LESSONS FROM THE PAST

Why do famines still plague us?

In East Africa, a humanitarian disaster is fast unfolding. The worst drought in 60 years means that crops have failed and livestock have perished. Poverty, climate change, and rising grain prices are combining to endanger a population already vulnerable to malnutrition and hunger-related diseases. More than 10 million people are affected across areas of Somalia, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda. Multitudes are on the move, leaving their homes and walking hundreds of miles to seek food and medicine in temporary feeding stations. Just last month, Islamic militants broke up camps at the Somali-Kenyan border, forcing tens of thousands to flee back into starvation. News reports describe mothers having to choose between buying medicine for their weakest child and nourishment for the others. They live in a situation in which everyday decisions are truly vital.

Who is at fault for this awful situation? What are its likely consequences? One way to answer those questions is to reflect on past famines for which the historical records are robust enough to draw useful parallels with the present. Too many analyses today focus on the conditions in the camps and the parched land. Those issues are important, and the world needs to know about them if aid is to be raised to feed the dying. They are, however, only one part of the story.

In the middle of the 19th century, a devastating famine hit Ireland, then an integral part of the United Kingdom and thus a constituent of the most economically advanced region in the world. From an Irish population of about nine million, one million perished and a further two million emigrated in what became known as An Gorta Mor, or the Great Hunger.

The rural Irish poor, many of whom were subsistence farmers renting barely viable plots of land, relied on the potato for their staple diet. When a mysterious blight, later identified as Phytophthora infestans, ruined the harvest, huge numbers faced starvation. The poorest--who suffered dreadfully even in ordinary years--were quickly reduced to digging the ground for seedlings so small "that only hunger could see them." Others fed on diseased carrion and noxious weeds. Thousands turned to the government's public-works schemes or to the workhouses of the Poor Law Unions, where a combination of punitive labor and infectious diseases carried off already weakened frames. Millions fled the country; the population of Ireland sank from around nine million in 1845 to 6.1 million in 1851.

When judged in terms of the mortality rate, the Great Irish Famine was one of the worst demographic disasters of the 19th century and among the worst famines in history. For East Africa, the Irish example offers some important lessons about how famines are caused and the heightened vulnerability of certain social groups. Writing during the 1840s, for example, Archbishop John MacHale insisted on distinguishing the "antecedent circumstances and influences" from the "primary" or "original causes" of famine, although it was the radical nationalist and Presbyterian John Mitchel who most memorably captured that distinction in his colorful aphorism: "The Almighty, indeed, sent the potato blight, but the English created the famine."

Like MacHale, Mitchel was stressing the significant difference between immediate shocks and long-term trends. Although droughts, floods, and other climatic events might contribute

to a food crisis, the primary cause of famine, so Mitchel believed, was a political system that produced and maintained poverty by denying the Irish poor any ownership of the land. For these commentators, the famine was not a natural disaster.

The challenge, therefore, is to identify the conditions that underpin poverty. In thinking about the crisis in East Africa today, we ought to begin by looking at how vulnerability is created and how poor communities that have formerly coped with erratic rainfall find themselves unable to weather the shock of drought. Long-term, degrading poverty means that whole communities, to adapt a classic formulation of the historian R.H. Tawney, are "standing up to their neck in water so that even a ripple is sufficient to drown them."

History also teaches us that famines are rarely the result of an absolute shortage of food. During the Great Bengal Famine of 1943, hundreds of thousands of agricultural laborers starved to death while Bengal produced one of the largest rice crops in recent history. Research by the Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen on the famine in Wollo, Ethiopia, in the early 1970s similarly shows that sufficient food was available in other parts of the country. Those who died--pastoral farmers, women in domestic service, tenant cultivators, artisans, petty craftsmen--were unable to purchase food because they lacked the means to do so.

Sen's research suggests, first, that if we focus solely on food availability and supply, we ignore the vital issues of distribution, access, and the affordability of food--not to mention the security of livelihood that enables purchasing power. Second, in the battle to establish control over resources, one group can suffer from another's relative prosperity. Indeed, famines never affect all groups equally; there are always winners and losers.

