

PUBLIC ACTION TO REMEDY HUNGER

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"Free Enterprise was born with man and shall survive as long as man survives".

— **A. D. Shroff**

1899-1965

Founder-President

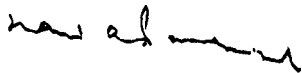
Forum of Free Enterprise

INTRODUCTION

The announcement that the Nobel Prize for Economics has been awarded to Prof. Amartya Sen was welcomed all over the world, particularly by the Indians. By winning this prestigious Prize Prof. Sen has brought honour and glory to India. Those who had known his work in the field, however, were not surprised at all since it was expected that he was bound to win this prestigious Prize.

The Forum had in the past published two booklets, authored by Prof. Sen. One was "Food for Thought and Survival" (published in January 1989), and the other, "Public Action to Remedy Hunger" (published in July 1991). Both the booklets are out of print.

On the occasion of Prof. Amartya Sen getting the Nobel Prize, as a mark of honour, we are reprinting the booklet, "Public Action to Remedy Hunger", for free distribution all over the country, particularly for the benefit of the younger generation.



Nani A. Palkhivala
President
Forum of Free Enterprise

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PUBLIC ACTION TO REMEDY HUNGER

Prof. Amartya Sen*

Famines and Endemic Deprivation

The problem of hunger can be broadly divided into two types, viz., (1) famines, and (2) endemic deprivation. Famines are transient but violent events - they come and go, decimating the population and causing extreme misery and widespread death. In contrast, endemic deprivation is a more persistent phenomenon, forcing people to live regularly and ceaselessly in a state of undernourishment, disease and weakness. While endemic deprivation is less fierce as a calamity, it is also more resilient and affects more people. If famines kill millions through starvation and epidemic diseases, endemic deprivation can afflict hundreds of millions through debilitation and illness, increasing mortality rates and shortening people's lives.

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It is possible to have endemic deprivation without famines, and vice versa. For example, India has been successful in preventing famines - there has been no substantial famine in India since independence in 1947. The last such famine was four years before independence, the Bengal famine of 1943, in which nearly 3 million people died. Since then there have been many occurrences of substantial crop failures, often covering large regions, and sometimes sharp declines in national food availability, but the threatening famines have been stopped by public action before they could become major killers. While this has happened throughout the post-independence period, there is evidence of increased efficiency in averting famine conditions. For example, the threatening famines in Maharashtra in 1973, in West Bengal in 1979, in Gujarat in 1987, have all been prevented much more speedily - with relatively little adverse impact on mortality rates - than happened in the earlier case of averted-famine in 1967 in Bihar.

But this effectiveness and increased efficiency in preventing famines has not insulated India from chronic undernourishment and endemic deprivation. Indeed, a substantial portion - perhaps as much as a quarter - of the rural population suffers from persistent undernourishment and chronic ailments. In contrast, China has dealt much better with endemic deprivation, and has radically enhanced normal life expectancy, and the lessons of its experience must be studied. But China has also experienced a gigantic famine during 1958-61 (one of the largest in recorded history) in which, it is now estimated, between 3 to 30 million people died.

Some countries do, of course, regularly experience both the problems of periodic famines and persistent

undernourishment. For example, many of the sub-Saharan economies in Africa, such as the Sahel countries - Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan - and others have had recurrent famines in recent years, in addition to experiencing endemic hunger and widespread distress. There are many cases of unremitting deprivation punctuated by intermittent famines.

Famines and chronic undernourishment have different though related - causal backgrounds, and the strategic issues that arise in dealing with the respective problems can be quite different. We have to discuss the part that public action can play in eliminating both famines and endemic deprivation. They have to be treated as distinct - though interconnected - problems.

Pessimism Versus Remedial Action

One of the problems that makes the task of the prevention of famines and hunger particularly difficult is the general sense of pessimism and defeatism that characterizes so much of the discussion on poverty and hunger in the modern world. While pictures of misery and starvation arouse sympathy and pity across the world, it is often taken for granted that nothing much can be done to remedy these desperate situations, at least in the short run.

