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# The Food Crisis in Sub-Saharan Africa

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By Wilfred L. David

**D**uring the past several years world attention has become riveted to the stark and startling pictures portraying the ravages of famine and drought in Ethiopia and other countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. Many have died, and many more have been threatened by poverty, disease, and malnutrition.

The rains have now fallen in many areas, and some countries now report green fields and bumper harvests. While this may be a visible sign of recovery, the fundamental problem of food insecurity still remains. New approaches to development are needed to effectively combat the inevitable disasters wrought by nature, by man, and a generalized African penury.

The attainment of "food security" is a primary objective of development. Food security connotes a situation in which all people at all times have access to enough food for an active and healthy life. By contrast, "food insecurity" means a lack of access to enough food. It has both temporary and chronic dimensions. In the former case, people's access to food may decline in the short run due to an instability in food production, escalating food prices, periodic unemployment, and so on. Famine represents the worst form of this temporary food insecurity.

Chronic food insecurity is reflected in continuously inadequate diets caused by the inability to acquire enough food. This affects people who persistently lack the ability either to grow their own food or to buy it. It may manifest itself in a variety of ways, including: chronic malnutrition, declining food production per capita, environmental damage (desertification, deforestation), growing reliance on imports of food staples, rising food aid requirements, increasing foreign debt, and overall economic stagnation and decline.

An inordinate degree of attention has been focused on the short-term crises and



Photos by Africare





temporary food insecurity, e.g., the late 1960s famine in Biafra (Nigeria) due to a civil war, the calamities that befell the Sahelian countries and Ethiopia between 1968 and 1972, and the "Great Famine" of 1984-1986.

However, these examples have become poignant reminders of the fact that huge areas of the African continent are famine-prone, and that in practically all countries severe and recurrent food shortages may have become endemic. Elements of the longer term crisis have been less obvious to the casual observer. For more than two decades, gradual changes in economic and ecological relationships have continuously threatened the stability and existence of societies. With the imponderable strains put on national and local food systems, many countries have increasingly lost the ability to improve the living standards of the masses of the population.

The U.N. Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) has reported that about 214 million people living in 24 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa now experience severe forms of food insecurity. More than 150 million people in these countries face energy-deficient diets, i.e., they are not consuming enough calories for an active working life. Of these, about 90 million or 25 percent of the population do not get enough calories to prevent stunted growth and other health risks. These estimates do not include the long-term effects of malnutrition, such as increased susceptibility to crippling and fatal disease, brain damage, retardation, and other forms of deformity.

Therefore, there is a need to explore some of the deeper causes of food insecurity in Sub-Saharan Africa, the policy changes required, and the prospects for solving the crisis that these policies offer.

The underlying problems are complex, and coming to grips with them requires a multifaceted political economy approach. Within the bounds of such a broad struc-

tural approach, the centrality of agriculture in improving food security and raising the basic standard of living should be recognized.

Agriculture is the mainstay of the African economy, and provides the principal means through which the continent participates in the world economy. However, Sub-Saharan Africa is the only region in the world that today grows less food than it did in the 1960s.

### Causes of the Food Crisis

The causes of the food crisis include a multiplicity of internal and external factors that continue to affect the structure and performance of the agricultural sector in particular, and the behavior of the overall economic system and society. In general, these include: poverty; international economic and political processes; global recession; serious natural, economic, and political disasters; population growth; national politics and government policies; social relations; and the technical possibilities facing the agricultural sector.

Indeed, poverty remains the major cause of hunger, famine, and other forms of food insecurity. Rarely do middle class and wealthy people go hungry in countries experiencing drought, famine, or food shortages. Food is usually available to the monied class. It is the poor who go hungry, who even in normal times tend to exist at the margins of national economies.