During the Irish famine, for example, Mitchel described how a ship sailing to Ireland with aid was passed by several ships leaving Ireland carrying cattle, oats, wheat, and other commodities that were beyond the reach of the starving Irish. "The exact complement of a comfortable dinner in England," Mitchel wrote, "is a coroner's inquest in Ireland."

Mitchel almost certainly overstated the amount of food exports, but the historical record is unambiguous that they continued throughout the years of the famine. It is also the case that the British government refused calls to put into effect traditional antifamine measures in Ireland--like prohibiting the distillation of alcohol (which requires grain), ordering the slaughter of livestock for local consumption rather than export, and establishing public granaries to dampen prices in local markets--policies that doubtless would have spared more lives. Such measures were roundly dismissed by free-trade fundamentalists, who followed Adam Smith's warning that intervention by the government would serve only to undermine the rights of property and prolong the violence of famine. For many Irish observers, economic dogma was but an excuse to clear off the surplus population of their country.

Africa, a land synonymous with disease and starvation (if one gives weight to the mainstream-media coverage in the so-called developed world), is actually a resource-rich continent that exports oil, gold, diamonds, timber, biofuels, uranium, and other valuable commodities. The historical study of famine shows that even the people of countries that are nominally rich in resources can starve because those resources are extracted to put money in foreign pockets rather than food on local plates. That paradox of poverty amid plenty is so common that scholars and activists have dubbed it the "resource curse."

News reports about the expropriation of land in Africa to grow crops for biofuels, livestock feed, and products for export describe only the most recent iteration of a long history of accumulation by confiscation. The great imperialist Cecil Rhodes famously characterized colonial expansion as a "bread and butter question." Today the dirty business of annexation is driven by governments seeking secure food supplies, agribusiness firms aiming to vertically integrate their production, and transnational capitalists hoping to diversify their investment portfolios. A report by the International Institute for Environment and Development, for example, has shown a significant rise in the number and size of land deals to the highest bidder, as well as a growing dominance by foreign investors and the private sector (with government encouragement), in sub-Saharan Africa, where local populations often struggle to make ends meet.

Scientists and academics engaged in the development of agro-biotechnologies have also played a role in facilitating what Susan George, a social scientist and international activist, calls "commerciogenic malnutrition." The ability to retrofit our volatile hydrocarbon economy to accommodate fuel derived from biomass has undoubtedly accelerated global land grabs. The United Nations has announced that biofuels are now the fastest-growing segment of the world agricultural market. The emergence of that industry comes with severe costs for the world's poor. Filling the tank of an SUV, for example, uses approximately 450 pounds of corn--enough food to feed one person for a year. Thus policies designed to enhance the "energy security" of relatively affluent countries in Europe or North America can compromise the food sovereignty of peoples in Africa. Today, as in history, life-and-death decisions, on a terrifying scale, are woven in the fabric of international economic relations.

Food can also be power--and aid used as a political weapon. During the Irish famine, the government wielded food relief to force political and economic change in Ireland. After 1847, for instance, the poor who owned more than one-quarter acre of ground were required to give up their land in return for assistance: Aid became a charter for eviction.

We can draw an analogy here with the present crisis in East Africa. On the one hand, U.S. guidelines have sometimes prevented the delivery of food to regions under the control of Islamic militant groups. On the other hand, Somali rebel leaders have announced that there is no famine, and that no aid will be accepted. U.S. involvement in Somali relief has been shaped by the geopolitical prerogatives of the war on terror; within Somalia, years of political instability and civil war have led to withholding food to certain local populations as a way of maintaining political power. The recent raids on food camps were carried out by Shabab militants who were attempting to take back land held by groups loyal to the Somali government. With awful results, and not for the first time in history, the poor are left to starve in service to the ideological causes of others.

History can also provide an opportunity to think about the likely long-term consequences of famine: demographic, economic, political, and cultural. In demographic terms, famine deaths deplete the work force, multiply the social burden of orphans, send the elderly and weak to earlier graves, and decimate the rising generation of children. Those who survive are left with few resources, and those still maturing have their development stunted.

Such long-term consequences are clear from studies of well-documented famines like that in Amsterdam during the German blockade of the city during World War II. The adult pathologies resulting from childhood malnutrition included an increased propensity to heart

disease and diabetes and a greater likelihood of producing underweight babies, with attendant health risks for the infant.