There is, in fact, little factual basis for such pessimism and no grounds at all for assuming the immutability of hunger and deprivation. Yet those unreasoned feelings dominate a good deal of public reaction to misery in the world today. In fact, pessimism is not new in this field, and has had a major role over the centuries in dampening hearts and in forestalling preventive public action.

“Does not this weather frighten you?” wrote James Mill, the utilitarian philosopher, to David Ricardo, the pioneering economist, in the troubled English summer of 1816. “There must now be of necessity a very deficient crop and very high prices - and these with an unexampled scarcity of work will produce a degree of misery, the thought of which makes the flesh creep on one’s bones - one third of the people must die - it would be a blessing to take them into the streets and high ways, and cut their throats as we do with the pigs.” David Ricardo did not dissent from James Mill’s paralysing gloom, and in a later letter assured him that he was “sorry to see a disposition to inflame the minds of the lower orders by persuading them that legislation can afford them any relief”. The unquestioning fatalism that characterizes this exchange between two of the leading minds of nineteenth-century Britain remains distressingly common even today. And yet famines are nearly always avoidable, even after gigantic natural disasters. Sensible public action, including appropriate legislation, can systematically eradicate large-scale starvation altogether. The inflamed minds of “the lower orders” had got the picture more nearly right than two of the foremost intellectuals of Britain.

Public Action, the Economy and the Society

To understand how all this might work, it is necessary to see public action and legislation in rather broad perspective. First, public action includes not only what is done for the public by the state, but also what is done by the public for itself. It includes, for example, what people can do by demanding remedial action and through making governments accountable. The relevant legislation includes

not only the protection of certain basic provisions of public support and social security, but also - at a deeper level - the guaranteeing of democratic rights of free elections, uncensored news reporting and unfettered public criticism. Even though these political features may, on a superficial view, look rather remote from the elementary economic problem of hunger and starvation, they are, in fact, closely connected. They promote the political incentive for governments to be responsive, caring and prompt.

Second, while public action includes actions of the state, it is important to see such actions in conjunction with other social institutions and practices. State action, as I shall presently discuss, can be particularly crucial in regenerating lost incomes of potential famine victims and providing health care and social services to the relatively deprived. But these actions must not be seen as excluding the efficient functioning of markets, commerce and incentives. The heroic view of the state as a "lone ranger" cleaning up the wild West is as unreal as it is pernicious in trivializing and ignoring the positive functions of other social and economic institutions. The mistake of absent public action must not be replaced by the opposite mistake of complete concentration on state activities, ignoring - or stifling - trade, commerce, scientific research, the news media, political parties, and other instruments of economic, social and political actions.

Endemic Undernourishment, Health and Education

I first take up the more widespread but less acute problem of endemic undernourishment, and will address the problem of famines later on in this lecture. Persistent undernutrition is partly a matter of insufficient food intake, but the problem

cannot be dissociated from that of deprivation of health care and basic education. For example, undernutrition is often generated by parasitic disease. Also, epidemics can lead to widespread undernourishment. Being insufficiently nourished is both a cause and an effect of ill health, and the deprivation of food cannot be studied independently of the insufficiency of health care.

Furthermore, the actual use of medical facilities depends not only on what is provided, but also on the public's informed concern with health needs and available opportunities. The basic level of education of the public can play an important part in the utilization of communal health care and of general medical facilities, and female education in particular is especially important in this. For example, if we contrast the life expectancy at birth in different states in India, we find that the state of Kerala, despite being no richer, - indeed rather poorer - than the Indian average has a remarkably longer life expectancy rate than the Indian average of 56 to 58 years. The latest estimates suggest a life expectancy of Kerala of around 70 years - not far from European figures. There is much evidence that this is closely connected with the high level of literacy - especially female literacy - in Kerala. The massive educational expansion in what is now Kerala began as early as 1817 with a powerful call for mass literacy by Rani Gouri Parvathi Bai, the young female monarch of what was then the "native" state of Travancore. The policy of education and public health has been pursued fairly consistently ever since, and has been further consolidated in recent decades by state governments keen on public services in education and health.

