International Food Aid and Political Empowerment: A Historical Study of Famine Relief

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ABSTRACT

As starvation and malnutrition present some of the greatest threats to the well-being of individuals in developing countries, it is essential to find long-term solutions for such dilemmas. While international food aid is a powerful and often well-funded system to help combat famine, other more long-lasting solutions may exist. To better understand this time-less issue, one may look at the historical record for clues as to how famines and starvation have best been controlled, managed and prevented. Through such a survey one finds that the history of both India and China—the two most populous nations in the world—provide insightful and relevant case studies as to how governments should and should not provide famine relief. One discovers that as governments are held politically accountable for the welfare of at-risk populations, famine relief can be better prevented. Thus one can come to the conclusion that effective and long-term solutions for starvation relief are founded in the principle of political empowerment of affected populations.

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Daniel Polk is farsighted and inquisitive, humorous and kind. He brings those qualities to each of his many areas of interest: Latin American history, contemporary politics, ballroom dancing, and research and writing. With this article, Daniel makes a unique contribution to the issues that Amartya Sen raised in his important Poverty and Famines (1981.) Sen offered the insight that politics are at the root of the great famines of the twentieth century. Spurred on by that book, historians and economists have engaged in rethinking the question of why famine occurs. Daniel's work examines what these debates mean for real life humanitarian work. On the basis of a comparative study, Daniel concludes that efficient food relief must focus on local communities and must reinforce political accountability. Humanitarians, he argues, must do more than replace the supply of food; they must empower civil society.
While world-wide food production is at a historic all-time high with many developed countries enjoying large food surpluses, over 800 million people currently suffer from chronic under-nourishment while more than 25,000 die of starvation every day, according to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). This startling juxtaposition of the haves and have-nots of the global community has led to the rise of numerous government- and privately-funded organizations, each seeking to bring relief to the famine-stricken regions of the world. In spite of the constant work of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), charities, private and church organizations, little has been done to find a long-term solution for the cause of famine. Through a historical perspective, one discovers that only by addressing the political structures of famine-prone regions can a long-term solution be found. This political relationship between famines and the suffering population becomes apparent when one looks at historical case studies of famine relief in India and China—two countries that both illustrate some of the most successful and unsuccessful examples of famine relief. By examining the nature of famine and food-relief agencies, as well as historical case studies of documented failures and successes of famine relief, it becomes clear that permanent solutions to famines can be found through the political empowerment of the population.

The Political Paradigm

To better understand the dynamics of hunger and food aid, one may recognize that occurrences of famine are inherently political phenomena. While natural disasters, droughts or crop failures may make a population susceptible to starvation, it is ultimately the failure of political and economic systems that result in wide-spread food shortages. When a potato blight eradicated Ireland’s food staple from 1848-51, the British colonial government failed to provide sufficient aid or support, resulting in the starvation of nearly 2.5 million people. Because of the Irish people’s political and economic powerlessness, they were unfairly dependent on the single potato crop and equally powerless to obtain aid when this crop failed. When looking at the modern case of totalitarian North Korea, one sees a similar situation. In a dictatorial political system granting few individual rights, the people have suffered continued food shortages, culminating in the starvation deaths of as many as three million in late 1990s. As stated by Nobel laureate Amartya Sen, famines are about the “relationship of the persons to the [food] commodity”. Thus, it is not natural or environmental factors, but the political relationship between a population and its food source that is the primary cause of starvation. In Michael Watt’s examination of colonial Nigeria, he concludes that “famines are social crises” caused not by climate-induced draught, but by the “failures of particular economic and political systems”. These political failures result in the disempowerment of populations, making it economically or politically impossible to gain access to the food needed for survival. As succinctly stated by Sen, famine is the event of “some people not having enough food to eat,” and not “of there being not enough food to eat”.

