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**A Review of
"Famine Prevention:
Lessons from African Experience"**

**by
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for Winrock Colloquium**

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Famine Prevention – Lessons from African Experience

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OVERVIEW

In this article, Williams explores the implications for Africa of A.K. Sen's well known and widely accepted thesis that the main cause of famine is poverty, not breakdowns in food production. The article is particularly interesting for its discussion of the linkages between famine relief efforts and more general development policy. In general, Williams feels that donor organizations have done a poor job of coordinating the two. The article starts out with an analysis of the causes of famine in Africa and then moves on to suggest some specific measures to reduce the continent's vulnerability.

HIGHLIGHTS OF PAPER

Causes of Famine

Williams believes strongly that famine in Africa is a result of poverty, which increases the vulnerability of threatened populations to the environmental and political disasters that are more commonly identified as the sources of famine. To support this view, he cites instances where food has been readily available in famine-struck areas, but was of little use in preventing famine because the afflicted populations had lost both their assets and income and were unable to buy it. Africa is particularly victimized by famine because of its sheer poverty, which far exceeds that of any other continent.

Preventing Famine

Williams identifies five ways in which donor agencies could more effectively fight famine:

1) He believes the donors can do a better job of alleviating poverty by targeting more aid to the poor, particularly the rural poor who are most often afflicted by famine. He favors more project funds for rural projects to reduce people's vulnerability to climactic fluctuations. Williams would earmark more funds for integrated rural development projects, in particular, which actually provide the rural poor with various forms of income earning assets.

2) He would also enhance the famine response capacities of existing programs. Along these lines, he would build into existing projects various measures requiring such things as tree planting, well digging and irrigation ditch digging. However, on a wider level, he also stresses that the larger development authorities, both the donors and the governments, should do a better job of contingency planning by basing forecasts not on "normal year" estimates but at levels somewhat below what they should expect in a normal year—thereby reducing the negative variance around the mean. This would do much to improve their logistical performances and preparedness when crises arise.

3) Perhaps Williams most strident suggestion (and one which is full of implicit criticism of past practices) is his call for better management of food aid in Africa. Williams decries the lack of imagination in the use of food aid—which more often than not has been used to lower and stabilize consumer prices. Citing the problems this creates (lowering farmers' incentives and encouraging consumption of imports), the author argues for greater use of "food for work" programs and other measures which link food aid more closely to the development process.

4) Another original suggestion that Williams makes is to increase the flow of straight cash income support payments to vulnerable populations in the form of "cash for work" programs. To Williams, this policy is preferable to food aid in that it does not disrupt local markets by displacing demand for locally grown food.

5) The last measure put forth in the article calls for strengthening the early warning and nutritional surveillance programs. According to Williams, this should be relatively easy to do by enlisting local medical personnel and by making more systematic surveys of food prices in local markets at regular intervals.

Famine Prevention - Lessons from African Experience

by Maurice Williams

Recurrent crop failures and famine conditions in large areas of sub-Saharan Africa have focused unprecedented attention on the nature and causes of famine and the means for their prevention.

1988 again witnesses the threat of drought-related famine for areas of eastern and southern Africa. Ethiopia is especially vulnerable with six million people at risk and food relief needs approaching one million tons. Almost complete crop failures afflict areas of Botswana, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe, and several million people are near starvation as a result of civil strife in Angola, Chad, Mozambique, and the Sudan.

This current threat of famine follows closely the great drought emergency in Africa during 1984-85 which is estimated to have taken the lives of over one million people, despite the international shipment of about seven million tons of food aid. This was preceded ten years earlier by widespread famine in the African Sahel countries and Ethiopia.

The scale of these emergencies, the magnitude of human suffering and starvation to which they gave rise, and the degree of economic disruption, social dislocation and environmental degradation make it imperative to understand the nature of famine and the lessons that have been learned for preventing this scourge and, when that is not possible, for better managing emergency relief.

A better knowledge of the nature of famine leads to the conclusion that the means for its prevention is basically a problem of development.

Nature of Famine

It is now understood that famine in the current period is not necessarily, or even primarily, caused by a physical shortage of food but rather by a loss of assets or income and by the politics that influences their distribution. Hence, people may suffer food deprivation even though food may be available in the market. The problem today is often less one of a physical shortage of food than it is of the inability of isolated groups to command the means to obtain food. This point has been emphasized in the work of A. K. Sen on poverty and famines. (1)

(1) A. K. Sen, Poverty and Famines: An Essay In Entitlement and Deprivation (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1981)

Even in drought stricken countries of Africa, it often happens that food is available but that afflicted groups have lost not only their harvests but entitlements, in assets and income, to assure their food needs. Poverty increases the possibility of such vulnerability.