There is plenty of other evidence connecting education, especially female education, with good use of health care. Widespread education also leads to better understanding of the need for public health provision, and stronger popular demand for it, with more vigilance in that pursuit. In this field, as in many others, what one gets is not independent of what one seeks and demands.

Markets and Participatory Growth

The different deprivations - of food, health care, education - tend typically to go together. Given the current euphoria with the achievements of the market mechanism, the point has often been made that there is no surer way of getting to economic prosperity and of eliminating poverty and deprivation than unleashing the market forces. Is that view correct?

The achievements of the market have indeed been significant, not only in enhancing the gross national product, but also in providing the basis for raising the quality of life. For example, if we look at the top 10 performers in reducing infant and child mortality (the so-called "under-five mortality") among all the developing countries during the years 1960 to 1985, we find in our list such examples of successful capitalism as South Korea, Hong Kong and Singapore, and also Kuwait and United Arab Emirates. It is, however, important to note that these countries have not only had high growth in real incomes - to a great extent through the market mechanism (though supplemented by state planning in some cases, most notably South Korea) - but they have also ploughed back a lot of the fruits of that growth in the public distribution of education and health care.

There is a striking contrast between these experiences and those of say, Brazil or Oman, with comparably high economic expansion but much less use of public intervention - and correspondingly lower achievements in mortality and in other fields. Furthermore, the high level of basic education in Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, etc., has led to widespread participation in the process of growth, with rewarding employment spreading the fruits of growth across the nation. What we may call the policy of "unaimed opulence", illustrated by the experience of countries such as Brazil, contrasts sharply with the use of "participatory growth" in countries such as South Korea, with employment-oriented expansion and with broad public support of education, epidemiological planning and general health care. The success of the market does not preclude the need for fruitful and efficient public action.

Public Provisioning and Mortality Reduction

Another issue concerns the identity of the remaining five countries in the list of the top 10 in reducing infant and child mortality. They are all much poorer countries, which have nevertheless achieved tremendous lowering of under-five mortality (reductions of 70 to 80 per cent during 1960-85), and have reached very low absolute mortality rates, mainly through public programmes of medical care, epidemiological control and elementary education. The list includes socialist economies such as China and Cuba. Others on the list are Costa Rica, Chile and Jamaica, and all of them have used, for significant parts of the period, much public intervention in securing health care, medical facilities and basic education across the population.

While Brazil, South Africa and Oman have many times the income per head of China or Sri Lanka, those poorer countries, making good use of public delivery of health and education, have remarkably higher achievements in life expectancy and mortality reduction than what is observed in the countries that have pursued "unaimed opulence".

In China the general reduction of mortality rates took place much before economic reforms of 1979. Indeed, since then progress in public health care and mortality reduction seems to have somewhat slowed, despite high economic growth. Official Chinese statistics record a considerable rise in mortality rates after the economic reforms of 1979, and this happens at the same time as the decline of communal medical insurance previously provided by production brigades and a substantial reduction of village-level medical workers (and "barefoot" doctors). There is certainly a spurious element in this mortality increase (connected particularly with changing age composition and better data coverage), but even after taking note of that, there is evidence of some setback in mortality reduction taking place along with a deterioration of communal health care, precisely when the growth of GNP speeded up. A massive increase in Chinese life expectancy (despite the temporary decline during the famines of 1958-61) took place before the speeding up of economic expansion with the reforms of 1979, and that increase has slowed down (even if not reversed) precisely with the acceleration of economic growth ushered in by the reforms. While communal agriculture did little for agricultural output itself, it had the effect of providing a good deal of support for public health both in terms of social insurance and communal care. That situation has changed with privatization, which has been enormously

beneficial for agricultural output, but not quite for communal health services. While growth of real incomes can, obviously, be very useful for eliminating deprivation, public action and communal facilities are also of crucial importance.

It is sometimes forgotten that the reduction in mortality rates and the increase in life expectancy in the Western countries themselves also took place with much public action and state planning. For example, if we look at the increase in English life expectancy in different decades in this century, we find moderate increases in each decade of one to four years, except for two decades, viz, 1911-21 and 1940-51, when life expectancy increased by nearly seven years. Those decades of the world wars saw radical expansion of public action and planning including public employment, food rationing and health care. Even the National Health Service was born in the decade of the '40s, just after the war. Similar connections between public action and expansion of life expectancy can be shown from the history of other rich countries, including Japan.

