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## Why famines in a world of plenty?

After a period of five years (2008-2013) during which the world food crisis made the news headlines and a short pause, the spectre of famine is back and visible in our media. After the great Somalia famine of 2011-2012, here comes a new crisis in Somalia, Yemen, South Sudan and Nigeria that, according to specialised agencies, hits more than 20 million people ([GIEWS-FAO](#)) and could be one of the worse famines of these last decades.



But what is exactly a famine and how is it possible for a famine to occur in our world of plenty?

According to the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) developed by a consortium of intergovernmental organisations and international NGOs, *"Famine exists in areas where, even with the benefit of any delivered humanitarian assistance, at least one in five households has an extreme lack of food and other basic needs. Extreme hunger and destitution is evident. Significant mortality, directly attributable to outright starvation or to the interaction of malnutrition and disease is occurring."* ([Guidelines on Key parameters for IPC Famine classification](#))

Famine is therefore a failure that is characterised by the inability of humanitarian assistance to prevent extreme hunger, disease and death on a large scale.

This inability can have several reasons:

- A state of insecurity that makes difficult, even impossible, the intervention of humanitarian aid agencies, whether national or international. This is the case in war zones, as illustrated by the present situation in Somalia, Yemen, South Sudan and Nigeria.
- Humanitarian aid agencies do not have sufficient means to help affected population groups (personnel, food, medicine, means of transportation, etc.).
- The access to the affected territory is made difficult or impossible because of the state of communication infrastructure (lack of facilities, damaged roads or bridges because of floods, destruction because of an earthquake or a conflict, etc.).

It is worth to note that the two first of these reasons are of a human origin and the third could at least be circumvented by using means of air transport (airdrop of food or medicines), although very costly, but when saving lives is at stake, is it thinkable to spare our efforts?

Before reaching this final phase of famine, the IPC considers 4 phases that go from a “*generally food secure*” phase - that can however entail up to 3% acute malnutrition and up to 20% stunting... - to famine through the successive stages of “*moderate/borderline food insecurity*”, “*acute food and livelihood crisis*” and “*humanitarian emergency*”.

In almost all cases, apart maybe in the case of a violent and sudden natural disaster, famine is not an unexpected event, but it is preceded by early-warning events and arrives progressively, and measures can be taken to prevent it from occurring. An even in case of a sudden disaster, famine can be anticipated in advance and measures of preparedness can be taken, in particular the establishment of prior stocks of food and medicines. Therefore, there is always a way to avoid that these situations occur, particularly the situation of extreme famine.

In a number of cases, if large donors accepted to mobilise, at the very initial stage of the crisis when appeals are made by international organisations such as WFP and FAO, the resources that they will end up giving later when the situation has degraded to become catastrophic, the worse tragedies could often be avoided and the number of victims would be much smaller. Unfortunately, experience shows that resources usually are too late and too little and, in case of conflict, all efforts are not made by great powers to obtain a cessation of hostilities and the reestablishment of security in the afflicted areas. It is a combination of these two phenomena that contribute to aggravate the present crisis.

It is worth noting here that food emergency or famine only represents the tip of the hunger and undernourishment iceberg. In addition to the approximately 20 million people found in an extreme situation in the four already mentioned countries (Somalia, Yemen, South Sudan and Nigeria), the [last bulletin](#) of the [Global Information and Early Warning System](#) (GIEWS), published in the first days of March 2017, mentions 37 countries (of which 28 in Africa) and estimates that around 30 million additional people in Africa require food assistance, not only in countries in conflict or neighbours of countries in conflict, but also in “peaceful” countries such as Mozambique, Madagascar or Kenya. Compared to these 50 million people that require assistance today, FAO estimated that there were approximately 220 million people chronically undernourished in Africa (almost 800 in the world) [read], with dramatic consequences on physical and intellectual development, work capacity, health and life expectancy of affected persons, and creating for the countries affected a considerable economic disadvantage.

- Persons suffering from chronic undernourishment: **800 millions**.
- Every year **more than 5 million**, of which **3 million children**, die from undernourishment in the world.

*How could we possibly have come to this, at a time when there is much more food available in the world than what is required to feed each and every person?*

- **A long period of neglect of agriculture.** For decades, food and agriculture were not sectors in which the States were willing to invest. When international financial institutions (IMF, World Bank) imposed drastic budget cuts to poor countries during the two last decades of the XXth century, it was food and agriculture that were the designated victims. [\[read\]](#). This was all the more the case as, in the words used by a former Prime minister of Uganda in the early years of 2000, *“decision makers had believed that there would always be ‘cold’ money coming from donors in case of food emergency and that it was therefore preferable to invest ‘hot’ money from the national budget for other activities that donors were not willing to support”*.

