The Profits of Famine

Southern Africa's Long Decade of Hunger

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At the end of September, Colin Powell requested an altogether earthly intercession from Archbishop Jean-Louis Tauran, the Vatican foreign minister The Secretary of State wanted the Vatican to persuade the Zambian government to accept U.S.-supplied genetically modified (GM) food aid. With a population under 10 million and with the vast majority of people earning under $1,000 a year,' Zambia is a mouse that has roared. In refusing to accept U.S. GM corn, and by dealing with its famine by sourcing grain from within the region, the Zambian government has sent a clear signal that it understands both why famines happen and that U.S. aid is part of the problem, not the solution.

By the end of 2002, a little under 15 million people will have faced starvation in Southern Africa. Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Swaziland, Zambia, and Zimbabwe are among the most severely affected. Thus, while the U.S. State Department blames the Zimbabwean government for the famine there, that explanation is clearly inadequate to account for a famine that has affected the entire region. For a meaningful explanation, we need to understand what a famine means, and put it into the context of a phenomenon that has affected the entire region-structural adjustment.

How to Define a Famine

Definitions of famine run a gamut. The World Health Organization (WHO), for example, declares a famine when "the severity of critical malnutrition levels exceed 15 percent of children aged 6 to 59.9 months." The U.N.'s Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) defines famine as "an extreme collapse in local availability [ofl and access to food that causes [a] widespread rise in mortality from outright starvation or hunger-related illnesses."

These definitions focus on the threshold a situation crosses in order for chronic hunger to be officially declared acute. But this threshold is essentially arbitrary. For example, because rates of acute malnutrition have remained stable in most Southern African countries, the WHO has not yet declared a state of famine in every country.

Mike Davis, who has written on famine in recent history, points us away from this sort of threshold thinking: "We must acknowledge that famine is part of a continuum with the silent violence of malnutrition that precedes and conditions it, and with the mortality of the shadow of debilitation and disease that follows it." Famine does not arise spontaneously with the failure of a harvest season; rather it is the outcome of a system that places greater importance upon the market than upon those going hungry.

The Silent Violence of Malnutrition

It's no wonder the people of Southern Africa are starving in 2002- they have been starving for over a decade. The Southern African Development Community reports that in Zambia in 1991, the chronic malnutrition (stunting) rate of children between the ages of 6 and 59 months was 39 percent. Since then it has increased to (and leveled off at) about 55 percent. At the same time, acute malnutrition (wasting) rates have thus far remained stable at 4.4 percent in Zambia. In Malawi, the rate of chronic malnutrition has remained at 49 percent since 1990.' It is only acute malnutrition that has slightly increased over the same period, by 1 percent for a total rate of 6 percent. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) estimated in 2000 that 35 percent of the people in the famine region were undernourished, with 54 percent of Mozambique's population undernourished. Among those most vulnerable to chronic hunger are women, children, and the elderly. The UNDP reported in 2000 that 20 percent of children in the region under the age of five were underweight.

In 2002, rampant Southern African hunger was tipped over the official "famine" threshold by two years of bad harvests. That's one reason we're now hearing news of it. Another likely reason is that some Southern African countries aren't behaving as the U.S. would want them to, and the word "famine," with the desperate urgency it conveys, helps put pressure on those governments. That sense of emergency also masks the question we must ask: why, even before the current food crisis, have so many people suffered for so long from chronic malnutrition?

The Ingredients for Hunger

Man-made famine isn't new in world history. For example, an 1878 study published in the prestigious Journal of the Statistical Society found thirty-one serious famines in 120 years of British rule in India and only seventeen recorded famines in the entire previous two millennia.'° The reason for the change? According to Mike Davis' recent commentary, it happened because the British integrated the Indian food system into the world economy while simultaneously removing the traditional supports that had existed to feed the hungry in times of crisis-supports that were rejected as the trappings of a hopelessly backward and indolent society. And so, by the end of the 1800s, "Millions died, not outside the 'modern world system,' but in the very process of being dynamically conscripted into its economic and political structures. They died in the golden age of Liberal Capitalism.""

This lesson was not lost on the first generation of African governments. At the beginning of the 1980s, African states had a very clear idea of what their economies and societies needed in order to flourish. In the Lagos Plan of Action,' heads of state called for a type of economic growth disconnected from the vicissitudes of the world market, relying on import-substitution policies, food sovereignty and trade within Africa, and, critically, a reduction in the level of external indebtedness that was systematically siphoning value out of Africa.

