

## **ETHIOPIA'S FOOD SECURITY:**

### **PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS**

BY

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#### ***1. Introductory Remarks***

I will start by making five statements of impossibilities.

- Impossible one: it is impossible to deny the fact that Ethiopia has almost become synonymous with famine. The whole world has witnessed for a full decade on television screens the dead or nearly dying emaciated bodies of Ethiopians.
- Impossible two: it is impossible to deny that the problem of food shortage has become so extremely serious and chronic that its solution cannot be postponed any longer.
- Impossible three: it is impossible to solve the problem by merely wishing it away without an honest and scientific understanding of the nature of the problem and all its dimensions.
- Impossible four: it is impossible to plan in the dark without knowing all the relevant facts. The dearth of accurate statistical material on the agricultural resources of the country including climate is simply shocking.
- Impossible five: all other things remaining equal, it is impossible to avert another disaster in the years to come.

If we allow the next one to happen, it is going to be much more disastrous, because it will be affecting a much wider area and a much greater number of people.

The problem of food security, therefore, must be given a very high and sincere priority not only because we are, as a proud nation, terribly ashamed of what has already happened in the past, but also because the whole world is watching to see how we will handle the challenge, the much graver danger that lies ahead. There is absolutely no reason at all for complacency in so far as the problem of food security is concerned.

What is food security? I understand food security to mean the right of every human being to have adequate food supply every day of the year. Food security is a right of old men and women and children as well as a right of criminals and all sorts of social dregs. The right of food security is an affirmation of the right to life. There is nothing higher than human life. I think no one will argue against Marx's statement that "life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life." He also said that "men must be in a position to live in order to be able to make history." There cannot be any hope of making history without food security. It is important to realise the concrete situation we are in and the views of the international public as well as the moral pain we are inflicting on numerous persons elsewhere in the world not to mention our own agony, sense of shame and moral degradation. If these pains of ourselves and of others do not stimulate us to focus attention on the problem of food security and to resolute actions then we are not worth the heritage of pride and dignity of our forefathers and the concern of the rest of the world. We have to learn to be realistic. Let me indulge in quoting Karl Marx once more, because I find it a good lesson on realism:

**...we do not set out from what men say, imagine, conceive, nor from men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh. We set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process.**

In short, existence determines consciousness, and it cannot be the other way around. The uncelebrated Ethiopian poet, Kebede Mikael, is expressing the same sense of realism when he wrote:

*Rasen sibelagn wist igren biakugn,  
Leminim aibejegn minim aiteqmegn.*

meaning:

When I feel the itch on my head to scratch my foot,  
Serves no purpose and helps me not one bit.

For the multitudes of starving peasant families there is nothing higher than food. All acts of heroism come after food security. Food security means, therefore, the affirmation of the continued existence of the Ethiopian society with honour and dignity even in relative poverty.

It is really not necessary to borrow ideas in order to validate the right of Ethiopians to food security. Ethiopian culture recognised everyman's right to food. It was concretely manifested by the fact that food was never a commodity in traditional Ethiopia. Even now there are poor Ethiopians who frown upon selling food. In fact it is very disgraceful to sell food. Food, traditional Ethiopians believe, must always be given free to the hungry and to the traveller. Feeding each other is both a social act and an art. The saying: *bichawin yebela bichawin yimotal*, meaning one who eats alone dies alone, is loaded with numerous social implications one of which is that someone who habitually eats alone will not have people even to bury him. One must understand the preoccupation of Ethiopians with the burial ceremony in order to appreciate the social significance of the saying.

## **2. FROM FOOD EXPORTER TO FOOD IMPORTER: A REVIEW OF THE PAST**

The pattern of Ethiopia's foreign trade in agricultural products during the period 1945 to 1984 is extremely useful in understanding the roots of the problem of food security. Immediately after the war Ethiopia emerged as a very promising food exporter, as the future bread basket of the Middle East. Table 1 shows various agricultural exports for quintuple years upto 1984.

Table 1  
Ethiopia's Exports of Agricultural Products  
1945-1984 (Tons)

YEARS	CEREALS&P ULSES	OIL SEEDS	COFFEE
1945-1949	435780	71655	82496
1950-1954	373808	206733	146145
1955-1959	262570	285407	209383
1960-1964	298098	351295	307590
1965-1969	14763	280634	403553
1970-1974	30456	412532	365853
1975-1979	3576	150394	333459
1980-1984	99434	86819	426086

Source: various CSO Publications.

It may be important to note some facts that may give some clues to the problem of food security in this country. First, it is interesting to observe that although the export of cereals and pulses was declining in general right from the beginning until it fell sharply after 1964, it is not possible to detect any national famine even those of 1973-1974 and 1983-1984 from the figures. The fact is that all years since 1958 have been famine years in Ethiopia.

Although exports have been declining in absolute terms the substantial increases in the proportion during the two most terrible famine periods, 1973-1974 and 1983-1984, are clear.

In 1970-1974 there was an increase of 206% over the previous period whereas in 1980-1984 the increase was more than 2780% over the previous period.

Second, the fact that the export of cereals and pulses declined persistently may have significant lessons for those who may care to examine the probable reasons. It may be a response to unfavourable market conditions. The price of tef per quintal dropped from about 30.0 Birr in the 1940s to about 25 at beginning of the 1960s. During the same period the price of wheat dropped from over 30 to 20, maize from nearly 16 to under 14, chick peas from nearly 23 to 12, horse beans from about 16 to 11, lentils from 31 to 15.

Was peasant production responding to prices? If so there is a lesson to learn. If not it will be extremely important to find out the reasons for the decline in exports. Third, the rise and fall in the exports of oil seeds and coffee, it must be noted, is hardly related to the rise and fall in the exports of cereals and pulses. This lack of correspondence between the variations in the two agricultural products makes it difficult to detect the effects of the weather. In fact it is not possible to detect the so-called droughts that significantly reduced the quantity of exports of oilseeds and coffee. On the contrary we see a rise during periods of food shortage.

Yet we clearly see the effects of the revolutionary situation and the war conditions in the country. In general, both oil seeds and coffee show an upward trend until the period of 1975-1979 when both, especially oil seeds, begin a downward trend. After 1974 coffee has outstripped oil seeds exports in quantity.

It appears to be clear that the decline in the exports of oil seeds and coffee in the period of 1975-1979 is related to the revolutionary situation and war conditions prevailing in the country in those years. Oil seeds are produced mostly in the northern half of the country while coffee is mostly a product of the southwestern parts. The revolutionary situation in general and the war condition in the northwest (Gonder) in particular are certainly the most important factors that explain the sharp decline of oil seeds exports during 1975-1979. The war conditions created by the Somalian invasion of Ogaden has certainly adversely affected the exports of coffee from Harerghe, Sidamo, and Gamo Gofa.

But the most important fact that deserves serious attention is that the exports of oil seeds and coffee are not at all related to years of famine in any way. Now, if the explanation for famine and food shortage were drought, as is often claimed, then we must either claim that the weather is partial and favours oil seeds and coffee, or that stocks of oil seeds and coffee are always large enough not to be dependent on yearly production. The point that I really want to make is that if the weather were the most decisive factor for the problem of food security how is it that its negative effects are not visible in equal measure on the exports of oil seeds and coffee which have been showing a steady growth? It should be noted that the highest record for oil seeds export was the period 1970-1974, the period of a devastating national famine.

Similarly, the period 1965-1969 was a time of national famine and yet the export of coffee declined only slightly, only to about 80% of the previous period. But the exports of cereals and pulses in 1965-1969 plummeted to about 5% of the previous period.

What is even more important is that the imports of food seem to indicate more decisively the periods of food shortage than the exports. The severe famine that hit Eritrea, Tigray, and Wollo in 1958 and 1959 cannot be detected at all from the export figures for those years while the sudden and sharp rise of the the imports clearly suggest the problem.

That so much food was exported at a time of famine is not surprising at all to people who understand the socioeconomic origins of famine. In periods of successive famines more than twice as much food was exported than imported. That is the source for the peasant saying: *nech deha nech mar yikeflal*, meaning that those who have turned pale by abject poverty pay white honey. Or *deha yemibelaw inji yemikeflew ayatam*, meaning the poor may starve but they are never short of what they must pay.