One of the most serious consequences of these cuts was the dismantling of research and extension system and their replacement by private extension programmes in the hands of seed and agrochemical companies who only operated for solvable farmers living in the most potential areas. The mass of small and poor peasants was thus abandoned to fate, and these farmers found themselves unable to produce enough or earn the monetary income needed to purchase the food necessary to feed themselves and their families.

- **Declining international assistance for agricultural development and an increasing emergency assistance.** The share of aid allocated to agricultural development was cut by half between 1987 and 2003, before regaining some importance later, at the time of the food crisis. This reduction was simultaneous to an increase of emergency assistance. These changes can be put on the account to two facts:
  - (i) an increasingly skeptical attitude towards the usefulness of development assistance as results observed on the ground were neither very good nor sustainable;
  - (ii) a strong sensitivity of public opinion in rich countries to photos of people in need published in the media, which makes it easier, from a political point of view, to allocate resources to emergency assistance that is seen as being an effective and direct way of saving lives, rather than funding development programmes that could avoid crises but that appear in the eyes of the public as inefficient and often prone to corruption. Moreover, private citizens themselves are making considerable financial contributions to NGOs providing emergency assistance.
- **Priority given to the increase of food production in agricultural development strategies.** Since the 2007-2008 food crisis, a series of initiatives have been launched with the view to increase world food production, following the [“New Vision for Agriculture”](#) adopted at the Davos Forum in 2009. This approach rests on a diagnosis that explains the food issue by the lack of availability of food and attributes the responsibility of this failure to governments and their alleged inability to assist efficiently and effectively those who suffer from hunger. The logical consequence of this view for

its promoters, is to turn to the private sector with hope that it could solve the problem. [\[read\]](#) However, if you talk to private sector representatives - outside of official communication channels -, you will not find them ready to take up the role of development agents: they agree to invest, produce and make profits, but do not want to be disturbed in their projects by a mass of small farmers, this very mass of people to whom the World Bank leaves the choice between becoming agricultural labourers or migrate to cities. [\[read\]](#)

As a result of all this, a vast movement of land grabbing has been encouraged and the New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition of the G8 was created, whose activities have been criticised by NGOs [\[read\]](#) as well as by a report prepared for the European Union. [\[read\]](#) The consequence of this approach, has been that investments are taking place for the benefit of a limited number of private entities in high agricultural potential zones, often irrigated and well connected by transport infrastructure, while the rest of the land is left almost abandoned. This contributes to make those areas more fragile and increases further the vulnerability of its inhabitants. [\[read\]](#)

- **Climate change.** The mode of operation of our food system is one of the main culprits of climate change which is a consequence of human activities and will cause more frequent extreme climatic events and conflicts ([FAO](#)). This risks to further multiply cases where conditions leading to an emergency situation or even famine, will be fulfilled if we do not act on time.

To conclude, famine or quasi-famine situation observed in the world are not caused by fate or lack of chance. They are events that result from a sequence of human decisions that have been made and *continue to be made* (or not made) on the basis of a faulty diagnosis erroné, an inadequate approach and a power balance that gives priority to the quest for profit for a few and not to public interest and combat against undernourishment.

Thus, these dramatic events could be avoided, because, as our former motto at [hungerexplained.org](#) said, "*What has been done by humans, can be undone by them*", provided, of course that adequate pressure is applied on decision makers so that they change the orientation of our food and agriculture strategy.

Considering current political conditions and major trends observed in our food system [\[read\]](#), there are good reasons to be rather pessimistic and expect that famines will again become more frequent. But as Antonio Gramsci used to say, "*I am a pessimist because of intelligence, but an optimist because of will.*"

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To know more:

- Global Information and Early Warning System (GIEWS-FAO), [Crop Prospects and Food Situation](#), FAO, 2017
- FAO, [The future of food and agriculture Trends and challenges - Summary version](#), FAO, 2017
- IPC Food Security Working Group & IPC Nutrition Working Group, [Guidelines on Key parameters for IPC Famine classification](#), 2016

Earlier articles on [hungerexplained.org](http://hungerexplained.org) related to the topic:

- [What are the challenges to be met in order to secure a sustainable future for our food system?](#), 2017
- [After pockets, corridors,... what next?](#), 2017
- [The World Economic Forum's "New Vision for Agriculture" is moving ahead on the ground...](#), 2017
- [Climate is changing - Food and Agriculture must too - Towards a "new food and agricultural revolution"](#), 2016
- [The European Union investigates on the New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition](#), 2016
- [Facts and figures on world hunger](#), 2015
- [Insufficient support to agricultural development](#), 2013
- [Hunger, markets and good feelings: how hunger feeds profits of multinationals](#), 2013
- [A first analysis of the implementation of the G8's New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition confirms worries about this initiative](#), 2013
- [Food crises: A consequence of disastrous economic policies](#), 2012