Among nongovernmental organizations, there is much talk of the "right of humanitarian intervention," when outside intervention in a crisis saves lives. While we must be careful not to reinforce structures of dependence that undermine local food security, there is clearly a compelling case for intervening with emergency food aid in times of acute need. But perhaps there is also a further obligation to care for the survivors. Were we, as in the thought experiment of the philosopher Peter Singer, to have rescued a child from drowning, we would not then walk away. Our responsibilities would surely extend to keeping the child warm, getting medical attention, finding out where the child was from, and trying to ensure that she or he was safe from further immediate harm. Alongside short-term palliative aid, long-term care must be anticipated in complex emergencies like famines.

Mike Davis, a professor of creative writing at the University of California at Riverside and former MacArthur Fellow, has argued that, by colonial design, several famines of the late 19th century left rural populations so bereft of savings that independent farming thereafter was effectively denied them. In his book Late Victorian Holocausts (Verso, 2001), he showed that in places like Brazil and India, the famished were so desperate that they were forced to accept low-wage labor--never to be able to accumulate the savings to become independent or acquire the social capital to bargain for higher wages. A vicious cycle of low wages, proletarian status, and intense exploitation thus began.

In the case of East Africa, should we attend not only to the survival of the starving but also to reinstating the economic independence of the pastoralists who have now lost their cattle or capital?

The list of issues that will need to be considered goes on. Seeing livelihoods dry up and loved ones starve is traumatic. In Ireland, particularly in the rural west, many people concluded that the land had turned against them. And in an act redolent of cultural suicide, they saw flight as their only survival and steered their children away from their native language and soil toward the English language and the cities of Britain or North America. The emigrants themselves understood that they had abandoned their cultural roots and, as Thomas Keneally described so well in his The Great Shame, felt disgraced. The resources of a cultural tradition need nurturing and attention in such circumstances; what the psychiatrist Mindy Fullilove describes as "root shock" creates further social dislocation and intergenerational alienation.

Finally, while social conflict can trigger crisis, famine can also stoke social conflict. The Irish-nationalist movement of the mid-19th century was changed profoundly by the experience of famine. In broad terms, anticolonial sentiment became so intense that politics took on a narrow Manichaean character, focusing almost entirely on ejecting the British. In utterly demonizing the British, the Irish-nationalist movement at times lost sight of what independence was for, foreclosing the utopian dimension of nationhood. As we look at the synergies between famine and war in East Africa, and indeed in other parts of the world, we can only fear that conflicts there will take on ever more absolute and unforgiving forms.

The case of Ireland furthermore shows that famine can disperse extremism far beyond its local setting. Irish migrants took with them to Australia, the United States, Canada, and South America the violent tactics of a nationalism haunted by the horrors of famine. Once distant from the consequences of violence in Ireland and Britain, the diaspora was, if anything, more

committed than its cousins at home to making Ireland and Britain ungovernable through a campaign of terror.

In North America, for instance, the Irish-nationalist Fenians openly raised money to bomb British offices and buildings; indeed, they were successful, culminating in the destruction of part of Scotland Yard in 1884. But diasporic movements can also find other targets in their new homes. The Fenians organized raids (in 1866 and 1870) across the Great Lakes into Canada, hoping to draw British imperial forces into a fight that would spill back into the United States and incite conflict between their new homeland and their old masters. Violence is not necessarily a consequence of collective trauma, but history shows that it is likely to be.

No, of course we must not turn our backs on those millions who are starving today. But we should remember that deadly famines have deep causes and profound consequences. They are more creatures of geopolitics than of local environmental failure. Whether we have the moral imagination and political will to learn that lesson is as much in question today as it was in the past.

~~~~~~~~

By David P. Nally and Gerry Kearns

David P. Nally is a lecturer in geography at the University of Cambridge and author of Human Encumbrances: Political Violence and the Great Irish Famine (University of Notre Dame Press, 2011). Gerry Kearns is a professor of geography at the National University of Ireland-Maynooth and author of Geopolitics and Empire: The Legacy of Halford Mackinder (Oxford University Press, 2009)
~~~~~~~~