

# The Political Economy of Famine

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'To him that hath shall be given;  
from him that hath not shall be taken away . . .'<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

This paper explores some of the reasons why the well-laid plans of the 1970's failed to be an effective bulwark against hunger. It is reflective rather than critical because we are faced with the certainty that just as surely as the famines of the 1980's followed the famines of the 1970's, the 1990's will again see drought, crop failure and, unless things change a great deal, famine as well.

The analysis of the causes of hunger current in the 1970's can be summarized somewhat brutally as follows. Either there is not enough to eat, or what is available is poor in nutritional quality. Poor nutrition is synergistic with disease. Together they result in increasing debility and finally death. Famine is an unusual event, precipitated by this same triad of factors, on a catastrophic scale.

The strategies which emerged from this analysis can be placed similarly under three broad headings. The first is that food production must be increased so that there is more available for everyone. The second is that national food security strategies should be developed and implemented. The third is that nutritional quality of people's diets should be improved. These are three major goals which have dominated international thinking for a decade.

This paper argues that this analysis is at the very least incomplete and that the strategies based upon it have failed to make a marked impact on the risk vulnerable households face to famine. It goes on to suggest that, irrespective of the quantity and quality of food generally available, the households, poorer communities and poorer countries are able to lay claim to a share of what is available. These claims are mediated by a hierarchy of relationships—households within communities, communities within countries and countries in the world at large—and the nature of the relationships constitutes the 'political economy' within which famines arise and must be analysed.

## INTRODUCTION

Many people in Africa have died of hunger since 1982, and many more are still hungry. On the grounds of both logic and determination, this ought never to have been. There is no overall shortage of food in the world so, logic would suggest, that famines on the scale we have witnessed recently were unnecessary. Furthermore, both the means and the determination apparently existed to prevent them. Despite worldwide economic difficulties, there can be no doubt that resources existed to interrupt the progress of events which began in 1982

1. Matthew 25: 29.

and culminated in the human tragedy which, interpreted by its television images, finally goaded a response from the affluent north in 1984.

Arguably, the determination existed as well. In 1974, following the droughts earlier that decade, a World Food Conference was convened to mobilize world effort so that nothing of the like would ever happen again. There, the world's most influential, best informed and, no doubt most sincere, determined that by the Year 2000 no-one would go to bed hungry and most certainly no famine would escape notice and no food crisis would evade remedy.

A Global Early Warning System was established to make certain that the effects of drought would be known. Facilities were made available to ensure that the world had food security stocks available for lean years. Millions of dollars were invested in agricultural development. It seemed that regional and national food self-sufficiency and food security were major items on the agenda of nearly every national and international meeting concerned with development issues. How could either the will or the way fail to remedy the causes of the famines which had so recently affected Ethiopia and the Sahel? And yet, eight short years later Africa has again been plunged into a food crisis, more profound and more devastating than anyone in 1974 could have imagined.

This paper explores some of the reasons why the well-laid plans of the 1970's failed to be an effective bulwark against hunger. It is reflective rather than critical because we are faced with the certainty that just as surely as the famines of the 1980's followed the famines of the 1970's, the 1990's will again see drought, crop failure and, unless things change a great deal, famine as well.

The paper begins by examining the analytical foundation of strategies to combat world hunger conceived in the 1970's and the extent to which these strategies were effective. The latter part of the paper summarizes an alternative analysis of the causes of famine and examines its strategic implications for the next decade.

## FOOD SELF-SUFFICIENCY, FOOD SECURITY AND NUTRITIONAL ADEQUACY

The analysis of the causes of hunger current in the 1970's can be summarized somewhat brutally as follows. There are two primary reasons for under-nutrition. Either there is not enough to eat, or what is available is poor in nutritional quality. Poor nutrition is synergistic with disease. Together they result in increasing debility and finally death. Famine is an unusual 'event', precipitated by this same triad of factors, on a catastrophic scale.

