DEMOCRATIC POLITICAL PROCESS AND THE FIGHT AGAINST FAMINE

IDS Working Paper 107

Alex de Waal

SUMMARY

This paper examines the linkages between certain sorts of political processes and institutions and the prevention of famine. It begins with an examination of the 'democracy prevents famine' hypothesis, which is found to be in need of elaboration. Democratic political institutions and processes *can* play a lead role in the struggle against famine, but this depends upon the development of political coalitions in the countries concerned, and the strategies they use. In Africa, the challenge of democratic anti-famine politics is complicated by the nature of famines, the political history of anti-famine measures, the prevalence of war, and the level of international aid. The paper develops the concept of a 'political contract' against famine.

ISBN 1 85864 300 7

INTRODUCTION

Amartya Sen has famously remarked that famines do not occur in countries with democratic political institutions.

> The diverse political freedoms that are available in a democratic state, including regular elections, free newspapers and freedom of speech, must be seen as the real force behind the elimination of famines. Here again, it seems that one set of freedoms—to criticize, publish and vote—are usually linked with other types of freedoms, such as the freedom to escape starvation and famine mortality.[1]

This observation is commonly simplified and presented as 'there is no famine in democracies'. Sometimes it is rather smugly presented as an endorsement of liberal electoral systems plus a free press as both necessary and sufficient for the conquest of poverty—and as a rejoinder to those who argue that socialism in China or Eastern Europe made great strides in combating hunger. The reality is not so simple. In this paper I suggest that while Sen's claim is broadly true, the reality is rather more complex. Examining these complexities helps us to identify the specific political mechanisms that help protect against famine — and to identify the appropriate political changes that may be necessary in famine-prone countries.

While there is no shortage of historical and contemporary material to analyse, it is not easy to test the 'democracy prevents famine' hypothesis. There are important counter-examples, which require us to make some major clarifications and revisions to the hypothesis. The major difficulty is that democracy has often failed to play a role in preventing chronic hunger—indeed, as Sen himself as repeatedly pointed out, democratic India has conspicuously failed to overcome widespread undernutrition. What is the dividing line between this extensive chronic poverty and hunger, and the phenomenon of famine? In addition, demonstrating an empirical association between liberal democratic institutions and the absence of famine is not enough to prove the causal link. We need to investigate further and detail some of the exact processes and mechanisms that have enabled democratic institutions to play a pivotal role in famine prevention. The 'democracy prevents famine' argument seems to assume that just because liberal institutions *can* be used to protect famine vulnerable people, it automatically follows that they *will*. It implies that, in a free press, journalists and editors will automatically be concerned with the threat of famine and will use this concern to push for effective

1 (Sen 1990)

governmental action, and that electors will reward representatives who protect them against famine, but vote out those who fail to do so. These assumptions do not always hold true. In short, we need to problematise both 'famine' and 'democracy' before a sensible analysis can be made of the 'democracy prevents famines' hypothesis.

This paper will attempt to identify what is meant by famine, disaggregating the components of famine and identifying some of the main variants. It will also try to identify some of the elements in political democracy that make it possible to prevent famine. This does not amount to a theorisation of democracy—such a task is beyond the scope of a modest paper—but rather it is a preliminary identification of some of the broadly democratic processes, mechanisms and institutions that can serve in the struggle against famine.

War is now the commonest cause of famine, and no theorisation of famine or the struggle against it can ignore warfare. This paper covers the by-now familiar ground of the various ways in which war creates or contributes to famine.

This paper is primarily concerned with Africa, as the continent most susceptible to famine, but some cases are drawn from Asia and some conclusions may be relevant to protection against famine in countries such as Bangladesh and North Korea.

THEORISING FAMINE

Sen has pointed out that most definitions of famine are in fact pithy descriptions of what happens during famine, usually based on a few selected extreme cases.[2] They are not much help in diagnosing when a borderline case actually counts as famine, and they are little better when it comes to identifying the component parts of famine.

Famine is in fact extraordinarily difficult to define. Most definitions break down when one tries to use them — chiefly because many cases diagnosed as 'famine' do not meet textbook definitions, or because the definitions are too subjective and give no guide for how they are to be used. The definitions of other comparable terms does not help. 'Poverty' can be defined by income or assets. 'Drought' can be defined meteorologically. An epidemic can be defined by an epidemiologist. In all these cases, there is a certain mismatch between arbitrary scientific cut-off points and popular perceptions. But for 'famine', there is no discipline that can lay claim to the right of definition. Demographers, or agricultural or nutritional statisticians may aspire to take precedence, but no

2 (Sen 1981)

definition based on excess mortality, food supply, food consumption, or nutritional status alone is workable. Everyone can diagnose a famine when they encounter one, but identifying its crucial elements is rather more difficult. One of the main reasons for this is that statistics (on death rates, on food supplies) tend to confound lay impressions — for example the disastrous Sahel famine of the early 1970s passed without measurable excess mortality, while several major famines are famous for having occurred without a decline in food availability. A comparison between the measured mortality rates in different districts of Bengal in the 1940s and the recorded impressions of government administrators confirms that observers' estimates for the gravity and nature of famine can be highly unreliable.

One of the important reasons for needing a workable definition of famine is that the distinction between chronic poverty and acute famine is essential for any attempt to examine the 'democracy prevents famine' hypothesis. This is because no-one argues that democracy prevents poverty (at least not in the short run). While it is easy to identify the extreme cases, especially in South Asia where major famines are dramatic, visible and rapid onset events, there are many instances of famine, especially in Africa, that are borderline. A number of African societies have lived for years in a sort of economic twilight, suffering extreme dislocation and poverty, and occasionally attracting international media and relief attention that points to starvation and famine. Some communities, for example in Southern Sudan, will argue that they have suffered famine continuously for several years. (In their languages, the words 'hunger' and 'famine' are usually cognates, so that 'famine' need not have the meaning of a sudden outbreak of severe hunger.)

