

Food aid is never the answer to famine essay



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The opening paragraph of a report written in 1999 by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations (UN) made for grim reading:” Almost 800 million people in the developing world do not have enough to eat. Another 34 million people in the industrialized countries and countries in transition also suffer from chronic food insecurity” It is apparent that globally there is a serious problem with providing enough food to eat to everyone that requires it. This report will, by its conclusion, have studied whether ‘ Food aid is (never) the answer to famine’ or not.

In order for this conclusion to be firmly established, it is required that a definition for what a famine is, and what it’s causes are, is brought to the fore. Moving on from this, we will need to investigate areas in which famine is a regular, or even seemingly constant occurrence, where food aid has been offered to solve the problems, and look at it’s subsequent effects, both positive and negative. After looking at the effects of food aid provision, a look at alternatives that have been suggested by groups such as the FAO, the World Food Programme (WFP), and the charitable, non-government organizations (NGOs) like Oxfam. The conclusion I expect will, after considering the evidence presented, show that food aid is a short term solution for some, but will never satisfy all of the needy – and that other, long term schemes are required in an effort to start offering food security to all. Recent studies have suggested that the notion that famine means a total food shortage, can be challenged as it appears that famine only affects certain socio-economic groups, those commonly being poorest, least skilled, and the unemployed. During worst times of famine, it has been known for

some food to be available at local market, but demand is as such that the prices soon go beyond the reach of the majority.

Famine would therefore be a decline in the ease of access to food, rather than a decline in the available food supply. Causes of famine can be varied, from natural disasters; earthquakes, volcanoes, flooding, and drought, to socio-economic factors such as poor access to farmland of sufficient nutritional value to yield a good crop, since such farmland will be highly valued, and accessible to the more affluent, relatively speaking, of the population, leaving those less affluent struggling, able to claim the less nutritionally abundant farmland. The problems of inequity can often be further exacerbated by internal conflict and war which can dislocate rural and farming communities. These causes could have a flip side though; flooding will obviously destroy what crops, (if any) were in the flooded region, however its positive effects can be that it provides silt and nutrients for the soils which if managed well, could be advantageously used to stock for years to come.

It was floods that led to major problems in Bangladesh, where 2 months of flooding nationwide, which started in June 1998, left 900 million either homeless or stranded, and resulted in an outbreak of disease due to stagnant water. Once the waters had receded however the UN were warning that loss of two of Bangladesh's three crops, in the floods, would leave up to around 20 million hungry. A ship from the World Food Program carried 50,000 Tonnes of wheat, once the region was accessible, to assist in the \$223 million worth of aid the UN had assigned. Floods however seem to be an annual event in Bangladesh, and no matter how much food aid is requested

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year on year, to deal with the immediate humanitarian disaster, there appears to be no preparation or strategy on how to prevent a thorough “wash-out” of the crops. Figure 2 (below) shows that Bangladesh rely on four vital factors in order for famine not to hit their nation, should any one of these ‘bonds’, as they have been called by theorist Amartya Sen, be broken then a famine disaster is imminent, and the reliance on food aid provision will begin: The above diagram would suggest that in the case described above, it was the bond involving the environment that led to flooding, which in turn leads to famine.

Food aid didn't help here in solving the long term problem of famine arising, it did help in that some people survived the floods in as much as they got some assistance to fulfil their nutritional requirements. Another natural disaster that leads to a need for sudden mass aid, are earthquakes, and I would like to look at the more recent events hitting Afghanistan, to an earthquake of magnitude six on the Richter scale, dated 26th March 2002, which had an epicentre at the town of Nahrin, in the nation's remote, mountainous, and yet well populated, northern province of Baghian - a town which was effectively destroyed. Due to the total devastation, access to the already remote region became increasingly difficult, particularly with the numerous aftershocks involved. Some 50, 000 people were homeless, with little to no food, and no water supply - and under the definition given earlier, a famine was now facing the United Nations. Food aid was flown in by the various organizations already mentioned earlier, although it was frequently reported that this aid was being sold to the highest buyer, preferential

treatment was being given, and that because of this violent clashes broke out at points of distribution of the aid.