By looking at famine as a political anomaly, one can better gain a basic understanding of current humanitarian aid. Since World War II, modern food aid is a complex assortment of international agencies, NGOs and charities, often wielding enormous power with their ability to raise money from donor nations. Most often humanitarian aid seeks to address immediate crises of a region through the physical distribution of food supplies, such as rice rations or corn seeds. Due to its inherent nature, food aid typically addresses only the physical needs and not the political inequalities of the people. As clearly noted by author Paul Theroux from his far-reaching travels through Africa, humanitarian organizations had originally “grown out of disaster relief agencies” but had now become “multinational institutions, permanent fixtures of welfare and services”. Although these relief agencies provide much-needed aid, they often interfere with the political systems of famine-stricken lands. Starvation victims may receive the food sustenance needed to survive, but continue to subsist in states of political powerlessness under their government. As with modern Kenya, aid-recipient governments relinquish their political responsibility to their people, resulting in
food aid and other welfare services to be managed almost exclusively by “sympathetic foreigners”\textsuperscript{ix}. Initially it can be seen that modern humanitarian aid does not address the inherent problem of famine (i.e. the political disempowerment of the population). In order to form a working theory for famine relief and the possible role of international aid, one must first examine historical cases of both unsuccessful and successful instances of famine relief.

The Paradigm Applied: Historical Case Studies

The two most populous regions of the world—India and China—have been subject to some of the most severe famines and some of the most efficient famine-relief efforts. By examining historical case studies of the failures and successes of famine relief in these two regions, one can better see the relationship between the starving populations, political structures and food aid. Failures of famine relief in India can be seen through the tragic mismanagement of British colonial rule during the late nineteenth century. In 1876, when monsoon rains failed to appear over the land of Madras, the people of this Indian region were left dangerously vulnerable to famine\textsuperscript{x}. The imperial government lent almost no effective support to prevent or relieve famine, but instead enacted Malthusian ideals of non-intervention, with commitments to not “interfere with market forces”\textsuperscript{xi}. Scholar Mike Davis notes the ironic fact that the modern infrastructure put in place by the colonial government actually served to exacerbate, not relieve, the famine: “The telegraph ensured that price hikes were coordinated in a thousand towns at once, regardless of local supply trends,” while the railroads, which had been “lauded as institutional safeguards against famine,” were in fact “used by merchants to ship grain inventories from outlying drought-stricken districts to central depots for hoarding”\textsuperscript{xii}. So extreme was the native people’s level of political disempowerment that riots often erupted in desperate attempts to regain control of grain supplies\textsuperscript{xiii}. The ruling viceroy, Lord Lytton, was there to serve the interests of the British crown, not the millions of Indian subjects beneath his rule. The people of India were not only disempowered politically, but also ideologically, as Malthusian principles and Social Darwinism placed blame on the natives for having caused the famine through their own overpopulation. This political ideology of native-disempowerment largely contributed to the lack of aid, as can be seen in the unforgiving words of Sir Evelyn Baring, a colonial official: “Every benevolent attempt made to mitigate the effects of famine...serves but to enhance the evils resulting form overpopulation”\textsuperscript{xiv}. Only after starvation had become an epidemic problem did British relief begin, which was maintained at low levels and under conditions that often required hard labor from the victims\textsuperscript{xv}. Under the laissez-fair political system, Lord Lytton achieved his duties, allowing merchants to export huge amounts of wheat to Europe during the height of the famine\textsuperscript{xvi}. As such, the British government was not held accountable to the native population, allowing British officials to idly sit by while starvation overtook their Indian subjects, each politically helpless to enact change. As a result of the people’s political disempowerment and the resulting lack of sufficient food aid, millions perished under the oppressive imperial government.

While the failures of famine relief in India are most clearly seen during the period of British imperialism, it was during the first decade of Communist rule when China suffered one of its worst famines, further illustrating the relationship between political ideology and failed relief efforts\textsuperscript{xvii}. During the “Great Leap Forward,” Chairman Mao Zedong sought far-reaching agrarian reforms throughout the land, preaching Communist principles of equality and justice. From these dogmatic and unchallenged ideals, China suffered the largest famine of the 20th century\textsuperscript{xviii}. Through Mao’s “Great Leap Forward,” China was forced to adopt faulty agricultural reforms and to transfer labor from farming to industrial work, resulting in mass food shortages even within regions with ideal farming conditions. Despite declared commitments to equality and the welfare of the poor, the dynamics of the Communist government and Mao’s dictatorial power did not allow for the peasants or even regional officials to challenge party policies. As noted by Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen, these disastrous programs “could not be modified by the pressure of public criticism both because the leadership was uncompromising and overconfident and
because the system did not encourage—or indeed allow—such criticism”xix. As detailed by Alex de Waal, the central government only learned of the famine when Peng Duhai, “one of the most respected cadres,” personally confronted Chairman Mao about the faminexx. This exchange between the two exemplified the lack of accountability held by the Communist leadership: “Mao listened, ignored the evidence, and then purged Peng”xxi. Mostly affecting rural regions of China’s countryside, the famine of 1958-61 was a result of political failure on the part of the central government and complete political disempowerment of the victim population. Despite the fact that the country had both abundant labor and land for farming and food relief, failure by the authoritarian political system resulted in the death of over 20 million peoplexxii. Although the peasant populations were respected and revered in the Communist Party’s ideology, they held almost no political force in the Communist government. This unique relationship between famines and political power can be further illustrated by historical examples of successful famine prevention and relief within India and China.

