

"ONE CANNOT MAKE THE DONKEY MOVE BY BEATING THE LOAD"

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July 2003

***Breaking the Cycle of Recurrent Famine in Ethiopia
Christian Aid and Christian Relief and Development Agency
At Economic Commission for Africa***

1. INTRODUCTION

Famine is an ugly sight. I wonder how many persons here have actually seen famine, and experienced a little of famine. It is my encounter with famine in 1958-59 in Tigray and the subsequent nightmare that I could not get rid of that literally forced me to study famine for a total of more than ten years. I want you all to feel what I feel, the dehumanizing experience of famine, the degradation and the impotence in face of such terrifying atmosphere of death: what you see is death; what you hear is death; what you smell is death. Ugly death. It is a terrifying sight where there is hardly any distinction between those that are already dead and those that are gasping their last breath.

My definition of famine is very precise. It is the following:

Famine is the most negative state of food consumption under which people, unable to replace even the energy they lose in basal metabolism, consume whatever is stored in their bodies; that means they literally consume themselves to death.

This is the worst type of death. We are brought up with high-flown social and religious values. They all disappear under the slow, persistent and grinding death by famine. They are replaced by a sense of abandonment, abandonment even by God, of helplessness and hopelessness. A famine situation is a condition under which a mother cannot help her emaciated and tormented baby, which only becomes an additional source of torment for her. Can we afford to be less than absolutely honest on such an issue?

I want to impress upon you all that you are dealing with the gravest human problem facing this country for over forty years. The subject demands the highest intellectual honesty, the highest moral rectitude and the most determined human commitment and social responsibility.

In 1984, I had written:

The fact that famine, as the most extreme form of malnutrition, stunts the physical and mental development of children does not seem debatable. The effect of famine on children must be understood not only in its interference in the normal biological process of growth and development, but also in terms of the psychological scars that it is bound to leave on their minds.

These facts lead us into a realm of speculation. All other things remaining equal, will surviving famine victims develop a production capacity that will enable them to live a life that is free from famine? Or will they become even more vulnerable to famine?

Today, almost twenty years later, I can answer my questions with confidence. All other things remaining equal, the situation will be much worse ten years later. All other things remaining equal population pressure alone will have devastating consequences. Self-defeating policies will only accelerate the process.

2. THE PROBLEM

An Ethiopian saying has it that one who is afraid of beating the donkey beats the load instead. That will certainly not have much effect in moving the donkey. In this case it is climate and weather with occasional encounter with conservation that has lost distinction between ends and means that constitutes the load. The numerous conferences and workshops that have taken place, the innumerable papers that have been presented by various persons, and the enormous amount of money spent on such conferences and workshops during the last thirty years have not made the slightest dent on those who have the power to solve the problem of Ethiopian famine for good. The problem is not lack of knowledge in understanding the problem of famine, nor in devising solutions for it, but lack of will. What is it that is so mysterious about famine in Ethiopia? Famine is a very serious matter that kills hundreds of peasants in local famines in one part of the country or another every year; thousands of peasants in regional famines; and hundreds of thousands of peasants in national famines like the one we have now. If life means anything to us the problem is urgent, so urgent that there is no time for talking.

- We *know* that it is subsistence producers that are vulnerable to famine;
- we *know* that vulnerability is caused by persistent oppression and exploitation of peasants;
- we *know* that most of the production of peasants has to turn into cash to meet the pressing demands of the state and competing petty officials;

- we *know* that peasants go through severe periods of hunger even at normal years;
- we *know* that as a result of all this, peasants have no savings of any kind, cash or grain;
- we *know* that these are acts of deliberate commission on the part of the state forces;
- we also *know* that after a crop failure a period of about six to nine months passes before famine turns into a mass killer: this is the result of an act of omission on the part of the state forces.

These facts are very well known, but those in power certainly do not recognize them. I think it is the moral obligation of all conscious Ethiopians to ask:

- How many years of famine do we need to understand the problem?
- How many millions of peasants must die before we recognize the cause, the donkey that we must hold responsible?
- Are we so insensitive and, perhaps worse, that we have failed to even realize that we have almost officially declared both Ethiopian famine and relief assistance as the responsibility of the international community?
- How many conferences and workshops will it take to convince us and those in power that the real causes of famine are not drought and other adverse natural conditions?