Table 2  
Exports & Imports of Food  
1945-1984

Years	Exp(T)	%	Imp.(T)	%
1945-49	435780	28.7	58	0.0
1950-54	373808	24.6	2421	0.1
1955-59	262570	17.3	77179	4.6
1960-64	298098	19.6	83334	5.0
1965-69	14763	1.0	165732	9.8
1970-74	30455	2.0	163833	9.7
1975-79	3576	0.2	140609	8.4
1980-84	99434	6.6	1048964	62.4
Total	1518484	100.0	1682130	100.0

For more than a decade now Ethiopia has institutionilised food aid, becoming increasingly dependent on external assistance. It is necessary, therefore, to identify the problem not merely as one of chronic food shortage but also as institutionilised dependence on foreign assistance.

Apparently, Ethiopian peasants are in the unfortunate position of being under either continuing famine or continuing food aid. This leads us to consider the subsistence condition of Ethiopian peasants.

### 3. Subsistence Requirements

According to the Ethiopian Nutrition Institute (N.D.), the average daily requirements of grain for one person per day is 0.5 kg.. This means that nearly 183 kg. of grain per person per year will be the absolute minimum requirement for subsistence alone. Taking the average peasant household to be five, the subsistence requirement will be 9.15 quintals of grain per year. If this figure is acceptable, we can examine the production of the peasants.

It is possible to have an idea of peasant production from some studies that have been made in recent years. One study made in seven weredas of Wello, Shewa, Harerghe, and Gamo Gofa involving 600 peasant households indicates that nearly 77% of them cultivate less than one hectare of land (Yeraswork et al, 1985). Another study made in four weredas of Gojjam, Wellega, Kefa and Sidamo involving nearly 2000 peasant households shows that about 62% of them cultivate plots of land of less than one hectare (Dessalegn, 1984).

Finally if we take the rural population of the country and divide it by five to get the average farm household size, and then divide the total privately cultivated land in the country by the number of peasant households, we get a figure that is much less than one hectare (CSO, 1984, 1986). The mere fact that we are forced to do such tortuous mathematical exercises whenever we want some information on Ethiopian agriculture is evidence enough of the little attention that it receives. But the point is that with less than one hectare of land the peasant household can hardly subsist for one year. Even in areas where the farm size is much higher the problem of food deficit is still present (Gryseels & Anderson, 1983).

The CSO's estimate of total agricultural production from privately operated peasant holdings is 39,781,670.00 quintals for 1984/1985 and if we include the belg crop it will be 44,317,550.00 (in fact includes state farms and

co-operatives) quintals. That amount divided by the rural population will yield only 1.2 quintals per person per year, 0.63 quintal short of the minimum requirement for subsistence. The study in seven weredas cited earlier shows that 81.7% of the peasants produced less than 5.00 quintals each in 1982/1983. The following year, 1983/1984, the proportion of peasants who produced less than 5.00 quintals rose to 90.8% (Yeraswork et al, 1985). My own study in eight different weredas in Shewa indicates that out of 200 peasants nearly 28.00% borrowed grain and 20.1% borrowed cash and 52.23% were recipients of food aid in 1984/1985. Nearly 70% of these peasants felt they did not eat adequately. And yet each one paid on the average almost 90.00 Birr in one year for taxes, contributions, iddir, debt, association fees, etc.

How do these peasants afford to pay so much when they do not have enough to eat? Whenever possible they sell sheep and goats and if the sale from these does not cover their obligations, they sell their oxen, their main capital. Without oxen they almost ensure their downfall for the coming year. Every year they sink lower and lower below the starvation line, becoming more and more incapable of greater output and of withstanding the smallest vicissitude of nature. The deterioration of the subsistence level of Ethiopian peasants is the most decisive factor for the grave problems facing Ethiopian agriculture.

It has not been sufficiently understood yet that famine breeds famine. Whatever its initial cause may have been, and all other things remaining equal, one year of famine is almost inevitably followed by one or more years of famine. The reason is simple: the whole system of agricultural activity breaks down as a result of one famine.

Starving peasants and oxen, even if they have survived, do not have the energy to work on the land. In such a situation, a season with the most favourable climatic conditions passes inconsequentially aggravating the problem of food shortage.

Even with relief assistance, the resumption of the normal input in farm operations will take a long time. It is gratifying to note that quite considerable effort is made by the Ministry of Agriculture and by various UN agencies to study the problem of land degradation in this country. But to date I am not aware of any study to determine the magnitude, intensity and the consequences of human degradation.

The recent Survey on Rural Health conducted by CSO (September 1986) is a modest but very good beginning. The Comprehensive Health Service Directory of the Ministry of Public Health is a commendable work that all ministries, especially the Ministry of Agriculture, should emulate. But this is only a necessary digression from the unrecognised problem of human degradation. Bearing in mind that deaths in hospitals are privileges of a very small minority of Ethiopians, out of the 14 Administrative Regions only Bale, Gojjam and Sidamo do not have registered hospital deaths due to malnutrition. In Arsi it is 20.4%, Gonder 15.8%, Gamo Gofa 9.7%, Illubabor 8.1%, Eritrea 7.6%, Kefa 6.2%, and for some strange reason Wello, Shewa, Harerghe and Tigray have less than 5% each (Ministry of P. Health, 1982). The prevalence rates of having illness in rural areas are between 40 and 50% for Illubabor, Wellega and Gonder, 30 to 40% for Arsi and Kefa, 20 to 30% for Wello, Gojjam, Gamo Gofa, Sidamo and Harerghe, and less than 20% for Bale (CSO, September 1986). Such information on malnutrition and morbidity are extremely useful. But they will have to be related to agricultural production in order to measure their effects on labour productivity.

In this connection it will be necessary to pay special attention to the long-run effects of famine or chronic malnutrition on children. The biological, mental and psychological consequences may linger and may even be transmitted to future generations. Malnourished children growing to be malnourished peasants may perpetuate the problem. Malnourished peasants will continue to have low labour productivity and, as a result, low land productivity.

These arguments on subsistence requirements call for two urgent measures: a thorough and definitive research on the problems of food shortage and its effects on labour productivity in rural Ethiopia, and the establishment of a minimum subsistence requirement that will not be taxable.

Of course there are several other factors that need to be examined with sincerity in order to boost agricultural production. I will briefly discuss some of these below.

#### **4. Obstacles to Agricultural Development**

It is possible to identify two sets of major obstacles to agricultural development in Ethiopia. I shall call one set structural obstacles, and the other institutional obstacles. First, the structural obstacles. Nearly 94% of the total cultivated land in the country is operated by individual peasants. These peasant farms are small, often less than one hectare in size, and fragmented. It is one of the major weaknesses of the land reform that it has not removed the problem of fragmentation. Land reform has also extended rather than removed the problem of security of tenure. The small and fragmented peasant plots are difficult if not impossible to modernise. Because of their small scale their individual production is also small as a result of which it is nearly impossible to make the necessary investments to raise the productivity of the land.

In general and in the long-run, it can be said that the solution lies in inducing peasants to come together under co-operatives. I am using the word 'inducing' and the clause 'come together' advisedly because forming co-operatives is not a mechanical or a technical procedure. It has a human and a psychological dimension that is critical to the achievement of the ultimate goal. There is no ground for assuming a uniform type of co-operatives in every part of the country. Given the full and active participation of peasants they may vary according to local conditions of production potential, social cohesion, values and attitudes. The physical assembly of land and peasants alone will not remove the structural obstacles which are a composite of various interactive and dynamic social, economic, and political elements. It is valuable to learn from such co-operatives like Welte'i Atota which started around 1957 in Harerghe and after many years of tribulation is now doing well in Ghinnir wereda of Bale (Qinijit Lelimat, Megabit 1978).

The more intractable issues of agricultural diversification, division of labour and peasant motivation cannot be ignored. The structural obstacles underlying peasant cultivation are not restricted to the problem of farm size and fragmentation and land productivity alone. Even more importantly, they include the subsistence mentality, psycho-social attitudes and the labour productivity of peasants. It will be difficult to raise the productivity of the land either on peasant farms or on co-operatives without raising the productivity of labour, and that requires a clear understanding of peasant motivation.