Anthropological research has found that local definitions and diagnoses of famine are commonly more subtle and complex than those of outsiders, such as nutritionists and economists. This is not surprising. But the concepts used by one community (e.g. in Bangladesh) may not transfer to another (e.g. in west Africa) with very different social structures and economic history. It is notable however that all distinguish in some way between chronic poverty and hunger and more exceptional outbreaks of famine.

In short, famines are not a naturally constituted object, subject to a scientific definition. Nor are they just a convenience of disciplinary nomenclature. But while there can be no precise definition of famine workable across the world, and no diagnosis that is not subject to some contestation, it is possible to identify what famines have in common, and thereby begin to develop a general account of how they may be caused or prevented.

Components of Famine

The most profitable approach to the definition of famine is to disaggregate the components of famine, and argue that what we identify as famines tend to combine many, sometimes all, of these elements in varying degrees. This allows us to combine the insights of different famine-affected peoples across the world and the analyses of the various relevant disciplines.[3]

The four main components are:

1. Hunger. This includes subjective feelings of severe and prolonged hunger, the socially-defined going without acceptable food, and the measurable fact of undernutrition.

2. Impoverishment. This includes loss of livelihood, income and assets, and other components of increased poverty. For most rural people threatened with famine, the most concrete fears arising from famine are those associated with the threat of destitution.

3. Social breakdown. Famine commonly has social symptoms such as distress migration, splitting up of families, etc. For many famine-affected communities, these are not 'symptoms' of famine, but are intrinsic elements of the unpleasant experience itself.

4. Mortality. Many famines are accompanied by increased levels of mortality, usually concentrated among vulnerable groups such as children, the aged, and migrants. (Interestingly, in all famines for which demographic information is available, death rates are higher among men than women.) The highest death rates are invariably found in camps and other concentrations of destitute people. When social disruption is such that there is mass migration to camps, death rates tend to shoot up.

A fifth component of famine must also be mentioned, namely, the resistance of individuals, families and groups to each of the above. The study of social and economic 'coping strategies' has become an important subdiscipline since the 1980s drought-famines in Africa, during which many rural people showed a resilience in the face of extreme food shortages that astounded many observers and aid providers. For example, in western Sudan in 1984-5, journalists and aid workers predicted deaths in the millions. In fact, excess mortality was probably about 200,000 — unacceptably high, but well short of the figures confidently forecast. (The exaggeration of imminent famine mortality is in fact a

3 (de Waal 1989)

commonplace: predictions of mass deaths reaching a million or more are a staple of relief agency funding appeals, but are invariably erroneous.)

It is important to note that famine can occur without all of the above factors being present. Some famines have struck relatively asset-rich societies (a classic case being the Dutch Hunger Winter of 1944); some have occurred without social breakdown; many have occurred without excess mortality.

The nature of a famine, and its impact, is therefore shaped by the social and economic responses to the threats by the affected population. Most research indicates that coping strategies are primarily geared to the protection of livelihoods and assets. This is usually because the processes of impoverishment are predictable and thus to some extent preventable, while mortality in famines is chiefly a function of epidemic disease and health crises, which are inherently less predictable and less controllable by those affected by famines.

Severity of Famine

A second dimension of analysis of famine relates to the degree of severity. This is not a simple linear deterioration from mild to severe. Rather, as famines unfold, they can cross thresholds into qualitatively different kinds of disaster. Some analysts have compared the onset of 'outright' famine to the difference between 'ice and freezing water.'[4] This has been noted in South Asia and Ethiopia, at the point in which an affected society reaches a critical point and suddenly (to use a different metaphor) 'crashes'.

In a simplified manner, we can identify three different degrees of famine severity:

1. Famines involving primarily hunger and impoverishment.

2. Famines in which there are elevated rates of mortality.

3. Famines in which there are spectacularly high death rates alongside severe social dislocation and collapse.

Standard English language *definitions* of famine refer to types 2 and 3, whereas most local definitions include type 1 (sometimes explicitly making the distinction between the different kinds). But *diagnoses* of famine usually agree in including all the types.

4 (Rivers et al., 1976)

It is important to note that the difference between these various kinds of famine does not lie solely in the extent of loss of entitlement to food, but also in the factors creating the famine and the socio-economic response to those factors. If a famine shifts from a less severe, type one famine, to a more severe type two, it may be because the affected population's coping strategy involves widespread migration which changes disease patterns and thus increases the incidence of disease, thereby heightening death rates. A shift to a type three famine may occur because large groups are concentrated in relief shelters, perhaps because their home areas have been devastated by war or because they have been forced into the camps by armed groups. The 'crashing' of some agrarian societies (such as parts of highland Ethiopia in 1973 and again in 1984) suddenly brings large number of very poor peasant families on to the road in search of food and money, creating a dramatic crisis of displacement, congregation around relief shelters, and rapid spread of infectious disease.

Responses to famine change over time, and affected people learn. The sad experience of relief shelters in western Sudan in 1984-5 led many rural people to avoid migration to towns in the drought and famine of 1990-1. This probably helped keep death rates down, although (in common with most contemporary African famines) there are no reliable figures for mortality on which to base any meaningful conclusions.

Types of Famine

The final dimension to the theorisation of famine concerns the type of famine. A simplified typology of famines can be attempted, based on the kind of society affected and the main causal elements.

1. Pastoral. These are famines that affect herders. Usually their short-term cause is drought and resulting lack of pasture and water for animals. The longer-term cause is alienation of pastures for farms and plantations, and restrictions on nomadic movements. These are slow-onset famines. Because of the mobility of pastoralists, these famines tend to cover wide areas, but often they are invisible outside the pastoral areas. They may be extremely protracted. Coping strategies are relatively more important than relief interventions. As well as relief distributions, effective responses can include buying up livestock at guaranteed prices and providing credit.