The strategies which emerge from this analysis can be placed similarly under three broad headings. The first is that food production must be increased so that there is more available for everyone. The second is that national food security strategies should be developed and implemented. The third is that the nutritional quality of people's diets should be improved. These are the three major goals which have dominated international thinking for a decade. Let us now examine each more closely and, in doing so, try to assess how much each has contributed to the abolition of famine in the 1980's.

### *Increased food production*

On the face of it, increasing food production seems to be a *sine qua non* for the elimination of famine; more food, less hunger. At the time when the growth in world food output was perceived to be the most important priority, the 'green revolution' was also beginning to produce startling increases in crop yields and, on this basis the new potential for sustained agricultural growth became the

foundation for much of the optimism of the 1970's. More could be grown on less land. Although the Club of Rome had drawn attention to the finite resources of our planet earth, the optimists argued that any resource constraint could be moved back by a technological shift and here to prove their point was the technology of the 'green revolution'.

Indeed, on a global scale, food production has kept pace with and actually exceeded population growth over the last ten years. Furthermore, there is little evidence to suggest that the limits to further growth in food production have been reached. Although pressure on land is increasing, there is still arable land which has not been brought under the plough and crop yields are still increasing faster than the world's population. Protein from sea algae and other radically alternative sources of food are no longer receiving the attention they once did. Optimistic projections suggest that the new crop technology, aided by intensive methods of animal husbandry and improved fishing methods will see us through until world population growth can be reduced to zero or near-zero levels.

At a national level too, there is evidence which gives general support to the inherent value of increasing food production. In India and China, for example, two vast countries with large populations, food production has kept up with population growth, although it has not exceeded it by very much. Furthermore, famines which were common in both countries in the 1960's and 1970's have become rare if not unthinkable. In contrast, in Africa, where food production has lagged behind population growth, famines have occurred all too frequently.

Never-the-less, on closer examination, the relationship between food production and hunger is more complicated and any assumption that increasing food production necessarily eliminates famine cannot be sustained. There are three fundamental problems to be considered. The first is that in some countries with declining food production per capita, people are better fed and famines are unknown—countries in the Middle East, for example, and Hong Kong, Singapore, and Great Britain. The reason is obvious. Incomes have increased and food, if necessary imported food, is more readily afforded by more people. However obvious, this seems to have been more important for the people in these countries than an increase in national food production. The second is that in some countries, such as Kenya for example, famines continue to occur despite rising food production per capita. The third, and most important, is that although world food production is clearly moving ahead of population growth, the recent famines in Ethiopia, Mozambique, the Sudan and the countries of the Sahel have been more severe than a decade ago. It would therefore seem that the substantial increase in world food production achieved in the last decade has offered no protection at all in these countries against the occurrence of famine.

The logic of 'more food production—less hunger' is thus flawed. Although no-one would dispute the fact that an increase in food production is a necessary component of any strategy to rid the world of famine, the evidence suggests that it is not, of itself, sufficient.

It is obvious, for example, that the benefits of increased food availability will certainly not be shared equally. Indeed, given that much of the developed world is well fed, even over-fed, there is a naive logic in the contention that all of the additional food output should go to countries which have hungry populations. However, not even the most ardent egalitarianist could admit this as a realistic possibility. It is simply not the way the world works. In fact, if anything, the opposite is true. Those who have more, get more; those who have less, must make do with less.

Furthermore, not only is the world's food production concentrated where additional food is least required, but further growth in food output is most likely to occur in the same countries and areas which already have an abundant supply. They are closest to centres of demand and closest to the main sources of capital and are therefore likely to attract the bulk of investment, technology and

services. Indeed overproduction is now a problem in the United States and Europe. This is so, even taking to account the fact that the bulk of the maize grown in North America, for example, is not for human consumption at all but for animal feed. Meantime, in Africa, the growth in food output has lagged behind population growth, so that more people go hungry. At the same time, less and less is available per capita for investment to open up new lands and to improve crop yields. Ironically, this is the region of the world where land is more abundant and food producing potential is greater than almost anywhere else. Food is not like water; it does not find its own level. Transfers of food from rich to poor and from surplus to deficit do not happen automatically.