The only study on peasant motivation that I know of has instructive ideas on this issue (Habtamu, 1983). According to this study, Ethiopian peasants attach great importance to their own role in the process of decision-making. They are, the study states, "much more motivated when they have made the decision (themselves) than when decisions are made by MOA or others." Another very interesting finding of this study is that although some 95% of the peasants stated that they were motivated by material incentives such as money compared to mere recognition, 90% of them felt they were motivated more by "people's affection" or by "community respect and affection" than by money or wealth. When the results were tabulated by age, sex, language groups, and previous land ownership status, and by work performance in the co-operatives no significant difference is observed. These are very interesting results that need further investigation.

It will be wise not to simplify the very complex structural obstacles which relate not only to the physical aspects of peasant farming but also to attitudes, values, motivations and psycho-social behaviour as well. In the final analysis it is really people that are both the instruments and the beneficiaries of development. Therefore, people must understand and want development, if development is to be dynamic and generative. Ethiopian history, both ancient and modern, offers many examples of developments that have come to naught only because they were imposed and the people were not made to accept them.

The institutional obstacles, too, are rather varied and complex, ranging from taxation to marketing. Ethiopian peasants are required to pay two types of

taxes, land tax and agricultural income tax. Both these taxes do not take into account family size. A solitary peasant pays the same taxes as a peasant who has ten persons in his family. The taxes are the same for all peasants whether their land is fertile or poor, small or large. The assessment of the land and other environmental qualities is essential to make taxation justifiable. It is indeed surprising that so far no attempt is made to differentiate even between famine prone and famine free areas of the country. Most important of all no account is made of the minimum subsistence requirements of the peasants.

It has already been indicated and it is common knowledge that the decade of 1972/1973 to 1982/1983 was one of famine and extreme food shortage. Yet during this period land tax increased from 5.7 million Birr to 50 million which represents an increase of more than 877% in ten extremely difficult years for the peasants. Similarly, agricultural income tax rose during the same period from 14 million Birr to 56 million, an increase of 400%. It is interesting to note that although in 1972/1973 agricultural income tax was almost three times as much as land tax, in 1982/1983 agricultural income tax was hardly bigger than the land tax.

This fact seems to suggest that agricultural production has not grown commensurately. In absolute terms, these figures of both land and agricultural income taxes are really not much. In fact they could have been much higher if it were possible to collect taxes more efficiently and effectively. If every peasant in Ethiopia paid 20.00 Birr according to the Proclamation No.152 of 1978 the revenue from land could have been more than 150.00 million Birr.

Of course the legal taxes are not the only payments peasants make each year. Local administrators and peasant association officials require ad hoc contributions for various development projects such as road construction and building of schools and clinics. They also pay contributions for the construction of offices, stadiums, public squares, auditoriums, as well as for folkloric music bands and for the campaign against illiteracy (Dessalegn,1984). These are facts that we learn from the media nearly every day. There is no doubt that some of these activities are extremely important to revitalise rural Ethiopia. But the question is what is the opportunity cost? And are these the priorities of the peasants who suffer from undernourishment and malnutrition and even from starvation? There are also the requirements of peasant labour for various agricultural and non-agricultural activities as well as demands on peasant time for all sorts of meetings which do not always take into account the farm activities of peasants.

One other point must be mentioned with respect to taxation. The land tax discriminates against privately cultivating peasants. The motive is clearly understandable.

Is it better to achieve the goal through education, demonstration and persuasion rather than coercing them by reducing their subsistence? An elementary understanding of the psycho-social behaviour of Ethiopians in general and of Ethiopian peasants in particular would seem to indicate that if they join co-operatives as a result of heavier taxation they will make sure to derive the benefits with minimum effort. Anyhow, when it comes to agricultural income tax the co-operatives are hardly provided with incentives, for they are required to pay about 50% of their net product when they have "a gross income of more than 1200.00 Birr" (Lesane Work, 1979).

Another form of institutional obstacle is related to the marketing of agricultural products. At harvest time two institutional factors conspire against the peasants. One is the invigorated campaign of administrators at all levels to force peasants to pay their taxes. The other is the law of supply and demand of the market. Because almost all the peasants in a given area harvest at about the same time and because they are prodded by tax collectors they flood the market with their products and of necessity bring prices down. The peasants have no alternative but to sell their products at much cheaper prices in order to pay their taxes and other formal and informal dues in time and avoid harassment by officials. There may be a difference of as much as 30.00 Birr or more in the price of tef and of 20.00 Birr or more for barley in market prices between the harvest and the rainy seasons (Greensyls & Anderson, 1983).

It is important to understand that because of the lower prices for their products at harvest time the peasants are forced to sell more in order to acquire

the necessary cash. But this is not all. There is still another form of institutional demand on the products of the peasants: they are required to sell a certain amount of their products, usually grain, according to a fixed quota often one quintal for each peasant, to the service co-operatives at a very low price. As it is well known, the average price fixed by AMC (Agricultural Marketing Corporation) is 39.00 Birr per quintal for tef, 31.00 Birr for wheat, 27.00 Birr for barley, 20.00 for maize and 25.00 for sorghum.

The AMC buying prices are 4.00 to 5.00 Birr higher than the prices paid to peasants. This means that the service co-operatives make 12 to 16% over prices received by peasants only as intermediaries between peasants and AMC.

It is not necessary for me to discuss the problem of grain prices, for already much has been written and said about it. But I want to point out two important facts that I believe will have bearing on agricultural production.

One is that according to the Ministry of Agriculture the average cost of production of most grains is so high that it makes AMC prices a naked exploitation. If these figures are correct then peasants are giving away their crops for only their cost of production or less. After taxes and other obligations are paid, peasants will have almost nothing left neither for security nor for investment. We see here, therefore, not only the problem of food security but also the forces that seem to perpetuate the problem.

Table 3  
Cost of Production and AMC Prices  
Birr, 1981

Crop	Cost of Produc.	AMC Price	Diff.
Wheat	24.9	31.0	6.1
Barley	25.7	27.0	1.3
Tef	29.0	36.0	7.0
Maize	16.0	17.0	1.0
Sorghum	16.4	20.0	3.6
Horse bean	39.9	25.0	-14.9
Field pea	34.5	34.0	-0.5

Source: Min. of Agr., 1982

The other point is psychological. In a study that I am making on the perceptions of peasants, I have collected some information on market prices for various agricultural products. The results are not at all realistic. But what we should bear in mind is that as far as peasants are concerned they are real. In other words, their statements may not be real objectively, but they are real psychologically. It appears that the peasants feel very much cheated or exploited. Peasants believe that the market prices for tef, wheat, barley, sorghum and maize range 190-250.00, 100-200.00, 120-140.00, 120-160.00, and 120-160.00 Birr respectively. The prices they receive, according to them, are about five times lower. That feeling, whether it is objectively true or not does not matter, will have a very serious implication on the productivity of the peasants.

Increasing population, decreasing size and quality of farm lands, increasing demands on peasant resources, and the peasants' increasing incapacity for more input --- all these factors combine to hinder the growth of agricultural production. The net result of these structural and institutional obstacles to agricultural development is the stagnation or even deterioration of production. Moreover, population increase will aggravate further the structural obstacles by forcing farms to become even smaller and more fragmented and pushing peasants into marginal areas as in Gojjam. The problem is also compounded by the fact that farm "input costs have risen rapidly in recent years ...seed costs have increased...access to institutional credit is limited, and only available for short term loans, usually for the cropping season only" (Greesyls & Anderson, 1983). These obstacles need to be removed in order to attain a level of food security.

## **5. Prospects for the Future**

In 1967 an American expert who studied the very serious problem of food shortage existing then assumed the population of the country to be 28 million by 1972, and calculating a minimum of 2300 calories per capita per day concluded that agricultural production should increase at an average of 4.4% per year. He then wrote: "This is more than 200% of the rate by which total food production has been increasing in recent years. To achieve such a rate of growth is possible but short of superior effort by Ethiopia - is improbable." (Fischer, 1967). No superior effort was made and and we all know the consequences. Now more than ever before, nothing less than superior effort can overcome the problem of food shortage in this country.