2. Agrarian/smallholder. These are the paradigmatic African famines, affecting scattered farming populations. Commonly, drought-related production failures are the proximate cause, with deeper causes including exclusion from land, exploitative economic relationships, etc. These are also usually slow-onset famines. They can often be highly localised, and the more severe famines are

often akin to a series of interconnected localised famines in which each locality is unable to assist its neighbour. Often there is an 'epicentre', from which waves of grain price rises and distress migrations move out. Only severe agrarian famines become visible outside the affected area. Coping strategies are usually much more important than relief programmes. A wide range of programmes and policies, ranging from land preservation to prepositioning food stocks, can help prevent such famines, and a range of responses including food relief and labour-based relief projects can help ameliorate the effects.

3. Class-based/occupational. In this category, wage labourers are often the worst hit occupation. These are the paradigmatic Asian famines, in which whole classes of people (farm labourers, artisans, fishermen) are suddenly rendered destitute by a collapse in the demand for their labour or a rise in the price of staple food. Some recent African famines have become closer to this type. These famines tend to be rapid onset and cover a wide area, selectively affecting certain groups. They can be highly visible, with affected people flooding towns, and townspeople themselves suffering. Political visibility and newsworthiness are certainly factors in the extent of political concern about these famines. In these famines, coping strategies are less effective, and state intervention is far more necessary. Grain price controls and employment guarantee schemes are the most effective relief measures.

4. Wartime. Wartime famines are usually associated with a catastrophic collapse of the livelihood base, either by physical destruction or confiscation, or by severe restrictions on movement and economic activity. The nature of the famine depends very much on the nature of the war and the determination with which the belligerent parties pursue their famine-creating strategies. These famines can be very rapid, or can take years to develop (perhaps affected societies that are not normally famine-prone); they can be highly localised, or can cover a huge area. Occasionally, coping strategies can be forcibly prevented by belligerents, leaving affected people wholly reliant on relief. Sometimes these famines are almost completely invisible—deliberately kept that way by the belligerents. A more detailed theorisation of war famines will be attempted later in this paper.

Note that many famines are compounds of the above. Agrarian famines are commonly, though not always, associated with pastoral famines. Grain price rises caused by an agrarian or wartime famine can cause a secondary class-based famine in adjoining areas, for example nearby towns. In Ethiopia in 1984/5, some of the highest mortality was recorded in areas which did not themselves suffer a major production failure, but which were suddenly (and to their residents, inexplicably) struck by high food prices and immigration of destitute labourers.

At a high level of generality, we can note that the characteristic 'Asian' famines that have given rise to the most sophisticated famine theorising have been class-based, rapid-onset, and high visibility. With coping strategies relatively ineffective, state action is important—and such famines sometimes have a dramatic political impact. Most African famines have been more locality based, slow-onset, low visibility, and with greater roles for coping strategies and less for public action. This contributes to their lesser political impact. This contrast is important when it comes to explaining the role of political processes in famine creation and prevention.

DEMOCRACY AS AN INOCULATION AGAINST FAMINE

Liberal democracy is no antidote to homelessness or widespread chronic undernutrition or the selective murder of girl babies. The examples of the U.S. and India demonstrate this amply. Why should it be an inoculation against famine? The answer is that it isn't — at least not simply.

First, there are important examples and counter-examples from the history of famines that indicate that the relationship is not a simple one. Second, the means whereby democracy does (often) act as an antidote to famine demonstrate the complexities of the relationship. Amartya Sen himself has identified the 'informational' and 'incentive' roles of democracy in protecting against famine[5], but comparative analysis indicates that there are other important factors as well.

Famine and Democracy: Cases from History

The famous, paradigmatic cases of democratic institutions preventing famine are India and Botswana. Each of these demands a careful historical discussion in its own right.[6] In summary, however, it is important to notice that the mechanisms whereby democratic mobilisation and democratic institutions prevented famine were historically constituted. In the case of India, the critical events occurred over nearly a century in the later colonial period. First, in the 1880s, the colonial government realised it needed to intervene to prevent mass deaths from famine, and began to develop the famine codes. The motivation was political — to maintain security — rather than benevolent. Second, at about the turn of the century, the failures of the famine codes to prevent disastrous famines became an embarrassment in

5 (Sen 1999:178-184)
6 (Dreze and Sen 1990)

Britain and a danger in India (where famine became the rallying cry of the Congress), leading to a thorough overhaul of anti-famine policy. Third, in 1943, the British failed to prevent a needless famine in Bengal, causing at least one million deaths and decisively undermining the Raj's aspirations to legitimacy. As a result, one of the main imperatives of the independent Indian government was to prevent famine. In the case of Botswana, a comparable sequence of events between the 1970s and 1990s created the political (and electoral) imperative for an efficient drought relief policy.

Some of the counter-examples, in which democratic or liberal institutions have failed to prevent famine include the following:

1. Bihar, India, 1966-7. Although mass deaths were prevented, a famine in the sense of widespread hunger, destitution and social breakdown occurred. This reflects the wider phenomenon that the Indian government has failed to tackle the extent of chronic immiseration in the subcontinent, and the economic processes that create endemic hunger.

2. Bangladesh, 1974. The liberal institutions failed to prevent this famine. They were, however, extremely precarious in the wake of the war of 1972 and before the imminent reversion to authoritarian rule.

3. Sudan, 1986-8. The institutions of liberal democracy rule in Khartoum failed to prevent a disastrous famine in the war-affected South and a mild famine in western Sudan.

4. Ireland, 1845-9. The great Irish famines of these years occurred despite the existence of a parliamentary system and a free press.

These cases can all be taken as exceptions that prove the rule. In case one, severe famine was prevented, but undernutrition and poverty were not—as is the case for independent India as a whole. This compels us to analyse the different positions of 'famine' and 'poverty' in Indian political discourse. In case two, the institutions were democratic and liberal in name only. In cases three and four, the affected populace was not regarded as full citizens of the country by the government and also by the most vocal and influential citizens. The affected people were not only in no position to defend their own rights, but they were regarded as undeserving by their rulers. But this begs the question: what are 'real' democratic institutions?

