

What's Stopping Us? The Failures Behind Famine Prevention in the 21st Century

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Since the year 2000, Ethiopia, Niger, and Yemen have all been threatened with or experienced famine to varying degrees. At first glance this is somewhat surprising, as preventing famine should be relatively straightforward even in the world's poorest regions (de Waal 1989, 7). Governments possess the ability to preserve, store, transport and distribute food in mass quantities over vast distances during times of acute food shortage (Malk 2017, 1). On closer inspection however, the continued existence of famine can be accounted for by the Malthusian lens through which international actors 'understand' the phenomenon.

Until the publication of Amartya Sen's seminal *Poverty and Famines* in 1981 the causes and solutions to famine were conceived solely in terms of food availability decline (FAD). Sen's monograph challenged this discourse, arguing instead that theories of food entitlement decline (FED) offer more comprehensive accounts of famine causation. In short, Sen convincingly demonstrates that people's inability to access raw foodstuffs, not a lack of it in absolute terms, leads to the onset of famine. Although FED was initially understood in economic terms as a consequence of market failures, a body of literature on famine research has built upon Sen's work to illustrate that FED can also occur due to political decision-making (Devereux 2001; Rubin 2009a).

Despite FED theories being able to account for the causes of famine more accurately than the notion of FAD (Insel 1985), the latter still plays a dominant role in dictating courses of action in famine prevention and response. A multitude of food early warning systems (FEWS) commonly fail to prevent famines even though they are reasonably effective at predicting them in advance. In essence, international organisations and actors commonly view stopping the onset of famines and resolving them as a purely technical exercise of utilising quantitative methods to prevent and alleviate declines in food availability.

This work is therefore largely concerned with exploring the epistemological limitations of famine's quantification which are reflected within famine prevention and famine response efforts. Moreover, the deficiencies within the policy community's fixation with quantifying everything famine related are inherent in the methods utilised to determine whether or not an acute food crisis *qualifies* as a famine. Together, these shortcomings pervert the ability of policymakers to forecast, diagnose, and coordinate relief efforts in response to famine and famine-like conditions accurately.

This paper will therefore illustrate how the implications of famine's numerical operationalisation shapes the international community's interactions with the phenomenon, which permits its continued existence, and will proceed in three stages. Firstly, the ways in which quantification shapes policymakers' understanding of what a famine is will be illustrated through analysing how it is defined and measured. Following this, a section is devoted to briefly examining the limitations of current measurement systems in predicting the outbreak of famine which they perceive solely in FAD terms. A third section assesses how traditional thinking about famine as the product of natural phenomena, such as weather events like drought, shapes the political actions taken by states during times of food crisis, after which this essay concludes.

The Quantification of Famine Classification

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It is estimated that there are over 800 million people in the world suffering from chronic hunger (World Hunger 2018). Hence, it is necessary to distinguish this from famine as failing to do so would hinder efforts to determine exactly when a famine begins and when it ends. Famine is conceived to be intrinsically entwined with starvation which causes widespread death (Sen 1981, 40) and are understood to be transitory events (Rubin 2016, 11). Famine can thus be differentiated from chronic hunger on the grounds that the former is a temporary phenomenon characterised by starvation and the spread of disease engendering rampant mortality. In contrast, people can persistently be subject to a state of chronic hunger without necessarily starving to death (ibid.). This thus leads to an obvious question: when does a famine become a famine?

In 1998, the United Nations (UN), the body responsible for designating famines, pronounced that Sudan was experiencing a 'food emergency crisis'. A similar judgement was passed for Ethiopia during 1999–2000 (and again in 2002–2003) with famine not being declared due to disagreement between experts about whether the food crisis could be classified as such because the UN lacked an effective operationalisation of the phenomenon (Sheckler et al. cited in Rubin 2016, 13). In response, the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) was established, a global multi-agency initiative which utilises a standardised set of tools and measurements that dynamically assesses whether an extreme food insecurity crisis can be deemed to be a famine.

The IPC is managed by multiple actors and its members include the U.S Agency for International Development (USAID) and the UN's Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO). A severity scale is employed which determines whether food crises can be classified as famines once the thresholds that constitute the fifth phase of the IPC classification scheme are breached. Phase 5 of the severity scale is defined as a specific geographic locality in which > 20% of households face extreme food shortages, there is acute malnutrition of at least 30% and an excess mortality rate (EMR) > 2 in every 10,000 people per day (IPC Global Partners 2012, 32). EMRs are obtained from a range of sources on the ground, including from non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The levels that demarcate extreme food shortages^[1] and acute malnutrition vary by country and are sourced from information systems such as the USAID's Food Early Warning Systems Network (FEWSNET) and the FAO's Global Information and Early Warning System (GIEWS).

The IPC utilises a severity scale primarily due its ability to facilitate ease of measurement in real time as it was intended to be a diagnostic tool to facilitate decision-making to halt famine onset (de Waal 2018, 185). The IPC thereby adopts a positivist outlook that sets a technical standard which seeks to robustly diagnose an extreme food crisis as a famine through objective, scientific means of measurement (Rubin 2016, 11). Effectively, the IPC has sought to remove subjectivity from the classification of famine to ensure that the international community is not impeded in its response to future food crises as it had been in the cases of Sudan and Ethiopia during 1998–2003. Famines, therefore, are defined as the manner in which they operationalised (ibid.).

