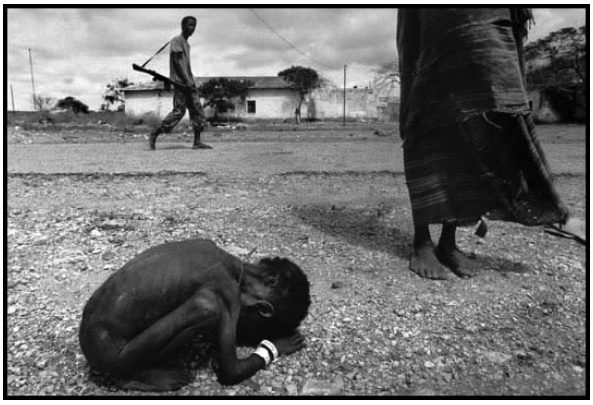


JAMES NACHTWEY

Why is famine occurring in the 21st century?

SOMALIA – A CASE STUDY

Big power politics, the inequitable global economic system and climate change, caused by the way of life in rich countries are the causes of Somalia's current devastating famine, reports SANJI GUNASEKARA. Only by addressing these structural problems and by organising a democratic food system where food production is undertaken as a basic essential for all rather than for profits for a few can we eliminate the horror of famine.

In an era of obesity epidemics and lavish TV food shows, it's difficult to comprehend why thousands of people are dying from starvation in the Horn of Africa, and millions more are malnourished worldwide. How can famine occur in the 21st century, a period of unprecedented global productive capacity which, despite current economic woes, has resulted in a net global food surplus for the first time in human history?[1]

In July 2011, the UN formally declared that parts of Somalia were suffering a famine.[2] This most severe grade of human catastrophe is reached when more than two people per 10,000 die daily, acute malnutrition rates are above 30%, all livestock are dead, and there are less than 2100 kilocalories of food and four litres of water available per person daily.

Mainstream media and many non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have attributed the situation in Somalia to terrible drought and insecurity. This explanation fails to recognise the historical and structural context of the famine, undermining progress to tackle its root causes. It also perpetuates negative stereotypes about Africa and the third world and obscures our collective responsibility to avert future famines. The famine in Somalia is a man-made catastrophe, the result of inequitable global economic structures, wider geopolitics and climate change caused by the industrialized world.

The current famine in Somalia is a man-made catastrophe that reflects prevailing inequitable global economic structures, wider geopolitical considerations, and climate change caused by policies in the industrialised world

Rising food prices, speculation

Acclaimed economist Amartya Sen contends that when livestock and crops perish in a drought, it is the loss of the ability to generate income to buy food rather than lack of food itself that is the cause of famine.[3] In the Horn of Africa lack of income has been compounded by rampant food price increases. The UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) reported that world food prices rose by 39% in the year to July 2011, to an all-time high.[4] The price of maize, a staple across much of East Africa, doubled. Factors contributing to these steep rises include serial droughts in major wheat-producing countries, high oil prices, increasing meat consumption in emerging markets and diversion of crops to biofuels. Perhaps the most disturbing development is the huge growth in food speculation.[5]

Banks, hedge funds and financiers are speculating on the price of food, causing volatile and rising prices. Traditionally, 'hedging' protected farmers against climatic or other risks by agreeing in advance of the harvest to sell crops to traders at an agreed price. When hedging was tightly regulated, it worked reasonably well and food prices were set by the forces of supply and demand.[6] But after heavy lobbying by free-market fundamentalists, regulations on commodity markets were steadily dismantled from the mid-1990s. Contracts to buy and sell food were turned into 'derivatives' that could be traded by those with no involvement in agriculture.

Following the sub-prime fiasco which started in 2006, banks and traders rushed to move billions of dollars in pension funds and equities into 'safe' commodities, especially food. In 2011, investments in food derivatives stood at $126 billion, compared to $3 billion in 2003. The top three food commodities, wheat, rice and maize, are the staple diet of the world's two

billion poorest people. Higher prices for these staples translate directly into malnutrition and starvation. While few traders admit to links between food speculation and famine, other people are more outspoken.