It is not quite true to say that the strategy of global food self-sufficiency made no provision for the transfer of surplus to deficit areas, but concessionary arrangements and food aid programmes have been clearly insufficient for the task. Furthermore, as I shall attempt to show in due course, the strategy over-emphasized the supply of food and failed to take into account a more fundamental problem. No matter how abundant the supply of food, an individual family has to gain access to enough of it to survive or it experiences 'famine'.

The recognition that a growth in world per capita food output is not a sufficient remedy for world hunger led to the second great pillar of the 1970's strategy-national food self-sufficiency.

#### *National and regional food security*

It is clear that the benefits of growth in food output do not necessarily reach people living in countries where food is most scarce. A major refinement was to concentrate on agricultural growth country by country. This strategy has been promoted and received most attention in Africa. A variant is regional food security based largely on regional food self-sufficiency targets.

The concept of national or regional food security carries with it strong political overtones. Newly independent nations may wish to express their hard-won nationhood by being self-sufficient and independent of the rest of the world for the basic goods required to feed their people. In southern Africa, for example, the goal of national and regional food security is intimately associated with the struggle for economic independence from South Africa. It is also associated with a strong distrust of the behaviour of world markets controlled by forces far removed from the free interaction of supply and demand.

On a technical level there are two main parts to most definitions of food security. The first is food self-sufficiency or the ability of each country or group of countries to produce enough food to feed its people. The conventional measure used to assess the success of a self-sufficiency strategy is the food balance sheet on which requirements are compared with supply. The second part of the strategy deals with year to year variations in domestic food production. These are very pronounced in most parts of Africa on account of agriculture's great dependence on uncertain and highly variable rainfall. The strategy proposed was simple and dates to Joseph's strategy to deal with the seven lean years in Egypt. A proportion of output in good years would be kept in stock for release in years when the crops fail.

There are two main reasons why national food self-sufficiency, the first component of a national food security strategy, bears more than a cursory critical glance. The first is one of cost. There is a price to be paid for food self-sufficiency and many famine-prone countries can ill-afford this price. They might be better to invest their scarce resources in more profitable enterprises which will buy food from countries which can produce it more cheaply.

In any event, the cost of absolute food self-sufficiency is always inordinately high and in many countries even relative food self-sufficiency cannot be

sustained on an economic basis. There is a 'Catch-22' here. When levels of economic development are modest, the range of food commodities demanded is small and their production is feasible even for a subsistence farming family. As a society 'develops', the range of food commodities it demands increases, and absolute food self-sufficiency becomes less and less feasible and more and more expensive to achieve. An obvious example is the rate at which the demand for rice has grown in the last ten years in many African countries – typically of the order of 13 per cent per annum. There is no way in which this can be matched by a growth in the domestic production of rice without enormous costs in subsidies and incentive investment capital and, even then production costs would far exceed the costs of imports. It is cheaper to import rice than to grow it, which is just what most African countries do, contrary to the principle of food self-sufficiency. It is to be noted however, that imported food rarely contributes in Africa to the abolition of famine because the poorest households, the most vulnerable, cannot afford to buy it. This food is only available to households which are least vulnerable to famine.

The second reason why national food self-sufficiency alone may not materially alter the risk of famine is similar to the main defect in the global food self-sufficiency strategy. The problem is one of distribution. It is surely obvious that a balance between national food needs and food production does not ensure that everyone has enough to eat. The rich inevitably obtain more than their requirements and the poor less. Furthermore, the rate at which richer groups in a society can improve and expand their diet, is almost always greater than that of poorer groups. This means that, until the rich are satiated, there is an inbuilt tendency for the poor to have access to a smaller and smaller share of national food resources even if, in aggregate terms, food requirements are 'balanced' by food production.

The idea of national food security stocks, the second common component of a food security strategy, is superficially persuasive but, in practice has only a limited impact on the risk of famine. It is true that the existence of food stocks, which can be released during times of scarcity, has a direct effect on stabilising market supply, an indirect effect on the stability of food prices and tends to restrain trader speculation. It is also true that the prevention of undue price rises is to the advantage of poor people. However, there are two problems with food security stocking as a national strategy to insure against famine.

