
Book Review

Famine in Africa – Causes, Responses and Prevention

Joachim von Braun, Tesfaye Teklu and Patrick Webb

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In this important book the authors present the results of field work and other research from different parts of Africa. According to them, a famine is a catastrophic disruption of the social, economic and institutional systems involved with food production, distribution and consumption.

For a long time famines have been considered anomalies – crises that must be remedied by short-term relief activities so that the normal process of development can be resumed. Today we know differently. Famines can destroy not only life, but also the hope of development.

The conceptual basis for research on famine in Africa, is based on relationships between causes and symptoms of famine. The following are listed: Economic strategy and policy interacting with social discrimination, conflict and wars; resource endowments and their relationship to climate, or disaster events influencing poverty and instability of the (food) system; and population pressure.

Organizational capacities and governance, such as subsidies and distributional policies, that are critical to the choice and effective implementation of policy intervention, influence input/output relationships like production amounts and stability. Policy intervention interacting with price formation and linkages among capital, labour and output markets may contribute to market failures.

In addition actual income and consumption failure (and resultant starvation and high mortality rates) compound the collapse of services and distress migration. At this level the failure of “entitlements” becomes evident. Most of Africa’s recent famines have occurred within the context of armed conflicts between countries or intermittent civil conflicts within countries. The relation between conflict and economic policy – represented by reduced resources and

organizational capacity for public services – is important. There should be greater emphasis on conflict resolution as a famine prevention effort.

In connection with governance and famine, the authors note that those countries of the continent with a strong commitment to democracy, were not prone to famine in the past two decades. In contrast, the majority of countries that can be categorized as “authoritarian”, with ambiguous commitment to democracy or under “contested sovereignty”, have experienced repeated occurrences of famine in the past three decades. There is competition for resources between military expenditure and social action and hence famine is militarized in many parts of Africa.

Military conflicts have many direct and indirect effects on food security, many of which occur far from the fighting. The triangular relationship of – famine, economic disaster, and political turmoil – must be kept in mind when famine prevention and mitigating strategies are designed.

The authors then considered market and price effects in actual famine situations in Africa. The adverse effects of large price movements are felt mostly by the indigent, because of their resource and income constraints and the large proportion of their budget allocated to food and other essentials.

Therefore price monitoring systems must form part of larger information-monitoring systems. A set of indicators most appropriate to each vulnerable region, needs to be determined in advance, prior to the next exogenous shock. Concerning household food security and famine, two questions are considered, namely, who is the worst affected by famine (and why); and how and to what effect do responses differ among individuals, households and communities?

The authors found that famine causes multifaceted economic and social responses in the affected society. A diverse set of market and community insurance systems allows for a variety of household responses.

The continued prevalence of famine in Africa nevertheless represents a general “policy failure” on a worldwide scale, although there have been some success stories. The results of many programmes to strengthen household and national food security against famine have been positive. Famines triggered by natural disasters (rather than conflict) were dealt with much more successfully by the end of the 1990s than had been the case earlier. There remains, however, a lack of systematic assessment of these programmes, which hinders learning assessment and institutional strengthening across borders.

Finally, the authors conclude that:

- Present-day famines in Africa are largely the result of military conflicts that arise as a result of oppressive, unaccountable, and non-participatory governments;
- Famine in Africa is inseparable from chronic poverty and risk;
- Famines do not occur suddenly. They are an accumulation of events and policies that progressively erode the capacity of countries, including households, to deal with short-term shocks to the economy and food supply;
- The fact that famines continue to threaten life must be ascribed to a failure (both nationally and internationally) to give priority to the conceptualization, analysis, preparation and implementation of preventative measures, especially the promotion of agricultural growth;
- One of the main stumbling blocks that prevents knowledge being transformed into action is the lack of political and financial commitment to create and maintain the legal and administrative frameworks essential for efficient interventions.

To be successful in the fight against hunger and famine, international co-operation must be institutionalized through appropriate incentives. Hopefully the NEPAD initiative will contribute to achieve just that. It is a very important book, based upon sound theories and meticulous empirical research. A thorough study of this book would benefit both public and private development practitioners.

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