This concept is in contrast to earlier views that large scale deaths from food deprivation in any region were entirely due to the failure of food production and a breakdown in its distribution. However, with the emergence of an ever-widening economy in transport, communication and markets, food shortages in one region can more readily be met from the food stocks and surpluses of other regions.

For the first time in human history it is possible to do away with famine. This has been achieved in most of Asia, where the combination of increased agricultural productivity and organized food security measures have abolished the specter of famine even in the low income countries of China and India. Famine, however, remains a grim prospect for Africa. In drought prone areas - where crops are subject to fragile climatic conditions - it is professional development practice to include measures to minimize the effects of drought as part of development programs. The relative unpreparedness for recent drought in Africa has been called the last area of "unprofessionalism" in the field of development.

It is also true that drought does not cause a sudden disaster in the same way as an earthquake or typhoon. When drought occurs there may be some months to go before there is a resulting food shortage. These months should usually provide time to re-enforce necessary famine prevention measures: initiating emergency employment programs, arranging for procurement and transport of additional food, and raising the financial means required required for these activities. Often governments and aid organizations are not sufficiently alerted in advance of impending drought, or when alerted they are slow and inflexible in changing priorities and reallocating resources for drought emergency needs.

Poverty Is the Main Cause of Famine

One of the principal lessons of the food emergencies in sub-Saharan Africa is that famine is fundamentally a result of poverty, a poverty which has its roots in severe physical and man-made disadvantages.

Many of the African countries suffer from variable rains, widespread soil deficiencies and recurrent pest infestations which impose substantial burdens on their farmers. Others have

fertile land and rich mineral resources. All, however, are at relatively low levels of economic development and all are experiencing extremely rapid rates of population growth. Even before the economic setbacks of the 1980s sub-Saharan Africa lagged behind most of the developing world in levels of per capita income, development of social infrastructure, availability of education and health, and rates of economic growth. Twenty-nine of the African countries qualify by their poverty for the soft loans of the World Bank, and 22 are classified by the United Nations as among the world's "least developed" nations.

The countries of Africa are highly dependent on a relatively small number of primary commodities for their export earnings. They have thus been severely affected by the 1980 global recession and the drastic decline in the prices of basic commodities. The resulting foreign exchange shortages have reduced economic growth over the last five years to one per cent annually, and per capita incomes have declined by 2 per cent annually.

Increasing human and animal populations and the related intensification of human activity in search of land for grazing or cropping and firewood have produced an ecological breakdown of catastrophic proportions and accelerated the processes by which vast areas of land are being converted to desert. This impoverishment of the land inevitably impoverishes the people dependent on it.

Of particular importance has been the relative lack of adequate support for indigenous food production. Although largely an agrarian continent, Africa is progressively losing the capacity to feed itself.

Africa's Chronic Food Crisis

Africa's food situation has been deteriorating for over a decade, with agricultural production averaging an increase of 1.7 per cent annually and the rate of population growth at 3.1 per cent. As a result dependence on food imports and food aid has continued to increase. The annual volume of cereal imports almost quadrupled between 1970 and 1982, to over 11 million tons, of which 5 million was provided by food aid. Every fifth African depends on imported food, a dependency which is increasing.

The decline in the value of most of the basic commodities on which African countries are dependent for foreign exchange earnings and a substantial increase in debt service obligations have severely undermined their capacity to import needed food.

Projections point to the likely persistence of this economic and food crisis well into the 1990's. The downward trend in per capita food production, against a background of stalled development and the concomitant prospects of recurring drought place sub-Saharan Africa in the historically unique position of being a systemic and long term emergency. Hence, the importance of integrating measures for famine prevention as part of African recovery and development programs.

Measures for Famine Prevention

A better understanding of the causes of famine, based on both entitlement as well as physical shortages of food, points to the fact that economic development to more directly alleviate poverty is the most important measure for prevention of famine.

--Alleviating Poverty

Previous neglect of rural areas, resulting in inadequate infrastructure investment and in food price policies that favor urban consumers rather than producers, has not only led to inadequate food production in Africa, but to an inequitable distribution of income and large areas of low entitlement to food.

Policies to help the poor realize their productive potential will reduce their vulnerability to famine. These should include programs for investment in roads, small-scale irrigation, storage and market facilities, as well as provision of new varieties of seed, especially sorghum and millet in semi-arid areas, and new breeds of small livestock that can tolerate stress from little water. These programs must be implemented in ways which will strengthen the capacity of poor people to better adapt to periodic drought conditions. Especially important are measures which strengthen household food security, generate employment and provide basic health care.

