

Understanding Famine in Ethiopia: Poverty, Politics and Human Rights

Alexander Attilio Vadala
University of Oslo

Some countries suffer from famine more than others. In recent years, famine has unfortunately become Ethiopia's trademark and even now, despite changes in regimes, the threat of famine continues. At present, nature's forces and climatic conditions cannot solely be responsible for famine causation as was the dominant mode of thinking five decades ago. Famine implies poverty, hence it cannot be understood outside of the context of poverty and poverty is as much a political issue as it is an economic concern. Amartya Sen maintains that there has never been a famine in a functioning multi-party democracy, thereby asserting the positive role of democracy in its prevention. This paper mainly covers the period after 1993 and it explores the extent to which human rights, democracy, and political contracts can be useful to provide the major explanations of – and prevention approaches to – famine in Ethiopia. The main argument presented in this paper is that despite enormous external challenges, countries even as poor as Ethiopia can and should prevent famine. Famine cannot be explained exclusively in terms of resource shortage, politics is no less important.

Introduction*

In a world of plenty, how is it possible to explain the occurrence of famine?¹ Famine affects only certain countries while drought can affect any country. Drought in Australia causes no famine at all while drought of the same intensity may result in famine in many sub-Saharan countries, including Ethiopia. It has become clear in recent years that nature's forces and climatic conditions like drought cannot solely be responsible for famine causation as was the dominant mode of thinking five decades ago. There is more to famine than just drought or other adverse climatic conditions. Famine implies poverty and it cannot be understood outside of the context of poverty (Sen 1981), and poverty is as much a political issue as it is an economic concern. This paper addresses the major causes and explanations of famine in Ethiopia within such a framework.

In recent years, famine has unfortunately become Ethiopia's trademark and even now, despite changes in regimes, the threat of famine continues. In 1973, during the imperial regime, almost three million Ethiopians were affected by food shortages and total excess mortality in the country hovered at around 250,000 (Kidane 1989). A decade later, during the 'Marxist-Leninist' Derg regime, approximately 7.8 million Ethiopians were caught struggling for survival, out of which excess mortality was conservatively estimated at 700,000 (Kidane 1990). And in the year 2000, amidst the 'free-market' orientation of the EPRDF² regime, 8 million people required food aid (MediaEthiopia 2000), out of which excess mortality was estimated to be over 6000 in one district alone³ (Howe and Devereux 2007: 41). Three years later, the number of Ethiopians requiring food aid rose to 14 million (BBC 2003). While there has been disagreement over the number of deaths that took place during the last two events, it appears quite clear that the number of people vulnerable to famine in the country has crossed 14 million in just three decades.

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¹ Famine is defined as 'a community crisis resulting from a general state of mass starvation caused by a decline in the food intake per capita over a prolonged period. The end result of a famine is excess deaths caused, directly or indirectly, by the inability of vulnerable groups to acquire sufficient food to sustain life' (Banik 2007:31).

² EPRDF stands for Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front – the ruling party in Ethiopia since 1991.

³ Crude Mortality Rate (CMR) is often used as an indicator of the number of excess death related to famine. A CMR of more than 2/10,000/day usually is called a famine (Banik, 2007: 32). The district in question is Gode where the average CMR was 3.2 over a period of 7 months (CDC 2001); this can be taken as a famine of low intensity.

This paper looks at both internal and external factors and actors that explain vulnerability to famine. It draws our attention to the fact that the country faces several challenges in fighting against famine.

Internal factors

Internal factors focus on explanations of famine that are within the confines of the Ethiopian state. This section will not only analyse explanations of famine from different perspectives but it will also consider some famine prevention approaches, from food availability decline to food entitlements, then to food rights, and finally ending with the role of politics. These internal factors are important in understanding both the nature of famine itself and famine prevention policies.

1. Food availability decline

Traditionally, famine has been perceived as an act of God or nature. Leaving the first possibility aside, the explanation that famine is nature's fault merits some attention. There are two variations of this approach, also known as the Food Availability Decline (FAD) approach (Sen 1981). The first, takes natural disasters like drought and flood as the major determinants. Such natural disasters are said to reduce food production for a particular period and in the case of Ethiopia, there is no doubt that droughts have created severe food shortages. According to the World Bank (2006), the whole Ethiopian economy is dependent on rainfall and data on rainfall variation and GDP growth from 1982 to 2000 illustrate that there is a positive correlation between the two⁴. Thus, drought has obvious negative impacts on food production and even on the economic performance of the country.