The poor in Sub-Saharan Africa have average incomes of just above \$200 per year, and live predominantly in rural areas. Very little has been done to enhance the socioeconomic conditions and life chances of these rural masses, who constitute 80-90 percent of the continent's population. By and large, they subsist on uneconomically small holdings or as landless laborers. The typical rural dweller remains a citizen in name only; he/she is neglected and/or forgotten, especially in the distribution of

the national dividend to which he/she is also a contributor.

In every known society, especially in market-oriented economies based on private ownership, how much food people can command depends on (a) ownership rights, i.e., what they own, and (b) their exchange entitlements, i.e., what they can get in exchange for what they own through trade, production, or both.<sup>1</sup> In such a situation, people can face starvation and other forms of food insecurity for either of two reasons.

On the one hand, their ownership rights may collapse. Such rights define the system of income and asset distribution and represent rules about who ought to get what under what circumstances.<sup>2</sup> They are created in political practice, and are embodied in beliefs and rules as reflected in legal and economic processes, e.g., land tenure rules, notions about family obligations, wage rates, rules about market transactions, and so on. They are specific to particular historical circumstances facing a given country. In the African context, such rules have increasingly discriminated against peasant farmers.

On the other hand, exchange entitlements may collapse, e.g., through people becoming unemployed. In the typical case, this is accompanied by a lack of income to purchase food, a general fall in the relative price of goods, and an increase in food prices. Thus, despite the total availability of food in any particular area, people still may go hungry because they cannot establish their "entitlement" to the food they need. When there is a general shortage, food price, relative to other goods, is raised, making affordability difficult for poor people. However, starvation can occur with little or no rise in food prices. In the great Ethiopian famines of the 1970s and 1980s, hundreds of thousands died without any sustained rise in food prices.



## African Agriculture and the Global Political Economy

There is considerable discussion of the impact of external factors and relationships on African agriculture, and whether Africa suffers from too much or too little integration into the world capitalist economy. The conventional wisdom is that current food shortages and economic dependency have their historical roots in the continent's incorporation into the world capitalist economy.

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Before colonialism, agriculture was the primary economic activity in Africa. Relatively sophisticated indigenous techniques had evolved — techniques that were suited to the needs of the people and their fragile ecosystems, and that helped them to cope with cyclical droughts and crop failures due to other causes. Adequate food security and self-reliance were common before European colonization. Effective methods had been developed for storage of food surpluses, and complex patterns of trade had evolved around food availability. Within the existing system, population, resources, and technology were linked, and African societies shaped their agrarian institutions accordingly.

Colonialism introduces a system for extracting wealth from the continent. Agricultural products and raw materials became an integral part of this wealth. Colonial powers encouraged forms of production that met their own needs and tastes, not the needs of the African people. Colonial governments mandated that cash crops be planted for export, such as sugar, coffee, sisal, cotton, and tobacco, which displaced the production of food for local consumption.

Land with the greatest fertility and agricultural potential was allocated to the production of cash crops for export. As a result, food production for local consumption has had to rely increasingly on new cultivation in marginal rainfall zones and areas less suitable for farming. The historical process rendered food production more precarious and initiated the deterioration of these more fragile ecosystems.

Transportation networks were designed to facilitate the flow of export crops and other material goods between Africa and Europe, and not to facilitate the broad-based development of Africa.

The structural forms of dependency initiated during the colonial period have been heightened in post-colonial Africa. The cash crop system remains a reality

today in much of Africa, and agricultural exports are the primary source of foreign currency earnings. For example, Ethiopia, a country that has suffered the severest shortages of food, continues to grow coffee for export to industrialized nations and vegetables for consumption in Europe.

Successive world recessions have driven down the prices of export crops in world markets. At the same time, there have been asymmetric increases in the prices which Africa has had to pay for essential imports

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of consumer, intermediate, and capital goods, especially farm and transport machinery.