India provides good examples of programs which aim at asset-transfers and wage employment for the poor. One is the Integrated Rural Development Program which finances, through a combination of loan and subsidy, a variety of income earning assets to households under the poverty line such as irrigation wells, milk cattle, draft animals, other livestock, poultry, carts and facilities for small scale occupations in production, trade and services. Additionally, Indian states seek to provide employment opportunities for the poor on irrigation works, land reclamation, soil conservation, afforestation, rural roads and small buildings.

Of course direct measures for increasing the self-reliant

capacity of the poor to increase their assets and productive capacity must be within a framework of national policies which set appropriate price policies for food and agricultural production, build national food reserves and support education and research facilities to provide the human resources for broad based food and agricultural development.

--Building Famine Response Capacities in Existing Programs

Those African countries which are susceptible to recurrent drought should be given special assistance in developing a response capacity designed to enable them to anticipate, prepare for and, as necessary, deal with future droughts in ways which prevent them from giving rise to famine conditions. The capacity required for this purpose can best be established by integrating it into the development efforts of the countries concerned and closely related to programs and organizations for food production, agriculture, conservation, environmental management, provision of basic health, sanitation and social service and other aspects of rural development.

For example, in famine-prone areas all agricultural and rural development projects should have components that help to alleviate famine and assist survivors. Such components might include tree planting, well digging, and small scale irrigation. Techniques should be stressed for minimizing agronomic risk through crop mixes, intercropping and drawing on famine reserve crops such as cassava, and other interventions to reduce the risk of famine. Nutrition education should not only include information on how to improve nutrition but also on how to survive bad years.

Health care and feeding programs, food-for-work and other employment projects should be planned in such a way that they can readily be expanded in response to emergency situations.

More effective stand-by capabilities also are required, in terms of food stocks in strategic locations and the logistic means for moving them. Generally, it should not be necessary to establish large and expensive stand-by capabilities. Emphasis should be on logistic planning, and the availability of phased supplies as shortfalls in food production and their effects on vulnerable groups are assessed. What is needed is a ready capability to obtain food supplies, at least initially in small quantities, to provide a margin of time for assessment of the scale of requirements and of the means for mobilizing them.

In particular, there is need for recognition of the close relationship between emergency relief, food security and food policies. Development assistance agencies should build into their programs, to a greater degree than in the past, the

physical and institutional improvements that will help African societies to better manage recurrent drought. It is unrealistic in drought-prone countries to base programs on "normal year" prospects, since a failure of monsoon rains, in varying degrees, can be expected every third year. This is the basis on which agricultural planning for rain-fed areas is projected in India.

--Food Aid Management in the Context of Africa's Food Crisis

Food aid is a versatile resource. It can be used in many ways: income transfer, incentives for community projects, a supplement to government budgets, creation of local currency support funds, balance of payments, price stabilization, food reserves, and emergency relief. How it is used depends on the context of objectives and policies set for food aid.

Until recently -- when many African governments adopted structural adjustment and reform programs -- food aid had been important as a means to lower and stabilize consumer prices. This had the effect of lowering producer price incentives and reinforcing consumption changes away from indigenous foods and in favor of imported cereals, notably in urban areas. Food aid used in this policy context dampened investment in agriculture, reinforced urban migration, exacerbated labor shortage in rural areas, and encouraged food aid dependency.

Currently, however, the objective of reform programs is to reverse the trend in declining per capita incomes and food production through stepped up investment in agriculture. This change in objectives and policy, if it is to be successful, will require several critical changes in the way food aid is programmed and managed, both in terms of emergency assistance and development uses of food aid.

As a development resource, it would be important to program food aid on a multi-year basis and to integrate it with other economic resources in support of sectoral objectives. What African countries need, in the current circumstances, is the assurance of multi-year commitments, similar to the commitments which food aid donors made to India at an earlier and critical transition stage of its agricultural modernization program. In this way the Indian government was bolstered with the means for shifting food prices in favor of producers and increasing investment in agriculture while assuring both continuity of supplies and the possibility of supplementing the food needs of low-income consumers.

Notwithstanding its clear advantages, multi-year programming for African countries is an issue on which donors have not yet been able to agree, a fact which brings to the fore other related issues concerning both flexibility and coordination in donor

programming of food aid.