The first is that in many cases it may be cheaper to hold stocks of foreign currency and buy food on the world market when required rather than to stock food in the country but this varies from country to country. The second is that in practice, national food security stocks are urban food security stocks. The release and distribution of food security stocks are frequently governed by a political economy which gives preference to the needs of the politically vocal urban minority. They therefore benefit those who buy food most, not those who are most at risk to famine in Africa.

### *Nutritional adequacy*

The third component of the 1970's strategy to rid the world of famine was an effort to improve the quality of the diet of those most at risk. This took various forms. The 'protein-gap' doctrine dominated nutritional thinking for a period until it was finally extinguished by incontrovertible evidence that malnutrition was caused primarily by a total food lack rather than by a specific protein deficiency. There was a considerable interest in fortifying cereals which are deficient in specific amino acids. A particular effort was and is made to promote good quality local weaning foods. Another, related activity was the introduction of nutritionally superior foods in countries where these were not

available. Nutrition education had and has its adherents.

Whatever contribution these efforts have made to improving the nutritional status of individuals, I fear that I can find little evidence that they have contributed to the protection of people against famine. There is little doubt that nutrition has made an enormous and indispensable contribution to the management of malnourished individuals in the context of famine. The extent to which its concepts and practice have contributed to protection against famine is much more questionable. More powerful forces than nutritional education shape dietary habits and adequacy; levels of income for one, advertising for another and the example set by groups which people mimic and to which they aspire. In the final analysis, faced with impending starvation, nutritional precepts offer little protection.

I find, for example, little evidence of ignorance and yet the whole basis of nutrition education is based on the idea that women do not know how to look after their children. I find instead that many mothers do not have the resources or the time to look after their children as they would wish. Indeed, I find many examples of whole communities which have lost their drive and direction and whose identity has been eroded by the marginal position in which they find themselves. I find relatively few cases where the introduction of new foods are required. Instead, I find many examples of the use of foreign foods in emergency food aid programmes which are either inappropriate or perhaps worse, stimulate new tastes which cannot be sustained from local resources. I find few cases where local foods need to be reinforced with nutritional additives and even fewer where this would be a feasible option on a sustained basis. I find instead that good traditional practices, with mixed foods to provide natural nutritional complements, have been eroded by contact with a degenerate form of western dietary habits.

Above all, I am saddened by the extent to which old and outdated nutritional ideas, particularly 'protein-gap concepts', still influence international food aid policies and practice; high protein biscuits instead of beans, for example, dried skimmed milk instead of oil, protein extracted from red blood cells, and tuna fish in vegetable broth, (can you believe it?) instead of almost anything. In summary, it would appear that three components of the 1970's strategy to rid the world of famine – increased food production, aspirations for national food security and improved nutritional adequacy – have produced, at best, only partial solutions and have failed to avert the food crisis which Africa is facing. The strategies were based, I believe, on an incomplete analysis of the problem, a matter to which we now turn. However, in doing so, I fear we will produce more questions than answers.

## THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF FAMINE

### *Three analytical defects*

The analysis which ordered the strategies of the 1970's suffered from at least three defects which, in total, resulted in the true nature of the problem escaping definition entirely. The first defect was that the main cause of famine was attributed to crop failures resulting from drought. The droughts which have plagued Africa during the last decade are not new. Their effects are, however, unprecedented. We are therefore led to our first conclusion that drought *per se* is not the primary cause of Africa's food crisis or of the famine which has been its tragic outcome.

The droughts of the 1970's were regarded as unusual events. This, of course is not true. Drought and flood are visible expressions of the variability of rainfall

which is a climatic characteristic of most of the continent. The 'good years' of the late 1970's, in many ways created a 'red herring' as they were only a temporary respite. They were commonly regarded as 'normal' years when instead they were exceptionally good. More than one country has predicated its entire agricultural development programme on the basis of the sector's unusually good performance between 1976 and 1979. The preoccupation with drought as an exceptional event drew attention away from more important underlying processes which were and are at work and which inevitably and inexorably work their way out into the open as increasingly serious famines during years when rainfall was less than average.