The Report of the International Conference on African Economic Recovery, organized by the UN Economic Commission for Africa in June, 1987, drew attention to the fact that the prices of Africa's principal commodity exports plummeted to their lowest level in 30 years. Total export receipts fell by \$19 billion, from \$65 billion in 1985 to \$46 billion in 1987. Meanwhile, the prices of imported manufactured goods increased by 20 percent. According to the World Bank, this resulted in a 1986 deterioration, in the terms of trade, of about 32 percent. Needless to say, such a blow would be hard enough to bear even for the richest countries.

The situation also has been compounded by Africa's severe debt problem. The UN Economic Commission for Africa has estimated that the total foreign debt of Africa may have reached \$200 billion.

A particularly disturbing aspect of the debt situation is that countries have to borrow more and more to pay off old loans. The World Bank has reported that the 17

most "debt-distressed" low-income African countries face scheduled debt-service payments in 1988-90 three times higher than they were able to pay in 1985 (from \$2.3 billion to \$6.9 billion annually).

Between 1986 and February 1987, African countries transferred, on a net basis, three and a half times as much money to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as they received in 1985. Further, official lenders account for more than three-quarters of the debt service due for low-income countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. Of this, about 20 percent is due to the IMF and 17 percent to other multilateral agencies.

The combined effects of declining export earnings, inadequate resource inflows, and increasing debt service obligations have forced many African countries to cut investment and import levels, with detrimental effects on growth and development. The heavy burden of the foreign debt has given rise to substantial rescheduling and accumulation of arrears. Where new loans take the form of rescheduling, banks and other creditors are in fact lending money to themselves. In other words, countries use the new money to meet interest payments on old loans, which remain active.

## Population Pressure, Natural and Man-Made Disasters

Africa has a population of more than 500 million people, which is expected to exceed 800 million by the end of the century. In Sub-Saharan Africa, where the food problem is most acute, the population will have increased from an estimated 350 million in 1980 to more than 640 million by the year 2000. With food production and availability already chronically deficient, there is no likelihood that conditions will improve dramatically over the medium term without radical changes in a number of areas.

Africa's population growth is one of the highest in the world. It has been accelerating at about 2.5 percent per annum in 1960 to about 3-4 percent per annum during the 1980s. If this rate continues, the current population will double in just 22 years. Therefore, population control is frequently advocated.

The rapid population growth in Africa results both from a steady fall in death rates and increases in birth rates. By contrast, both birth and death rates have been declining in other continents, especially in the developed world.

Several important factors explain the apparent uniqueness of the African situa-



tion. First, population pressure is integrally connected with the nature of the agricultural economy and social institutions. Since most Africans make their living from the land, child labor is a valuable resource for tending food and cash crops, herding livestock, and helping with daily chores of fetching water and firewood. Having several children can be a considerable help to the typical rural family. Second, many African societies tend to equate large families with wealth and power. Third, having many children is linked to the traditional role of women in society.

In many African countries, women do most of the farming and other household chores, notwithstanding the cumulative physical strain of repeated pregnancies. Under the circumstances, women tend to want children for economic reasons, and for protection and support in their old age. Children are also desirable for social reasons, since women's standing in the family and community is closely linked to their ability to bear children.

In historical terms, the high birth rates in Africa are somewhat related to centuries of experience. Such high birth rates have been dictated by the absolute necessity to compensate for devastatingly high infant mortality rates, and to replace populations regularly decimated by drought and disease. In this context, it is estimated that of the 7 million or so children under the age of 2 who will die yearly throughout the world, about 5 million will be Africans.

Even with the highest population growth rate in the world, Africa still remains the region with the lowest population density. The African continent as a whole contains about 20 percent of the world's cultivable land and about 9 percent of its people. Sub-Saharan Africa has fewer than 60 people per 100 hectares of cultivable land, compared to an average ratio of 180 people per 100 hectares for all developing countries. However, the distribution of arable land does not coincide with the distribution of the population. This historical disparity has been maintained by political borders, tribal and linguistic differences, poor internal transportation, and endemic diseases, particularly in the humid and semi-humid zones of Central and West Africa.