Can Poor Countries Afford Health Services and Education ?

The method of combining high economic growth with expansion of public support has obvious advantages and much to recommend it. The question must also be raised; however, as to whether a poor country should have to wait many decades before it has enough resources generated by economic growth to undertake ambitious public programmes of health care and education. It is not illegitimate to wonder whether a poor country can "afford" to spend so much on health and education.

In answering this question we must not only note the empirical reality that many poor countries - such as Sri Lanka, China, Costa Rica, the Indian state of Kerala, and others - have done precisely that with much success, but also understand the general fact that delivering public health care and basic educational facilities is enormously cheaper in a poor country than in a rich one. This is because both health and education are labour-intensive activities and this makes them much cheaper in poorer countries because of lower wages. Thus, even though a poor country is tremendously constrained in expending money on health and education because of general poverty, the money needed to pay for these services is also significantly less when a country is still quite poor.

The fact of the relative cheapness of labour-intensive services (including health care and education) to some extent counteracts the constraint of poverty. When the proper economic calculations are made, taking note of relative costs, there is less reason for pessimism here - even for quite poor countries - than is frequently supposed. We must resist the tendency to rely on plain cynicism, based on over-theoretical reasoning, masquerading as cunning practical wisdom.

Famines as Entitlement Failures

I turn now to the more extreme problem of famines. As was noted earlier, this is a rather different matter from endemic deprivation. Indeed, as was discussed earlier, a country like China can be enormously successful in subduing persistent deprivation and yet experience one of the largest famines in recorded history.

What causes a famine? The temptation to see it as invariably associated with a large and sudden drop in food production and availability is strong, but huge famines have occurred without such a drop - both in Asia and in Africa. Sometimes famines have coincided with years of peak food availability, as in Bangladesh famine of 1974.

Even when a famine is, in fact, associated with a decline in food production (as it clearly was in the case of the Chinese famines of 1958-61 or in the Irish famines in the 1840s), we still have to go beyond the output statistics to explain why it is that some parts of the population get wiped out and the rest do just fine. To be sure, there are alleged accounts of famines in which nearly everyone in a country had to go hungry, but most of these accounts do not bear much scrutiny. For example, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, in its vintage eleventh edition, does indeed refer to the Indian famine of 1344-45 as one in which even "the Moghul emperor was unable to obtain the necessaries for his household". But that story runs into many problems. An elementary issue relates to the fact that the Moghal empire in India was not established until 1526. More importantly, the Tughlak emperor in power in 1344-45 not only had no great difficulty in securing "necessaries" for his household, but also had enough means to organize one of the most illustrious programmes of famine relief in history. The anecdotes of unified starvation do not tally with the reality of divided fortunes.

Since food and other commodities are not distributed freely, people's consumption depends on their "entitlements", that is on the bundles of goods over which they can establish ownership through production and trade, using their own

means. Some people own the food they themselves grow, while others buy it in the market on the basis of incomes earned through employment, trade or business. Famines are initiated by severe loss of entitlements of one or more occupation groups, depriving them of the opportunity to command and consume food.

Famines survive by divide and rule. For example, a group of peasants may suffer entitlement losses when food output in their territory declines, perhaps due to a local drought, even when there is no general dearth of food in the country.

The victims would not have the means to buy food from elsewhere, since they wouldn't have anything much to sell to earn an income, given their own production loss. Others with more secure earnings in other occupations or in other locations may be able to get by well enough by purchasing food from elsewhere. Something very like this happened in the Wollo famine in Ethiopia in 1973, with impoverished residents of the province of Wollo unable to buy food, despite the fact that food prices in Dessie (the capital of Wollo) were no higher than in Addis Ababa and Asmera. Indeed, there is evidence of some food moving out of Wollo to the more prosperous regions of Ethiopia where people had more income to buy food.