However, this sole dependence on data to designate what is and is not a famine limits the IPC's ability to recognise the phenomenon as its operationalisation relies on access to accurate data. In Syria, for instance, famine should have been declared on numerous occasions in regions besieged by pro-Assad forces (de Waal 2018, 193). Yet, this has not happened. Why? Quite simply, the data collection and information analysis systems used to help diagnose famine are not suited to developed economies such as Syria's. Instead, such systems are curated for poor agrarian countries like Yemen (ibid., 194). Put differently, the Afro-centric nature of FEWS reflects the ontology of the international community in viewing famine as the outcome of food insecurity caused by natural disasters, not socio-economic factors. This provides a compelling account for why famine has not only not been declared in Syria, but it also explains why Yemen has not been designated as suffering from famine.

Despite experiencing widespread human suffering, Yemen's food crisis has only been declared as an imminent famine by the UN (IPC Phase 4 classification). Again, de Waal argues that the reason for famine not officially being declared is mostly due to insufficient data because government forces have obstructed humanitarians' efforts to quantify the extent of the suffering (ibid.). This is a frequent problem with data collection in warzones. NGOs are often ejected from their host countries once conflict becomes critical which largely severs their data gathering networks and makes them over-reliant on official government reporting that is commonly exaggerated (Malk 2017, 5). Consequently, this hampers efforts to secure accurate information about the variables which contribute to the famine

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intensity scale such as the number of households experiencing extreme food shortages.

Therefore, in their eagerness to learn from past mistakes in Sudan and Ethiopia the international community has gone from one extreme to another. It has expelled qualitative means from its own measurement systems and chosen instead to depend upon the totality of quantification to both define and operationalise famine, failing to perceive the shortcomings of doing so (de Waal 2018, 194). The inability to obtain robust data during conflicts – which is a common occurrence in many sub-Saharan African states – highlights a serious design flaw of a system whose reliance for designating famines in a timely manner is underpinned by the need for accurate information.

FEWS and Preventing Famine Onset

When FEWS have unrestricted access to the data they require they are capable of predicting food crises months in advance (Ververs 2012). FEWS measure weather-related factors that influence variables which dictate levels of food consumption and they have a fair track record in forecasting food production shortages. For example, a series of alerts by GEWIS and FEWSNET helped to provoke international relief efforts to halt a famine from developing in Ethiopia during 2014–2016 (Prášková 2018). Nonetheless, FEWS's conceptualisation of famines as the product of declines in food production can be detrimental to their ability to prevent famines.

A clear example of this is the Nigerien famine of 2005. After a drought and locust invasion slashed crop production, FEWSNET downplayed the food emergency by arguing that the decrease of national cereal production in 2004 was only 11% less than the five year average and could be sufficiently covered if the Nigerien government raised cereal imports by just 3% (IRIN News 2005). This recommendation was based on a flawed understanding of the causes of the food crisis. Furthermore, it also played a central role in guiding the Nigerien government's 'understanding' of the famine's causes – and their subsequent lacklustre response – during the early stages of the famine's formation (Rubin 2009a, 630).

FEWSNET models the effects of a range of variables in determining aggregate levels of food production and the issuance of food alerts is based upon the breaching of thresholds when declines in food production are expected. In other words, FEWSNET is underpinned by a famine logic which subscribes solely to a theory of FAD. The famine Niger experienced in 2005 was *not* caused by locusts and drought devastating the yield from the late 2004 crop harvest. Comparable crop failures were recorded across the likes of Eritrea during the same period yet famine only developed in Niger and not elsewhere. Rather, these natural disasters were the famine's trigger, exacerbating food insecurity caused by an unregulated Nigerien food market enabled by economic liberalisation policies and the chronic underfunding of basic infrastructure^[2](Devereux 2009, 28). An exchange entitlement collapse ensued^[3], creating a food crisis due to high prices that made basic foodstuffs unaffordable for most (ibid., 32).

Thus, FEWSNET's recommendation that Niger could overcome its food crisis through a mere 3% increase in cereal imports was inherently flawed due to its overt focus on aggregate levels of food production. FEWSNET's inability to model socio-economic factors meant that a short-term decline in food production had severe repercussions for an already insecure food market. The ramifications of the resulting exchange entitlement failure far surpassed those of a mere decline in raw food output (Rubin 2009b, 287–288). As such, the famine was allowed to develop in an environment of general ignorance due to the tunnel vision of key actors who, wrongly, perceived 'solutions' to mitigate the food crisis at its outset primarily through a lens of food availability.

Famine and Politics

While FED was the main cause of Niger's famine and is illustrative of the need to incorporate exchange entitlements into FEWS, more than anything else famine prevention requires willing political actors. Governments possess the ability to devise and coordinate effective food redistribution policies to either halt famine onset or alleviate the suffering of those experiencing famine-like conditions. The solution to mitigating famine regardless of whether it is caused by FAD or FED is the short-term, targeted distribution of food aid directly to those affected (Rubin 2016, 8), until policy interventions to tackle the underlying causes of the famine can be devised and implemented. Accordingly, only minimal efforts are required by states to halt famine outbreak (Rubin 2019, 1635).