In stark contrast to the devastating famines under colonial rule, post-independence India demonstrates the success of a democratic government in its ability to prevent wide-scale famine. The last famine in India was the Bengali famine of 1943, in which British imperialism and free-market ideals had, like in 1876, resulted in the preventable death of millions of natives. So extreme was the injustice of the imperial rule that the people of India forcefully reclaimed their political sovereignty from Britain. As noted by de Waal, the Bengali famine saw the “largest loss of life in British-ruled territory during the war years,” an event so atrocious that within four years India was independent from the colonial powerxxii. Since its adoption of a democratic, self-ruling government in 1947, India has been free from large-scale famines for nearly six decades. Under this democratic structure, the Indian government is held politically accountable for its actions towards its citizens. Despite periods of droughts, floods and food shortages, the Indian government has successfully combated famine through the responsible actions of its politicians and bureaucrats. Because the reelection and career advancement of government officials depends on their performance, the citizens of India are the ones who ultimately retain political power. As stated by Deréz and Sen, this political system makes it “extremely hard for any government in office—whether at the state level or at the centre—to get away with neglecting prompt and extensive anti-famine measures at the first signs of a famine”xxiv. As a result of India’s political climate, India has an efficient and well-run famine relief system supplemented by an “employment creation” service as well as monetary welfare for the “unemployable”xxv. Because of the favorable political structure in modern India, politicians are held accountable to the people, resulting in famine-prevention policies that have proven successful up to present day.

In sharp difference from the economic and societal travesty of Mao’s “Great Leap Forward,” China had seen successful examples of food aid and famine prevention during the eighteenth century, further illustrating that effective famine relief is possible under proper political leadership. Under the Qing dynasty, effective governmental control of the country’s agricultural production resulted in a well-fed and famine-free China. What was unique about the Qing government was that the imperial system recognized itself as being responsible for the well-being of the people. As noted by Davis, the Qing Dynasty acknowledged food as a human right (ming-sheng in Chinese), illustrating that there existed a social or “political” contract between the peasants and the ruling powerxxvi. Even though Qing was an authoritarian, imperial power, it recognized the societal value of the rural peasants (who comprised about 80% of the population), thus resulting in efficient and self-induced efforts to avoid famines or food shortagesxxvii. As detailed in a study by Pierre-Etienne Will, the success of famine relief resulted from efficient and responsible action by the ruling Chinese government: Food rations were brought in from local supplies as well as huge amounts of relief transported from distant granaries and depots, sustaining the survival of over two million peasants for two-thirds of one famine-stricken yearxxviii. Because of this political contract between the government and the people, the government assumed
full responsibility for food shortages as the emperors had “an extraordinary engagement with the administration of food security and rural well-being” \textsuperscript{xxix}. Unlike the government of Mao, the Qing rulers kept themselves deeply involved with the needs of the people, utilizing a complex and well-established bureaucratic system. China’s capabilities at this time were remarkable, considering the thoroughness with which the system was organized. At China’s disposal there was “a cadre of skilled administrators and trouble-shooters, a unique national system of grain price stabilization, large crop surpluses, [and] well-managed granaries storing more than a million bushels of grain in each of the twelve provinces” \textsuperscript{xxx}. From this historical perspective of the failures and successes of Indian and Chinese famine relief, it becomes obvious that relief can best be carried out under political systems that are held accountable to the country’s population.