The second version of the FAD approach focuses on population growth. Malthus (1993) was one of the most influential proponents of this idea, which purports that there is a limit to the carrying capacity of the earth at large. In his work, which dates back to 1798, Malthus entertained the notion that population growth has to balance with food production, failure to do so would force nature to take measures into its own hands by wiping off the 'excess'. There have been several critics on his work; the fact

⁴ For a more graphic explanation refer to Figure 3.2 of the World Bank's Country Water Resources Assistance Strategy (2006).

that nowadays the world is over-producing food at a time when there are almost seven times more people than the 1 billion Malthusian 'limit' could be cited as an example. Malthus' analysis may have several inconsistencies, but the central theme is not so erroneous, there is indeed a limit as to the carrying capacity of the earth, though no one knows for sure how much is 'full house'⁵. In the case of Ethiopia, what is more relevant in this regard is the carrying capacity of land for agricultural purposes to a population that grows at a yearly rate of 2.3 per cent. It will be imprudent to ignore the problem of decreasing land-size holdings for agricultural purposes in the country not least because around 85 per cent of the population is engaged in subsistence agriculture. Until people shift from agriculture to other sectors of the economy for their livelihood, then population pressure on agricultural land can be part of the explanation of famine in Ethiopia. Two thirds of households farm on less than 0.5 hectares, a size which is known to be insufficient to support a family; at the same time high population growth is increasingly putting a pressure on land (Ziegler, 2005). Coupled with droughts and other unfavourable weather conditions, increasing population pressure on land is a challenge to famine prevention in Ethiopia. The FAD approach, though it is acknowledged to have many inconsistencies, still provides a partial explanation of famine and starvation in Ethiopia.

II. Food entitlements

In the last two or three decades, there has been a revolution in thinking about the explanations of famines. The entitlement's approach by Amartya Sen brought the issue of food accessibility to the forefront of the academic debate on famine. Sen noted that, often enough, there is enough food available in the country during famines but all people do not have the means to access it. More specifically, famines are explained by entitlement failures, which in turn can be understood in terms of endowments, production possibilities, and exchange conditions among others (Sen, 1981).

⁵ Recently, Malthus work is re-gaining importance in connection to global warming, which is supposedly one of the consequences of high population numbers in the world according to the 'Gaia theory' of Lovelock (2006).

Ethiopia is a good case in point where, for instance, food was moving out of Wollo when the people in the region were affected by the 1972-3 famine (Sen, 1981), and even today some regions in Ethiopia produce surplus, while people in other regions face famine threats. There are of course infrastructural problems in the country to link the surplus producing regions to the food-deficit ones. However, the question goes beyond this simplistic level, as some people simply do not have enough entitlements to have a share of the food available in the country, a situation which can be described as a case of direct entitlement failures (Tully 2003: 60)⁶. Or else, peasants do not find the right price for their surplus, as in the 2002 Bumper Harvest which ended up in an 80 per cent price drop, and illustrates a failure in peasants' exchange entitlements. Alternatively, the most irrigated land of the country in the Awash River basin, for instance, is used primarily for cash crop production to be exported to the western world (even when there is drought) leading the vulnerability of various pastoralist groups to turn into famine or underpinned by what is known as a crisis in endowments and production possibilities.

In short, while drought and population pressure can partly explain famine threats in Ethiopia, the entitlements approach provides an explanation from an important but less visible angle. By shifting the attention from absence of food to lack of financial access to food, the approach points in the direction of policy failures. That only some classes in society are affected by famine clearly indicates that policy failures are central to the understanding of famine. In the next section, the success or failure of famine prevention policies and practices will be measured against internationally recognized standards, and one such standard is the right to food.

III. The right to food

The right to food is embodied in article 25 (1) of the UDHR⁷, which states that '[e]veryone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food'. The UDHR later served as the foundation to the ICESCR⁸ to which Ethiopia became a state party in 1993. The covenant is

⁶ There are around 4-5 million 'chronically food insecure' people every year, regardless of weather conditions (Tully, 2003: 60).

⁷ UDHR (Universal Declaration of Human Rights) 1948.

⁸ The International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) was adopted in 1966 and it first entered into force in 1976.

legally binding on all state parties, which includes Ethiopia. Article 11(2) of the ICESCR further elaborated on the right to food and it also set a minimum threshold below which state action/inaction becomes a violation to the right to food.

The States Parties to the present Covenant, recognizing the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger, shall take, individually and through international co-operation, the measures, including specific programmes, which are needed:

(a) To improve methods of production, conservation and distribution of food by making full use of technical and scientific knowledge, by disseminating knowledge of the principles of nutrition and by developing or reforming agrarian systems in such a way as to achieve the most efficient development and utilization of natural resources;

(b) Taking into account the problems of both food-importing and food-exporting countries, to ensure an equitable distribution of world food supplies in relation to need.

In the year 1999, the CCPR⁹ issued General Comment No.12 – an authoritative interpretation of the right to food as stated in the ICESCR. According to the General Comment (article 8), the content of the right to adequate food implies ‘[t]he availability of food in a quantity and quality sufficient to satisfy the dietary needs of individuals, free from adverse substances, and acceptable within a given culture’. The state has to ensure that enough food is available but that it is also physically, economically, and culturally accessible to all; the right to adequate food therefore also entails ‘[t]he accessibility of such food in ways that are sustainable and that do not interfere with the enjoyment of other human rights’.