Or, to take a different type of case, food prices may shoot up because of the increased purchasing power of some occupation groups, and as a result others who have to buy food may be ruined because the real purchasing power of their money incomes may have shrunk sharply. Such a famine may occur without any decline in food output, resulting as it does from a rise in competing demand rather than a fall in total supply. This is what set off the famine

in Bengal in 1943, with urban dwellers gaining from the “war boom” - the Japanese army was round the corner and the British and Indian defence expenditures were heavy in urban Bengal, including Calcutta. Once rice prices started moving up sharply, public panic as well as manipulative speculation played its part in pushing the prices sky high, beyond the reach of a substantial part of the population of rural Bengal. The devil, then, took the hindmost.

Or, to take yet another type of case, some workers may find their “occupation’s gone” as the economy changes and the types and locations of gainful activities shift. This has happened, for example, in sub-Saharan Africa, with changing environmental and climatic conditions. Erstwhile productive workers may then be without work or earnings, and in the absence of social security systems, there wouldn’t be anything else to fall back on.

In some other cases, the loss of gainful employment can be a temporary phenomenon, with powerful effects in initiating a famine. For example, in the Bangladesh famine of 1974, to which I referred earlier, the first signs of distress were found among the landless rural labourers, after the summer floods, which disrupted the employment of labour for transplanting rice. These labourers, who lead a hand-to-mouth existence, were forced to starve as a result of the loss of wage employment, and this phenomenon occurred much before the crop that was adversely affected was to be harvested.

Income Creation and Public Intervention

Since famines are associated with the loss of entitlements of one or more occupation groups in particular regions, the

resulting starvation can be prevented by systematically re-creating a minimum level of incomes and entitlements for those who are hit by economic changes. The numbers of people involved, while often absolutely large, are usually small fractions of the total population, and the minimum levels of purchasing power needed to ward off starvation can be quite small. Thus, the costs of such public action for famine prevention are typically rather modest even for poor countries, provided they make systematic and efficient arrangements in good time.

Just to get an idea of the magnitudes involved, if potential famine victims constitute, say, 10 per cent of the total population of the country (famines usually affect a much smaller proportion than that), their share of total income in normal circumstances would typically not exceed say, about 3 per cent of the GNP. Their normal share of food consumption may also, typically, not be greater than 4 or 5 per cent of the total national food consumption. Thus the resources needed to recreate their entire income, or to resupply their entire normal food consumption, starting from zero, do not have to be very large provided the preventive measures are efficiently organized. In fact, of course, famine victims typically have some resources left (so that their entitlements do not have to be re-created from zero), and the net resource requirement can be, thus, even smaller.

Also, a good deal of the mortality associated with famines results from diseases unleashed by debilitation, breakdown of sanitary arrangements, population movements and spread of infectious diseases endemic in the region. These too can be sharply reduced through sensible public action involving epidemic control and communal health

arrangements. In this field too, the returns to small amounts of well-planned public expenditure can be very large indeed.

Food Production, Diversification and Economic Growth

Needless to say, in organizing famine prevention measures, it helps to have a more opulent and growing economy. Economic expansion typically reduces the need for entitlement protection, and also enhances the resources available for providing that protection. This is a lesson of obvious importance for sub-Saharan Africa, where the lack of overall economic growth has been a major underlying source of deprivation. The proneness to famines is much greater when the population is generally impoverished and when public funds are hard to secure.

Attention has to be paid to problems of appropriate incentives to generate the growth of outputs and incomes - including, inter alia, the expansion of food output. This calls not only for devising sensible price incentives, but also for measures to encourage and enhance technical change, skill formation and productivity - both in agriculture and in other fields.

While growth of food output is important, the main issue concerns overall economic growth, since food is purchasable in the world market, provided the country has the resources to buy it. It is often pointed out - rightly - that food output per head has been falling in sub-Saharan Africa. This is indeed so and is obviously a matter of concern, and has implications for many aspects of public policy - varying from agricultural research to population control. But it is also important to note that the same fact of falling food output per head also applies to many countries in other regions of the world as well. These countries did not

experience famines both (1) because they achieved relatively high growth rates in other areas of production, and also (2) because the dependence on food output as a source of income is much less in these countries than in the typical sub-Saharan African economy.

