

# Unit 2 Paper: Food and Famines

Adam Marcus—marcua@csail.mit.edu

October 9, 2009

(Selected Essay 3: *What do you think a government should do in response to a famine?*)

The immediate government response to a famine should be a proper characterization of its causes alongside a bidirectional exchange of information between government and citizens. While the proper action in response to a famine will involve increasing supply, stabilizing markets, and suppressing disease, the speed at which each response is activated as well as its appropriateness will determine its effectiveness. Governments are uniquely positioned to act as first-responders to famines, requiring their responses to be fast and accurate. Improving governmental responses to a famine thus requires planning and development before the famine strikes, involving international collaboration in the face of systemic failure.

A government should first respond to a famine by identifying its causes, using established market-, supply-, and consumption-monitoring systems. Economists and historians have given us a rich categorization of famines and their causes [1]. With these, a government should identify early-warning signs—market forces, natural disruptions, and political events—that a famine is starting. Different causes require different responses. For example, to combat a vicious cycle between hoarding and price increases, a government can release an excessive amount of staple foods to consumers to drive prices down. If the famine is instead caused by food availability decline, the government could avoid excessive action by supplementing basic supplies before widespread panic erupts, or by facilitating trade with unaffected regions of the country. Knowledge of the source of a famine can guide the government's response, and avoid extended famine conditions.

A two-way line of communication between government and citizens during a famine can both mitigate needless panic and alert the government to changes in the situation. True supply-side famines are increasingly rare [1], so keeping the public informed with hard data may stabilize a panicked market. A government should also keep itself informed, as famines have multiple stages requiring different responses. For example, because famine may lead to disease, keeping track of consumption *and* health metrics informs governments when to change tactics. It is important to collect data in all affected regions to avoid events such as the uneven distribution of aid to the countryside during the Bengal famine [2].

Governments only have an advantage in providing a timely response in so far as they design responses before famines strike. The first step for a non-governmental organization in response to a disaster is often to raise funds, which results in delays [1, 3]. The government, whose mode of raising funds is orthogonal to the occurrence of disasters, is in the unique position of planning and allocating resources ahead of time. Establishing

information channels, measuring baseline metrics, storing excess staple foods and medical supplies, and enforcement of distribution channels in the face of corruption can not happen overnight. Proper famine response requires proper famine preparedness.

Planned infrastructures do not always withstand unexpected catastrophies. A well-equipped national government can still fail if the cause of the famine extends beyond its borders. To address systemic failures, international governance and development organizations must also respond appropriately to famine conditions. Many of the same planning requirements apply, and an increase in collaboration across diverse geographies, political ideologies, and financial markets can prevent failure in cases where individual countries are helpless in a large-scale catastrophe.

While root cause identification and open channels of information can help governments respond appropriately to a famine, proper *a priori* planning and resource allocation both nationally and internationally will enable an effective and timely response.

## References

- [1] O'Grada, Cormac (2007) "Making Famine History," Journal of Economic Literature
- [2] Sen, Amartya (1982), "The Great Bengal Famine," Chapter 6 of Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation, Oxford University Press.
- [3] In-class discussion, September 28, 2009.