Population growth is a strategic factor in the African food crisis. For one, it imposes serious constraints on the amount of food that is available. However, its impact should be analyzed in terms of the skewed system of land distribution in African countries.

While population density in most countries remains relatively low, population growth continues to impose increasing pressures on the available land resources.

One result has been the irreversible ecological damage caused by deforestation, as people search for new lands on which to subsist. Most serious is the loss of soil fertility and soil erosion on deforested lands. In its extreme form, the loss of soil fertility turns land into desert. If that occurs on a large scale, it can reduce

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rainfall, thereby reinforcing existing tendencies toward drought in many parts of Africa. Some analysts believe that this factor best explains the severity of recent droughts in many parts of Africa.

Drought remains one of the primary reasons for the African food disaster, and its impact cannot be minimized. Many parts of Africa are considered areas of marginal rainfall so that disruption of rain patterns in one year tends to produce a cumulative effect, decreasing the ability of the land to sustain any kind of prolonged agricultural activity. For many consecutive years, rains have failed in the corn and grain belts of several African countries. This has drastically affected food production, and future production is threatened by wind erosion and lack of soil regeneration.

Just as it impedes the production of food, drought, along with deforestation, has a direct impact on another vital resource, firewood, which accounts for about 75 percent of Africa's energy use. Deforestation was already a problem before the droughts, as demand exceeded the capacity of woodlands to replenish themselves.

The cutting and burning of timber has contributed significantly to the increased desertification of a number of areas. Even marginal lands, without trees, are further deprived of the means of maintaining and building up fragile layers of topsoil. The point is that deforestation can contribute to drought by influencing water retention and evaporation rates.

Finally, many countries in Africa that are unable to feed their populations are also involved in wars, civil strife, or external or internal threats to their stability and security. For many years, Ethiopia has been involved in military conflict with Somalia, and with separatist or autonomist movements in Eritrea and Tigray. This situation has created millions of refugees. And young men are taken from the already fragile agricultural economy to bear arms and fight. Farmlands have either become battle zones or have been abandoned. The result is a simultaneous increase in the demand on the food supply and a decrease in the capacity for production. Thus, in addition to those fleeing drought, another class of refugees has been created — those fleeing famine and war.

The situation facing the nations of Southern Africa also deserves mention. For example, Mozambique, one of the countries hardest hit by drought and food shortages, is at the same time confronted with South African-backed guerilla forces that are wreaking havoc on the nation's economy and infrastructure. South Africa, which supports dissident forces in nations to its north, is also involved in the destabilization of their economies. Paradoxically, these policies work to assure continued economic dependency by the frontline states on South Africa — as buffers against the movement for majority rule in South Africa, as markets for its products, and as suppliers of cheap migrant labor for its gold mines and industry.

Therefore, the correlation between hunger and military conflict cannot be over-emphasized. The terrible consequences of militarism and fighting, combined with cyclical droughts and the negative impact of inappropriate development, continue to make millions of people vulnerable to hunger and starvation.

Nations involved in military conflict, or which face concentrated destabilization, end up channeling their already meager national resources into building large armies and massive military hardware. As the Ethiopian experience continues to reveal,



when famine conditions develop, relief efforts are complicated by military priorities, instability, and insecurity.

### **Technology and Food Production Systems**

The poor food production record in Africa is also partly explained by a variety of technical factors. While some of these factors are specific to the structure of the African environment, others reflect contradictions between the food production systems in the developed and developing world, and the lack of appropriate technological diffusion between these two sectors.

The technical factors affecting production and productivity include: the inadequate spread of improved technology, the prevalence of pest damage and disease, inappropriate and inadequate agricultural research, poor agricultural extension programs, and the lack of infrastructure. In the latter context, food availability in Africa has suffered not only because of a lag in food production, but also because a large part of the small amount that is produced never reaches the consumers. In many parts of the continent, more than one-third of the potential harvest of certain crops is wasted before harvest (in the harvesting process or during the subsequent phases prior to final consumption).