The tendency to think of growing more food as the only way of solving a food problem is strong and tempting, and often it does have some rationale. But the picture is more complex than that, related to alternative economic opportunities and the possibility of international trade. As far as lack of growth is concerned, the major feature of the problems of sub-Saharan Africa is not the particular lack of growth of food output as such, but the general lack of economic growth altogether (of which the problem of food output is only one part). The need for a more diversified production structure is very strong in sub-Saharan Africa, given the climatic uncertainties, on the one hand, and the existence of other fields of productive activity on the other. The often-advocated strategy of concentrating exclusively on the expansion of agriculture - and specifically food crops - is like putting all the eggs in the same basket, and the perils of such a policy can be great.

It is, of course, unlikely that the dependence of sub-Saharan Africa on food production as a source of income can be dramatically reduced in the short run. But some diversification can be attempted straightaway, and even the reduction of over dependence on a few crops can enhance security of incomes. In the long run, for sub-Saharan Africa to join in the economic expansion that has taken place in much of the rest of the world, sources of income and growth outside food production and even outside agriculture would have to be more vigorously sought and used.

Social Security, Environment and Peace

However, no matter how successful Africa is in enhancing economic growth, the need for public action in protecting entitlements will undoubtedly remain important in the foreseeable future, if only because there are variations over time and between regions - often related to uncertain climatic conditions and also to social disorders (sometimes related to military actions). I should also mention that the need for corrective public action can be substantially reduced in the long run both by better environmental planning and also by the cultivation of peace.

The climatic uncertainties in sub-Saharan Africa are not unrelated to environmental neglect, and the time has certainly come to reverse that negligence. Environmental changes take time, but coordinated public efforts in this field can make a difference in the long run.

The urgency of peace in Africa is hard to overstate. Many of the recent famines in sub-Saharan countries have been directly connected with military conflicts (for example, in Ethiopia, Sudan, Somalia, Uganda, Chad, Nigeria and Mozambique). Wars not only lead to massacres and associated horrors, they also destroy crops and other economic resources, undermine traditional patterns of livelihood, discourage economic investment and capital formation, and also disrupt the normal operations of trade and commerce. They also help consolidate the grip of the military on civil life and tend to disrupt civil liberties, including the freedom of the press, which - as I shall presently discuss - as an important safeguard against famines and other man-made catastrophies. The "peace dividend" in Africa can stretch well beyond the saving of financial and economic

resources on which the discussion in the West has tended to concentrate.

Public Employment for Famine Prevention

Generating minimum incomes for entitlement protection can be done in different ways. Public employment with cash wages can be an effective method. Offering public employment to potential famine victims can re-create lost purchasing power and prevent starvation. In many cases, this is best done through paying cash wages to the people thus employed. This might, at first, appear to be an odd way of preventing famines, since the idea of famine relief is so firmly linked with the vision of food distribution and relief camps. But this is an obvious line to pursue if famines are seen as being caused by entitlement failures of some sections of the population. Also, the strategy of preventing a famine through timely regeneration of incomes has to be distinguished from the tactics of relieving an unprevented famine through whatever emergency means may be still available to provide support for starving victims.

There are two different issues related to the strategy of regenerating incomes through cash wages being paid in public employment: (1) Why *employment*, rather than relief in the form of hand-outs? (2) Why *cash* payment rather than direct distribution of food (either as relief-camp feeding, or as food wages)? To take up the question of employment first, the rationale of this procedure can be understood only in the context of the hard problem of selection involved in giving away something for nothing. The possibility of abuse can be particularly serious in a country where most people are generally rather poor - even though not as poor as famine victims. The unconditional provision of employment

at a basic wage can serve as a screening device to select the really needy who are willing to take up employment opportunities. This reduces the possibility of corruption and abuse.

Further, providing protection through employment is less disruptive of the victims' economic, social and family life, compared with herding them together in makeshift feeding camps. It is easier to combine family living with working for a wage in a public employment project than what is permitted by the standard relief camps. There is also more scope for continuing to look after one's farm or other economic assets and continuing productive operations. It is also less humiliating for the dispossessed.