3. VULNERABILITY TO FAMINE

I consider the concept of vulnerability to famine to be my best contribution to the study of famine. Vulnerability is the most critical factor for the proper understanding of famine. What do we mean by vulnerability to famine? Drought occurs in various parts of the world and yet we do not hear of any famine in those places. China was once considered to be the land of famine. India, too, until recently was plagued by famine. Yet, today neither China nor India experiences famine.

Obviously, the natural conditions have not changed so radically to favour those countries. It is the socio-economic conditions that have changed and removed vulnerability to famine. The essential conditions for vulnerability to famine are the powerlessness of peasants, on one hand, and brutal oppression and exploitation, on the other.

It may be said that mainly three forces create vulnerability to famine. The most important of these are the forces of the state. The cash claims of the state in various forms such as taxation and contributions are persistent. The peasant associations demand their own claims from the peasants. Moreover, petty local officials demand their own illegal extortions as well.

The second important force is the market, in the transactions that peasants are forced to conduct. All cash claimants from the peasants arrive at the rural scene at harvest time. Consequently, all peasants are forced to take their produce to the market at about the same time. This floods the market with food products and causes prices to fall considerably. Because of low prices peasants have to sell more of their produce to meet the various cash demands imposed on them. In addition debts have to be paid with exorbitant interest rates.

Then there are a third set of forces, social and religious. In Ethiopia even the dead demand their tribute from the living. Various aspects of social and religious obligations extract much from the peasants.

It is these sets of forces almost acting in concert that create the conditions for peasant vulnerability to famine. Without these conditions there cannot be vulnerability to famine, and without vulnerability to famine there cannot be famine. The essence of vulnerability to famine is *the undermining of the peasants' capacity to save* some food or cash for hard times. Peasants are effectively incapacitated by the three sets of forces described above. The state and market forces together with social and religious forces conspire to incapacitate the productive and saving capacities of the peasants.

It is necessary to emphasize that the externally imposed cash demands have *priority over the subsistence requirements* of the peasants and their families. Peasants and their families have to subsist with ***what is left after they have met the cash demands*** imposed on them by the various forces. What is left with them is hardly sufficient to meet their subsistence requirements for six to eight months before the next harvest. During these months there is often widespread undernourishment and malnutrition. This period constitutes what is often referred to as the pre-harvest hunger. It is this *living on the brink of famine in normal years* when the natural forces are favourable to the peasants that we refer to as vulnerability to famine. Natural conditions have nothing to do with it.

4. ETHIOPIAN PEASANTS

The dilemma of the Ethiopian peasant is, on one hand, to surrender to the necessity of making a living ONLY ON THE LAND by force of circumstances, and on the other, to submit to the demands made on him by the ruling forces. In other words, the peasant has no choice over his predicament as a peasant. Nor does he have any choice on the actions of his tormentors.

Ethiopian peasants constitute some 85 % of the total population of the country. Their numbers, however, have never had any significance in terms of power and influence. This fact must be included as one of the most important aspects of the problem of famine in Ethiopia and its

increasing frequency and magnitude. There is no doubt whatsoever that unless the Ethiopian peasants are liberated and empowered, famine will remain with us.

The most important problem is the fact that policy makers refuse to accept their role in generating famine. If this fact is not accepted seriously and sincerely no amount of muddling through with the assistance of international organizations will solve the problem of famine. It will only intensify it. It is sad to realize that Ethiopian officials shamelessly blame international agencies and other governments for not providing assistance in time while they refuse to accept the responsibility for generating the famine in the first place.