Technological progress for improved staple food crop production has been limited or almost non-existent. While hybrid maize and other types of technology have been introduced in some countries, there have been few breakthroughs in breeding improved crop varieties with higher yields. In general, the African production environment is highly inflexible. As a result, it has been unable to respond to changing market conditions by introducing more productive varieties of old crops or new high demand ones.

The African food crisis reflects a basic contradiction in the global food production system. There is enough food in the world. Due to scientific and technical advances, global food production has tended to outpace the unprecedented population growth of the past four decades, and for the first time more food is being produced than the world needs. Enough food is available so that countries which do not produce all of their food needs can import food if they can afford to do so.

These trends should be interpreted from the wider perspective of the three agricultural revolutions that the world has witnessed, and which have virtually bypassed the African continent. The first was marked by a change from animal to mechanical power during the first four decades of the 19th century, and which is still taking place in many parts of the developing world. The second revolution was linked to the

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creation and widespread use of modern agricultural inputs—high-yielding varieties of seed, fertilizers, pesticides, etc.—after the Second World War. The third revolution has been based on improved plant genetics. The use of a variety of plant breeding techniques and genetic engineering have helped to produce crops that grow faster, are less expensive to plant, and are more resistant to harsh weather, pests, and diseases.

### **Politics and the Policies of African Governments**

A general claim is that African governments tend to pursue economic and political priorities that are at variance with the food needs of their populations or the interests of subsistence farmers. There is now a considerable debate on the negative effects of government intervention on agricultural performance and food production. This intervention has taken many forms, but the policies listed below have received widespread attention.

Many African governments, as a matter of deliberate policy, have kept official food prices for certain staples generally low, with the objective of avoiding civil disturbances and ensuring cheap food for the urban middle class. On a related basis, government marketing agencies and parastatal organizations frequently import food and sell at a loss.

In order to protect the welfare of middle class consumers, payments of procurement or producer prices to farmers have been kept low, and below market levels. In some countries, e.g., Ethiopia, governments have for many years forced farmers to sell much of their harvested surpluses to the state at artificially low prices. In addition, peasant farmers are required to deliver a state-determined quota of grain to the state purchasing agency, which pays at the low official rate.

The parastatal organizations have been characterized almost everywhere by corruption, inefficiency, and mismanagement. In many cases, their expenses are considerably higher than their revenues from crop sales, with the financial losses subsidized by the government. The result has been a consistent tendency toward nonpayment, late payment, or partial payment to farmers. Therefore, farmers have become prone to divert their food surpluses to the private "parallel" or "black" market, or otherwise smuggle their produce to neighboring countries where they can obtain higher prices.

The currencies of most African countries have become overvalued. Where a currency is overvalued, a hidden tax is placed on producers of export crops. It has the same disincentive effect on agricultural production as when producer prices paid to farmers are kept artificially low. It cheapens the cost of imported food and therefore sets an unfair competition with domestic food production. In general, currency overvaluation provides a hidden subsidy to urban consumers at the expense of rural dwellers.

In the typical case, currency overvaluation is combined with taxes on agricultural exports and import duties and quotas that protect manufactured goods produced locally against competition from imports. This has formed an integral part of a development strategy known as import substitution industrialization (I-S).

In the majority of cases, the I-S strategies have required high levels of tariffs for new urban-based industries. As a result,



farmers have been confronted with extremely high prices for the consumer goods and agricultural inputs produced by these industries.

The emphasis on import substitution industrialization has produced an "urban bias" in development policy, as well as patterns of agricultural development that consistently discriminate against small farmers. Such patterns continue to be "bi-modal" or dualistic in orientation, in the sense that they encourage the development of large capital-intensive farm units alongside the capital-intensive urban industries.