'People die from hunger while the banks make a killing from betting on food,' says Deborah Doane, director of the UK-based World Development Movement.[7] Lack of transparency in these markets bears worrying resemblance to the behaviour that led to the 2008 financial crash. Like any irrational asset bubble, investors pile their money in for profits, in spite of the consequences. The UN Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Olivier de Schutter, concurs that speculators are behind surging food prices.[7] 'Prices of wheat, maize and rice have increased very significantly but this is not linked to low stock levels or harvest, but rather to traders reacting to information and speculating on the markets,' he says.

While people living in the Horn of Africa are accustomed to scarce water supplies, the rainfall pattern in the region is changing. According to Michael Klaus, UNICEF spokesman for the area, 'droughts used to happen every 5–10 years but we see now it's basically every other year, an indication of climate change conditions.' The overwhelming body of scientific evidence concludes that climate change is linked to the huge increase in human industrial activity and rising greenhouse gas emissions. In short, the high carbon footprint way-of-life enjoyed in rich industrialised countries has directly contributed to the devastation of crops, livestock and human lives with far lower carbon footprints across the Horn of Africa. This inconvenient truth may explain why reporting on this crisis has largely failed to draw attention to the link between droughts and climate change.

Geopolitics harm Somalia

What about the rhetoric that Somalia is a failed state, prone to factional conflict and insecurity? It's true there's an ongoing armed conflict between the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and al-Shabaab, an Islamist group with alleged links to Al Qaeda. But this conflict did not develop out of a vacuum, nor is it confined to Somalia. An understanding of Somalia's history illuminates its current predicament. The seeds for the fighting that has wracked Somalia from 1991 were sown during the European colonial carve up of Greater Somalia, watered by cold war geopolitics, and sprouted after a disastrous structural adjustment programme foisted on the country by the World Bank and IMF.[8]

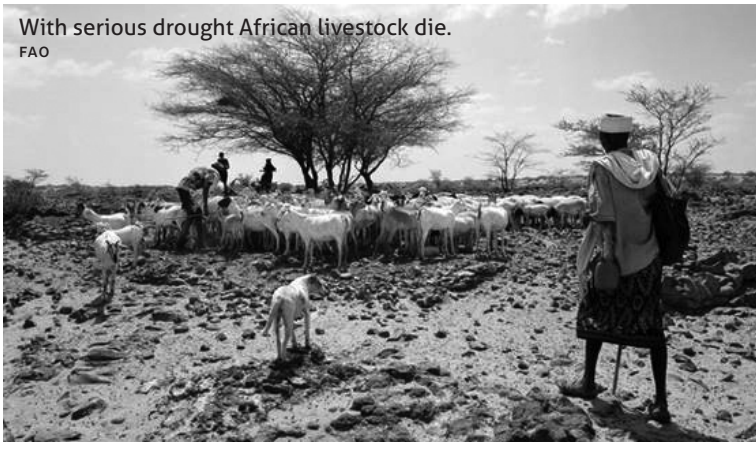
Somalia's position near key shipping lanes has long made it subject to outside interference.[9] The British launched the first modern airstrike in Africa against Dervish Somalia during the 1920s, effectively crushing the resistance of the only independent Muslim power on the continent.[10] Regions populated by ethnic Somalis were subsequently ceded to Ethiopia, setting the scene for regional conflict subsequently sponsored by the superpowers during the Cold War.

Initially aligning with the Soviet Union, Somalia's military dictator Siad Barre switched allegiance to the US in the mid-1970s.[10] The US readily obliged with massive shipments of weapons and turned a blind eye as Barre's regime brutally suppressed a number of rebellions during the 1980s. Despite persistent droughts, Somalia maintained agricultural self-sufficiency throughout the 1970s. But in return for US support, Somalia had to implement an economic programme of structural adjustment prescribed by the World Bank and the IMF. Forced privatisation, currency devaluation and removal of subsidies to the pastoral sector severely disrupted Somalia's economy. Food insecurity was exacerbated by the push for export agriculture to generate foreign exchange needed to service the growing debt.[10]

'People die from hunger while the banks make a killing from betting on food,' says Deborah Doane, director of the UK-based World Development Movement

These dismal outcomes were not accidental but part of a bizarre plan. As then US Agriculture Secretary John Block put it in 1996: 'The idea that developing countries should feed themselves is an anachronism from a bygone era. They could better ensure their food security by relying on US agricultural products, which are available, in most cases at lower cost.' Of course, he did not allude to the heavily subsidized nature of US agriculture which enabled it to dump its surplus produce on world markets at rates below production costs.