The World Bank disagreed, insisting in its Berg Report that state interference in the smooth functioning of the market was precisely the cause of low levels of growth.' As most African governments were buried in debt, their futures mortgaged on declining commodity prices, the Bank's plan prevailed. Under the Bank's regime, African nations are forced to produce foreign exchange earning (i.e., cash) crops to pay off increasing debt, and find themselves importing more and more

food. In a perfect, stable market, this ought not pose a problem: the farmer will grow an export crop in which she or he has a comparative advantage, and will use the cash to buy imported food, goods, and services. But in the real world, this model increases farming communities' vulnerability to a number of risks:

1. Commodity price fluctuations and decline: Primary commodity prices have been falling consistently for thirty years, and have been exceptionally variable within this time frame. In part, the World Bank is to blame; its structural adjustment programs enforced the export of a few key commodities in high demand in the North, putting Southern countries on the receiving end of volatile and decreasing prices for their exports.

2. Currency fluctuations: Southern countries have also suffered fluctuations in the currency market. Even the most efficient farmers

are unable to buy food on the world market if their currency is undervalued. Yet this is what every economic model suggests will happen when countries follow World Bank recommendations to liberalize exchange markets: the currency will depreciate and require stabilization, which these countries, because of their debt burden and structural adjustment obligations, cannot provide. "

3. Loss of food sovereignty: The World Bank and the international aid community tend to use the term "food security" to talk about the availability of food and people's access to it. Since the 1996 World Food Summit, Via Campesina, the international farmers' movement, has pushed for an alternative concept: food sovereignty, which it defines as "the right of countries and peoples to define their own agricultural and food policies which are ecologically, socially, economically, and culturally appropriate for them." The difference between these approaches lies in the issue of who controls access to food, seed, land, and the market. Movement towards a free trade economy takes control away from the majority of rural people. This is a fundamental issue of justice, dignity, and democracy.

Debt: The Tie that Binds

Vast debt was instrumental in forcing Third World governments to accept World Bank control. The level of debt is staggering. The Bank itself suggests that debt is "unsustainable" if it is above 5 percent of the total gross national product of a country. Meanwhile, Zambia, for example, is paying three times as much in debt service as on health care.

But the debt level isn't the whole story. Debt is also a discipline wielded over Southern economies High levels of external debt mean foreign creditors call the shots. And when countries with limited foreign cash decide which creditor gets paid and which has to wait, they always put the World Bank first. This special position gives the Bank considerable power. On behalf of itself and other creditors-and in return for an increased line of credit-it imposes conditions on the governments that owe it money. These conditions, though clothed in the language of impartial economics, are nevertheless political decisions. Ideas about interest rates, exchange rates, and the "appropriate" level of unemployment are always politically motivated, and always justified by talking about untouchable, mysterious phenomena like "investor confidence." Governments transform their economies to make them "credible" places for investors to come, and to pull back capital that has flown the country in the wake of structural adjustment policies. Investors who want to be "confident" about Southern economies essentially control those economies, overseeing outflows of resources and wealth that invariably make the lives of the people in those countries less democratic and less secure.

Trade: The Gift That Keeps on Taking

Within Southern Africa-where, for example, tobacco production has expanded by 50 percent per year over the past three years in communal, small-scale, and resettlement areas -the most desirable land is continually used for export agriculture, and food production is sacrificed to boost agricultural production. After each year's harvest the soil is often left unprotected, accelerating erosion. And small farmers are pushed ever farther into marginal land. This marginalization is not trivial: it affects the African majority, who remain wage laborers and small-scale farmers without savings or capital to devote to expansion.

Export and foreign exchange-oriented trade has consigned most African farmers to shrinking returns The declining real price of all primary commodities forces many farmers to sell what land they have to pay the debts their crop income can no longer sustain. Still, even until the 1990s in Southern Africa, government-run marketing boards protected farmers by assuring a fixed price for their crops published in advance. Structural adjustment decreed the effective elimination of marketing boards in favor of private buyers Now, in addition to enduring direct exposure to international market fluctuations, farmers are often unsure when private buyers will next appear, and are thus forced to sell cheap to the first trader. Finally, many remote areas remain unserviced by private traders who prefer to buy from a few large farmers near better roads

The World Bank's policies of increased trade, lower government spending on health and education, and increased debt have made poverty blossom. As Giovanni Arrighi, a scholar of the world economy, has noted: "In 1975, the regional GNP per capita of Sub-Saharan Africa stood at 17.6 percent of the world' per capita GNP; by 1999 it had dropped to 10.5 percent." And in these countries, the removal of social supports to redistribute what little there is has rendered the poorest destitute.

