that, ‘the next important step for the international community

may be to ensure a clearer and more robust link between data and accountability for action in humanitarian response'.⁹¹

There are several avenues that exist in terms of the law. There is already a significant body of work by UN Rapporteurs on the right to food. There are prohibitions against the use of starvation as a method of war in International Humanitarian Law (in particular article 54 of the Geneva Convention Additional Protocols of 1977). Perhaps most significantly – or most concretely – there are countries that have either explicit or implicit 'anti-famine political contracts', such as India and Ethiopia. This latter certainly serves as an enforceable model in countries where there is a degree of political accountability.

Writers such as Jenny Edkins, David Keen and Alex de Waal go further, calling for mass starvation to be added to the list of crimes against humanity, and for perpetrators to be prosecuted at the International Criminal Court.

LESSONS LEARNED

- 1 When famine is used deliberately as a method of war, all efforts should be made to hold those responsible accountable for their crimes.
- 2 Where there is political will, famines – even deliberate famines – can be prevented. Public pressure and advocacy on political leaders is important to trigger this.
- 3 The body of law surrounding the use of famine as a method of war needs development so that eventually mass starvation is considered a war crime.

Key resources

Edkins, J. (2007) 'The Criminalisation of Mass Starvations: From Natural Disaster to Crime Against Humanity', chapter 3 in Devereux, S. (ed.), *The New Famines: Why Famines Persist in an Era of Globalisation*, London: Routledge

Sen, A. (1999) *Development as Freedom*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

de Waal, A. (2017) 'The Nazis Used It, We Use It', *London Review of Books* 39.12: 9–12

Notes

- 1 de Waal, A. (2017) 'The Nazis Used It, We Use It', *London Review of Books* 39.12: 9–12.
- 2 Sen, A. (1981) *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- 3 Devereux, S. (1993) *Theories of Famine*, London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- 4 A well-known case in point being the Dutch 'hunger winter' during the Second World War.
- 5 Sen, A. (1990) 'Food, Economics and Entitlement', in A. Sen and J. Drèze (eds), *The Political Economy of Hunger, Volume 1: Entitlement and Well-Being*, Oxford: Clarendon Press: 38.
- 6 Checci, F. and Robinson, C. (2013) *Mortality among Populations of Southern and Central Somalia Affected by Severe Food Insecurity and Famine During 2010–2012*, a study commissioned by FAO/FSNAU and FEWS NET from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and the Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health: 8.
- 7 Salama, P. and Collins, S. (1998) Article in *Field Exchange* of the Emergency Nutrition Network.
- 8 Swift, J. (1993) 'Understanding and Preventing Famine and Famine Mortality', *IDS Bulletin* 24.4: 1–16.
- 9 Macintyre, K. (2002) 'Famine and the Female Famine Advantage', in T. Dyson and C.Ó. Gráda (eds), *Famine Demography: Lessons from the Past and Present*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- 10 Devereux, S. (2006) *Vulnerable Livelihoods in Somali Region, Ethiopia*, IDS Research Report 57, Brighton: IDS: 11.
- 11 Devereux, S. (2010) 'Better Marginalised than Incorporated? Pastoralist Livelihoods in Somali Region, Ethiopia', *European Journal of Development Research* 22.5: 693.
- 12 Majid, N. and McDowell, S. (2012) 'Hidden Dimensions of the Somalia Famine', *Global Food Security*, Special Edition on the Somalia famine.
- 13 See for instance Jaspars, S. and Maxwell, D. (2009) *Food Security and Livelihoods Programming in Conflict: A Review*, Network Paper 65, London: Humanitarian Practice Network at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI).
- 14 Young, H. and Jaspers, S. (1995) *Nutrition Matters: People Food and Famine*, Oxford: Practical Action Publishing: 61–79.
- 15 Deng, L.B. (2002) 'The Sudan Famine of 1998: Unfolding of the Global Dimension', *IDS Bulletin* 33.4: 28–38.
- 16 For instance, in Somalia in 2011, the humanitarian imperative was derailed by a political prioritisation of withholding material assistance from terrorist groups (Maxwell, D. and Majid, N. (2014) *Famine in Somalia: Competing Imperatives, Collective Failures, 2011–12*, London: Hurst Publishers).
- 17 Drèze, J. (1990) 'Famine Prevention in India', in J. Drèze and A. Sen (eds) *The Political Economy of Hunger, Volume II: Famine Prevention*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
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