



The United States Agency for International Development

Background Paper: Famine

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Famine is defined as a catastrophic food crisis that results in widespread acute malnutrition and mass mortality. It is a process, rather than an event, with a beginning, a middle, and an end.

The context of famine is important in defining why and how widespread acute malnutrition and mass mortality can affect populations. In Amartya Sen's theory, individuals and households are described as having 'bundles' of assets and entitlements. As the environment changes through time in a drought or conflict, individuals sell personal assets and call on social and familial entitlements until they are exhausted. When all assets and entitlements are exhausted, then either the individual and their household will have to migrate or starvation ensues.

If we understand the genesis of famines and how people cope with them, we can see that they are preventable. There are a number of stages where timely intervention can forestall or reverse the downward spiral caused by an episodic shock such as a drought or conflict.

Traditional famine relief models look at individual starvation as the biological manifestation of a culmination of economic and environmental stress. These requirements are translated into tons of commodities delivered to the targeted groups through a logistics pipeline. If a drought or conflict deteriorates into a famine, relief may be the only remedy possible. Going "beyond relief", however, requires that we respond not only to the peoples' immediate needs when they are affected by a drought or conflict, but also strengthen their strategies to manage assets and entitlements to prevent a famine. Preventing famine requires robust understanding of the evolving environment, culture, and livelihoods; how individuals and households acquire and sell assets; and the social networks through which individuals can acquire money to provide food security.

Wars triggered most of the great famines of the late twentieth century. War not only contributes to the creation of famine, but also poses huge challenges to famine relief operations. War:

- ▶ drives farmers from their land,

- ▶ disrupts markets,
- ▶ destroys stores of harvested foods,
- ▶ creates food shortages that drive prices above levels that low income families can pay, and
- ▶ disrupts the agricultural cycle.

Famine, in addition to being a human tragedy, sparks a large competition for development resources. Between 1989 and 1993, worldwide emergency food needs doubled from \$1.1 billion to \$2.5 billion per year.

FIVE PRINCIPLES FOR ADDRESSING FAMINE

1. **A Hungry Child Knows No Politics:** Food aid will not be used as an instrument of diplomacy in a nutritional emergency. We separate people from government and follow Ronald Reagan's advice: "a hungry child knows no politics."
2. **Target the Vulnerable:** Immediate responses to pre-famine indicators will include: donor food aid to targeted populations through both the emergency Title II food programs and the non-emergency Title II food programs. Companion responses will include; general immunization of children under five, water and sanitation interventions, equitable market interventions to stabilize skyrocketing prices, and heightened attention to the most vulnerable such as the landless poor and women-led households. Interventions to support livelihoods and coping systems will also be undertaken.
3. **Develop Local Capacity- Support Livelihoods:** Develop local capacities in famine prevention, mitigation, and preparedness so famine prone countries can withstand episodic shocks without international help. Some immediate actions can be adjusting of agriculture and livestock practices (planting alternative famine crops, improved pastoral practices), building food stocks (better post harvest storage practices, lending programs for purchase of food) and changing food habits (identification and harvesting of wild foods). Encourage governments to take increasing responsibility to guide public action to save lives and reduce chronic food insecurity.
4. **Make Early Warning Information Available:** Build commitment among senior political leaders and disseminate information to affected communities to respond effectively to early signs of conflict and famine by connecting early warning systems (Famine Early Warning System - FEWSNET -- Global Information Early Warning System - GIEWS -- and Vulnerability Analysis and Mapping - VAM) to the political system and to decision-makers. Provide incentives for the affected governments to take greater responsibility for reducing conditions of vulnerability so that the likelihood of future emergencies is reduced.
5. **Transparent Accountability:** Democratic systems of government are the most effective measures to reduce the risk of famine. One characteristic common to famines is authoritarian systems of governments. Famines are not identified with democracies. Democratic government, transparency and accountability are priorities for the USG.

HOW USAID WILL PREVENT FAMINES

Enhance Early Warning Systems

1. We are providing funding to Famine Early Warning systems such as FEWSNET and the Livestock Early Warning System (LEWS) and have funded FEWSNET to include global coverage, and we will do more. FEWSNET's objective is to help establish more effective and sustainable public and private food security and response networks that reduce the vulnerability of groups to increased hunger and morbidity that are the precursors of

famine (i.e. widespread starvation and death). The system works by building networks that identify longer term development problems, threats and short term hazards (e.g. drought, flood) that increase the risk of famine and that guide humanitarian interventions that will save lives and reduce chronic food insecurity.