Due to these clashes, the aid was delayed, as the workers transporting the aid were under threat - often requiring escorts to the large camps. In a similar case to the Bangladeshi flooding, food aid was an adequate option, and suitable, as a short term plan - what aid should be going towards though, is to stop vulnerability by investing in a well thought out rebuilding strategy that will take into account for earthquakes which given Afghanistan's location, will occur relatively frequently. Famine is not commonly associated however, with earthquakes and floods, it is more likely that drought will be thought of more as a cause of famine, than either of the two events looked at already. In the Spring of 2000, an awful drought hit the region known as the "Horn of Africa", a collective name for a group of African nations. Specifically here looking at the Ogaden region of Ethiopia, which relies heavily on two "seasons" of rain in order for their food production regime to be of any success. We are looking however at a period where rainfall had been lower than average in the period 1997-2000, and when the first season of rain in February 2000, failed to come to fruition, 95% of livestock were lost, and 50% of crops were lost here alone.

The longer season of rain, later in the year, came too late, for harvest, and so the Ethiopian's were facing a struggle for access to sufficient food. Soils in Ethiopia were severely overworked over the '97-2000 period, and so the crop yield was due to be low. Food aid though could not arrive all that easily, as Ethiopia is landlocked, and were in a conflict with neighbouring nation Eritria, who had the major port of the region. Around 4 1/2 million people died in this

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famine, an enormous loss, in a long drought, most similar to one in 1984 in Ethiopia - but due to population growth, there were far more fatalities in this event.

Food aid simply was in too high of a demand, and couldn't arrive quickly enough - this is some indication of how fragile the system is, although it can be argued that many nations are too over dependant on food aid - Ethiopia were in turmoil when Eritria would not allow aid to pass through to assist their neighbours and many died from it. I hope it has become clearer through just these three examples, of many famine events globally, that the topic of aid is a major issue, and that were this aid to suddenly cease, for any reason, the developing nations would be failing to cope - and this dependence will be the downfall for many nations, especially those who haven't yet been faced with famine for themselves. The challenges in achieving food security are:
* To reduce poverty
* Increase food security without degrading natural resources
* To allow for, and cope with population growth, rising incomes, and urbanisation. This challenge can be seen on two levels. 1.

Firstly, to achieve basic food requires provision of the main dietary requirements to a population. Food security should aim to safeguard the rights and interests of local communities, allowing each individual the basic human right to have access to food. 2. Secondly, achieving food security must also contribute to sustainable agriculture (so that dependency on food aid is limited), rural development and the achievement of sustainable production and consumption. Some of the alternatives to constant food aid, offered by the WFP, that were considered at the 2002 Earth Summit are summarized in Table 1. Looking at the issue of trade as an alternative, more
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long-term option, I would like to offer news of the success of a British aid worker in Kenya, Jim Chettle, who encouraged a group of farmers, struggling individually, to form a company, "Farmers Own".

The farmers used local produce; soya, beans, nuts and rice to make confectionary, and snacks. Chettle firmly believes that people receiving aid should be encouraged more to diversify in these ways. Reducing poverty by promoting sustainable livelihoods would allow access to alternative food sources during local shortages. Communities would become food secure if they diversify crop patterns, use traditional varieties of crops resistant to disease and climate variation, balance food and cash crops, and have more adequate storage facilities. After considering the points raised in this report, I do not believe that food aid is never the answer to famine, it would appear to be an answer in solving short term emergencies, but communities should be encouraged to follow the path of Jim Chettle and Farmers Own, I believe – the long term benefits would be more rewarding and personally secure, for the state of mind of oneself, and one's family." An ability, to give all people, at all times, physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life"