In terms of quality of agricultural resources, including climate, Ethiopia has the capability to produce enough food for its growing population and even surplus for export. But this will require fundamental changes in policies and practices of the management of rural Ethiopia, the introduction and promotion of a new culture in peasant communities, the encouragement and even financing of field research that may be tested and applied, the institutionilisation of decision-making which will seriously and sincerely consider the wishes and the aspirations of the peasants.

Let me pinpoint some of the issues that require special attention. First, we need to articulate more precisely the very concept of development. No physical structure of any magnitude or dimension is worth the name development if it leaves the basic problems of ordinary men and women untouched. No generation has greater responsibility for tomorrow's problems than those of its own. No loud and visible structure can conceal the agonies of starvation in every peasant's hut. So we must refine and refine our concept of development until it means a measureable improvement of the lives of, at least a tolerable level of food security for, all the peasants.

Second, there are issues of policy that need urgent reviewing: these include functions of peasant associations (are they instruments of the government and of the party or are they instruments of development for the peasants?), rural immobility, quota allocation, grain marketing and pricing, attempts to discourage the cultivation of tef, dangerous trends in resource allocation (as in the textile industry in the Borkenna Valley and in many of the villagisation sites), discordance between the priorities of the government and of the peasants, and avenues of access to the highest bodies of government. Policies must be grounded on the objective reality and on a sound understanding of the psycho-social traits of the peasants. Very often changes are envisaged without taking into account psychological factors that may hinder the achievement of the desired goal. Moreover, a disgruntled peasantry will hardly be a positive factor for peace and stability in the country and without peace and stability it is futile to expect any significant economic development for rural Ethiopia.

Perhaps one of the most important issues of policy is the very existence of RRC (the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission). Although the media for some strange reason want to portray it otherwise, this is the last organization created by the ancien regime while it was on its death-bed. Like the defunct Ministry of Land Reform, RRC is an organization that institutionilises the problem. The issue of land reform could not be resolved by the Ministry of Land Reform---it served only as gesture of acknowledgement of the existence of a vexetious problem. RRC is not different. To institutinilise a problem is in effect to decide to live with the problem by merely providing ad hoc and temporary palliative. Fire brigades represent a universally institutionilised problem.

But RRC is not even equivalent to a fire brigade for the simple reason that it is dependent on external assisstance and as it was demonstrated in our last disaster it is totally helpless, so helpless in fact that it could not even muster internal resources in time to avert the catastrophe. RRC stands on crutches and feeds false hope to gullible peasants. Moreover, the Ministry of Agriculture, every body believes is the organisation charged with the responsibility of promoting the development of peasant farming whereas RRC

has the rather peculiar responsibility of monitoring and of crying wolf if and when crop failure occurs in peasant farms.

It would be very reasonable to assume that the Ministry of Agriculture, provided it took its responsibility seriously and provided it has the necessary manpower and financial resources, cannot and should not fail to monitor the risks of crop failure. In fact it is singularly qualified for precisely that task because of the trained manpower that it has under its command.

Third, it must be admitted that there is no possibility for modernising minuscule and constantly diminishing farms primarily geared to subsistence. We must at the same time admit, too, that it will be counter-productive in more ways than one to force peasants into co-operatives or any other apparently reasonable and desirable endeavour. In the long-run it will not serve any useful purpose to antagonise the peasants.

The changing of peasant attitudes deserves prior attention. First and foremost, the problem of subsistence mentality must be tackled. During my recent field work in northern Shewa and southern Wello, I came back totally convinced that one of the most formidable psychological problems for agricultural development is the solidified subsistence mentality of the peasants. The market serves only to complement minor subsistence requirements and to acquire cash for payment of various obligations. The fact that EDDC (Ethiopian Domestic Distribution Corporation) sells only about 100 million Birr worth of goods per year to the peasant sector is indicative of the peasant participation in the market. They take only about 18% of the total sale of EDDC and that amounts to less than 3 Birr per rural person per year.

This extremely low purchasing power of the peasants is both the symptom and the economic malaise of peasant agriculture. As a concrete manifestation of their abject poverty it is a symptom. But as proof of their disability or of their economic paralysis it is the malaise itself. This condition of peasant life is certainly created by various forms of institutional forces. It cannot be said, however, that the peasants themselves have no responsibility for their own condition of life. At least they are responsible for their subsistence mentality and for not daring to take calculated risks in their farming activities and for their fossilised attitudes towards production and consumption.

Whatever its causes may be, it seems to be a very difficult task to bring about significant transformation in agricultural production without solving the deeply ingrained subsistence mentality of the peasants. This will require high-powered development administrators who can win the genuine affection, respect, and confidence of peasants. It is only by planning and working with them rather than for them that it may be possible to weaken the subsistence mentality and to open the psychological vistas for new and greater possibilities. I will conclude with statements of possibilities:

- **Possibility One:** It is possible for Ethiopia to produce surplus food for export, because it does have the necessary agricultural resources --land, water, climate.
- **Possibility Two:** It is possible to have a clear land use policy so that prime agricultural land will not be used for industrial and residential purposes as in the Borkenna Valley and Ada.
- **Possibility Three:** It is possible to mobilise all institutions of higher learning to make a complete inventory of the agricultural resources of the country and of the views of peasants on the problem of food shortage and its solution.
- **Possibility Four:** It is possible to arouse the peasants to much greater productivity and out of their subsistence mentality not by treating them like children but like responsible adults that they are.
- **Possibility Five:** It is possible to introduce and promote a water conservation culture so that the effects of drought can be mitigated.
- **Possibility Six:** It is possible to establish grain banks at least in every wereda so that peasants will be encouraged to deposit whatever small grain they may not use for immediate consumption and to get interest in form of various inputs.
- **Possibility Seven:** It is possible to elicit considerable international support for a clear and imaginative plan of action to combat the problem of chronic food shortage to which peasants themselves are genuinely committed.

- **Possibility Eight:** It is possible for this generation to eliminate the threat of famine from Ethiopia and to reestablish the honour and dignity of the people.

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.

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## **DIMENSIONS OF VULNERABILITY**

### **TO FAMINE**

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### ***I. THE PROBLEM***

#### **1. What is Disaster?**

Let us start by defining our key words, disaster and vulnerability. Disaster, says Webster's dictionary, is a sudden and extraordinary misfortune with the implication of being unforeseen and bringing with it destruction of life or property or the ruin of projects. We can all agree in accepting disaster as an extraordinary misfortune. But we are not thinking, however, of misfortunes that happens to individuals but to societies. So we are talking of social misfortunes.

First, essentially we may agree that disaster may be sudden not in the sense of being generally unexpected or generally unforeseen unless the disaster is totally new, that is, if it never occurred before in the history of a given society's occupancy of a given place. But there is hardly any really new disaster, natural or man-made. It is, therefore, necessary to understand the words sudden and unexpected only in the sense of not being precisely timed. It is in such a context and in the context of public accountability to the needs of the people that we can understand the existence of fire brigades.

Second, it may be useful to distinguish the potential PLACE OF DISASTER from THE TIME OF DISASTER. In very broad and general terms the places which are prone to various types of disaster are known. That disaster will occur at some precisely unknown time at certain places is known, too\*. Moreover, all disasters are not the same in their characteristics. Some disasters, like famine can be more or less precisely timed and are never sudden or unexpected.

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\* There is perhaps nothing as sudden as an earthquake. Can we say that the inhabitants of Managua after 1885 did not anticipate an earthquake? Or after 1931? Or are they still not expecting an earthquake after their 1972 experience? Still Managua has grown to at least twice its 1972 size now. Are they still not expecting an earthquake? How many earthquakes and how much destruction will make the inhabitants of Managua anticipate an earthquake?

Third, from a subjective point of view it is the presence or absence of the anticipation of disasters that is critical, more critical than the disasters themselves. Whether societies are prepared or not the events that produce disasters will continue to happen. But what makes the difference in the effects of disasters is the awareness and the anticipation of them by public officials, by those charged with the responsibility for the public good. The view that holds disasters to be sudden and unexpected in the absolute sense is only an official mask for hiding irresponsibility in face of mass human suffering and death.