An interesting parallel here is the argument that democracies do not go to war with one another. While this may be true of mature, capitalist liberal democracies, the generalisation holds much less for new or transitional democracies. In countries in which a newly elected civilian government is endeavouring to secure its power, it may be tempted to play the nationalist card, and provoke national or ethnic conflict. It is arguable that it is new, insecure transitional democracies that are most vulnerable to armed conflict.[7]

By a similar argument, it could be claimed that insecure or immature democracies may be more vulnerable to famine than stable authoritarian governments. This could come about because an insecure parliamentary government feels compelled to respond to the most vocal constituencies, ignoring more marginal ones. Thus in the case of Sudan, the authoritarian regime of President Jaafar Nimeiri could afford to ignore the most traditionally powerful constituencies in Sudan during the drought of the early 1970s, and respond to the needs of the remoter rural areas. But the parliamentary government of Prime Minister Sadiq el Mahdi in the late 1980s, while being acutely sensitive to the demands of the urban populace, ignored the needs of rural people and especially Southerners—against whom a vicious war was being fought. Thus in 1988 the Sudan Government was so accountable to the people of Khartoum that it had to forgo a major agreement with the IMF in order to maintain a subsidy on wheat for urban consumption, but could wholly ignore the starving people of Bahr el Ghazal in the South.[8]

While Sudan is an extreme case, this analysis points to a general problem that can occur with representative systems of government: certain groups have louder voices than others, and minorities can be excluded completely.

Why Should Democracy Prevent Famine?

The assumption behind the claim that democracy prevents famine is that civil and political rights — to free speech, to free association, to elect representatives of one's choice — contribute to the protection of social and economic rights — the right to food and livelihood. Certainly, one of the major uses of civil and political liberties has been to promote social, economic and cultural rights. Those engaged in the women's suffrage movement, the anti-colonial independence movements, and the civil rights movement, did not claim their civil and political rights solely for their own sake. They also believed that achieving these liberties would help them to attain better livelihoods, economic advancement, improved education, and more respect for their cultures and societies. The struggles for the different categories of rights were indivisible. In mature capitalist democracies, politicians appeal to voters' economic self-interest, and many people cast their votes because they hope they can better their economic position. It

7 (Mansfield and Snyder 1995:79-97)
8 (African Rights 1997)

would seem logical that citizens of a democracy would use their civil and political liberties to ensure that they are protected against famine.

But it is not so simple. Gross abuses of social, economic and cultural rights can exist in democracies. Homelessness in the U.S. and chronic poverty and undernutrition in India are two examples. In these cases, it seems that citizens have failed to use their civil and political liberties successfully to achieve basic social and economic rights. Why is famine different? Is it that famine is a more profound abuse than poverty or homelessness? That it affects the entire society and not just certain unfortunate sections? Both these seem implausible as complete answers. More likely, it seems that historically, famine has become a salient political issue in certain countries in a way that these other deprivations have not. Meanwhile, other issues — lack of political independence, racial discrimination, land alienation—have often achieved a comparable salience.

The basic reason why a government prevents famine is because its interests — the power of its leaders — depends on it. There is a political *incentive* to prevent famine. Elected politicians fear the retribution of their constituents in the polling booths, and hope for the electoral reward of successfully delivering famine prevention. Civil servants fear disgrace or demotion of their failure to prevent famine is exposed, while hoping that they can use the opportunities of a famine emergency to prove their capabilities and win promotion. The democracy-dictatorship distinction is of course not clear cut. There can be states with democratic processes and institutions that are not seeking the support of certain constituencies, and therefore are indifferent to their welfare (or lack of it), while some authoritarian states can derive their legitimacy from their reduction of poverty and prevention of famine.

A secondary reason is that in a democracy, where political opposition is allowed and dissent can be openly expressed, the *information* about an impending or actual famine cannot be suppressed.

In this context it is important to note that state action is usually necessary to prevent famines. Market solutions alone do not resolve the problem of famine—in fact, as much research has demonstrated, well-functioning markets are quite compatible with famines. There is a clear locus of responsibility for prevention and intervention — the state — which can also be called to account.

What mechanisms can make this work? Here we can distinguish between a variety of processes. There is a fundamental distinction to be made between 'primary' and 'secondary' mobilisation in pursuit of rights.

- Primary mobilisation. This is when people mobilise in pursuit of their own interests. These are mass movements. Their aims may be expressed in a rights idiom, or not. Cases include the women's movement, the labour movement, the U.S. civil rights movement, the anti-colonial movements in various countries under imperial rule.

- Secondary activism. This is the activities of specialist institutions to promote human rights, democracy and other goals. Organisations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Oxfam, etc., do not mobilise a mass constituency as much as use the skills of professionals and the power of the media to put pressure on politicians. This has been called 'mobilising shame.'

As a general rule, effective political action against famine requires both primary and secondary mobilisation. Primary mobilisation is essential because politicians heed the logic of numbers. Under any competitive electoral system, representatives cannot afford to ignore the complaints of large numbers. Famines—particularly when they involve large numbers of destitute people converging on towns—are also a major threat to security, and governments must take heed. But primary mobilisation alone is insufficient, because those simply seeking food can be provided with handouts, which does not amount to an anti-famine measure. Secondary activism, in the form of articulate leadership that can identify the issues and link them politically, is also essential.

Famine must be made an issue of legitimate political concern. This means disarming those who like to present it as purely a natural disaster and those who prefer to see it just as a challenge to charity. The issue of famine needs to be sustained politically even when there is no famine, and complex measures need to be instituted well in advance of any future crises. Economic, nutritional, epidemiological, agricultural and other expertise is necessary to change famine from being merely a charitable demand into a political cause. This is not easy. However, the issue of famine is also a case in which a farsighted political leadership can link the basic material interests of large numbers of people to other political agendas, such as national independence or major economic reform.

Coalition building is central to creating an anti-famine politics. The hungry rarely organise themselves, and their hunger is rarely of direct interest to other social groups except philanthropists who are notoriously resistant to political mobilisation of any kind. Those who take up the issue of famine must be ready to enter the political arena directly and make famine and related issues an electoral question; they must be ready to push to make commissions of inquiry and other mechanisms of accountability into a reality.