The General Comment (article 15) specifies that the right to food does not mean handing out food rations to everyone, instead, it discerns state responsibilities into three categories: to respect, protect, and fulfil (further subdivided into facilitate and provide). A state should therefore respect the right to food by not interfering in the existing access to food; the state should not prevent people from their access to food. The protective role of the state suggests that individuals or enterprises should not be allowed to deprive others from their access to food and the state should protect individuals from third parties. When it comes to fulfilling, the state primary

⁹ CCPR stands for Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights

responsibility involves the promotion a favourable environment for people to have their right to food satisfied; here the General Comment does not impose any particular policy blueprint but gives states the discretion to devise policies in accordance with general guidelines, such as developing legal framework, setting benchmarks and reforming agrarian systems (Oshaug and Eide, 2003: 359). However if individuals or groups are unable to provide for themselves for reasons beyond their control (i.e. droughts or floods), then the state should actually provide food or the means to acquire it. The state has therefore different roles to play in the realization of the right to food and it is the major actor, for human rights is, after all, the relationship between people, as rights-holders, and the state, as duty bearer (Eide, 1984: 153).

Freedom from hunger is one essential part of the right to food, as stipulated in the covenant and its authoritative interpretations mentioned above. Freedom from hunger is a fundamental right obliging the state to ensure that its people do not starve and it is intrinsically linked with the right to life. The right to food, on the other hand, includes, other than the freedom from hunger, additional requirements for the government to maintain an environment in which people can feed themselves, and it is to be implemented progressively (ICESCR General Comment 12: 6). Thus, a state violates the ICESCR when it fails to meet the minimum threshold of guaranteeing freedom from hunger: 'violations of the Covenant occur when a State fails to ensure the satisfaction of, at the very least, the minimum essential level required to be free from hunger' (ICESCR General Comment 3: 17)¹⁰.

In the event a state claims that it does not have sufficient resources to guarantee the minimum obligations of freedom from hunger, it needs to prove that this is the case; only in such a way will it be possible to differentiate inability from unwillingness¹¹. Even for a poor country like Ethiopia, guaranteeing the freedom from hunger should be possible provided that the government prioritises famine prevention. If the

¹⁰ There are two major ways (other than Human Rights) by which some aspects of famines are criminalized. The first deals with international humanitarian law and it is mainly concerned with laws of war, particularly the use of food as a weapon in armed conflict; the second uses international criminal law and argues based on the Genocide Convention. These issues, however, fall beyond the scope of this paper.

¹¹ General Comment No. 3 of the ICESCR, in 1990, also clarified further the state responsibility and the notion of progressive implementation relative to the ICESCR in general.

government blames everything on poverty, including the government incapacity to guarantee the freedom from famine, it has to demonstrate beyond doubt that it does not have enough resources. Making such claims might prove difficult and unconvincing for a government which spent almost \$1 million on a daily basis to finance the 1998-2000 war against Eritrea (Wax 2005). The price tag of the recent military expedition in Somalia has not been uncovered yet, but surely this will make the government's argument that it lacks resources even weaker.

This being said, the FDRE¹² Constitution is one of only 20 constitutions in the world which make reference to food (FAO). Article 90 of the Constitution, under the banner of social objectives, states that 'to the extent the country's resources permit, policies shall aim to provide all Ethiopians with access to public health and education, clean water, housing, food and social insurance'. Constitutionally food is regarded as a social objective rather than a human right, nevertheless, this not to say that Ethiopia is not bound by the right to food. Ethiopia is a party to the ICESCR since 1993 and has made no reservations to any articles when ratifying the covenant; hence it is legally bound by it.

To date, there has been no court case¹³ where the right to food has been a subject of contention in Ethiopia; reference in courts to the international human rights conventions in general is 'very minimal at best, nil at worst' (Rakeb 2002: 38). To make matters more complicated, most rural citizens resort to religious, customary or social courts at the *kebele*¹⁴ level where the notion of human rights is unheard of. There is thus a need to take all appropriate measures to make the right to food, and particularly the freedom from hunger, justiciable in the Ethiopian legal system starting from the local courts. Effective human rights education should also be provided for beneficiaries to claim rights; unless people are aware that they have these human rights, it will be very difficult to raise the issue of freedom from hunger in Ethiopia. Defining food as a right is very important in order to prevent famine in Ethiopia, not least because the country has repeatedly been facing famines throughout the past four decades.

¹² FDRE stands for Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.

¹³ Data available to the author at the time of writing.

¹⁴ This is the lowest level of local government in Ethiopia.

Furthermore, the freedom from hunger is not only related to ensuring direct food entitlements and constitutional or legal guarantees, but it is equally related to agricultural development policies and land tenure systems as well. It will not be possible to deal with all these issues in detail in this paper, but specific mentions will be made where there have actually been violations of and major challenges to the right to food in Ethiopia after 1993 (the date of accession to the ICESCR)¹⁵.

Although widespread famine-related deaths in the numbers witnessed during the 1974 or 1984 famines have been averted, the number of people vulnerable to famine has become unprecedented in recent Ethiopian history with over 14 million people requiring assistance in 2003-4. Looking at the violations first, it should be clear that using resources like land, food aid and agricultural inputs as political tools constitutes a violation of the right to food. There have been some reports that local authorities have indeed used, or have threatened to use, land, food aid, fertilizers, and improved seeds as a political leverage especially against (suspected) opposition party members numerous times. Also, government resettlement projects which, in principle, are carried out on a voluntary basis, have in some instances been manipulated at the local level to target (suspected) opposition party members. Using access to resources, some of which are inalienable human rights, as political tools to control dissent or to punish opposition party members is a violation of the right to food and the government can be held legally accountable (Ziegler 2005).