It is generally recognized that disaster is of two types: one caused by natural forces and the other caused by man-made forces. In the first place, it is useful to realize that there is no such a thing as natural disaster in the same sense as man-made disaster. In the case of man-made disaster destruction is deliberate. Such is not the case in the so-called natural disasters. This distinction is far from

academic. Natural processes do not operate with any INTENTION, malevolent or benevolent. We should, therefore, not place disasters that are deliberately generated to bring chaos and destruction not only to the economic and social infrastructure of societies but to even destroy human lives on a mass scale with risks that occur as a result of occupying specific places where certain natural processes are likely to occur.

Secondly, for broad analytical purposes it may be useful to divide disaster into natural and man-made. But from a practical point of view it is the manageability of the events that invite produce disaster that is more important. In so far as the actual or potential victims of a specific disaster are concerned it is the manageability, the preparations that anticipate such events and the social actions needed for protection that are more effectual. The study of the ultimate causes is better left to the various scientists who specialize in the realm of each disaster. The issue for the public at large and for public officials ought to be the past experiences of loss from disaster and the ever present threat of a social disaster in the future.

Zones of tectonic activity or of flooding are known. Areas and populations that are vulnerable to drought, hailstones, frost, worm and insect infestations are known. Areas where edaphic aridity has rendered the land less productive and therefore where peasants are often at risk are known. If all or any of these are not properly known it is not difficult to know them in a very short time. The Western legal tenet that ignorance of the law is no excuse may be rendered differently for disaster: ignorance of the causes of social disaster is no excuse for inaction.

Disaster, whether natural or man-made, is not a monopoly of the Third World or of Africa in particular. The First World has its own share of disaster. Where the two worlds differ is in the impact of disaster. In the world at large, about 90 % of the natural disasters originate in four hazard types: floods which account for 40 %, tropical cyclones for 20 %, earthquakes and droughts for 15 % each (Burton, Kates and White, 1978). It is also true that 95 % of the human mortality caused by disaster occurs in the Third World while about two-thirds of the wealth lost by disasters is from the First World. Each World loses only what it can afford to lose.

The reality is that there is perhaps no place that is free from any kind of disaster. People simply have to choose their disaster\*. There is disaster in the air. There is disaster in the oceans. There is disaster on the land. That is the range of human habitat. It is therefore reasonable to say that social disasters may be sudden but they are not totally unforeseen. If they are unforeseen it is because some societies refuse to accept the consequences of foresight and the responsibilities that go with it.

I would define disaster, therefore, as AN EXTRAORDINARY SOCIAL MISFORTUNE WHICH CAUSES DESTRUCTION OF LIFE AND PROPERTY IN PROPORTION TO THE SOCIETY'S ABILITY TO ACT RESPONSIBLY IN ANTICIPATION OF SUCH A MISFORTUNE.

Clear understanding of the problem of hazard or disaster is clouded by the dichotomy that views man and nature separately.\* It is also confounded by society's failure to accept responsibility for mitigating the consequences of disasters. If one takes man out of nature it will lead to the false conception that man is the mighty master who can manipulate nature at will. A few years ago we had a slogan "we shall bring nature under our control!" and it seemed that nature responded with more ferocity as if to prove her invincibility.

On the other hand if one takes man only as one of the components of nature, one will certainly lose sight of the special power man possesses and the special place man occupies in the very scheme of nature by his intelligence and consciousness. That is what Friedrich Nietzsche could not see, or more likely did not want to see, when he said: "The earth (he said) has a skin; and this skin has diseases. One of these diseases, for example, is called 'Man.'"

## **2. What is Vulnerability?**

What is vulnerability? Again Webster's dictionary defines vulnerability as capacity to be wounded. I like that definition, because it clearly puts at least as much responsibility in the one to be wounded as in the one inflicting the wound and agrees perfectly with my definition of disaster. It also seems clear that we

cannot apply the term vulnerability to non-man nature, because it will be difficult to talk of the capacity of the land or water or air to be wounded in the sense people can.

Vulnerability to disaster is a weakness in the body politic of a society. It is a manifestation of the level of organization, of social cohesion and of the responsibility of those that govern. To assert that poverty is the cause of vulnerability is to beg the question. Poverty is vulnerability.

Poverty means superhuman capacity to be wounded everywhere and by everyone. Poverty means living precariously by the hour almost totally exposed to every imaginable danger. Poverty is a social malaise just as vulnerability is a social malaise. Poor people are vulnerable, it is very true. But the reverse is also very true: vulnerable people are poor. Nevertheless, it must be admitted that there are some disasters, earthquake, for instance, that do not differentiate between occupations or social and economic classes. Some disasters, on the other hand, like famine, for instance, find only subsistence producers as the most vulnerable group. The vulnerability of food producers to famine is the most terrible and the most ironic aspect of vulnerability.

SOCIAL VULNERABILITY, THEREFORE, IS THE FATAL EXPOSURE TO AND THE SUPERHUMAN CAPACITY TO ENDURE REPEATED DISASTER. Its cause must be sought in the society's capacity to learn from past experience and in its ability to mobilize effective social action to mitigate the social consequences of disaster.

The consequences of disaster manifest the degree of social vulnerability in as much as the degree of vulnerability measures the public accountability of governments. The significance of this statement is that it implies that vulnerability to social disaster and disaster are inter-related only as partial cause and effect. To be sure there is always disaster of one kind or another. What makes the difference is the scale of the effect of disaster on human lives, and that is caused more by social vulnerability than by the disaster as such. If one stands in the rain for long one will certainly get soaked wet. Is the consequent pneumonia caused by the rain as such or by standing in the rain? It is standing in the rain that is the act of vulnerability.<sup>1</sup>

Vulnerability, as I use the term, is a measure of the interaction between societies and some kind of disaster as well as the measure of the interactions between political power and people. Vulnerability to disaster and disaster are directly related while the consequences of disaster and the power of the people are inversely related. In other words, vulnerability to disaster decreases (but never to 0 level) as the power of the people increases.

Vulnerability, therefore, is a function not of any natural phenomenon but of social interaction, interaction between man and man in a society. It is not any natural force that makes certain societies vulnerable to some disaster.

Rather, it is societies, by their failure to develop institutional capabilities to shelter themselves from disasters, that weaken themselves in comparison to the forces of nature. To believe that vulnerability is a function of the processes or the elements of nature is to misunderstand nature and man's place in nature.

It may be difficult to visualize any type of hazard or disaster in an environment where there are no people, not because the natural events that constitute a hazard do not occur; but because there are no people to experience these hazard events.

The real problem is, therefore, not disaster but social vulnerability to disaster. To identify the problem as disaster is in effect to decide not to do anything about it mainly because there is almost nothing that can be done to prevent the occurrence of the natural phenomena which are interpreted by us as disaster.

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<sup>1</sup> Three of the foremost authorities on hazard, Ian Burton, Robert W. Kates and Gilbert F. White, wrote a book with the rather interesting title THE ENVIRONMENT AS HAZARD. Their conclusion just falls short of proclaiming that living, or even life itself, is a hazard. At least that is what one may understand by their statements such as this: "It is PEOPLE who transform the environment into resources and hazards, by using natural features for economic, social, and aesthetic purposes."

At the present stage of human knowledge it is not possible at all to eliminate disaster. In fact there is every indication that it is increasing. But what can be done and what is within the realm of human possibility, even in the poorest countries, is to reduce social vulnerability to disaster to a tolerable level. Fundamentally there is no difference between a society's attempt to reduce traffic accidents and its attempts to reduce the effects of some disaster.

The function of responsibility is the most decisive factor that explains the differences between the consequences of disaster in the Third and the First worlds. In the First World governments know in advance that the risk of their falling out of power is much higher when they fail to reduce social vulnerability to disaster to a tolerable minimum. In most of the Third World there is neither accountability nor any such risk for governments.

This may be a point of departure to consider the specific problems of Ethiopia. But I hope that the arguments presented above establish a basis for understanding the dimensions of social vulnerability to disaster, namely, that the conditions for social accountability are critical pre-requisites for coping with disaster.

## **II. ETHIOPIA'S DISASTER**

Ethiopia generally has various types of natural disasters. There are areas of tectonic activity with their ever present threat of volcanic eruptions and earthquakes. So far, however, the occurrence of these disasters have been less frequent and their magnitude has been less intense. There is no doubt that the reasons for less intensity are to be found in the pattern of population distribution. But with more and more urbanization and even of villagization the intensity and the magnitude of disaster may be expected to rise.