Between 1996 and 2001, population living below the poverty line in Zambia rose from 69 percent to 86 percent. Twenty-eight million people, or 51 percent of those living in Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Swaziland, Zambia, and Zimbabwe, live below the national poverty lines. And we know that the face of the poorest 10 percent is likely to be black and female: since women are responsible for 70 percent of food production in Africa, the shift away from food production toward export production has been extremely detrimental to them.' Men's leaving the farm for wage labor makes women responsible for all domestic responsibilities as well.

A Shortage of Food?

Famine is not caused by a lack of food, but by poverty. For example, according to the World Food Programme (WFP) there are no shortages of food products in the markets in Lesotho. However, two-thirds of the population live below the poverty line and half are classified as destitute. Purchased cereals comprise 75 percent of annual food needs for Lesotho's poor, and over 70 percent of the households classified "very poor" in Lesotho have no cereal in reserve. Rapidly escalating prices and vanishing incomes are a lethal combination. The people of Lesotho cannot afford to buy the food that is available.

The situation is similar in Malawi where, in 2001, the IMF told the government to slash its strategic grain reserve from 165,000 metric tons (MT) to between 30,000 and 60,000 MT. The IMF advocated this on cost grounds, and because erroneous data persuaded them that the coming year's harvest would increase stocks. A year later, when people were already beginning to die of starvation, the IMF denied disbursement of a $47 million tranche of loans to the Malawian government amid accusations of impropriety in the government's efforts to mitigate the famine. The government accused the IMF of causing the famine, while the IMF blamed the government for corruption before admitting that it had, perhaps, behaved insensitively. Horst Koehler, managing director of the IMF, said at a British parliamentary hearing:

> [I]n the past we (the IMF) have not given enough attention to poverty and social safety nets when proposing structural changes. But structural changes are always accompanied by dislocation. We must live with permanent change in order to achieve economic growth in developing countries. .. [developing countries] should be able to produce food for themselves-and we should help them strengthen capacity to produce food.

Meanwhile, thousands were starving, and grain was being stockpiled by speculators betting that the famine would drive up maize prices-behaving, in short, precisely as they ought in a free market with high demand and a tight supply.

Who Benefits from Famine?

It's a continuing tragedy that still today, when we know what causes famine, we continue to witness it. Why does it persist? To answer this, we need to ask a still more painful question: Who benefits from famine?

Consumers in the U.S. and E.U. do well by having food and agricultural products that are cheap compared to the true cost of production. But the greatest beneficiaries are the transnational food corporations that market the food and control our food systems. Altria, the Philip Morris group of companies, which includes Kraft and Miller, made over $8 billion in profits last year. In the past six months, Switzerland-based Nestle S.A. posted profits of a little under $4 billion on sales of $29 billion. To put this in perspective, the entire gross domestic product for all six countries in the famine region was a little over $20 billion in 2001.

These corporations depend on cheap inputs, such as the agricultural products grown in the Third World, to make their food processing profitable. In fact, with the decline of every currency in Southern Africa against the U.S. dollar and the oversupply (and hence falling prices) of primary commodities, food industry inputs have never been cheaper. And profits never higher.

The Role of U.S. Policy

Such profits would never be possible without the constant mentorship of the U.S. government. It has a twenty-year history of first generating hunger through macroeconomic policy that, while selling itself as "austere," systematically enriches large corporations and impoverishes working families. Then the government hen-feeds the hungry with the surplus food this policy produces.' This two-step trick was perfected within the U.S. In 1981, Congress told the USDA to reduce the storage costs associated with its dairy support program. Simultaneous cuts in welfare provisions for the poor and the incipient recession provided a ready market for the surplus. Now this discipline is being applied in Southern Africa as a way to force open markets for U.S.-produced GM grain.

The U.S. GM grain stockpile, created through the vast, ongoing subsidy of U.S. agriculture, needs a home. This grain cannot be sold to the E.U. or Japan because of their embargoes on genetically modified food for human consumption. The figures for U.S. farm exports tell the story: U.S. corn exports to the European Union shrank from $426 million in 199 5 to $1 million in 1999.