After the Barre regime was eventually overthrown in 1991, rival Somali factions fought each other for control. Following a brief intervention by the US (infamously glorified in the racist Hollywood film



With serious drought African livestock die.
FAO

'Blackhawk Down'), the country continued along a path of destructive internecine warfare. The US re-engaged with Somalia after 9/11 under the framework of the so-called 'war on terror,' choosing to back certain factions and further militarising the political competition on the ground.

In 2005, a coalition of groups calling themselves the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) established security, law and order in most parts of Somalia for the first time in 16 years. Islamophobic neo-conservative elements in the Bush administration used this opportunity to sponsor an Ethiopian invasion of Somalia that was disastrous for both African countries. The invasion destabilised the nascent order that had been restored by the ICU and gave rise to hard-line factions that would later become al-Shabaab.

African Union forces sponsored by the US and the UN now prop up the TFG against al-Shabaab but the US also continues its direct military involvement in Somalia. Earlier in 2011, unmanned drones (costing US$6 million each) fired Hellfire missiles (costing US$60,000 each) at 'suspected Islamist insurgents' in the south of Somalia. The Obama administration also maintains a CIA prison facility at Mogadishu's International Airport where militants not already assassinated by American drones are 'rendered' for interrogation. Recent Kenyan military intervention in Somalia has further complicated aid efforts. Somalia may be undergoing civil turmoil and instability but the murky role of the US and its allies must not be airbrushed from the country's narrative.

It's patently clear that control over oil and resources takes precedence over saving African human lives. When viewed alongside those who have openly identified over-population as a serious threat, this message assumes sinister tones

Co-opting 'aid'

The situation in Somalia is complicated by politicisation of aid and the militarisation of humanitarian assistance. The US Agency for International Development (USAID) is integrated into AFRICOM, one of six regional commands established under the Department of Defense. While many analysts see the establishment of AFRICOM as a move by the US to counter China's growing influence in the resource rich continent, the alignment of a humanitarian aid outfit with a military that has taken sides in a civil conflict is a recipe for failure. It's hardly surprising that al-Shabaab has been deeply suspicious of Western Aid organisations, hindering efforts to render aid in areas it controls. Until recently, having any contact with al-Shabaab could land one in violation of US counter-terrorism laws. Humanitarian aid is seen by all sides in the conflict as either an opportunity or a threat.

Stepping back from the situation in the Horn of Africa, it's important not to overlook the fact that the current famine is taking place against a background of successive Western-led wars in the Middle East and North Africa over the past decade. Neither the US nor any other NATO country has provided anything remotely close to the funds spent on these costly wars towards famine relief. The UN estimates that $2.5 billion is needed for the humanitarian response to the Horn of Africa (as of 24/10/ 2011, the funding shortfall stands at $627 million).[11] It's worth keeping in mind that a recent study estimated the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have cost almost $4 trillion and the seven-month NATO campaign in Libya alone cost NATO $2 billion.[12]

It's patently clear that control over oil and resources takes precedence over saving (African) human lives. When viewed alongside those who have openly identified over-population as a serious threat, this message assumes sinister tones. Nobel Peace Prize recipient and former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger once said: 'Depopulation should be the highest priority of foreign policy towards the Third World, because the US economy will require large and increasing amounts of minerals from abroad, especially from less developed countries.' A former official from the US Office of Population Affairs, Thomas Ferguson, was even more explicit, saying: 'The quickest way to reduce population is through famine, like in Africa, or through disease, like the Black Death.' Such morally repugnant sentiments are linked not only to the preservation of national interests but are derived from racially-based thinking, including eugenics.

