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To Emma

CHAPTER 7

FAMINES AND OTHER CRISES



We live in a world with widespread hunger and undernourishment and frequent famines. It is often assumed—if only implicitly—that we can do little to remedy these desperate situations. It is also presumed, frequently enough, that these maladies may actually get worse in the long run, especially with the growth of world population. Tacit pessimism often dominates international reactions to these miseries in the world today. This perceived lack of freedom to remedy hunger can itself lead to fatalism and the absence of serious attempts to remedy the miseries that we see.

There is little factual basis for such pessimism, nor are there any cogent grounds for assuming the immutability of hunger and deprivation. Appropriate policies and actions can indeed eradicate the terrible problems of hunger in the modern world. Based on recent economic, political and social analyses, it is, I believe, possible to identify the measures that can bring about the elimination of famines and a radical reduction in chronic undernourishment. What is important at this time is to make policies and programs draw on the lessons that have emerged from analytical investigations and empirical studies.¹

This chapter is particularly concerned with famines and other transient “crises,” which may or may not include open starvation, but do involve a sudden eruption of severe deprivation for a considerable section of the population (for example, in the recent East and Southeast Asian economic crises). Famines and crises of this kind have to be distinguished from problems of endemic hunger and poverty that may lead to persistent suffering but do not include any

fresh explosion of extreme deprivation that suddenly engulfs a portion of the people. Even in analyzing endemic undernourishment and persistent, long-run deprivation later on in this study (mainly in chapter 9), I shall draw on some of the concepts that the study of famines will yield (in this chapter).

For the elimination of hunger in the modern world, it is crucial to understand the causation of famines in an adequately broad way, and not just in terms of some mechanical balance between food and population. What is crucial in analyzing hunger is the substantive freedom of the individual and the family to establish ownership over an adequate amount of food, which can be done either by growing the food oneself (as peasants do), or by buying it in the market (as the nongrowers of food do). A person may be forced into starvation even when there is plenty of food around if he loses his ability to buy food in the market, through a loss of income (for example, due to unemployment or the collapse of the market for goods that he produces and sells to earn a living). On the other side, even when food supply falls sharply in a country or a region, everyone can be saved from starvation by a better sharing of the available food (for example, through creating additional employment and income for the potential famine victims). This can be supplemented and made more effective by getting food from abroad, but many threatening famines have been prevented even without that—simply through a more equal sharing of the reduced domestic supply of food. The focus has to be on the economic power and substantive freedom of individuals and families to buy enough food, and not just on the quantum of food in the country in question.

There is need for economic and political analyses here, as there also is for having a fuller understanding of crises and disasters other than famines. A good example is the kind of predicament that some countries in East Asia and Southeast Asia have recently experienced. In these crises, as in famines, some sections of the population have lost their economic entitlements with unexpected suddenness. The speed and sheer intensity of deprivation in these crises (and also, typically, the unexpectedness of the disasters) differ from the more “regular” phenomenon of general poverty, in the same way that famines differ from endemic hunger.

ENTITLEMENT AND INTERDEPENDENCE

Hunger relates not only to food production and agricultural expansion, but also to the functioning of the entire economy and—even more broadly—the operation of the political and social arrangements that can, directly or indirectly, influence people's ability to acquire food and to achieve health and nourishment. Furthermore, while much can be done through sensible government policy, it is important to integrate the role of the government with the efficient functioning of other economic and social institutions—varying from trade, commerce and the markets to active functioning of political parties, nongovernmental organizations, and institutions that sustain and facilitate informed public discussion, including effective news media.

Undernourishment, starvation and famine are influenced by the working of the entire economy and society—not just food production and agricultural activities. It is crucial to take adequate note of the economic and social interdependences that govern the incidence of hunger in the contemporary world. Food is not distributed in the economy through charity or some system of automatic sharing. The ability to acquire food has to be *earned*. What we have to concentrate on is not the total food supply in the economy but the “entitlement” that each person enjoys: the commodities over which she can establish her ownership and command. People suffer from hunger when they cannot establish their entitlement over an adequate amount of food.²

What determines a family's entitlement? It depends on various distinct influences. First, there is the *endowment*: the ownership over productive resources as well as wealth that commands a price in the market. For much of humanity the only endowment that is at all significant is labor power. The majority of the world's people have little resource other than labor power, which may come combined with a variable amount of skill and experience. But in general, labor, land and other resources make up the basket of assets.