Africa's high population growth was recognised but this was translated mainly into calculations of the growth in food output required to feed the additional mouths not into the number of people who could no longer be supported in agriculture and who would be unable to find a livelihood elsewhere.

The problems facing newly independent states were acknowledged but, in the euphoria of new nationhood, the international community joined hands with the new leadership to invest in ports and airports and bridges and dams and highways at the expense of the vast majority of the people, peasant farmers, who produce most of the food but who also constitute the largest group at risk to famine.

The adverse effects of rising oil prices, and the world recession which followed, were recognised. However the extent to which these effects would be passed on, by national policies devised to protect the living standards of an urban minority, and would further impoverish the countryside was not. Neither were the effects of declining public expenditure on basic services such as health and education fully appreciated.

The extent to which policies, based on the need to provide cheap food for urban minorities and the need to keep industrial wage rates low, were stifling the agricultural sector were recognised and, over the last five years have become a major focus for international and national attention. However, this was too late to revitalize agriculture in most countries before the most recent series of droughts took their toll.

Thus, the bulk of Africans were steadily distanced from the main stream of economic life, from services, from investment, from markets and from the opportunity to contribute to the life of the nation. The distance between city and countryside increased as the countryside became more impoverished and the cities were seduced into an affluence based on western expectations and lifestyles which the economy as a whole could not sustain.

Many peasant farmers responded to these pressures by retreating into an increasingly self-reliant form of subsistence. However this could no longer be sustained in the face of climatic variations because the natural resources on which this form of livelihood depends were now under much greater pressure from population growth. They fell prey to the effects of drought because they could no longer lay claim to the resources they needed to survive.

The second defect in the analysis was that the problems were perceived to be technical. The transfer of the new crop technology was thought to be both necessary and possible on a large scale. In fact it was neither. The more liberal use of inputs was considered to be essential. The economics for small farmers were not considered. The introduction of large scale, capital intensive farms was considered to be the most effective way of boosting production. In the first place this is not necessarily true and in the second it ignores the fact that the vast majority of families in Africa earn their livelihood from farming and alternative employment for those displaced by large scale projects was not available.

There is ample evidence to suggest that, with only modest changes in technology but significant changes in their policy environment, African farmers are capable of producing enough food for their families and enough to provide staples for the cities if they are given half a chance. Before Zimbabwe's independence it was confidently predicted that if the European farmers left,

agriculture would collapse. In four years, Zimbabwean African farmers have moved from contributing five per cent of the marketed cereals to 40 per cent. In Kenya and Malawi, agriculture depends on smallholders, who were previously peasant farmers.

The third defect in the 1970's analysis was that it concentrated almost entirely on the *supply* of food and gave almost no attention to how people could come to *afford* the food they needed. This was the most grave defect of all and still persists. Indeed, although many of us understood this defect, it was not until Amartya Sen's writings on 'entitlements' and the failure of entitlements that a change in international thinking profound enough to reflect the gravity of the defect began to occur (2).

In summary, Sen says that a decline in the aggregate supply of food is much less important as a cause of hunger than a decline in a household's ability to acquire food. He points out, for example, that in the Bengal famine of 1943, food production fell almost imperceptibly but an increase in food prices relative to wage rates was enough to bring many families to the point of destitution and starvation.

Although declines in food production in Africa have a much more important effect than in the case of Bengal, the main point of Sen's argument can be sustained. It is rare, for example, that city folk suffer even in the worst African famines. This seems to surprise some people but it is perfectly logical. The urban population can afford to buy food; a subsistence farmer has no money to buy food for his family to replace what he or she would have obtained from their own production.

Some people seem surprised that countries can export food when their people are starving. This is also entirely explicable. The people who are starving cannot afford to pay for the food which is being exported; neither do they have enough political influence to compete with export pledges. They have no claim or, in Sen's words, 'entitlements' to their basic necessities.