Challenges for the realization of the right to food remain; though some measures to improve land tenure security are under way there is still a lot to be done to address the problem of shrinking size of landholdings. The country is also focusing more on exporting agricultural products while the same focus and stamina has lacked for developing local markets and safety nets. There are already many instances where the country receives food aid while it is exporting cash crops. In addition, the 2003-4 food crisis took place one year after excellent harvests which ironically proved

¹⁵ Jean Ziegler, the UN special rapporteur on the right to food, paid a visit to Ethiopia in 2004 to monitor the degree to which the Ethiopian state assumes its responsibilities to guarantee the right to food and the freedom from hunger in particular, namely the international treaties and conventions the state is party to. Most of the information in this section has been obtained from the report of Jean Ziegler.

detrimental to the peasants; having found no adequate markets, crop prices dropped as much as 80 per cent. This resulted in a huge deficit for many peasants who were unable to pay back their loans. Had the government intervened in 2002 through some sort of safety net programs or by fixing food prices or buying the surplus, for instance, peasants would have been much more protected against the famine threat a year later. Finally, the institutionalisation of food aid within the government and NGOs is very far from the realization of the right to food and can even become an obstacle to it (Ziegler 2005).

The last section in this part will focus particularly on famine prevention in Ethiopia by looking at the overall political environment of the country. It will be argued that the fulfilment of the right to food also requires the respect of civil and political rights.

IV. The Political Setting

In recent years, there have been attempts to determine if there is a link between the political system of a country and famine prevention, and if such link exists, which political system can best protect the people from famine. Sen (1999: 178) asserts that 'there has never been a famine in a functioning multiparty democracy', indeed, for him, it is not at all difficult to prevent famines; in addition to economic rights like the right to food, civil and political rights are of utmost importance.

[T]he occurrence of famines is only one example of the protective reach of democracy. The positive role of political and civil rights applies to the prevention of economic and social disasters in general. [...] Many economic technocrats recommend the use of economic incentives (which the market system provides) while ignoring political incentives (which democratic systems could guarantee). But economic incentives, important as they are, are no substitute for political incentives, and the absence of an adequate system of political incentives is a lacuna that cannot be filled by the operation of economic inducement (Sen 1999: 184).

Sen explains that the existence of functional multi-party politics and free and fair elections, among others, ensures that the government risks losing power unless it addresses major problems such as famine. The services of an independent media can also prove to be useful in reporting the depth and scale of famines. In developed and democratic countries, this particular role of democracy may no longer be apparent because of the existence of safety-measures and social security systems.

But it is precisely in developing and undemocratic countries that famines strike; a study of not only past famines but also of current ones supports this claim (Sen 2001).

There have been some criticisms on this statement by selectively referring to countries in transition, like post-reform China, Singapore, and pre-democratic South Korea. Critics say that non-democratic countries which place an emphasis on strong work 'discipline' are developing more quickly than some democratic countries; this is known as the 'the Lee hypothesis'¹⁶. However, in the absence of a functional democracy, the possibility that even these countries could face famines is still there. In general, democratic institutions are held to be necessary but not sufficient conditions in preventing famine and starvation (Banik 2002; 2007). Furthermore, it must be remembered that one of the largest famines in human history took place in China. Even if it occurred in 1959-61, excess death was estimated to be between 23 and 30 million (Lin and Yang 2000: 137).¹⁷

More and more scholars agree that recent famines, also known as new famines, are political because they are almost always preventable (Howe and Devereux 2007). In an attempt to further refine and complement Sen's theory, de Waal (1997; 2000) came up with the notion of an anti-famine political contract with the objective of preventing famines. In addition to democracy, de Waal assumes that anti-famine political contracts are necessary. Such contracts attempt to further politicise famine by presenting an incentive for governments to fulfil their responsibilities. By politicising famine, ineffective government action and even inaction can entail a heavy political cost.

Such political contract attempts to explain why some socio-economic rights are important enough that they need a political guarantee, in fact 'famine is so self-evident and so visible that it readily offers itself as a political cause' (Sen 1999: 11). The anti-famine political contract ensures a long-term solution to the problem by making the prevention of famine and starvation a priority in the governments'

¹⁶ It was named after Lee Kuan Yew, the former president of Singapore, who strongly advocated the idea (Sen, 2001).

¹⁷ Of course, no one denies that present day China is much more different in most ways than what it used to be at that time.

agenda. In the absence of civil and political rights, the government is not forced to put the fight against famine and starvation as a priority (Devereux 2000: 22). There is no certainty that liberal civil and political rights will definitely assist freedom from famine unless famine is politicised (de Waal 1997: 214). Furthermore, such political contracts could work only in democracies.

Famine in this sense ceases to be the result of natural disaster or a challenge to charity, and becomes a political issue. Such political contract makes famine and starvation an electoral question (de Waal, 2000: 14). The free election of a government depends, among other things, on its agenda, and its re-election on the fulfilment of that agenda; famine therefore must appear as one government agenda in a political contract. This is instrumental in getting the attention of any government facing famine threats and where there is free and fair election, the political contract is different from the notion of food as a right in the sense that it provides a clear incentive for a government.