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Thus, the continued prevalence of famines in today's globalised world despite the existence of the redistributive means to prevent them is largely down to the failings of states and their political choices (Devereux et al. 2002; Rubin 2009b, 2018). In the words of Devereux (2000, p. 27), "famines occur because they are not prevented, they are allowed to happen". Yet, 'solutions' to famine continue to be mistakenly quantified as measures to tackle FAD (Rubin 2009c, 714) due to the typical framing of famines as natural disasters which disrupt food production. This robs political actors of their agency to both minimise the impact of famines and prevent them as can be illustrated best by returning to the case of the 2005 Niger food crisis.

The Nigerien government of the time blamed the international community for the calamity because they did not respond quickly nor comprehensively enough to requests for food aid (Devereux 2009, 33). This is somewhat accurate: a lack of official famine classification from the UN^[4] resulted in delayed action from the international community whose response was insufficient to alleviate Niger's famine-like conditions. It is unarguable that earlier intervention in the form of international aid would have reduced EMRs. Nonetheless, the responsibility for the international community's slow response lies with the Nigerien government as they initially delayed requests for food aid during the early stages of the crisis. President Tandja denied the famine's existence because he did not want his administration to be associated with its manifestation due to the fear that his party would suffer at the ballot box during the next election as a result (Rubin 2009b). This initial denial of the famine's formation resulted in delayed requests for food aid which was arguably the stimulant for the widespread manifestation of the food crisis (Rubin 2009a, 637-638).

Rather than combatting the FED-induced famine, the Nigerien government instead embarked on an information campaign to shift responsibility for its onset. The state restrained the free press to control the narrative surrounding the famine and blame the international community for its emergence (Devereux 2009, 33). This contradicts Sen's famine-related democracy theorem which claims that food entitlement failures should not occur in democratic states because their governments prioritise the well-being of its citizens above all else (de Waal 2000, 12).

Sen's democracy hypothesis has been widely challenged^[5] and clearly it fails to stand up to scrutiny when applied to the Nigerien famine case, as the Tandja administration was more concerned with deflecting blame for the crisis than mitigating its impact or preventing it altogether. A more compelling account of the relationship between famine and democracy is offered by de Waal (2000, p. 13) who argues that (African) democracies will seek to halt famine only if their leaders' power is dependent on doing so and they are unable to censor information about the famine. This offers the most credible explanation for President Tandja's initial reaction to the food crisis, exploiting Niger's juvenile and weak free press to manipulate events surrounding the famine's outbreak and decrying claims of its existence as 'foreign propaganda'. Had there been a greater separation of powers between the state and media, the Nigerien government would not have possessed the means to construct a false narrative and its position of authority would have been innately tied to its ability to successfully mitigate the famine (Devereux 2009). Policies that strengthen democratic states' foundations thus minimise the scope for political actors to do anything but seek solutions to entitlement declines and alleviate the effects of, or prevent, famines (de Waal 2000, 16).

Conclusion

To summarise, this paper has explored the role that quantification has played in the operationalisation of famine, and its efficacy in both preventing and responding to the phenomenon. It has illustrated that although famine's quantification has produced a clear, unambiguous threshold at which it can be declared, its reliance on data availability thwarts efforts to validate legitimate instances of famine, thereby impeding effective international responses. Prior to famine outbreak, FEWS were shown to be robust at forecasting and quantifying declines in food production. However, the ability of policymakers to implement measures to mitigate these disruptions is hampered by the ineptitude of FEWS to incorporate food entitlement failures. This broadly reflects the international community's perception of famines as being the product of FAD brought about by natural causes and, thus, ignores the capacity of governments to prevent their occurrence. Consequently, policies designed to strengthen democratic principles that compel governments to counter famine-like conditions are neglected.

The need for a simple set of qualitative tools to complement famine research's current quantitative orientation has

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therefore never been greater. A qualitative toolkit used in conjunction with contemporary measurement techniques would allow for a complex, multistage assessment of the narratives and actions taken by actors in influencing our understanding of famine and the conditions that lead to its onset (Rubin 2009a, 637). Such knowledge would thereby strengthen famine prevention efforts and help move the international community towards a world in which famine is no longer allowed to exist.

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Notes

[1] Defined as the difference between necessary and actual consumption of food needed to maintain sustenance (Rubin 2016, 15).

[2] For further details, see Devereux (2009, pp. 27–30).

[3] See Rubin (2009a, pp. 631–632) for further details.

[4] Please note that famine was not officially declared in Niger. Nonetheless, for the purposes of this paper Niger's food crisis is understood to be a famine because there is broad consensus within the famine research community that food insecurity within the country in 2005 bared all the hallmarks of famine as argued by the likes of Devereux (2009) and Rubin (2009b, 2016).

[5] See: Bowbrick (1986); Kula (1988).

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