The Case for Political Empowerment

Drawing from this historical context, a proper role for modern humanitarian aid can be found when one identifies the ideal political environment necessary for successful relief to be carried out. In his pioneering argument, Amartya Sen states that famines can best be prevented in democratic governments, noting that “no famine has ever taken place in the history of the world in a functioning democracy” \textsuperscript{xxxx}. When the population is politically empowered, they have the ability to enact change and to hold the government accountable. A functioning democracy is the political system that ideally fulfills this requirement of political empowerment in order to provide successful relief and prevent famines. Although China prospered under responsible government of the Qing dynasty during the eighteenth century, the imperial political system left it vulnerable to future food shortages because the people had no power to enforce their political contract (as happened later in the nineteenth century). Through the democratic process, the voting public wields the power to change both policies and politicians when its needs are not met, allowing for a dynamic system able to change over time. To ensure that a democratic government remains accountable to the public, it is necessary to have visibility of government actions through a robust and independent media as well as the guaranteed preservation of political rights for the public. In Deréz and Sen’s examination of post-independence India, the country’s success in famine prevention is attributed to its “relatively free media and newspapers, and the active and investigative role that journalists as well as opposition politicians . . . play in the field” \textsuperscript{xxxxi}. These political rights must also be guaranteed to all citizens, including minorities and marginal populations. If any group is stripped of political power, then they become vulnerable to famine, even within a democratic government (as was the case in Sudan during the mid-1980s) \textsuperscript{xxxxii}. Once these political rights are granted to all members of the citizenry, with all able to wield power over the political process, then the government fulfills the definition of a \textit{functioning} democracy. As long as famine remains a “political scandal” of the government, then the political structure will ensure that they will not occur\textsuperscript{xxxxiv}. Under these conditions, one sees that the key to famine prevention is a governmental system that functions as a result of the political empowerment of the population. To identify the most proper role of international food aid, one must examine the advantages and disadvantages of modern aid and how it can successfully fit into the model of a politically-oriented approach to famine prevention.

Modern humanitarian aid is a complex system of independent organizations offering both invaluable short-term solutions and long-term political complications to the global issue of famine relief. To best utilize international food aid to combat famine, it must be used within a unique political context in order to offer long-lasting solutions. On a short-term basis, humanitarian aid is an essential tool to save lives when the most extreme conditions of famine arise. When humanitarian crises occur like the starvation resulting from the Nigerian/Biafra civil war of 1967-70, relief agencies become a necessity, as a last resort in preventing mass starvation. However, problems arise when countries become dependent on the continuing presence of these agencies, which often results in local governments relinquishing their responsibility over the people’s welfare.
In his extensive travelogue, Theroux quotes a former Zambian parliamentary member, Rolf Shenton, whose concerns clearly illustrate this dilemma: “[Aid workers] are entrenched. Charity is a business. They don’t even think about leaving. They’ve created imbalances in food, artificial shortages, sudden surpluses from abroad that undercut the local farmers. They make more problems than they solve.” By assuming the responsibility of famine prevention and leaving locals out of the relief processes, international agencies allow local governments to no longer be concerned or accountable for the physical well-being of the population. As stated by Graham Hancock in Lords of Poverty, “if a project is funded by foreigners it will typically also be designed by foreigners and implemented by foreigners using foreign equipment procured in foreign markets.” For long-term solutions to be found, food aid must be used within a local political context. Ideally, aid should be used to help an already democratic government (such as tsunami relief to India in 2004-05) so that it has no detrimental effect on the political leverage of its recipients. Otherwise food aid can be used in a manner that encourages government responsibility and requires an active role to be played by the people and their politicians. By giving consideration to the necessity of politically empowering the suffering population, humanitarian aid can potentially have a more beneficial and sustainable effect.

By recognizing famine as an inherently political problem and through examining historical case studies of successful and unsuccessful famine relief in India and China, one can draw the conclusion that long-term solutions to famine can only be obtained through politically empowering local populations. Whether expressed as Sen’s paramount importance of “functioning democracies,” or de Waal’s emphasis on the “political contract,” political empowerment is an essential concept to consider in the search for effective famine relief. With this understanding, it becomes clear that international food aid must be utilized in manners that address the political nature of starvation and that ultimately seek to politically empower aid recipients. This simple concept is summarized in the words of Alex de Waal, who succinctly acknowledges the essential traits of this modern dilemma: “Famine is thus politicized: it is a key concern for ordinary people, and in a country where some basic political liberties can be enjoyed, this means that it is also a concern for politicians.”
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ENDNOTES


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