Successful anti-famine coalitions have often linked fighting famine with other goals. In colonial India, the nationalist leaders of Congress were at least as interested in political independence as in the conquest of famine, but the strategic alliance they struck with the masses on the issue of famine benefited both. In Botswana, relatively wealthy farmers and herders have derived substantial benefits from the drought relief programme.

One of the most unfortunate byproducts of the international humanitarian industry has been the way in which secondary mobilisation around famine has been undermined. Much of the international media (especially television) and most specialist international institutions have endeavoured to depoliticise famine. This will be discussed more below.

Mobilisation against famine has several interlinked goals. If achieved together, they amount to a 'political contract' against famine.

1. To ensure a timely response to the threat of famine. In many countries there are various forms of famine early warning systems, but there needs to be a *political* trigger to action if these are to work effectively. A coalition of affected people plus professional groups (including journalists, trade unions, farmers' associations, academics, civil servants etc) can help provide that political trigger.

2. To help create effective anti-famine mechanisms. Having the political will to prevent famine is essential but not sufficient. It must be augmented by a sound economic understanding of the causes of famine, combined with sound nutritional, public health, agricultural, environmental, migration, and other policies. This requires investment in technical expertise. If a government cannot take effective action, then it has a strong incentive to ignore or minimise the threat of famine.

3. To educate the public. It is important that political mobilisation does not become widely separated from the more technical debates. It would be rather ironically pointless to have sophisticated famine prevention systems in place, but a popular demand for just free food distribution. Therefore the public must be well informed. This must begin with a well-informed press and legislature. The regrettable tendency for the international media and western legislatures to confuse famine prevention with the provision of international relief is the sort of error that should be avoided.

4. To ensure that *all* citizens and residents are entitled to protection against famine. One of the recurrent problems in many democratic systems is that majoritarian democracy creates permanently disenfranchised minorities who may be the first in line to suffer from famine. One of the dangers of equating 'democracy' with just free elections and the dominance of a majority (often an ethnic majority), is that a state can claim to be 'democratic' but still fail to provide the basis for human rights including protection against famine. A political mobilisation against famine must ensure that, just as all are equal before the law, all must be equally entitled to protection against famine.

5. To enforce accountability. This can be done in various ways. Preferably, all should be employed.

- Electoral accountability of members of parliament, parties and governments to their electors, including all citizens with voting rights, and also organised groups such as trade unions, farmers' associations, etc.
- Wider democratic accountability, represented by public opinion, letters and editorials in newspapers, etc. A free and informed press is important for educating the public and politicians, acting as an early-warning system, and evaluating performance. A wide and well-informed public debate at various levels is essential. There must be a demand for good information about famine, creating mechanisms for supplying that information.
- Legal accountability, especially relevant where there are laws and codes of practice to establish effective measures against famine, which can be made real through the courts or through commissions of inquiry. The possibility of enacting legislation to criminalise aspects of famine creation deserves close attention, though it is probably more important and relevant to try and ensure the thorough use of existing sanctions relating to negligence etc.
- Professional accountability of public officials, health workers, planners and managers, and the technical accountability of the anti-famine system itself. Lessons must be learned and lesson learning must be enforced. Whatever the political will, famine will only be defeated if the right economic and managerial measures are implemented. Accountability on this front can be exercised through formal evaluations or through peer pressure. There must be political pressure to find the right economic and other measures necessary for famine prevention, and pressure to ensure that they are correctly implemented and evaluated. In non-democratic systems, professionals may be able to identify good anti-famine measures, but they will not necessarily be the political pressure to implement them. In a poorly informed democratic system, there will be pressure to respond, but not necessarily in a truly effective way.

In conclusion, more than just 'democracy' is required to prevent famine. In fact, liberal political institutions and popular mobilisation appear to be more important than simple electoral democracy. Famine must be politicised in a democratic manner, but there are also technical and educational requirements that need to be met for an effective famine prevention system, and a political or even legal obligation to prevent famine afflicting all citizens. The above paragraphs outline a particular set of mechanisms, processes and pressures which amount to an 'anti-famine political contract.' The idea of an 'anti-famine political contract' refers to the specific mechanisms that can exist, usually within a democratic state, to prevent famine. The remainder of this paper is concerned with a series of questions about how such a political contract can be created and enforced.

Can there be Anti-Famine Political Contracts without Democracy?

Are there variants of anti-famine contracts that are not dependent upon electoral democracy, or even on peace? There are interesting examples of effective anti-famine measures that suggest this possibility, and also its shortcomings:

1. Communist China. The 1940s famine in Hunan was one of the events that helped discredit the nationalist government in China and bring the Communists to power. During the subsequent decades, the Communist government achieved remarkable success in combating rural poverty and undernutrition, so that life expectancy in China rose rapidly to near-western levels. However this otherwise excellent record was marred by the worst famine of the 20th century, during 1959-62, when as many as thirty million people perished.

2. In the early 1970s, a number of authoritarian governments in northeast Africa all implemented effective anti-famine measures. Sudan withstood the 1970s 'Sahelian' drought without suffering famine. The new revolutionary government in Ethiopia introduced far-reaching land reform measures in 1975 and set up the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission. The military government in Somalia responded energetically to the drought of 1974-5. In each of these cases, a combination of idealistic mass mobilisation and professional commitment by civil servants briefly created efficient anti-famine systems. But within a few years all had collapsed, and all three countries suffered severe famine in later years.

3. The Kenyan government responded rapidly and effectively to the drought of 1984, using rural relief distributions as an opportunity to rebuild the mass base of the ruling party KANU. Despite a greater proportional food deficit than either Ethiopia or Sudan at that time, famine was avoided. But the commitment to famine prevention was both uneven (pastoral groups continued to suffer severe famine) and circumstantial (the government has been markedly less energetic in responding to subsequent food crises).