Sen's analysis is largely cast in the context of a sudden collapse in 'entitlements' which presages widespread famine. In Africa, everything we have said up to now implies a steady erosion of the entitlements of people most at risk to famine: by economic decline, by the erosion of employment opportunities, by increasing polarity between the city and the countryside, by political marginalization of peasant farmers, and by the allocation of declining national resources in favour of the more politically vocal urban population. It is true that this decline is punctuated by the effects of catastrophic rain failures, but the more important causes of famine are these underlying processes which are eating away at the capacity of more and more African families to survive the harsh years when they come.

### *The political economy of famine*

Let us now try to draw these observations into a more systematic framework in order to explain why more people are hungry in Africa now than ever before. The title of this paper and of this section suggests that, in my view, the problem is not primarily technical and not entirely economic, but arises from the political economy of national and international systems which work to the advantage of the strong and the disadvantage of the weak.

This analysis is based on three premises. The first is that at all levels in the human society, individuals, households, communities and nations, competing bids are being made for a share of what is available. The extent to which they are

(2) See for example, *Resources, Values and Development*, Amartya Sen, Harvard University Press; 1984, and Sen's earlier writings on famine and household 'entitlements'.

successful determines the access they have to what they desire and need. In the final analysis it determines whether they survive or die. The second is that, although in industrialised countries, household income is a fair measure of a household's 'bidding rights', in Africa this is not so. Non-economic factors such as kinship relationships play at least an equal part in the claim households can make to scarce resources. The third premise is that, in time, countervailing forces confront and serve to restrain exorbitant 'bidding' which results in the accumulation of great wealth and power. In Africa, however, these restraints have not had time to be fully developed.

The degree to which this competition for scarce resources is conscious and the manner by which it is pursued varies enormously from one society to another and according to whether the bidding takes place in the context of the family or on an international scale.

The smallest unit in which people relate with each other is the family. It is significant that in all societies, the weakest individuals, the children, are protected, first by their mothers who 'bid' for a share of the family's resources on their behalf, and secondly by social rules which militate against the neglect of children. However, it is also significant that, in Africa, the survival of an individual child may have to be foregone if the survival of the whole family is in jeopardy.

Families bid for a share of resources, first of all, in the context of a community. If resources are abundant—land and the means to make it produce—then this bidding may be benign and regulated by social rules with little conflict. The 'chef du terre' in some parts of Zaire still allocates land, family by family, at the beginning of each cropping season. In the past in Africa, if land became scarce, people simply moved to where it was more abundant. However, as the pressure on land increased, it became the primary source of conflict within and between societies.

Increasing scarcity also increases the scale on which 'bidding' has to occur and the risks that go with it. Competition within a community gives way to competition between communities but also to competition for resources by individuals who are displaced or move from their communities and find themselves competing against an unknown multitude of strangers.

In his autobiography, Sydney Poitier tells the story of his family's migration from Cat Island, where his father and mother had been primarily subsistence farmers but selling tomatoes as a cash crop, to Florida. Although in another place where the forces generating change were different, in many ways this is the archetypal story of an African family.

He writes: 'When in the mid-1930's the United States Government placed an embargo on the importation of tomatoes from the Bahamas, Reginald Poitier and his fellow tomato farmers on Cat Island searched frantically for another market for their goods but found none. They tried to find work in Nassau, the capital of the islands . . . My father arrived with the rest of the family and immediately began looking for work, but the job market was tight and for several months had no luck. During this time my mother took to 'beating rock'. That was what we called it. She took large rocks and broke them into very small stones . . . in the back yard, under a tree, with a hammer . . . She would hammer away eight or ten hours a day, breaking them all down into pebblelike stones in the hopes of selling them to builders to be used in cement mixtures . . . She earned an average of twenty cents a day . . .