If a political contract is adopted, it will have to engage the people too. For famine to be politicised, first, the effort must come from the people. Rarely will a government propose such a contract unless there is enough pressure by the people, it is only when the electorate is willing to vote against a government which has no policy on the eradication of famine and starvation, or against one whose policy has failed, that famine becomes an electoral question (de Waal 2000: 14). In other words, 'this requires making famine an issue of concern to those who are not directly affected: treating its prevention as a barometer of political legitimacy, and its occurrence as a political scandal' (de Waal 1997: 215). A political contract comes from within the state, it should emanate from the people rather than from beyond the state; 'such accountability and political contract cannot be implanted, let alone imposed, from outside, though they can be supported from outside. People must mobilize and impose their own political priorities. They must seize moral ownership of the issues' (de Waal 1997: 214).

Ethiopia has repeatedly been mentioned in the discussion on democracy and famine prevention. The previous regimes of Emperor Haile Selassie and the Derg serve as good examples where, respectively, the 1973-4 and 1984 famines occurred in the

absence of democracy. At present, not many people (not even the government itself) dare to assert that Ethiopia is a full-fledged democracy. In 1995 and 2000, elections were not very competitive, opposition parties that participated were weak, and election practices were not uniformly free and fair over the whole country (Pausewang et al. 2002). The last elections in 2005 were much more competitive but ended with controversial results and, among others, the main CUD¹⁸ opposition party leaders, most of whom were elected, found themselves behind bars¹⁹. The EU election observation mission (2005) stated that overall 'the elections fell short of international principles for genuine democratic elections'. According to Freedom House (2007) report for 2006, Ethiopia is categorised as 'partly free' and the trends are moving towards 'not free'. On a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 is free and 7 not free, Ethiopia scored 5 for both political rights and civil liberties. Accordingly, Ethiopia does not qualify for an 'electoral democracy' status.

As per the analysis on democracy and famine, it is therefore possible to assert that famine is still a threat in Ethiopia in part because of the lack of a functional multi-party democracy. Where opposition political parties, civil society organizations, and independent media cannot operate freely, there is no certainty that the government will put famine prevention as a priority. Democracy, according to Sen, is the one element that all famines lack; in other words, the presence of non-democratic government is the common denominator in all famines. In Ethiopia, the issue of famine has already been politicised to some extent, the 1974 famine, for example, came at a heavy political cost for the imperial government. However, where a full-fledged democracy is lacking, the effective politicisation of famine and starvation is by no means evident.

In order to better understand the current political setting in Ethiopia, one has to take a look at some of the main policies of the EPRDF which could have a bearing on famine. The example of land tenure is important in this regard, and so is the supply of agricultural inputs. To begin with the first, according to article 40 (1) of the Ethiopian Constitution, 'the right to ownership of rural and urban land, as well as of all natural

¹⁸ CUD (Coalition for Unity and Democracy) was the newest and arguably the most popular of all opposition parties that run for the 2005 elections.

¹⁹ After 18 months in prison the top opposition leaders were released in July 2007.

resources, is exclusively vested in the State and in the peoples of Ethiopia. Land is a common property of the Nations, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia and shall not be subject to sale or other means of exchange.’ Without going into the details of the land tenure debate, it is relevant to note that this constitutional provision in effect gives a lot of power to the government, and hence the ruling party. In this context Mesfin (as cited in Belcher 1998) states the following:

This new regime has now inherited the whole of Ethiopia’s land, and so it is now in a position to control Ethiopian peasants as much as it wants. They can kick out the peasant from some farm, they can reduce the size of his farm, they can take it away completely, so every peasant now lives under this threat of losing this land. And therefore, they cannot do anything other than [what] the EPRDF cadres tell them. This is one of the principal ways by which the EPRDF is controlling Ethiopian peasants.

Regardless of the advantages state ownership of land might have, it surely leaves enough room for those in power to impose their will by controlling the peasantry politically.²⁰ Similarly, the supply of agricultural inputs – one of the main components of the regime’s ADLI²¹ policy – is mainly carried out by companies affiliated to the ruling party (i.e. parastatals), and this can be considered as another way for the ruling party to have a political leverage over the peasants²². Vaughan and Tronvoll (2003: 79) note that ‘it needs little imagination [...] to envisage the difficulties which might beset the timely distribution of fertilizer, for instance to weredas²³ or zones which, after election, were administered by representatives of political parties other than those with which these key trading and distribution companies are so closely, if non-formally, associated.’ As mentioned earlier in Ziegler’s report (2005), these problems have occurred at least in a few areas. In the particular political setting of Ethiopia, state ownership of land or the way land is administered by the government and the

²⁰ In recent years, there has been an attempt by the government to issue land certification in some regions, but its impact on security of tenure is not clear yet.

²¹ ADLI (Agricultural Development-Led Industrialization) is the main policy of the EPRDF by which it aims at strengthening the agricultural sector and boost industrialization.

²² For instance, in a research carried out in the Amhara region, it was found that Ambassel Trading Co. (ruling party-affiliated company) and Agricultural Input Supply Enterprise AISE (also criticized for being affiliated to the ruling party) held 97 per cent and 99.3 per cent of the market share of fertilizer import and distribution in 2000 and 2001 respectively (Yonas 2002).