Drought or too much rain, frostbite or hailstones, locusts or armyworms, or any other natural force that reduces the production of crops can be foreseen. How many years of famine do we need, and how many millions of peasants must die before the policy makers are prepared to develop such foresight? Without that foresight there is no technology yet to prevent drought, nor too much rain, nor hailstones. It is only that foresight that can prevent famine. ***It is that lack of foresight that stands between the problem of famine and its solution.***

Barren explanations of famine are generated to obscure the understanding of famine and to postpone its solution, on one hand, and to foster the business of relief, on the other. Some of these explanations are seemingly moral and generous while others are academic and technical. One debates whether colonialism and exploitation by the West are not the REAL causes of famine. One debates whether it is morally right to feed cats and dogs, and even horses and pigs in the West while human beings are starving to death in Ethiopia. One debates whether the productions of agricultural raw materials in demand in the international market are not taking such a considerable proportion of the cultivated land which should have been under food crops instead. One debates whether land degradation brought about by the "ignorant" peasants in cultivating the land is not the main problem of food shortage. One debates whether the cause of famine is shortage of food supply or whether the real cause is the failure to command effective demand, or as some see it a combination of both. In so far as Ethiopia is concerned these are barren debates.

The crucial point is that these confused and confusing explanations of famine whether they are openly paternalistic or seemingly academic have one thing in common: They raise their own world to the level of humanity with all the sense of responsibility and goodness that it entails and lower the victims to mere objects of pity at worse and of charity at best. Very few of these explanations of famine charge the societies and governments with the responsibility for allowing famine to occur. If they had any respect for us as responsible human beings they would be blasting us in the strongest terms possible. The reason for the fact that they do not is I think because we are not even worthy of their contempt.

Barren explanations of famine lead us to no solutions. On the contrary, they reinforce the confusion about famine and its origin. Worse than that they provide a rather uncomfortable cushion to our guilty consciences and reduce the sense of responsibility that must necessarily be the foundation of the solution of the problem of famine. Not FAO or WFP nor the whole of the United Nations system can solve the problem of famine for Ethiopia before Ethiopia itself has identified the problem correctly.

If we have the will and the commitment, we do have the capacity to resolve our chronic problem of food shortage. It is high time that we stop blaming nature for our obvious failures to adjust to her vicissitudes and to harness her might. We have now gone a step further in blaming nature; the whole of our electricity supply is in jeopardy, not because we lacked foresight, as we are urged to believe, but because nature was harsh on us. The processes of nature do not operate with a motive of any kind. Nature simply is. It is society that ought to adjust and act purposefully and responsibly. We cannot say nature ought to be this or that. Nature responds neither to threats and slogans nor to prayers and supplications. It responds only to rational and effective SOCIAL ACTION.

5. CONCLUSION

In 1986, at a conference on Food Security in Alemaya University I concluded my paper with the following words, which are still true today.

“For the vast majority of the rural population of Ethiopia the problem of food security is a very pressing one, and for them, therefore, the future begins now. It is our present action that will determine whether the future will be a repetition of the recent past or a total departure from it.

The issues constituting and surrounding the problem of food security may appear complex and intractable, but they are manageable and soluble. We need only the will at the level of policy, a more assertive and a more committed role at the level of the professional and a more free and a more decisive participation at the level of the peasantry.”

The problem of land tenure and security remains an issue today as it was under the previous regime. The doubtful political benefits of the land tenure exact an enormous price in social, economic and political development. Those who pride themselves in holding revealed revolutionary truth must face the painful reality of mass death by starvation, mass dislocations from various parts of the country, and the effects of relief food assistance on national morale.

There is an urgent need for seriously reviewing the conception of development that policy makers hold. I will mention only four issues that I consider to be central to overcoming famine. First, it is idle to expect agricultural development with such a land policy. Second, there is an urgent need for moratorium on taxation and various other contributions for at least the small peasant producers. This is absolutely necessary. Third, the rhetoric and the effort to bring about modernization and rural development with minuscule peasant farms that are often less than one hectare and often fragmented, is a waste of energy and resources. Fourth, essentially development will come not by maintaining the present proportion of peasant population or by increasing it, but, on the contrary, by decreasing that proportion. The high proportion of the peasantry will not decrease unless the peasant is free and master of his own destiny.

With sound social and economic policies, Ethiopia has the potential to become a very important exporter of agricultural products. There is no dearth of resources, only mismanagement of resources.