My father . . . tried unsuccessfully to return to the soil. He claimed 'squatters' rights' to some small acreage . . . (but) that land, with only his sweat and blood to fertilize it never yielded enough to meet the family's minimal food requirements. Consequently, with ends never quite meeting, even in the face of his best efforts, despair began to surface in his actions . . . (My mother)..sensing his pain and knowing his burden suffered quietly within . . . Her only comfort was the

knowledge that . . . this new ruthless, sophisticated system . . . would never succeed in dismantling her husband's pride. Indeed she knew better than he how rough things were. Because she had no fertile land to go to for our food, circumstances directed her to the grocer, and going to the grocer meant taking money with her. In order to take money with her Reginald Poitier had to have a job. If he didnt have a job, the grocer wouldnt deal with her and if he didnt deal with her the family wouldnt eat. Unlike Cat Island, Nassau required the selling of one's labour for a price, and using the returns . . . for food buying and the rent paying and the clothes buying . . . Her new neighbours did not exchange corn for beans, yams for peas, or papayas for sugar apples..

An increasing number of African families are facing similar difficulties. The choices are not simply economic neither are they unconstrained. The inexorable pressure from population growth has made previously abundant natural resources increasingly scarce but the more important point is that this has forced radical changes in the nature and context in which families have to bid in order to survive. The desire to escape from the land, but also a recognition that it is necessary to acquire the technical equipment to bid for survival in a context that has little in common with traditional structures, is too large to be known on an individual basis and is being shaped by foreign forces. Some survive but most are marginalised by a proces of change which is proceeding too rapidly to be entirely understood but not rapidly enough to provide a livelihood for everyone.

In addition, the countervailing forces which constrain this bidding process, in a richer society where resources are more abundant, are not yet in place in Africa. The mechanisms for income transfers, for example, which were developed in Europe and North America to place a safety net under the poorest families, do not exist. Instead, the social ties of the extended family provide for the support of the elderly and other family members who are less well-off. These link town and countryside and constitute a form of taxation which is probably more effective than any instituted by a state apparatus. These mechanisms, for example, were probably a more effective form of 'relief' in Kenya in 1984 in areas close to Nairobi, and in Mozambique in areas close to the Zimbabwe border, than the government's food aid programme.

However, the capacity of this traditional form of 'social security' is limited by the wealth of the family as a whole and by the stability of family relationships- both of which are under increasing pressure. These limits have been demonstrated by the fact that kinship ties were not effective in preventing suffering in areas farther from the capital in Kenya or in most of the rural areas of Ethiopia or Mozambique.

At the level of the nation as a whole, a hesitancy of direction which has replaced the ebullient optimism of the immediate post-colonial period, underlies the changes at the community level which are eroding the claims families can make on resources in order to survive. Africa is caught in a dilemma of identity. The social and political models inherited from colonial powers are proving less than satisfactory. And yet, despite the attempts by the giants of African Independence to build states which were truly African, it is difficult to see how lasting forms of nationhood will emerge from the experience to date. The concept of the nation-state, except possibly in Tanzania, rarely governs the actions and decisions of political leaders. National identity and priorities have yet to displace the imperatives of the family and tribal group, yet African families increasingly have to bid for survival in the context of a national marketplace outside the protection of the family.

Furthermore, the national structures themselves are frequently dominated by family based oligopolies, as yet unrestrained by countervailing forces which are truly national in origin. It is interesting to note, for example, that although most governments intervene actively in the operation of the national food market, this is to control the flow of supply- a legacy of 'supply-orientated' food security

strategies. The cases where African states intervene to enhance the 'bidding power' of disadvantaged families is extremely rare.

In summary, this analysis suggests that the political economy in which households bid for access to the resources they need to survive, is biased against the interests of those most vulnerable to famine. This bleak picture will not be brightened immediately by a technical solution nor even by a policy shift along the lines being suggested by the international financial institutions which are becoming more and more influential in the affairs of African countries.

The final level at which the political economy of famine operates is international. Just as families and groups of families within countries compete in their bid for scarce resources, so countries too bid with other countries for a share of international resources. It was common a few years ago to hear African leaders attributing their difficulties to a world system which worked against their interests. The extent to which their claims were true is arguable but the statements themselves were bids for fairer or more stable terms of trade, a greater share of public and private investment capital or greater access to international technology.