4. Tigray, northern Ethiopia, during the war against the Dergue in the mid-1980s. In the face of a war directed against the civilian population that involved the creation of severe famine, the Tigrayan

> People's Liberation Front (TPLF) made famine relief and prevention its strategic priority. This helped gain the adherence of the great mass of the Tigrayan peasantry and thereby ensure victory. Since then, the ruling TPLF has invested much in the economic development of Tigray, and the struggle against poverty has figured high in the government's agenda. However, the weakness of democratic institutions nationally and the absence of a free press or competitive elections within Tigray region make the durability of this anti-famine contract open to question.

The first three cases all illustrate the basic point that any government can, if it so desires, take effective measures to combat famine and poverty. Most governments, if secure and stable, or if they are seeking to consolidate a power base among a constituency affected by famine, are likely to take such measures. However, in such cases, anti-famine measures are a privilege rather than a right. The affected people cannot enforce their demands, and if the priorities of the government change, then anti-famine programmes can melt away.

The final case — Tigray — is indicative of a wider phenomenon in which guerrilla armies under enlightened leadership rely on the support of the populace, and hence adopt social and economic programmes that serve the interests of the masses. Another example of this phenomenon is the National Resistance Army under Yoweri Museveni in Uganda. During the struggle, the fact that the guerrillas rely on the support of the people compels them to respond to the demands of the people, and this can make for an effective anti-famine political contract. However, other guerrilla armies have not followed this path. The Sudan People's Liberation Army is a case in point, which has done very little to protect the people of Southern Sudan from famine. In such cases, enlightened leadership, commitment to a social agenda and the development of some forms of representative institutions are key to the possibility of a political contract against famine (and indeed a political contract of any sort).

In conclusion, there can be anti-famine *commitments* and anti-famine *programmes* in the absence of democratic accountability, but an anti-famine *contract* requires the interested party — the people — to have some capacity to enforce the bargain. Liberal political systems provide a number of mechanisms that can help people to do that. In authoritarian systems, the only recourse is protest, either armed or unarmed.

WAR AND FAMINE

At the turn of the 21st century, the commonest cause of famine is war. The clearest connection between war and famine is that wars tend to presuppose lack of democracy. This is a complex subject but we can schematise:

1. Mature democracies are less warlike than authoritarian states and transitional or insecure democracies;

2. War undermines democratic systems because of the political stresses, the need for secrecy in government, and war usually entails a state of emergency and suspension of civil and political rights.

These factors imply that the democratic freedoms that protect against famine are likely to be weakened or non-existent in a country at war.

We can also examine the specific ways in which war creates famine. While war is even more resistant to theorising than famine, it has proved possible to catalogue some of the major means whereby war creates famine. These include:

- Diversion of resources to the warfront;
- Diversion of manpower to the warfront;
- Destruction of food by belligerent forces;
- Requisitioning or looting of food by belligerent forces;
- Destruction or looting of items necessary for food production or storage, including livestock, farms, seeds, etc;
- Rendering land unusable by use of land mines, poisoning wells, free-fire zones, etc.;
- Blocking or holding-up of food transport, either by outright prevention and blockade, or by other measures such as strict regulation or requiring food transports to move in convoy;
- Prevention of activities by the affected population essential for survival, including marketing livestock, migrating for work, foraging for wild foods, fishing, trading, etc.;
- Destroying marketing systems by strict control, regulation, or threat of attack on markets and traders;
- Forced removal of civilian populations;
- Blocking aid or stealing aid (although this garners most publicity it is usually the least important because of the low proportion of relief food in general consumption).

These various methods of creating famine tend to crystallise into several patterns:

1. Counter-insurgency famine. A government seeking to combat a rural insurgency commonly seeks to establish tight control over the rural population. Methods include relocation of scattered farms to

protected villages, control over trade and movement, control over food stores, destruction of farms and food stocks in remote areas where they may be used by guerrillas, etc. These measures can all amount to the creation of famine.

2. Destabilisation famine. A guerrilla force or government army may seek to destroy the social base of its adversary by so destablising the community that people can no longer live normal lives. In some wars, whole areas are ravaged in order to undermine the social base, economic power and authority of the adversary. Famine results.

3. Blockade famine. Guerrilla armies routinely besiege government-held towns, reducing them to starvation. The reverse occasionally occurs. Governments may also seek to isolate and blockade whole rebellious provinces. In inter-state wars, it is common for one country to try to cut off the shipping and overland trade routes of the other.

4. Ethnic cleansing famine. Starvation is one method used by ethnic cleansors, who pursue a strategy that is a mix of the above, with the aim of forcing an entire civil populace to relocate.

These categories are not wholly distinct and tend to overlap. For example, population removal for ethnic cleansing is commonly justified as a counter-insurgency measure.

Indirectly, war also contributes to famine. War tends to undermine democracy and the rule of law. By creating authoritarian or military governments, it thereby undermines the possibility of democratic action against famine.

We cannot ignore the stopping of war if we are concerned with the prevention of famine. Yet strategies for dealing with the two are usually disconnected. Some of the major economic components of war-affected societies that warrant attention include the following:

1. The self-reinforcing cycle of famine creation in war-stricken environments, in which certain groups seek to achieve security or even relative prosperity at the expense of others. The economics of primary accumulation and asset transfer in famine-stricken societies has recently received some attention. Private and public interests often coincide in famine creation. Where a government aims to create famine, it commonly encourages its servants to pursue their own interests at the same time. Famines create major opportunities for self-enrichment by those in positions of power. Military officers may collaborate with merchants — or become merchants themselves — to profit from the inflated prices of foodstuffs in besieged towns. They may also profit from the resale of

looted goods, or become engaged in protection rackets and other black market and profiteering activities. In extreme cases, war has become a highly profitable business, with the military and commercial sectors becoming highly integrated.

Major donors have long been concerned with military-commercial linkages. For example, the World Bank was highly critical of the Military Economic Board in Sudan. But such complexes tend to move underground when they have been formally abolished. Economic policies, especially for post-conflict societies, need to pay special attention to how to disengage warfare and trade, and dismantle military-commercial complexes.