There are also areas that are occasionally flooded, even here in Addis Abeba itself. But here again the magnitude of damage has not been serious enough to be alarming. The problem of floods, too, will rise with increasing concentrations of settlements along river valleys in the lowlands.

Although not often heard is a very recurrent problem of landslides in some of the highlands of Ethiopia. Many people have certainly seen landslides blocking highways. But the landslides that crush the fragile rural houses and even at times kill people are rarely reported. This problem must be seriously studied when deciding village sites.

There are also various types of epidemics like cholera or meningitis or malaria that at times reach disaster proportions in terms of the magnitude of human lives that are lost in relatively short time. Here again it may be useful to study epidemics in terms of population distribution and the type of settlement pattern.

For Ethiopia the most serious disasters are those that affect the rural areas and the peasants. All of these disasters in one way or another affect agricultural resources and, therefore, agricultural production. Epidemics that incapacitate the peasant labour force, animal diseases that deprive the peasants of their oxen power, climatic aberrations that either reduce or destroy crops, worms and insects that destroy crops at various levels of the production stage may be considered as the most important disasters in Ethiopia, because they affect the largest proportion of the population of the country.

We often talk of drought as being the most serious agricultural problem in Ethiopia. But the fact is that the range of climatic problems is much wider. There are hailstones and frosts as well as rainfall that is too heavy and intense coming at the wrong time that destroy crops at various stages of their growth. But drought has become the term that envelops all these varied disasters. Whatever the cause, however, the ultimate consequences are the same: it is the partial or total loss of the expected harvest. In the case of drought there is more. It also brings about mass destruction of the livestock, the most important assets and capital of Ethiopian peasants.

Realizing that the range of the most serious disasters in Ethiopia affect agricultural resources whether human labour or animal power or the land, the most significant question should be: how is it that Ethiopian peasants are so repeatedly vulnerable to disaster of the most devastating and debilitating kind,

famine? It is even more surprising to observe that the social vulnerability of peasants to the disaster of famine has not been showing any signs of contraction. On the contrary, it has been growing and expanding during the last twenty years, increasing even more the magnitude of successive famines. All indications seem to suggest that the future will be much worse than anything we have seen so far in the history of this country.

This may sound alarming. But there are facts which force one to this conclusion. The vulnerability of Ethiopian peasants is increasing alarmingly from year to year. Their burden of payment is rising with the government's impatient programs of what may be called statistical development. For instance, the impressive results of the campaign against illiteracy is one manifestation of such statistical development. It is something that cannot be translated into bread and butter for the peasants that bear the cost. Let there be no misunderstanding: everybody is for literacy, what is in question is the cost to the peasants compared to the benefits to them.

But of course the contributions for literacy are not the only burden of the peasants. There are many other contributions that are demanded from the peasants. We hear of these and their results on the television and radio all the time. There is the taxation, too, which does not take into account neither the subsistence requirements of the peasants nor the size of their families. But the most ironic of all is the extra taxation imposed for relief to famine victims who also have to pay themselves.

Peasants have also had the lion's share of the war and security effort both in terms of the best manpower, their youth, and in their money. In some parts of the country the problem of security has a triple effect on the vulnerability of peasants. First, the security problems do not allow them to carry on their normal farming operations peacefully and efficiently. Second, their youth, their most effective manpower are either forced by the various guerilla groups or they are enlisted into the government's militia. This together with the normal outflow of the rural youth to the towns is leaving behind more old men and women with the very young. Third, the peasants pay much of the cost for the security problem in more than one way.

Consequently, peasant production is decreased by shortage of effective labour force and by the general condition of unrest which stifles inter-regional commerce which would have been a very important factor in stimulating production. Their meagre (paltry) net incomes are reduced by various contributions, normal and extra taxation as well as other official and unofficial demands. In this connection there is also another factor that must be taken into account. How many peasants own a pair of oxen to operate their farms with? As the various demands increase peasants will be forced to sell their oxen to meet their requirements. This in turn will adversely affect their production potential, or to put it differently, it will increase their vulnerability to famine.

Although no study has yet been done on it, the problem of peasant immobility, especially in eastern Gonder, Wello, Tigray and Gojjam, is a factor that is increasing the vulnerability of peasants to famine. In the past large numbers of peasants used to make annual trips to the coffee producing southwestern regions during the coffee picking season. This provided them not only with sufficient cash to live on but it also enabled them to leave marginal land fallow for a year or two.

Moreover, many peasants after several years of trips to the southwestern provinces gradually got used to these new places and eventually settled there, thus relieving the

population pressure on the land in their home areas. There are a number of such voluntary settlement areas in Kefa and Illubabor.

Now peasants do not find such attractive temporary employment alternatives. As a result they plough their marginal land which gives them very little yield. In addition such land is eventually impoverished to total unproductiveness. As a result, in Gonder and Gojjam we shall be witnessing much land becoming similar to that in Tigray and Wello very soon.

Another factor that is intimately related to peasant immobility is population growth. As the population of the peasants continues to rise every year peasant associations will have to redivide the land in order to provide a means of

living to young people. This means as time goes on there will be not only less and less land available to peasants but also the quality will be poorer as well. The effect of population growth on one hand and land deterioration on the other is certainly a very important factor in increasing the vulnerability of peasants to famine.

These considerations of Ethiopia's vulnerability to disaster in general to famine in particular are only explanations of the symptoms, not the ultimate causes of social vulnerability of Ethiopian peasants. In addition it is useful to remember that natural factors that reduce or totally destroy crops are not amenable to complete control. What is possible and feasible is for societies to adjust to their particular type of disaster and to reduce their vulnerability. In other words, nature is not going to take any special exception for or against any society. The natural processes will simply go on irrespective of loss of lives or property. It is for societies to ensure that the processes of nature will not affect them adversely in terms of lives and property every so often.

Societies either learn from their experiences and adjust their living conditions or failing that will be subject to the adverse forces of nature.

### **III. INDIVIDUAL CHOICE AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY**

The individual peasant family is preoccupied with the necessity of living. The range of choice at his disposal is limited. The peasant's life and that of his whole family depends on the land and the climatic conditions. These form the basis of his production system. Whether he cultivates various crops or raises livestock or does both for his sustenance, apart from his own labour power, it is on the land and the climatic conditions that he depends almost absolutely.

Very often the peasant is judged by what he does to the land, that is, by the way he utilizes his most important resource. Those who judge the peasant by their own knowledge of the processes of nature and by their freedom of choice err egregiously. They transfer their better knowledge of nature and their freedom of choice to the condition of the peasant which they neither know or understand. It must be understood clearly and without any doubt that the peasant's basic needs are not determined by him but by his nature as a living being.

The peasant has no other choice but to till the land and to make it produce enough to sustain himself and his family. HOW he makes the land produce is not a totally individual matter, and therefore, not a totally individual choice. The extent to which he can call the land his own is not determined by him. Nor is the technology that he uses to make the land produce to satisfy his basic needs. In the context of Ethiopian history up to the present, both are social choices, or more precisely, they are institutional or governmental choices. The dilemma of the Ethiopian peasant, therefore, is to submit to the necessity of making a living ONLY ON THE LAND on one hand, and, on the other, to submit to the choices made for him by social forces.

The uses of resources like land and water definitely require social regulation. Similarly, the development of better technology to use land and water more efficiently requires social input. We cannot expect the peasant to carry on experiments on various crops or seeds nor to set up individual workshops for making better tools and implements. To think that the Ethiopian peasant can engage in such fanciful endeavour is to completely misunderstand him. For many and, especially for the so-called experts who are as much experts as instant coffee is coffee, the Ethiopian peasant carries the burden of responsibility for his own condition. That is as the Ethiopian saying has it to beat the load (instead of the donkey) for fear that the donkey may kick back.