The allocation of food aid is itself a striking example, not primarily of how much food countries are prepared to give away, but of the strength and persuasiveness of claims made by countries which want assistance. The fact is that food aid is not distributed according to need any more than national resources are allocated according to requirements.

The recent example of Ethiopia is a case in point. While Kenya, which is surely by comparison in a stronger position to finance its food deficit, received more offers of food assistance than it required, Ethiopia's appeals, albeit supported by one of the more effective internal 'early warning systems' and corroborated by data from FAO's Global Early Warning System, went largely ignored until children dying in front of television cameras created a public reaction which could not be set aside. Zimbabwe has an embarrassing surplus of food aid while Mozambique's requirements have not yet been met. The strength of national bids for food aid and the basis on which they are made determines its allocation, and not an objective assessment of needs.

## SOME CONCLUSIONS

A number of conclusions can be drawn from this analysis. The first is that survival is an individual matter and directly dependent on the effectiveness of the family's claim on scarce resources. There are an increasing number of African families who can no longer gain access to the essentials they require for survival. This, rather than drought, is the main cause of famine.

The second conclusion arises from the first. The relationship between a family's claim on resources for survival and international resource allocation is far from clear and much more complex than might appear at first sight. It is far from obvious, for example, the 'international' solutions such as proposed by the 1974 World Food Conference constitute either an appropriate or an effective strategy to rid the world of famine.

The third conclusion is that the prime importance given to the provision of aid may not be the most effective way to ensure that the famines of the 1980's do not recur in the 1990's. An analysis centred on the extent to which families can command a share of local resources in the context of rapid and uncertain political and economic change, suggests that the enhancement of their bidding position should be the first consideration.

Of course, this places international assistance in a most ambiguous position. No longer is the focus on the transfers of material and financial international resources but on something much more fundamental and much less accessible to

the generosity or even the technical capacity of industrialised peoples. The analysis even calls into question the most basic assumptions about 'responsibility' for the poorest in a 'one-world' family. The polemic of international agencies becomes less relevant than when 'we' are the suppliers and 'they' are the recipients or beneficiaries; the 'we's' and the 'they's' are more easily recognisable in a world order which is based on patronage. A number of Non-Governmental Organizations have recognised the need to create direct alliances with people who can no longer lay a survival claim but this is much more difficult for governments and international aid agencies.

The fourth conclusion arising from this analysis calls into question the efficacy of food aid. There has been a good deal written about the negative effects of food aid in terms of production disincentives and dependency. This analysis might suggest that the temporary sustenance of people who can no longer command a survival share of local resources creates a problem which has no remedy. This conclusion is given some credibility by the presence of refugee camps left over from the famines in Eastern Africa a decade ago. However, we cannot allow this conclusion to stand without question. A more important conclusion merits consideration. It may be that the way food aid is delivered is based on the wrong analysis. The alternative is that food aid should only be provided if simultaneously communities can be encouraged to invest themselves in a more viable future.

The final conclusion is even more shot through with questions than the last but it is one that demands examination however briefly. If our analysis is correct, a continued cycle of drought, famine and decline in the protection families can provide for themselves, looks to be inevitable. I think not. However, it is my belief that the solutions will not come primarily from the deliberations, strategies and actions of the international community but from the people themselves.

Despite the overall picture which is undoubtedly gloomy, there are a number of hopeful signs. The first is that the African peasant farmer has been shown to be tough, tenacious and resourceful. The stagnation so often to be seen in African capitals is not typical of the African countryside. The second is that despite the estrangement from the national economy and polity of much rural Africa, the experience of Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Malawi and Kenya, for example, suggests that, given a chance, the African peasant has an almost untapped potential to produce both for the family and for the national economy. But this potential will only be realised when the structure of the political economy in which she and he operate is realigned in their favour by however small a degree.

The release of this energy is probably the most overwhelmingly important task facing any government on the continent. It needs to be given a chance because it may be the last chance Africa has to beat the inexorable erosion of its people's rights to survive.