Cash Wages, Public Action and Private Trade

The second issue concerns the question of using cash wages. One advantage is that this method can be used with speed. Unlike direct distribution of food, a system of cash wages does not require moving food through governmental organization before relief can be given. Cash payment permits the newly created demand of potential famine victims to be met by normal channels of trade and transport. The system can be supplemented by building up a sizeable stock of food grains in the public distribution system, to reduce the danger of manipulative inflation through the collusion of private traders.

A mixed system of this kind is typically much easier to organize than direct public distribution of food, and it cuts out a lot of bureaucracy. Cash payment for work combines public action and market functioning. The incomes are created by public employment, but the demand for food

generated by the newly-created incomes are met by the normal channels of trade and transport. Of course, special provisions have to be made in particular cases in which those channels are effectively underdeveloped, or fragile, or disrupted, especially as a consequence of war. But in general, the alternative experience of moving food through bureaucratic methods (often involving ad hoc trading and transporting arrangements, with harassed civil servants wrestling with hastily requisitioned lorries) has not been an encouraging one, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. The public sector is often as bad in meeting market demand as the private sector is in generating relief incomes, and pragmatism has something to offer against prejudice in either direction.

Economic Reasoning and Practical Experiences

Understanding the cause of famines in terms of entitlement failures points directly to the possibility of making effective use of public employment and of cash wages. But the case for this strategy is not only based on economic theory, but also on practical experience in different parts of the world. Comparative studies of different methods of famine prevention used in India and in different countries in sub-Saharan Africa confirm the great practical advantages of this mixed technique, combining state action with private trade and marketing.

In India, this method has been used intermittently for a long time, and it has in recent years become the principal procedure for famine prevention. Famines have been averted in post-independence India by having systematic public arrangements for regenerating incomes when a large section of the population lose their normal incomes as a result of

a drought or a flood or other economic changes. Sometimes the availability of food in India has been much lower than that in the Sahel countries and others experiencing famines. Nevertheless famines have been prevented from developing because of the timely strategy of public employment with extensive use of cash wages.

Political Incentives, News Media and Democracy

While there is no great practical difficulty in organizing effective measures for famine prevention, provided the problems are correctly diagnosed and addressed, one reason why this does not occur adequately - or at all - in many parts of the world is that the penalty of the famines are borne only by the suffering public and not by the ruling government. If the government were to be accountable to the public, through elections, free news reporting and uncensored public criticism, then the government too would have good reasons - to avoid condemnation and ultimately rejection - to do its best to eradicate famines.

It is not, in fact, surprising that in the terrible history of famines in the world, there is hardly any case in which a famine has occurred in a country that is independent and democratic with an uncensored press. This absence of famines applies not only to the rich economies, but also to poor but relatively democratic countries, such as post-independence India, or Botswana, or Zimbabwe.

It is also significant that famines continued to occur in India right up to Independence (the last one was in 1943 in Bengal four years before Independence in 1947), whereas there has been no major famine at all since then. This has been helped by the expansion of food production since Independence, but a crucial difference has been made also by the changed political circumstances. With a democratic

political system, a relatively free news media and active opposition parties eager to pounce on the government whenever there are news reports of any starvation (or fears expressed of food shortages), the governments at the centre and at the state have been under severe pressure to take quick and effective action whenever famines have threatened. Since famines are easy to prevent once there is a real effort to stop them, prevention has been possible in the lines I have already discussed.

An uncensored and active news media can have a very important part to play in alerting the government as well as the public about impending threats of famines, by reporting early cases of starvation which often serve as tell-tale indicators of things to come, unless prevented by decisive public action. The diversity, which I discussed earlier in this lecture, of causes of famines indicates that the current passion for formal "early warning systems" cannot be realized by focussing on some simple indicator of an on-coming famine. Famines can be caused by quite different factors and processes and there is no alternative to fairly detailed economic analysis. No less importantly, there is an inescapable need to be on the lookout for straws in the wind. By drawing attention to such straws (for example, early starvation in some remote areas), an active and vigorous newspaper system can often do more to prevent famines than admirably cunning early warning systems set up by whiz kids.