Having reviewed some factors behind the catastrophe unfolding in Somalia, what can be done to ensure the first famine of the 21st century is also the last? Could it be as simple as picking up the phone and pledging a dollar a day to save one child? Many of us have become inured to the 'poverty porn' screened by various NGOs between advertisements for quadruple-decker cheese burgers. The images are all too familiar, silent columns of severely malnourished black or brown-skinned people converging on already over-crowded refugee camps struggling to cope, or the skeletal African child so weakened from malnutrition they are unable to swipe away the flies crawling over their face.

Pulling out our credit cards in response to such emotive appeals might soothe our conscience and make us feel we have done our part. It may even help ameliorate some suffering in far off Somalia, though it should not be assumed. Many international NGOs have come to resemble multinational conglomerates focussed more on public relations and renewing contracts than

actually alleviating human suffering. For more on the Machiavellian machinations of the international humanitarian aid industry, Michael Maren's excellent book, *The Road to Hell: The ravaging effects of foreign aid and international charity* is mandatory reading.[13]

Placing our hopes on charitable donations to humanitarian organisations or getting our governments to pledge increased foreign aid (pledges rarely fulfilled) will never be enough to truly eradicate famine from the planet. This is not to deny the importance of providing immediate emergency assistance, nor to demean the value of relief work carried out by many courageous individuals, often operating under extreme difficulty in the field. But governments and global organisations have been promising to eradicate hunger for decades via various stage- managed events and high profile declarations. Yet more than 25 years after Bob Geldof staged Live Aid to raise awareness and funds for those affected by famine in Ethiopia, mass starvation once again haunts the Horn of Africa.

Eliminating famine

Only a complete re-ordering of the global food system, and the underlying economic and political structures that support it, will eradicate famine once and for all. The food system needs to be democratized so that food production, distribution and consumption are undertaken not for profits for a few but on the basis of the essential needs of all. A few years ago, such aspirations may have seemed like pie in the sky, but recent mass protest movements against corporate greed and rising inequality in the industrialized world could be harbingers of real change for the better.

Many progressive measures can be taken, even within existing global economic and political structures, to address global hunger. The World Development Forum has called for the immediate re-introduction of regulations to prevent food speculation in an effort to curb rising food prices. There's significant scope to reduce food wastage. We should be demanding an end to costly imperialist wars and for diverting funds away from military expenditure to alleviating poverty.

Humanitarian aid must be de-coupled from military and foreign-policy objectives and an economic ideology premised on trade liberalisation. This is particularly important for New Zealand where our official overseas development agency, NZAID, has been subsumed under the auspices of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and our government, along with Australia's, is bullying small Pacific Island states towards trade liberalisation.

Regardless of the extent to which climate change has contributed to famine in Somalia, urgent action is needed by all governments to slash greenhouse gas emissions to avoid catastrophic levels of global warming. Oxfam has called for developed countries to lead by increasing their current targets to cut emissions to more than 40% below 1990 levels by 2020, and to start to deliver the $100 billion annually they have committed for climate action in developing countries.[14]

International humanitarian NGOs must do more than call for donations to fund emergency responses. They have a key role to play in exposing the inequitable global economic and political structures perpetuating human misery. They must take a clear stand on this. Otherwise they do nothing more than attempt to put a humane face on a rapacious, globalized capitalism and are arguably complicit in the very suffering they seek to ameliorate. The world today produces more than enough to feed, house and provide basic healthcare and education for the entire global population. This work should not be left to charities, or the markets.

To address famine in the 21st century, we need to understand that it's largely a man-made phenomenon. Only if we tackle the underlying structural causes of famine can we ensure such catastrophes as the one currently unfolding across the Horn of Africa never happen again. As international citizens, it's our collective obligation to ensure the fruits of modernity are enjoyed more equitably by all the world's peoples, while preserving the earth itself for the generations to come. As the world's most famous advocate of non-violent resistance, Mahatma Gandhi once said: 'the Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's need, but not every man's greed.'

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