Research is the most important means by which the society can understand the problems of the peasants and of the environment. There is also no doubt that the institutions of higher learning have much of the responsibility for research. In Addis Abeba University one of the most outstanding faculties, that of business administration was dismantled by amateurish ideological thinking and the resulting fusion of the former Faculty of Arts and what is left of the Business College is a considerably weakened College of Social Sciences. In spite of this, there is still much potential for greater output. The new Alemaya University has yet to regain the research glory of the former Agricultural College from which it developed.

Unfortunately, however, research is hampered by a very possessive climate of fear as well as by lack of funds. Very often when funds are available the topic of research is decided for the researcher. The problem of research is often not the problem of Ethiopian society but that of some people engaged in theoretical debate in distant lands. For instance, "how do Ethiopian peasants cope with famine?" is a research topic for those who forget that if the peasants had any means of coping with famine they would not have died by the hundreds of thousands. What interests funding agencies is often not practically useful in the sense of helping decision makers and planners.

It is of course not enough to do research. There must also be consumers of the research output. This is impeded by two factors: mutual diffidence between research workers and public officials who normally should be the consumers and even the generators of research output, and by the totally stifling censorship in Amharic. Those who have attempted it know that it is nearly impossible to have anything serious published in Amharic these days. This means that no research output can filter even in a summary form to the masses of Ethiopians who do not read English. Indeed, there may soon come a day when Amharic literature will be flourishing more outside Ethiopia than inside. This is already beginning and that is unfortunate and rather shameful.

It may also be stated here that some vital data are out of bounds for Ethiopian researchers. For instance, those who are charged with the responsibility of administering meteorological data curiously believe that it is a militarily sensitive information which cannot be distributed to any and every researcher. Equally curiously organizations that have the money can buy the so-called sensitive data on rainfall and temperature from the same source. Even the Central Statistical Office seems to be limited to about ten stations only, judging by the reports in their Statistical Abstracts. It is therefore only to the poor Ethiopian researcher that Ethiopian climatological data is effectively a secret. Even then Ethiopians who have contacts with the outside world can have Ethiopian climatological data more easily than they can from the climatological agency in Addis Abeba. I am aware that this sounds extraordinarily incredible. It is a fact. The dog in the manger attitude of the climatological agency has despaired many a researcher. Whatever little research has been done in this area has been done not because of but in spite of the climatological agency.

Equally discouraging is the fact that the three ministries charged with agriculture, the ministries of Agriculture, State Farm and Coffee and Tea have yet to produce statistical yearbooks like that of the Ministry of Public Health. Because of the failure of these ministries to do their homework, every researcher on rural Ethiopia will have to start from the scratch by collecting all types of data. The difficulty is not only the unnecessary labour, time and money spent on collecting the data. It is also the absence of an official data which may serve to compare and judge the results of various researches. Consequently, every case becomes unique and incomparable. We have seen how much the partially conducted population census has completely changed, or at least ought to change, the image of Ethiopia and the conception of those who are responsible for planning its future.

In connection with research there is another vital factor that is still in its infancy and has not still acquired the attention it deserves. This is mapping. Some may think that mathematical models are the proper tool of planning. But we ought to be convinced that mathematical models cannot replace maps, large scale maps which show this corrugated country for what it is. The weakening of the central agency charged with making maps has created a chaotic situation in map production.

The Highway Authority, the Ministry of Mines and several other government and non-government organizations produce their own maps. Consider the wastage of trained manpower, money, very expensive machines and time while the problem of maps remains very grave.

All these problems are certainly dimensions of vulnerability, if we believe, as we must, that ignorance about ourselves and about our own environment is basic to our social vulnerability. We often talk of the ignorance of the peasants. But we rarely if at all have the honesty to talk of the ignorance of the learned, or of those who presume to know more than they do. It is a well known technique of the learned to fill their lacunae of ignorance about specific and local conditions by

global and theoretical generalizations. The predicament of Ethiopian peasants springs more from such ignorance than from their own.

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.

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, frost bite or hailstones, locusts or army worms, or any other natural force that reduces the production of crops must 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.

#### ***IV. THE EXTERNAL DIMENSION OF VULNERABILITY***

The vulnerability of Ethiopian peasants to famine has an external dimension that is generally not recognized. But let us face it, famine is a lucrative international business. Nobody, at least to my knowledge, has made what would have been the most interesting study of relief assistance: What proportion of the money donated by truly humanitarian individuals reaches the victims of famine? 50 %? 25 %? or 10 %?

For example, between September 1984 and December 1985 I seem to recall that Ethiopia acquired relief assistance worth 1.25 billion Birr (I think). If this represented 50 %, the total money collected must be 2.5 billion Birr, or if it represented 25 % it would be 5.0 billion Birr, or if it represented only 10 % then the total money collected would be 12.5 Billion Birr. I will not hazard a guess. Those who are much more familiar with international business can make a more educated guess.

The point is not the magnitude of the proportion of the collected money that disappears as administrative and other cost. It is rather the indication of the range of business interests that famine relief assistance can attract and what these business interests can generate to promote their profits.

For example barren explanations of famine are generated to obscure the understanding of famine and 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 cause of famine. One debates whether it is morally right to feed cats and dogs, and even horses and pigs while human beings are starving to death. One debates whether the production 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. It is that simple. 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. They do not because they no better than to respect us.

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 can solve the problem of famine for Ethiopia before Ethiopia itself has identified the problem correctly.

All dogmatic ideological statements, whether of the right or of the left, concerning Ethiopian peasants have the tendency to turn the Ethiopian peasant into an abstract football game played freely without a referee.

Even those who take conservation as their lives' mission seem to ignore the necessity of the Ethiopian peasants to survive through the vicissitudes of nature. As a result their recommendations show more concern for wild animals and future generations than those living in abject misery today. There is little or no humanity in some of the prevailing notions of conservation. As always when the pain of thinking is abdicated to professional experts for whom the peasants are abstract entities it is not possible to expect anything beneficial to the latter. Nothing short of regaining the pain of thinking for ourselves within our own context is going to propel us to the desired goal of development.

Some people deliberately spread confusion with respect to famine. One such method is not to differentiate famine from normal and regular starvation of people in the developed states of the world or in the urban areas of the Third World. Famine that affects peasants is quite qualitatively and quantitatively different from such general and widespread starvation in many parts of the world. Peasants we should remember are food producers. It is famine affecting food producers that we are concerned with. We are not concerned with any other type of famine for most parts of Ethiopia. For Eritrea and Tigray where there are war conditions the explanations of famine may be different. But even in these parts the famines precede the war conditions and, therefore, do not serve as sound and fundamental explanations. Nor will it serve any purpose for our present problem of famine to blame the ancien regime dead for fifteen years now.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

I believe this Conference is concerned with an attempt, a very serious attempt, to understand the greatest human tragedy of our time, that of famine. The purpose of this understanding is, I presume, to extricate ourselves from famine for ever. I believe we have the capacity to do that. We can easily identify the three major sources of vulnerability to famine in rural Ethiopia. First, there are the institutional and extra institutional forces that oppress the Ethiopian peasants and depress his productive capacity. Second, there are the natural forces that once in a while reduce or totally destroy the peasants crops, leaving the peasants with practically nothing to live on for at least a year. Third, there are the peasants own inherent infirmities whether they are cultural or psychological that do not allow him to combat the institutional forces on one hand, and the natural forces on the other.

For those who are sincere and truthful the vulnerability of Ethiopian peasants is not and cannot be a mystery to us. Nor does it require experts from every part of the world to tell us about it. The foundation of the vulnerability of Ethiopian peasants to famine is constituted by their necessity to live and their limited choice on one hand, and by the insatiable and exponentially growing demands of the socioeconomic forces, including the market forces, on the other. Those who want to turn this statement of fact into an ideological argument serve only their narrow interests and are not addressing the problem of Ethiopian peasants in a historical context.

Moreover, it is imperative to bear in mind the fact that while the peasants as individuals are engaged in the necessity of making a living we should not expect them to think of future generations of peasants nor of the ecological advantages of forests and wild life. In order to make peasants think ecologically it is important first to free them from the nagging daily needs for food and other necessities. Until

then the ecological concern must remain more social-institutional than individual. At any rate ecological concerns cannot be expected to be fruitful if they are made the responsibility of individuals, especially starving ones. Ecological concern is a social responsibility and must never be confused with the individual peasant's necessity for living.