2. The destabilising implications of poorly coordinated or poorly sequenced post-conflict transitions in which the hardships of an economic transition destabilise a political transition, or vice versa. Famine is intrinsically destabilising to a political order, so that it is tempting for a transitional government and its donors to seek a quick fix to a food shortage, simply to get it out of the way. However, this tends to store up problems in the long term. If handled in a more sensitive manner, a famine relief programme can be an opportunity for public education about famine prevention and the need for a democratic politics of food.

3. The economics of disarmament and demobilisation. Without effective post-conflict demobilisation and the reintegration of former combatants, the probability of a country returning to armed conflict is high. During times of food shortage and famine, the incentives for former combatants to take up banditry or return to organised rebellion are much increased. Famine prevention and relief programmes therefore need to be especially robust during post-conflict transitions, and should pay special attention to this category of recipients, who may be less needy by objective criteria, but whose potential for causing profound problems is disturbingly high.

4. The realities of cross-border destabilisation. One country cannot be expected to achieve a lasting peace if its neighbours are still embroiled in a conflict. Flows of refugees, the need to maintain armed forces on a state of alert, the need to prevent infiltration or destabilisation, are all major pressures on a transitional government. As a result, a country-by-country approach to post-conflict transitions is likely to be insufficient.

Detailed examination of these factors is beyond the scope of this paper. However they point to the additional difficulties of achieving a political contract against famine in a country emerging from war.

THE POLITICAL ROLE OF AID

History demonstrates that famine is conquered primarily by internal political processes in the affected countries. Aid can have an ancillary role but should not aspire to be the principal factor. The grand claims for aid made in the media, in relief agencies' commercials, and in the legislatures of western governments, are rather far away from the more modest claims made by specialist evaluations. Simple arithmetic alone indicates that in recent African famines, relief supplies rarely account for more than 10-15% of overall food consumption by the affected populace.

There is a large literature on the unintended economic consequences of aid, especially relief food distributions. These will not be repeated here. Instead this section will examine how relief aid programmes impact politically on recipient countries. The major political problems with aid include the following:

1. The tendency of large high-profile humanitarian operations to backfire. Most major high-publicity famine relief programmes have had extremely serious negative unintended consequences. These include the massive diversion of resources to belligerent forces and authoritarian governments, and the sustaining of war efforts and attempts at socio-economic transformation. This seems to be a particular feature of very large-scale operations, with smaller relief activities less prone to these problems. This may arise because a high media profile creates a political and funding imperative for major UN agencies and NGOs to maintain a presence, rendering them more vulnerable to manipulation, because the sheer scale of activity makes monitoring and control less effective, and because a high level of media attention attracts less scrupulous NGOs that are ready to make unethical compromises.

2. External dependency and orientation of accountability towards external donors. The economic dependency of recipient countries inevitably creates internal political problems in those countries. Recipient and debtor governments become highly sensitive and responsive to their creditors and financiers, and less sensitive and responsive to their recipients. The best government personnel are deputed to negotiate aid and credit agreements. Government financing and policy decisions are coordinated with donor schedules. Local institutions including local governments, NGOs etc also become oriented towards external donors rather than local constituents. Less concretely but equally significantly, governments abdicate responsibility for fighting famine, by putting responsibility on aid donors and blaming them when things go wrong.

3. Weakening of national capacity. In intensively aided countries, many of the most educated personnel are either attracted to employment in aid institutions, or become engaged in aid-related tasks on behalf of the government and local institutions.

4. Cultural and informational factors. A protracted aid encounter creates an important if subtle cultural shift in the recipient country. External aid donors increasingly come to define the problems and solutions of the recipient country. Their dominant position in major policy debates undermines the possibility of the recipient country conducting its own domestic debates on these issues. National journalists and opinion formers (academics, political leaders, etc) may take the lead in being overly-influenced by western perceptions and prescriptions, and thus over-inflating the role of aid and the charitable approach at the expense of local policy-related and political solutions. The end result may be that the citizens themselves come to believe that solutions lie in the hands of aid agencies, not their own actions. This level of demoralisation and dependency is perhaps the most difficult obstacle to overcome.

5. Lack of transparency in the aid encounter itself. All major aid programmes now aim to promote democracy and good governance. However, the aid encounter is not a good model for this. Negotiations over aid contracts and modalities are conducted in private between representatives of donor and recipient governments. There is little or no opportunity for democratic participation. Many elements of the aid relationship are in fact not in the public realm at all. In the aid encounter, the donor has arbitrary power, and there is no right of appeal by the recipient. This is not a good model for democratic politics. It encourages secretive and elitist decision-making and discourages accountability to the recipient population.

Overall, relief aid appears not to contribute to the development of a form of governance that is likely to promote the struggle against famine. The basic elements of a political contract against famine are simply not there in the aid encounter. On the contrary, aid can be an obstacle to the development of the political awareness and political processes needed for such a contract to emerge.

Where a contract *already exists*, however, aid can achieve its humanitarian goals without adverse political impacts. For example, the Botswanan drought relief programme is essentially an indigenous relief and rehabilitation programme based upon a national political contract, but it often utilises aid resources to implement its commitments. This experience is in line with the general assessment of poverty alleviation and social welfare programmes: aid can support pre-existing sound policy, but can rarely achieve the same goals in the absence of such good policy, and aid donors cannot create or dictate good policy.

One of the major challenges for aid donors genuinely concerned about famine prevention is to find ways in which to minimise the risks of adverse political outcomes. The major means for doing this appear to lie in the direction of making the aid encounter more democratic and transparent. This will not only help to reduce the possibilities for abuse, but will be an exercise in public education (in both donor and recipient countries) and can help initiate processes of open debate in the recipient country that will promote democracy.

PROSPECTS FOR ANTI-FAMINE POLITICAL CONTRACTS IN AFRICA

Many in the humanitarian international will argue that the prospects for any form of an anti-famine political contract in Africa are so remote that considerations relating to it should not influence their decision-making, and that the adverse side-effects of relief programmes can therefore be disregarded largely or totally.

There is no doubt that Africa faces a number of special problems:

1. The characteristics of most African famines. Most African famines are associated with war, or are agrarian or pastoral famines, which are slow-onset and low visibility, with limited political impact. It is harder to generate a political coalition around such famines than the rapid-onset high visibility famines characteristic of Asia.