²³ A *wereda* is a local government unit higher than the *kebele*, the lowest tier of government.

parastatal oligopoly of agricultural inputs supply, among others, could therefore pose challenges to famine prevention.

Returning to recent history, the peculiarities of famines during the Imperial and Derg regimes was that they primarily affected central and northern highlands – historically, the power bases of most governments in Ethiopia. Because past famines were highly visible and mainly affected the power bases of the governments, the little politicisation of famine that was there led to the overthrow of the imperial regime despite the absence of a democracy. Conversely, the current government risks much less facing such a problem, partly because on the one hand, a full-fledged democracy is lacking to make famine a political and electoral question, and, on the other, it seems that the government might have shifted the political geography of famine in Ethiopia. According to Lautze and Maxwell (2007: 224), the EPRDF has been increasingly protective of these central and northern highlands from famine threats sometimes at the expense of the less visible peripheral and marginalized pastoralist communities. In this sense, the current government may have been able to limit the number of famine deaths, but nevertheless this does not mean that it has significantly improved the country's vulnerability to famine. It therefore remains to be seen whether famine will be eradicated from Ethiopia when and if the country will become a full-fledged democracy.

External factors

In order to fully understand famine, there is a need to look at the problem from international perspectives as well. External factors are those that go to a large extent beyond the control of the government in Ethiopia and that contribute to the problem of famine. This section will first provide a very short general background on the issue of poverty at the global level.

Almost half the world's population lives on under \$2 per day (Annan 2000), this half consumes only 1.3 per cent of the global product. By contrast, according to Pogge (2005) 955 million citizens of high-income countries have about 81 per cent of the global product. Furthermore, almost one in seven people do not have the means to consume enough food for a healthy life - they are undernourished. Almost all of the 852 million undernourished people live in developing countries (WFP 2007).

Similarly, every day around 25,000 people, mostly children, die of hunger or hunger-related causes (Breen 2007).

Some scholars like Pogge argue that the 955 million citizens of high-income countries mentioned above have no moral entitlements to the 81 per cent of the global product. Others assume that citizens of the rich world do not owe anything to the rest. Anywhere in between these two extreme arguments, states in the developed world have for many years engaged in various initiatives to deal with the problem of poverty in developing countries.

Starting from the late 1950s, there was already some discussion on the issue of official development assistance to developing countries and, in 1960, the UN General Assembly endorsed the notion that developed countries should earmark 0.7 per cent of their GNP for this purpose. Recent agreements were reached at the 2002 Monterrey Conference and again at the 2002 Johannesburg Summit where twenty-two states from the developed world recommitted themselves to devote the stated amount for official development assistance. Today, almost five decades after the first agreement at the UN General Assembly of 1960, only five countries met that standard²⁴ (Fomerand 2003; Breen 2007). The UN estimates that the \$195 billion a year, which would be raised when all 22 parties commit to their agreement, would allow the problems of extreme poverty to be 'substantially eliminated'.

It is with this background that this section will select three major areas of concern – areas that have, in one way or another, contributed to the occurrence of famines. These are: the International Financial Institutions (IFIs), international trade and some aspects of humanitarian activities.

1. The role of international financial institutions

The effect of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAP) in countries like Ethiopia is debatable. For instance, the Food First Institute for Food and Development Policy²⁵ blamed the World Bank and IMF policies for forcing the Ethiopian government to pay

²⁴ Sweden, Luxembourg, Norway, The Netherlands, and Denmark earmark respectively 1.03, 0.89, 0.89, 0.81, and 0.80 per cent of their gross national product for development assistance.

²⁵ It is a US-based think tank group.

down its debts by cutting social service provision, exporting crops, dismantling crop reserves, and devaluing its currency, all of which somehow contributed to famine threats. On the other hand, the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI)²⁶ stated that there is no external party to blame in the case of Ethiopia; 'nobody was pushing Ethiopia to sell extensively. Food surplus was short term, so let's not look for external culprits' (Von Braun cited in Mekay 2003).

What is less debatable is that SAPs and other policies of the IMF/World Bank have not prevented poverty, nor have they been able to check 'world hunger' from reaching to its current magnitude of more than 800 million people.

An overview of the record in Africa suggests that both adjusting and non-adjusting countries have suffered an increase in poverty. Factors such as debt, the international terms of trade, and internal political crises all played their role. The criticism of the World Bank and the IMF is less that their policies intensified poverty, but rather that, contrary to their claims, they failed to prevent this deterioration (De Waal, 1997: 53).

Not only did SAPs programs prove incapable of checking famine threats which are corollaries of poverty, but they also had a negative consequence on the nature of governments. Specifically, they did not encourage democracy²⁷ and were unable to 'help people help themselves' when it came to famine prevention. The role of the government was reduced to the extent that it was difficult for it to prevent famine. SAPs attempted to treat economic symptoms to otherwise political causes. The 1990s had seen a turn towards 'governance' and 'democratisation' but mainly to the benefit of well-organized groups that, for different reasons, were urban groups rather than the rural masses (de Waal 1997: 49-64). Recent trends in global politics, namely the US war on terror, has put relatively less emphasis on democratisation as opposed to maintaining strategic allies in the developing world.