But in addition to this informational role, the news can play a vital "adversarial" function - in putting the government under constant pressure to be responsive and sympathetic to the plight of the common people. So long as famines are relatively costless for the government, with no threat to its survival or credibility, effective actions to prevent famines

do not have the urgency to make them inescapable imperatives for the government. The persistence of severe famines in many of the sub-Saharan African countries - both with "left-wing" and "right-wing" governments - relates closely to the lack of democratic political systems and practice.

The issue relates also to the Chinese famines of 1958-61 in which, as was mentioned earlier, possibly up to 30 million people died. The Chinese government, despite being politically very committed to eliminating hunger in general, did not substantially revise its disastrous policies associated with the failed "Great Leap Forward", during the three famine years. The lack of a free system of news distribution misled the government itself, fed by its own propaganda and by rosy reports of local party officials competing for credit in Beijing. Indeed, there is evidence that just as the famine was moving towards its peak, the Chinese authorities mistakenly believed that they had 100 million more metric tons of grain than they actually did.

No less importantly, the lack of a free news media and the absence of opposition parties entailed that the government was not subjected to adversarial critique for its disastrous failure to save its population from starvation and famine. During that terrible calamity the government faced no pressure from newspapers, which were controlled, or from opposition parties, which were absent. Perhaps the most important reform that can contribute to the elimination of famines, in Africa as well as in Asia, is the enhancement of democratic practice, unfettered newspapers and - more generally - adversarial politics.

Ending Hunger Through Integrated Public Action

To conclude, there is nothing inevitable about famines. Famines are typically precipitated by the loss of entitlements

of one or more occupation groups, and the process can be halted by generating replacement incomes for the potential victims. To do this efficiently, the protective role of the government has to be integrated with the functioning of other economic and social institutions, including the normal channels of trade and commerce.

As was discussed earlier in this lecture, there is nothing inescapable about endemic undernourishment, either. Persistent deprivation can also be eradicated through positive public action without stifling other social institutions. While the public actions needed for eliminating famines involve somewhat different problems from those of endemic undernourishment and deprivation, both programmes require clear-headed diagnostics of the causation of the respective problems and determined efforts to counteract those causes. I have tried to discuss briefly - I fear much too briefly - the nature of the respective challenges, and have tried to outline possible lines of solution, drawing both on economic and political reasoning and on the reading of actual empirical experiences of different countries.

The eradication of famines and the elimination of endemic deprivation can both profit from active and efficient planning, with state action seen in conjunction with the normal functioning of the economy and the society. Public efforts have to be integrated with the role of other social institutions. The market mechanism cannot be supplanted by state action, nor can it be taken to be adequate on its own to deal with the resilient problems of persistent undernutrition and recurring famines.

Public Action and the Public

While incentives are central to ending hunger, some of the key relationships involve political - rather than economic - incentives, operating on the government. Democracy and

an uncensored press can spread the penalty of famines from the destitute to those in authority; there is no surer way of making the government responsive to the suffering of famine victims.

However, while democracy is a major step in the right direction, a democratic form of government is not in itself a sufficient guarantee for adequate public activism against hunger. For example, in India the issue of famines has been thoroughly politicized, helping to eliminate the phenomenon, but the quiet continuation of endemic undernourishment and deprivation has not yet become correspondingly prominent in the news media and in adversarial politics. The same can be said about gender bias and the greater relative deprivation of women. The political incentives to deal with these major failures would enormously increase if these issues were to be brought into political and journalistic focus, making greater use of the democratic framework.

As was argued earlier on in this lecture, public action has to be seen as actions by the public and not just as state actions for the public. To eliminate the problem of hunger, the political framework of democracy and uncensored press can make a substantial contribution, but it also calls for activism of the public. Ultimately, the effectiveness of public action depends not only on legislation, but also on the force and vigour of democratic practice. There is need for moving ahead on different fronts simultaneously to eradicate hunger in the modern world. The public is not only the beneficiary of that eradication, but in an important sense, it also has to be its primary instrument. The first step is to see the public as the active agent rather than merely as the long-suffering patient.

*The views expressed in this booklet are not necessarily those of the
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"People must come to accept private enterprise not as a necessary evil, but as an affirmative good".

— Eugene Black

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