

13.16 Famine in the 20th and 21st Centuries

Background: In the 20th and 21st centuries there have been a number of major and minor famines defined by the estimated number of deaths. The chart below (A) shows patterns in causation. The Sahel region of Africa is particularly susceptible to famine today. Problems facing this region are discussed in section B. Section C examines the complex circumstances leading to famine in Ethiopia in 1999-2000. It was prepared by Trócaire, a Roman Catholic relief agency with roots in Ireland.

Malnutrition occurs when the human body gets less food than it needs to function properly. The average adult needs 2,400 calories per day. Anyone receiving below this amount is considered undernourished. The critical minimum limit is 1,600 calories per day. Below this there is little chance of survival. Those most at risk of malnutrition and death include the poor (especially the rural poor), slum dwellers and the landless, refugees, and tribal people. Amongst these groups women and children are especially vulnerable. Famines occur when larger groups of people cannot get the food they need to survive. Sometimes there is no food, sometimes it is being intentionally withheld, and sometimes there is food, but people do not have the resources to purchase it. Famines today are not uncontrollable tragedies. In the modern world they are preventable.

Questions

1. According to Chart A, what were the principle causes of famine in the 20th and 21st century?
2. How have the principal causes of famine and localities shifted from 1914 to today?
3. Which famine is estimated to have caused the most deaths?
4. In your opinion, why is government policy often cited as a cause of famine?

A. 20th and 21st Century Famines

Place	Year(s)	Estimated Deaths	Causes
Lebanon	1914-1918	200,000	World War I
Persia (Iran)	1917-1919	2-10 million	World War I and epidemic diseases
Germany	1918-1919	400-800,000	World War I
Soviet Union (Russia)	1921-1923	9 million	Drought and civil war
Northwest China	1927	3-6 million	Drought and government indifference
Hunan Province (China)	1929	2 million	Drought and civil war
Soviet Union (Ukraine)	1932-1934	7-8 million	Government policy
Soviet Union (Leningrad)	1941-1942	1 million	German Blockage and frigid temperatures
Greece	1941-1944	300,000	German occupation
Henan Province (China)	1943	5 million	World War II invasion by Japan
India (Bengal)	1943	2-3 million	World War II and British colonial policy
Soviet Union (Ukraine/Belorussia)	1946-1947	2 million	Drought and government policy
China	1958-1962	10-30 million	Government policy
Sahel Region Northern Africa	1968-1972	1 million	Climate change caused drought
Cambodia	1979	1-2 million	War and government policy
North Korea	1995-1999	3-4 million	Natural disasters and government policy
Sudan	1998	70,000	War and climate change caused drought
Congo	1998-2004	3-4 million	Civil war and epidemic diseases
Ethiopia	1999-2000	70,000	Civil War and drought
Somalia	2011-2012	300,000	Climate change caused drought

B. Causes of Famine in Africa Today

1. Endemic Poverty: Of the 20 poorest countries of the world today, eighteen are Sub-Sahara Africa. Most of these countries have become poor in the last 30 years. Poor people are most at risk during food shortages because they have little in reserve to help them survive.
2. War: During 1945 and 1989 there were at least 30 major conflicts in Sub-Saharan Africa. In the 1990s there have been major conflicts in Somalia, Sudan, Mozambique, Liberia and Angola. War interferes with farmers so they grow less food. Animals and crops are destroyed. Money which should be spent on agriculture, health care and education is spent on buying arms and feeding armies.

3. Environmental Damage: The Saharan desert is growing. Trees are cut down for firewood and to make room for crops. In 1880, 44% of Ethiopian land was covered by trees. Today it is only 4%. The roots of the trees hold water and prevent the soil from blowing away. If the soil is eroded, harvest are smaller. More than 10 million people have been forced to leave home in Africa as a result of desertification.



4. Poor Land Quality: The best land in Africa is used for cash crops such as coffee. These crops are exported and most of the money earned goes to repay loans from foreign countries and banks. Small farmers are forced onto smaller farms on poorer land.

5. Climate Change and Drought: Drought is not the cause of famine but it is often the trigger which leads to a disaster. Drought has been a feature of many African countries.

6. Government Policies: During the 1970s many African governments borrowed large sums of money when interest rates were low. Many of those who borrowed and benefitted from the money have left office. Interest on these loans is very high. Food is sent overseas to pay off the debt while poor people go hungry and suffer from malnutrition.

C. Famine in Ethiopia

Source: <https://www.trocaire.org/sites/default/files/resources/edu/hunger-ethiopia-lesson-plan.pdf>

“Nowhere to come, nowhere to go” – that’s how an Ethiopian pastoralist describes the impact of the current drought on himself and his animals. In Ethiopia it means not even contemplating breakfast, having a piece of bread for lunch and hopefully having some bread and beans for dinner. It means asking your child to stop attending school because you need her to go in search of food instead. It means selling your ox to buy food which, as any farmer will tell you, is short-term gain for long-term pain. Ethiopia is yet again on the brink of disaster. Two failed rains have left more than six million people in need of food. This number is expected to rise to 14 million by March 2003. We need to ask ourselves why this has happened. The drought is not the root cause of the problem but rather the very high dependence on rain-fed agriculture in a drought-prone country. Almost 80% of Ethiopians depend on agriculture and that makes for a lot of vulnerable people when rains fail. While the country is in a better position to respond to famine than in previous years such as 1984 when 1.2 million people died, the poor roads and absence of ports make logistics extremely difficult. Also in 2000 many parts of Ethiopia experienced severe drought and people are still recovering from the impact. Unfortunately, the Ethiopian government rejected an offer from Eritrea to use their ports to transport food aid into Ethiopia – the wounds of the 1999/2000 war, in which about 70,000 people died, still run deep. The impact of the drought in Ethiopia is greatly exacerbated by a number of issues including a large debt burden, HIV/AIDS and a global collapse in the price of coffee, a significant export crop. More than 10% of the adult population in Ethiopia is HIV positive. These people are more affected by and less able to cope with malnutrition. Also many families have lost one or both parents through HIV/AIDS, malaria, war and hunger leaving children to cope and preventing them from going to school. The immediate impact of Ethiopia’s debt burden of \$5.4 billion is that it leaves the government without funds to purchase surplus production in some areas for redistribution in others. But, more importantly, it severely limits investment in crucial development activities such as education and health for a population of over 60 million where life expectancy is 43 years and almost two thirds of the population are illiterate. Families are also caught in a cycle of debt because they need to borrow for food before the harvest and then must pay tax to the government for their land after it.

Questions

1. How do hunger and malnutrition make people more vulnerable to famine?
2. Section B lists six causes for famine in Africa today. In your opinion, which of these causes is the major cause of famine? Explain.
3. Section C examines the complex causes leading to famine in Ethiopia. In your opinion, which of these causes is the major cause of famine? Explain.
4. In your opinion, what can other nations and international organizations do, if anything, to stem the causes of famine in the Sahel region of Africa?