Particularly while E.U. and U.S. negotiators are bickering over U.S. farm support in the run-up to the World Trade Organization ministerial in Cancun, Mexico, in 2003, explicit subsidies for agribusiness aren't in vogue. But food aid serves as a de facto means of product support and has an unimpeachable veneer of humanitarianism, and USAID spends over $1 billion a year buying American crops from agricultural corporations and shipping them to the starving. By insisting that this food aid be purchased from U.S. companies, Congress is able to support U.S. industry while appearing to help the Third World. United Nations agencies (the WHO, the WFP, and the UNDP) have all lauded the safety of GM food. However, no independent scientific human trials of GM food have yet taken place. And scientists in Africa remain concerned at their inability to limit the sort of genetic pollution that resulted from GM contamination of corn in Mexico.

In recent months, many countries in the region have protested a food aid arrangement that they see as a cynical ploy by the U.S. to dump its GM corn on a captive and starving market. However, discreet threats to slash nonfood aid budgets and suspend funding for other projects soon brought these countries into line. Except Zambia.

Glimmers of an Alternative in Zambia

The Zambian government has recognized that the problem is the lack of food available within the means of the poor Their short-term solution is to reject the output of U.S. agribusinesses (which are subsidized at a rate of $1 million in taxpayer dollars per hour). Instead, they have purchased grain from domestic and regional suppliers and made it available to the hungry. This approach directly threatens U.S. business interests. But it has begun to feed the hungry in Africa. Of course, it needs to be supplemented by more enduring social change for the poor-investment in education and health, serious measures to tackle HIV/AIDS, and land reform are key issues, and ones that cannot be resolved with the vast debt that currently shackles the region. Yet bypassing the U.S. aid industry is a heaven-sent idea, because it gives governments of poor countries some control of their economies and their farming systems.

NEPAD: A Siren, Not A Savior

Zambia is something of an exception in Southern Africa. Its independent clarion call has been drowned out by the clamor about the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), a plan for completing the integration of African economies begun by structural adjustment policies. Proposed by South African president Thabo Mbeki, NEPAD has been heralded as the solution to Africa's ongoing marginalization from globalization. It calls for the privatization of social services, a further shift towards export-oriented economic growth, and public-private partnerships to increase the efficiency with which scarce resources are used. The thinking is that Africa's integration into the global economy will alleviate widespread poverty, because Africans will be able to work in export industries, and thus buy food.

At the recent World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, 50,000 protesters chanted "phansi NEPAD"-"down with NEPAD." This is a conclusion that has been reached by hundreds of groups in Africa. Patrick Bond, professor at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, attacks the lack of democracy in the NEPAD process: "During the formulation of NEPAD, no civil society, church, political party, parliamentary, or other potentially democratic or progressive forces were consulted." Several groups, including the Economic Justice Network, Third World Network-Africa, the Secretariat of the Gender & Trade Network in Africa, and the Alternative Information and Development Centre, say this: "In essence, the document is an attempt to negotiate with Northern powers the terms of Africa's integration into the world economy without challenging the systemic and structural dynamics by which globalization has further marginalized and created polarization within Africa, both within individual African countries and between them." In short, NEPAD seems to be a plan for elites in Africa and elsewhere to mine the resources of the continent and its people. In fact, the reason many African countries are in such a parlous state is because they've been following NEPAD-like policies for the past twenty years. It is hardly likely that more of the same toxin will cure the continent.

Hope Eternal

This is a bleak picture. But there are spaces of hope, such as the recent development of soil fertility replenishment programs in the region.' These new methods rejuvenate the soil with leguminous tree fallows rather than with fertilizers that cost between two and six times more in Africa than in Europe and the U.S. Tens of thousands of farmers have adopted this practice with rapid success and increased productivity in their fields. This method far outshines the Green Revolution technology and high-tech innovations that have continuously failed in Africa.

Agroecology is only a small component in turning the tables for Africa. The grassroots spread of soil fertility programs is an example of how the active participation of local communities creates genuine change. Local communities in the U.S. can effect change, too. The WTO, IMF, and World Bank are controlled by the U.S. government, in the name of U.S. citizens. Yet these institutions hurt the poor around the world. Closing these three organizations, redistributing resources from rich to poor, and repaying debt to the global South - these are policies we could adopt today, if there were political will.

What You Can Do

Write to your elected representatives, challenge the myths in the mainstream media, and become involved in this struggle-because despite the World Bank, the IMF, and local elites, there is always hope for real social transformation. The answer will come from the relentless work and resistance of those oppressed. The African people have been left out of the solution to their problems for far too long and their anger will be heard. It is our responsibility to join that chorus.

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