For example, the levels of aggregate food aid among the donors need to be better co-ordinated and more flexibly adjusted to the changing conditions of individual African countries in order to avoid depressing producer incentives, which happens all too often. At the same time, food aid should be programmed in quantities somewhat below local demand, and for market sales, at a price close to local production costs.

In particular, food aid should no longer be regarded as a separate instrument, but rather should be recognized an important economic resource which must be more fully integrated with overall aid packages in support of African structural reform programs. In the resource scarce situation of African countries, food aid is too important, and too potentially disruptive, to be left outside the development process.

Further, When drought occurs, emergency food aid should aim at saving lives in ways that also address rehabilitation needs. This means that, to the maximum extent possible, food aid should not just be handed out, but should support health and education objectives and work programs. Such programs are more likely to be possible and effective when they have been planned in advance of emergency situations.

Children must receive extra protection as their nutritional needs are different from those of adults and measures for supplementary feeding and health care should be included in relief projects.

Non-governmental agencies have stressed the importance of actively involving the people directly affected by disasters in development-oriented relief efforts. In exchange for food and other emergency assistance, recipients usefully can participate in distribution efforts, health care and other relief activities.

India's experience with the management of recurrent droughts has established that communication between government agents and the people in need of relief, through their representatives and voluntary agencies, is important for effective management of advance warning, response and rehabilitation measures.

Management capabilities are important in the design and implementation of development-related emergency programs, as they are for on-going development projects. Stepped-up management training is a clear need, and experience indicates that it is also important to avoid elaborate administrative and institutional arrangements.

--Cash-for-Work Projects.

The concept of famine as a breakdown in access to income or other assets means that in some situations, supplementing income by cash may be more efficient than increasing the availability and direct distribution of food.

The experience with pilot cash relief approaches in the Ethiopian emergency demonstrated that with assurance of a small monthly income, families are able to avoid breaking-up and migrating from their communities to large relief camps. They are enabled to buy food and also preserve, or purchase, farm tools and seed for the next planting season. This helps families and communities to retain their self-reliance, and makes the task of later rehabilitation less difficult.

What is required, of course, is the availability of food in the local market and careful planning and management on the ground. The distribution of cash payments is best linked to the entrepreneurial and work skills of the recipients in various works and service programs.

Aid donors are frequently reluctant to directly provide cash for income supplement distribution, and find it more acceptable to support such approaches when the cash is raised by food aid sales in the local market.

--Early Warning and Nutrition Surveillance

Among the lessons of recent famine emergencies in Africa is the need for improving information and assessment procedures affecting the living standards, health and nutrition of vulnerable low income groups. What is required is a much more systematic approach to monitoring early warning indicators of worsening nutritional situations which lead potentially into large scale famine disasters.

Some indicators, such as food prices in local markets, are especially relevant and can be collected routinely. Monitoring systems should be simple and durable so that they can be sustained during non-crisis periods.

Gradually surveillance should be extended to include information on household food security, along with indicators of changes in entitlements, forecasts of crop prospects and overall estimates of stocks and projected availability of food at regional and national levels.

Civil Conflicts as a Cause of Famine

Conflicts in a number of the drought-afflicted African countries exacerbate human suffering and compound problems of emergency relief and famine prevention. They often prevent delivery of emergency food to those in need and impair their capacity for recovery and longer term development, particularly in areas of continuing violence.

In such cases, politics occasionally plays a large part in the the handling of emergency relief and the allocation of food by governments, both donor and recipient. Increasingly, however, an international standard is emerging in favor of the over-riding necessity to put aside food politics in times of famine emergencies.

Emergency life-saving food relief must be "above the battle" of political and military struggles within and among countries. Here the position of United Nations agencies is clear - humanitarian considerations are primary and imperatively must transcend narrower national interests and policies.

Conclusion

African countries are now engaged in major programs to reform and restructure their economies. At the same time, emergency food relief will continue to be urgently needed in many African countries. The historic experience in dealing with drought-induced famine emergencies, in both Asia and Africa, has demonstrated the importance of incorporating famine prevention measures into policies and programs for recovery and development. For famine prevention is basically a development problem.

The pressing need is for measures which reduce poverty among vulnerable groups and build-up infrastructure, services and productive opportunities for people below the poverty line of survival.

Surplus food aid availabilities provide a potential opportunity for African governments to shift away from policies which have encouraged declining per capita food production, rural impoverishment and growing dependency on imported food. If this potential is to be realized, food aid must be much better integrated with other economic resources in support of structural reform objectives. For modernization of agriculture and achieving greater food self-reliance over time is essential for the sustained over-all development of Africa.

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