2. We support programs such as RANET (Radio and Internet Technology for Communication of Weather and Climate Information to Rural Communities) to disseminate weather information into local languages transmitted by satellite to local weather stations and farmer cooperatives through radio. This project includes donating radios to communities that can receive these transmissions. For example, in Bankilare, a rural community in the Northwest of Niger, implementation of RANET empowered the local community to alleviate the negative impacts of climate. Local farmers now use forecasts to make better decisions on what and when to plant. Pastoralists feel secure in seeking sources of water or pastures farther distance from their homes since they now receive information at a greater distance from the community. The broadcasting also includes other relevant information on topics such as market conditions, agricultural crops, pest and diseases, education, health, and local information in addition to weather/climate information and forecasts.

Support assessment

1. We will undertake livelihoods assessments in regions identified by early warning systems to determine the household asset and entitlement systems and acquire a deeper knowledge of the current situation.
2. We will fund humanitarian assessments which look at water, sanitation, nutrition, agriculture and livestock, and security in these areas identified with pre-famine indicators.
3. We will fund NGOs to conduct nutritional and public health epidemiological surveys in areas identified by pre-famine indicators.

Promote public health and reduce malnutrition

1. In the initial response to emergencies, we will promote community-based public health and nutritional interventions such as measles vaccinations, supplemental feeding programs with local products where indicated and community-based therapeutic feeding.
2. We will mount integrated programs to reduce widespread conditions of low birthweight and underweight, including growth monitoring for mothers and children.
3. We will improve women's and girls access to education and sound nutritional health advice.
4. We will address hidden hunger or micro-nutrient deficiencies by fortifying foods and offering vitamin supplements, encouraging diversified diets or healthier eating habits, and breeding nutrients into staple crops.
5. One of our health finding priorities is to reduce health risks and diseases such as HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria.

Improve agricultural livelihoods

1. In all of our immediate responses, we will promote the dissemination of knowledge and availability of drought and disease resistant crops. For example, USAID has built upon the research of the international agricultural research system and supported development and distribution of cassava that is CMV (cassava mosaic virus) resistant to affected communities. We will continue to apply appropriate research to our programs.
2. We will continue to provide appropriate seeds and tools during a drought or conflict to promote self-sufficiency.
3. We will address natural resource degradation by providing sustainable production alternatives and addressing environmental consequences of development activities.
4. We will support the development of appropriate infrastructure - including transportation, storage (to minimize post harvest loss) and marketing infrastructure - particularly in rural areas.
5. We will target areas where destitution is greatest and the need for labor is greatest.

Create enabling markets

1. We will work locally with creative solutions to better distribute food within a country or between food surplus and food deficit areas.
2. We will build livelihoods support into our programming at the community level and provide technical assistance to demonstrate the implications of prospective policy reforms in countries where the government is committed to change.
3. We will pursue macroeconomic, microeconomic, trade and sectoral policies that benefit low-income people's food security, livelihoods, and equitable access to resources.
4. We will work to remove institutional barriers to the creation and expansion of small-scale rural credit and savings institutions and make them available to small farmers, traders, transporters, and processing enterprises.

Enhance human capacity and strengthen institutions.

1. We will strengthen national and regional information networks that provide famine early warnings that include climate and other information to mitigate climate-related impacts, such as droughts, floods, extreme climate events and to forewarn of civil strife, an example is our support for these programs in Bangladesh.
2. We will improve institutional preparedness of governments and donors to respond early and effectively to early warnings of drought, floods and other extreme climate events. Examples of this are successful programming and training in Latin America and in Asia.

Promote democratic processes in vulnerable countries.

1. We encourage transparency, participation, and anti-corruption programs.
2. Our programming will ensure the participation of civil society, especially in affected communities in emergency response and long-term food security plans of affected countries.
3. We will advise and support governments so they can improve asset distribution and promote wise use and access to land and other assets particularly in conflict-affected areas or areas with weak ecosystems.
4. We will work with local governments to enhance their capacity to manage natural resources and prevent environmental degradation.
5. We will work to increase awareness of citizen's rights and effective avenues for redress, especially among women, AIDS-afflicted households, and the landless poor.

IN SUMMARY, THE U.S. WILL

- ▶ Globalize the Famine Early Warning System (FEWS).
- ▶ Expand the Livestock Early Warning System (LEWS).
- ▶ Provide more than \$400 million in PL 480 Title II non-emergency projects to expand our efforts to reduce malnutrition and improve agricultural production.
- ▶ Support assessment and greater analysis of pre-famine conditions and livelihoods.
- ▶ Promote preventative or counter famine programming supporting local coping mechanisms
- ▶ Increase our funding to agricultural programs in Africa, principally through the Initiative to Cut Hunger in Africa.
- ▶ Promote multilateral responses to drought and famine.

- ▶ Promote democratic systems that stress transparency, accountability and national anti-corruption programs.
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