²⁶ The IFPRI is another Washington based think tank funded by the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank among others.

²⁷ According to de Waal (1997:57), International Financial Institutions legitimized a new form of external interventionism in African affairs and this had a bearing on how these governments dealt with their people: 'African governments became, simply through the routines of dealing with the IFIs, more externally accountable than ever before. [...] In turn, implementing the new economic policies required national governments to be resolute to the point of authoritarianism, even when newly elected by popular vote'. (Ellipses Mine)

In general, there are deep contradictions at the international level regarding poverty alleviation and reduction as well as famine prevention. This contradiction is between some UN agencies on the one side, and international financial institutions (i.e. World Bank and the IMF) on the other. UN agencies place emphasis on social justice and human rights when addressing the issue of famine prevention, whereas, the World Bank, the IMF, the WTO and some governments like the US over emphasise liberalization, deregulation, privatisation, and the compression of domestic budgets, all of which have made the fight against famine even more difficult (Ziegler as quoted in FAO 2002).

II. International trade

Related to the SAPs and other World Bank and IMF conditionalities is the issue of international trade. In this part, only selected issues in international trade that are of primary importance to the fight against famine will be looked at. It is very difficult to state that international trade is at present free and fair, not few in fact believe that there is nothing fair about free trade. International financial institutions have displayed a tendency to dictate economic policies in less developed countries, more so in 'least' developed countries like Ethiopia. While the governments are forced to scale down their size, avoid to interfere with the market, and open up their doors, agriculture in the developed world is heavily subsidized and protected. There seems to be an understanding that comparative advantage theories encourage the division of 'labour' at the global level; while developed countries produce finished and industrial products, developing countries have largely been encouraged to stick to agricultural production. At the same time, because agriculture in the developed world is heavily subsidized, products from Africa for instance cannot compete in the international market, and this has led to the sharp fall of prices on agricultural products and raw materials. For example, this meant that African countries had to export 30 per cent more in 1987 just to maintain the same level of import as in 1977 (Rau 1991: 84). Tewolde (as cited in Paget-Clarke 2002), further explains the situation as follows:

The most important single thing they [industrialized countries] can do is since they are preaching free trade they must make trade free. Eliminate all subsidies, especially from agricultural products, because that is where the developing countries are competitive.

Not only the direct subsidies but also the hidden subsidies. For example, [...] to produce one unit of food in the UK it costs about six hundred times more energy than it does in subsistence agriculture in rural Africa. Somebody is paying for that energy. [...] Trade agreements are so cleverly designed that the industrialized countries can say, "We don't want to import," for example, maize this year, or indefinitely, or whatever commodity. And there is nothing to stop them. But the markets of developing countries have been forced open from that kind of protectionism through the World Bank and the IMF when it comes to goods. [...] That is a very, very unfair system. [...] What chances does a least-developed country have in a level playing field of the free market. It's neither free nor can the field ever be level so long as there is inequality of capacities.

In the contemporary world trade regime, one that is far from free, it becomes very difficult for governments to cope with famine. The difference between the rhetoric of free trade and the practice is so great that developed countries pay to some of their farmers \$300 billion in subsidies annually, which is six times more than what they give for development aid (Bread for the World Institute 2003: 2).

There are of course several possible counter-arguments to be made in reference to agricultural liberalisation. To mention one of them, Panagariya (2005) for instance argues that poor countries – many of which, it is assumed, are net food importers – actually benefit from agricultural subsidies in the developed world as that reduces the price of their food imports. This could be the case in some developing countries, but in others like Ethiopia where the majority of the population is predominantly engaged in agriculture, cheap food imports and even food aid have the effect of damping the local market thus negatively affecting the producers.

III. International humanitarian aid

Regarding international humanitarianism as it exists today, the impact it has been able to bring about, especially in relieving people from the threat of famine is somewhat minimal. In the case of Ethiopia for instance, the largest share of assistance to the country is devoted to emergency food relief and not to development aid. Had the same amount of money spent on emergency food relief been used for development purposes before the 'emergency' occurred, the impacts could have been better. For instance, the US government emergency aid to Ethiopia in 2002 was \$200 million while its agricultural development assistance was \$4 million; emergency

aid was therefore fifty times greater than agricultural development aid. What makes development aid relatively better, according to aid practitioners, is the fact that \$1 of long-term mitigation aid is assumed to be worth \$7 of emergency aid (Frerichs 2003).

Amongst all types of emergency assistance, food aid can have a negative impact on the domestic food market. In a country like Ethiopia it is often the case that there are food surpluses in some regions for example while there is drought in other areas. In such situations, food aid has the effect of taking away the potential 'market' from those who have produced surplus food while depressing the local food market. There have been attempts by the current government to convince donors to give aid in the form of cash to be then distributed in cash-for-work programs so that aid recipients can buy the food from the local market. Alternatively, donors can also buy the food from local markets and distribute it themselves (FDRE 2001: 115-6). Surely, all this rests upon the good will of donors, who sometimes use food aid to dump their agricultural surpluses. In this regard, Ziegler (2004:10) noted that 'the whole rhetoric of the Bush regime is very ambiguous. First of all, they should give money to WFP²⁸ and not use WFP to dump their agricultural surplus. What should be done ideally is to get money to buy the food locally'. To be more specific, the United States for instance provided \$553.1 million in assistance in 2003, out of which \$471.7 million was provided as food aid (Ziegler 2005).