2. A modern history in which famine has rarely been an effective and enduring political issue. This is compounded by the fact that some anti-famine measures, such as environmental protection projects, have an unfortunate history of being ill-conceived and brutally implemented, helping to discredit them.

3. Historically, most anti-hunger political contracts in Africa have been based on towns. Since colonial days, governments have felt keenly obliged to provide cheap food to townspeople—because this is where their power can be threatened. Unfortunately, the obligation to guarantee urban food security has rarely been extended to rural areas, and in fact cheap food for cities has often been provided to the detriment of rural areas.

4. Weakness of contemporary democratic systems. Many democratically elected governments have yet to secure their power bases, and many are based on ethnic or regional coalitions that exclude certain groups.

5. Lack of high quality public debate about the nature of an effective anti-famine policy. For many journalists and public figures, famine is either not a subject of serious interest, or it is a problem to be solved by international charitable action.

6. Weakness of contemporary human rights activism, which is largely focussed on secondary activism rather than primary mobilisation, and which concentrates on civil and political liberties and tends to neglect social and economic rights.

7. The prevalence of war.

8. The numerous other pressing challenges for politicians and electorates in Africa including conflicts, breakdown of governmental services, corruption, etc.

9. Protracted and intense nature of the aid encounter, which has led to demoralisation and dependency among wide swaths of those who should be taking responsibility for famine prevention.

Certainly, if one is seeking a single formula for an anti-famine political contract, that formula will be elusive. But this is not the challenge. African countries are vulnerable to famine for markedly different reasons, and the measures needed to ensure protection from famine vary enormously from one country to the next. The experience of famine in, say, Mali is markedly different to the experience in highland Ethiopia, which is different again from Tanzania.

Anti-famine measures will also change over time. The immediate priority in one country may be the end to a war and the end to the exploitative and predatory relationships associated with it, but later the main requirement may be a sound food security policy to protect marginal areas against deprivations caused by harvest failures.

A focus on famine itself may not necessarily be the most productive approach. In some areas, famine is closely related to war, in others, to the vulnerability of pastoral livelihoods to rainfall fluctuations, and in yet another, to market failures. In some cases, the most pressing issue is the underlying cause of impoverishment (perhaps land alienation), and in others, the outcomes of cyclical food shortages (perhaps epidemic diseases and health crises). In each case, a different constituency will need to be mobilised and different political idiom developed to tackle the most pressing issues.

It is also necessary to be alert to some of the dangers that may arise with an attempt to construct a democratic politics of food.

1. The main danger is of populist over-simplification of the issue, especially with regard to urban populations. A democratic politics of food does *not* mean cheap food for the towns.[9] It was this kind of politically-motivated distortion to the food market that contributed to much of Africa's food insecurity in the first place.

2. A second danger is that over-concentration on food issues may be counter-productive. Famine is not just a food shortage, so that a policy that focuses over-much on food availability may fail to do its job, and divert attention and resources away from the policies that would actually be more effective.

However, on balance, the dangers of *not* beginning to develop a democratic politics of food are far greater than these risks.

There are also some positive aspects to the current situation in Africa.

1. States are here to stay: the extreme neo-liberal view that African states are unsustainable appears to be withering away. As it is only possible to achieve democracy in the context of statehood, this lays the foundation for the creation of democratic anti-famine political contracts.

2. There is a consensus on democracy and pluralism as the only acceptable forms of government in Africa.

3. There is a rapid development of African civil society and expansion of free exchange of information. Governments can no longer exercise tight censorship and prevent their citizens from knowing what is going on in the rest of the world—or the rest of the world from knowing what is happening within their borders. African citizens are better informed and more sophisticated than ever before.

---

[9] English demonstrators in the early 19th century once took to the streets demanding a 'provisional government' in the belief that this would supply them with provisions.

4. The considerable accumulated expertise about effective food security is such that any stable, peaceable African country should be able to design and implement a food security policy that safeguards against all but the most extreme disasters.

5. Increasing recognition of past policy errors in food security by both African governments and international financial institutions and donors.

6. Acknowledgment of the need to give special treatment to post-conflict transitions.

7. Minority rights are increasingly a subject of concern, and all governments recognise that the interests and needs of minorities cannot be ignored in the name of majoritarian rule.

In conclusion, while the challenges are considerable, there is no justification for discarding the possibility of democratisation in Africa. On the contrary, the severity of Africa's current crises demonstrate the bankruptcy of existing practices and the need to search for policies and programmes that also address the long-term needs of the region. It is probable that an approach to famine prevention that prioritises the requisite components of democracy will not only be more successful at attaining food security, but will also simultaneously strengthen the prospects for democracy as well.

The first steps to take concern debate and public education. The issue of the politics of food is famine prevention is paradoxical: there is extremely low awareness among most African publics and also policymakers about the importance of the issue, but also a tremendous receptivity to the ideas once they have been floated. It follows that a vigorous public debate across the African continent on these issues may be able to begin to move policy.

REFERENCES

African Rights, 1997, **Food and Power in Sudan: a critique of humanitarianism,** London

Dreze, J., and Sen, A., 1990, **The Political Economy of Hunger: Vol 2: Famine Prevention,** Oxford: Clarendon Press

Mansfield, E., and Snyder, J., 1995, 'Democratization and War', **Foreign Affairs,** May/June, pp. 79 – 97

Rivers, J. et al, 1976, 'Lessons for epidemiology from the Ethiopian famines', **Annales Société de Médicine Tropicale,** 56.

Sen, A. K., 1999, **Development as Freedom,** Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp. 178 – 184.

— , 1990, 'Individual freedom as a social commitment', **New York Review of Books,** 14 June

— , 1981, **Poverty and Famines: an essay on entitlement and deprivation,** Oxford: Clarendon Press

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

Alex de Waal
Justice Africa
33 Islington High St
London N1 9LH

Tel 020 7 837 7888
Fax 020 7 837 8919
Email alex_de_waal@compuserve.com