If we have the will and the commitment, we do have the capacity to resolve our chronic problems of food shortage. But whether we do really have the will and the commitment that extends beyond rhetoric I cannot in good conscience say. But it is high time that we stop blaming nature for our obvious failures to adjust to her vicissitudes and to harness her might. 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.

By social action I do not mean regimentation or control. On the contrary, I mean action that is conceived, planned and carried on together by a group of people who have identified a common problem. In this connection it may be worthwhile to review our criteria for evaluating administrators. If there is famine or mass death by starvation in a given area the administrator ought to take a measure of responsibility which of necessity demands a greater measure of authority and freedom of action in view of specific local conditions.

Perhaps the worst source of vulnerability to famine is psychological: it is the attitude of self-righteousness and complacency that rejects any dialogue. The prevalence of such state of mind denies the society the benefits issuing from interactions of opposing ideas and cross fertilization. There is no doubt that at least one of the roots of socioeconomic backwardness is the failure to distinguish between the clash of ideas and the clash of personalities. In other words, the absence of freedom for the clash of ideas without personalizing them and turning them into rationalizations for violence. Where differences of opinion are perceived with mortal fear, the society is surely vulnerable, vulnerable to negative forces from within as well as from without.

Do we learn? Can we learn? If we can learn the lesson is simple. Man-made disasters whether they are internal or inter-state, may be avoided by substituting debates and dialogues for violence and war, compromise for dogmatic religiosity, the appreciation of the stimulating richness of diversity for barren uniformity, the sincere acceptance of the masses as human beings with inalienable rights to live and to have a definite say in their own destiny. We have to acquire a tradition for listening to ordinary men and women and to acknowledge their sovereignty.

The ultimate sources of vulnerability to famine for Ethiopian peasants are three. First, they are the socioeconomic and political forces which are always more interested in their own pressing problems than the subsistence requirements of the peasants. Second, there are the vicissitudes of nature which produce conditions that do not allow the peasants to eke out even their marginal subsistence out of the land at certain times. Third, there is the peasants subsistence mentality and inadequate knowledge about natural forces as well as their propensity to be easily demotivated by the socioeconomic and political forces. These three conditions generate the peasants' vulnerability to famine. The third is really an outcome of the failure of the administrative forces to motivate the peasants to greater achievement not by prodding him but by understanding his psychology.

I will make three very precise recommendations for preparedness. First, whether the purpose is conservation or regeneration of the vegetation in most parts of northern Ethiopia, or whether it is creating agricultural resources that will be of immediate use to the peasants and eventually serve to rehabilitate the environment, the peasants must be central to the decision and the work required. They must not only be persuaded but they must see and understand what is in it for them individually and collectively. The rural environment belongs to them. It is the only source of their sustenance. It is the basis of their existence. Nobody, nobody can make them take good care of it if they are not made the principal motive force, the spirit and the energy behind any effort to improve the quality of the environment.

Second, peasants must also feel their worth as human beings and as citizens of a state which recognizes their rights for adequate food intake, for determining their future, for selling their produce when and wherever they want at the highest possible price. No one ought to decide for them whether they should live in villages or scattered hamlets, or whether they should be resettled in better areas or continue to live in their own traditional places in poverty. Both on human and political grounds these must be presented as choices, not as commandments. I have heard peasants wishing death before they were moved to villages or to other areas for resettlement. This dehumanizes them and fosters despair which can never be the source for effective social action to improve the future.

Third, the administration of the rural areas ought to be under a new breed of development agents who are prepared to work with the peasants and who have a knack for identifying local problems and for finding, together with the peasants, immediate solutions. Depending on local conditions their tasks of development must take the peasants as central because the peasants are, in the final analysis, both the end and the means of development. The peasants need to be educated on the virtues of establishing grain banks, of developing water conservation culture, and of thinking in terms of economic productivity of both land and labour, and of managing their farms with flexibility so that they can easily switch to more resistant and fast growing crops in times of stress.

Fourth, we must pledge as a people, a people who once, in spite of our poverty, were proud and dignified, never again to allow Ethiopia to be the scene of the ugly face of famine. We must pledge as a people never again to allow the emaciated bodies of Ethiopians to appear on the television screens of Europe and America and become a source of discomfort to decent people. We must pledge as a people never again to use the skeletal bodies of famine victims to elicit charity from Europe and America. Let us pledge to rehabilitate ourselves as human beings, poor but proud.

The question that these academic pundits and journalists never raise is what they propose to be the remedy for any of the causes of famine they may have identified, other than our continued dependence on external charity and the continued flow of profits to the business interests as well as the continued exploitation of millions of men and women who swell the charity funds?

Of course, the academic pundits will tell us to keep large quantities of grains in stock at all times, if the problem is supply. Or they will tell us to increase rural employment and develop cottage industries to provide alternative employment and to raise the purchasing capacity of the people, if the problem is identified as lack of effective demand. Or better still they will tell us to do both. This attitude is best characterized by the Ethiopian saying: *leteqemete semay qirbu new* (for one who is sitting down comfortably the sky looks so near). If we could do those things our peasants would never be starving in the first place. Our peasants regularly die of starvation by the hundreds of thousands because we have neither the will nor the capacity to do those things. Nobody is insensitive enough to tell a man starving to death that he would have not been in that condition if he stored grain in his *gotera* or if he kept some money in the bank.

There are at least three layers screen that conceal the true nature of famine. One is that it is the most shameful social phenomenon, especially for the leadership of a country. Famine lays bare the truth that all is not well. In fact it manifests a very serious social malaise. It is, therefore, generally preferred to stifle the fact of famine.

The second is the total rejection of any responsibility for famine by those in power, but attribute the whole phenomenon to either God or nature. Admittedly famine is too horrible a tragedy to admit responsibility for. But the ministries of interior, agriculture and information cannot dismiss their accountability for the phenomenon of famine. It is precisely the presence or absence of such accountability that determines whether or not famine can occur. It is a telling story that to date no Ethiopian minister of any sort has ever been dismissed for incompetence after the exposure of famine.

The third layer of screen is that of commercial writers and hasty academics. In one case the making of money is the purpose and in the other it is the writing of an academic paper for publication. For both the problem is

secondary, it is their purposes that are decisive. Unfortunately, however, such people attract the attention of important persons and organizations for whom the problem of famine is their *raison d'être*. In such interactions the problem of famine receives only a lip service. The general attitude of international organizations toward famine is to help the victims, not to discover the cause and to prescribe solutions. International civil servants are not particularly known for calling a spade a spade.

But the problem is confounded by two rather distinct attitudes, the attitudes of the victims of famine, that is us, and the attitude of the spectators or readers of famine, mostly academics, especially in Britain. In the famine country like ours we like to have conferences and seminars on famine and to hear people tell us what we have already determined we know.

Any body who follows the Ethiopian media knows the official explanation of famine. We also should know by now that this official explanation of famine will not change, come what may. So what are the conferences and seminars for? One can only say that they are the extensions of the external and spectator view of famine.

The proper understanding of the problem of famine is clouded by various interest groups who in one way or another are making a living out of famine. Do such people want to see the end of famine in Ethiopia or elsewhere? Do the multitudes of NGO's with their armies of relief workers desire the end of the means of their livelihood? Do the multitudes of business enterprises connected with famine want the end of their lucrative profits? Do the journalists and members of academia who have developed various theories of dependence and ideological choice want the end of famine?

As it was stated earlier most of the loss of human lives from disasters is in the Third World while the loss in material wealth is much more in the First World. To argue that this difference in loss is a function of poverty and wealth is to argue in a circle. The causes for social poverty and the causes for vulnerability to social disaster may not be necessarily different. At any rate poverty is one aspect of social vulnerability.

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\* One has first to dig one's way through these layers of veil to arrive to the real origins of famine. This is the most difficult problem. (Graham Hancock, *Ethiopia: The Challenge of Hunger*, London, 1985; Jason W. Clay and Bonnie K. Holcomb, *Politics and the Ethiopian Famine*, Peterborough, 1986; John Clarke, *Resettlement and Rehabilitation :Ethiopia's Campaign Against Famine*, n.d.; Kurt Jansson, Michael Harris and Angela Penrose, *The Ethiopian Famine*, London, 1987.)