On a more serious note, international humanitarianism by itself has become more intrusive and influential in the domestic politics of states. For instance, donor countries and institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF have been constantly pressuring the EPRDF government to privatise land. Whatever the merits of land privatisation, a crucial issue such as land ownership should not be decided in far remote countries and institutions but in Ethiopia and in consultation with the people. International humanitarianism has not assumed all the responsibility that goes with such intrusion and this has had some negative impact on movements from within the state that aim at preventing famine (de Waal 1997:65-6).

²⁸ World Food Programme.

Another related challenge to the prevention of famine and starvation is the impact of aid on government accountability. With government dependence on aid, responsiveness to donor demands rather than to those of its people is very likely and sometimes even expected. The following two quotations without doubt ascertain this. Though such statements would be politically incorrect these days, the officials in question were blunt enough to state how food aid is used as a weapon in the eyes of some donors.

I have heard ... that people may become dependent on us for food. I know that was not supposed to be good news. To me, that was good news, because before people can do anything they have got to eat. And if you are looking for a way to get people to lean on you and to be dependent on you, in terms of their cooperation with you, it seems to me that food dependence would be terrific (Senator Hubert Humphrey, on the U.S. Food for Peace programme, 1957, quoted in Rau 1991: 76).

Food is a weapon but the way to use that is to tie countries to us. That way they'll be far more reluctant to upset us (John Brock, during confirmation hearings as Secretary of Agriculture, 1980, quoted in Rau 1991: 76).

Overall, there has been an increasing trend of donors identifying both the problems of, and solutions to, the recipient country, and this does not appear to be a healthy relationship. Certainly, aid has saved the lives of millions during famine and starvation but it has done little to make sure that these lives do not face famine in the future.

The purpose of this section was to demonstrate that there are indeed great challenges that any government in a developing country such as Ethiopia is facing. External challenges go usually beyond the realm of what the government can do. True, these challenges are there, but it wouldn't be fair to blame everything on external forces. Furthermore, even in this context, Ethiopia is not the only government facing these challenges. History has recorded many success stories of states in similar situations freeing themselves from the scourges of famine and it should also be possible for the Ethiopian government to do the same.

Conclusion

It is very difficult to identify one single factor or perspective which can explain the occurrence of famine in Ethiopia. The decline of food availability, whether caused by natural disasters or population pressure, can provide an explanation – but only a partial one. It does not take too much to realize that droughts decrease the food available in a particular region. However, to attribute all responsibility to such natural disasters will not do justice to the issue of famine, not least because such ‘disasters’ always affect selected classes in society. In poor countries like Ethiopia, entitlement failures give an explanation as to why only some classes are affected by famine. There may be enough food at the national level, but still entitlement failures in some regions can cause famine. This is no natural disaster; it is a policy matter. This has happened in Ethiopia especially in the past. At present, one problem in this regard is the general government inclination to produce cash crops for export in such a way that famine prevention has not been given adequate attention. For example, agricultural development enterprises in the Awash River basin devote almost all of their resources to cash crop production and export amidst the recent crises. The responsibility of addressing famine threats has been mainly shifted to donors and NGOs. However, this will mean shunning of responsibilities that have been conferred to the state in international covenants like the ICESCR which stipulates that freedom from hunger is a primary responsibility of the state.

In developing countries where famine is a threat, a functional multi-party democracy tends to ensure that famines do not occur. Here again, democracy by itself is not sufficient; but it will render governments accountable by imposing a heavy political cost to failed famine prevention policies. Politics is therefore one major determinant in the famine equation. This approach can better provide a famine prevention strategy, and it can also shape our understanding of famine – that famine is not only the result of natural or economic problems, but that it is the result of political problems as well. In view of the fact that Ethiopia is presently not a full-fledged democracy addressing famine requires more than just applying technical or economic fixes to a partly political problem. The protection of human rights would therefore be of much help in the fight against famine and so would be an anti-famine political contract. In order to have a lasting solution, one important means to address the problem is an anti-

famine political contract, the outcome of which would inevitably depend on the strength and commitment of all contracting parties.

This being said, the international dimension of the problem needs to be mentioned. It is no secret that poverty which is the economic milieu of famines is a big problem in Ethiopia and it cannot remain confined only within the boundaries of the country. International financial institutions and international trade at large play roles that often times exacerbate the problem of famine. Peasants and pastoralists in Ethiopia are very far from being in a good bargaining position for their products; they can determine neither the price of agricultural inputs, nor the price of their products, but they are still supposed to compete with the highly subsidized farmers of developed countries. In this new free-market economy, where the 'invisible hand' is supposed to take care of everything, one thing can be ascertained: that hand has not relieved poor peasants and pastoralists from vulnerability to famine in Ethiopia.

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²⁹ Since Ethiopians don't have a family name (there is only a first name and father's name), I have indexed them with their first names.

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