The prevalence of "bi-modal" patterns of agricultural development is traceable to the widespread belief that size and economies of scale are important in agriculture. The prevalent belief is that only large and fairly capital-intensive farm units can be "modern" and efficient. Not only do many government officials in Africa share this view, but it also has been vigorously promoted by international lending agencies and transnational concerns who have a vested interest in the preferential treatment of large-scale farms.<sup>3</sup>

The emphasis on economies of scale has also been a persistent tenet in Marxist perspectives of agricultural development. In both capitalist and socialist-oriented countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, state farms have been established because of the presumed importance of economies of scale, as well as to facilitate the purchase of relatively cheap grain and other food staples for urban consumers.

The concentration of scarce resources of capital, foreign exchange, and trained manpower in a subsector of relatively large mechanized state farms has been achieved at the expense of depriving the majority of the farm population of inputs and supporting services needed to increase food production.

A more "uni-modal" pattern of agricultural development should be given top priority. This connotes a steady but gradual increase in food production and productivity by the large number of small farmers adopting innovations that are appropriate to their labor-abundant and capital-scarce environment.

### Policy Changes and Responses

What is clear is that both temporary and chronic forms of food insecurity in Sub-

Saharan Africa result from a complex of interacting factors — external, internal, man-made, natural, and environmental. This problem must be addressed on a systemic and sustained basis, requiring policies and programs based on anticipation, relief, prevention, and long-term development. This sets obligations not only for African governments themselves, but also for the larger international community.

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In this context, it can be argued that the nature of government policies should be accorded primary attention, in the sense that they usually set the stage for all forms of food insecurity and farmers' responses to the problem.

As a first order of business, African governments must put in mechanisms of preparedness and relief to stem all forms of temporary food insecurity, including famine. Such measures, for example, early warning systems about impending crises, can help countries cope with early stages of anticipated famine. Over the longer term, policy emphasis must shift in the direction of prevention by balancing the supply and demand for food at higher levels.

In essence, prevention and the attainment of food security depend on the possibilities offered for eradicating all forms of poverty. This calls for broad-based programs of agricultural, rural, and national development that simultaneously raise per capita food output and guarantee ownership rights and exchange entitlements. Decisions have to be made about the types of economic expansion that would lead to a steady rise in real incomes in general, and in

that of the poor and vulnerable groups, in particular.

A study by the FAO has investigated the potential carrying capacity of the world's farmlands, defined as the number of people that the land can feed. The study provides a rough indication of the ability of countries to feed themselves based on their own food production capabilities. Its conclusion is that Africa's land can in theory support several times the present population at adequate nutritional levels.<sup>4</sup>

If Sub-Saharan Africa is treated as a unit, and if all land with agricultural potential is devoted to growing food, and if all technological inputs remain low, Sub-Saharan Africa could support a population at least 1.6 times larger than its projected population in the year 2000. If technological inputs were raised to roughly the level used in some parts of Latin America and Southeast Asia, and if all available land were used for food production, Sub-Saharan Africa could support nearly six times its projected population.

However, the achievement of this option would require unprecedented levels of investment in technology, irrigation, and assistance to small farmers. Just to sustain the inadequate current levels of nutrition, agricultural production in Africa would have to grow at a sustained rate above 3 percent per annum for at least the next 20 years. Only a few developing countries, Mexico, the Philippines, and Thailand have ever achieved agricultural growth of more than 3 percent per year for more than two decades.

Even with the most ambitious plans for agricultural and national development, Africa would need substantial long-term development assistance for many years to come. A fundamental aim of such assistance should be food self-reliance for the millions of Africans who are now dependent on imported food. In this context, new programs of debt relief and international financial arrangements must be devised to free the debtor nations of Africa.

Most official aid to Africa is now conditioned on the requirement that African countries practice an export-oriented open door policy, rather than take steps to increase domestic food self-sufficiency. In particular, the World Bank has emphasized that Africa's comparative advantage lies in traditional export crops, and therefore that it should rely more on free trade policies.<sup>5</sup>

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