Second, an important influence consists of *production possibilities* and their use. This is where technology comes in: available technology determines the production possibilities, which are influenced by available knowledge as well as the ability of the people to marshal that knowledge and to make actual use of it.

In generating entitlements, the endowment in the form of land and labor may be directly used to produce food—as in the case of agriculture. Or, alternatively, a family or an individual may acquire the ability to buy food by getting a wage income. This will depend on employment opportunities and the prevailing wage rates. These too depend on production possibilities—in agriculture, industry and other activities. Most people in the world do not directly produce food, but earn their ability to get food by getting employment in the production of other commodities, which may vary from cash crops, to craft products, to industrial goods, to sundry services, and involve a variety of occupations. These interdependences may be very central to the analysis of famines, since substantial numbers of people may lose the ability to command food because of problems in the production of other goods, rather than food as such.

Third, much would depend on the *exchange conditions*: the ability to sell and buy goods and the determination of relative prices of different products (for example, craft products vis-à-vis staple food). Given the central—indeed unique—importance of labor power as an endowment for much of humanity, it is crucial to pay attention to the operation of the labor markets. Does a job seeker find employment at the prevailing wages? Also, can craftsmen and service providers manage to sell what they try to sell? At what relative prices (vis-à-vis the price of food in the market)?

These exchange conditions can change dramatically in an economic emergency, leading to the threat of a famine. These shifts can occur very rapidly as a result of a variety of influences. There have been famines associated with sharp changes in relative prices of products (or of wage rate vis-à-vis the price of food) due to quite distinct causes, such as a drought, or a flood, or a general shortfall of employment, or an uneven boom that raises the income of some but not of others, or even an exaggerated fear of food shortage that drives the food prices temporarily up, causing havoc.³

In an economic crisis, some services may be hit much harder than others. For example, during the 1943 Bengal famine, the exchange rates between food and the products of particular types altered radically. Other than the wage-food-price ratio, there were big shifts in the relative prices of fish vis-à-vis food grains, and Bengali fishermen were among the worst-affected occupational groups in the 1943 famine. Of course fish is food too, but it is high-quality food, and the

poor fishermen have to sell fish to be able to buy cheaper calories in staple foods (in Bengal, this mostly takes the form of rice) to be able to get enough calories to survive. The equilibrium of survival is sustained by this exchange, and a sudden fall in the relative price of fish vis-à-vis rice can devastate this equilibrium.⁴

Many other occupations are also acutely vulnerable to shifts in relative prices and sales proceeds. Take a job like haircutting. Barbers are hit by two sets of problems in a period of economic crisis: (1) in situations of distress people find it quite easy to postpone having their hair cut—so that the demand for the product of the barber may fall sharply; and (2) on top of this “quantity” decline, there is also a sharp fall in relative price of haircutting: during the 1943 Bengal famine, the rate of exchange between haircutting and staple food fell in some districts by 70 or 80 percent. So the barbers—already poor as they are—went to the wall, as did many other occupational groups. All this happened with very little overall decline in food output or aggregate supply. The combination of greater purchasing power of the urban population (who had benefited from the war boom) and fearful speculative withdrawal of food from the markets helped to generate starvation through a sharp distributional change. Understanding the causation of hunger and starvation calls for an analysis of the entire economic mechanism, not just an accounting of food output and supply.⁵

FAMINE CAUSATION

Entitlement failures that lead to famines can arise from a variety of causes. In attempting to remedy famines, and even more, to prevent them, this diversity of causal antecedence has to be kept in view. Famines reflect a shared predicament, but not necessarily a shared causation.

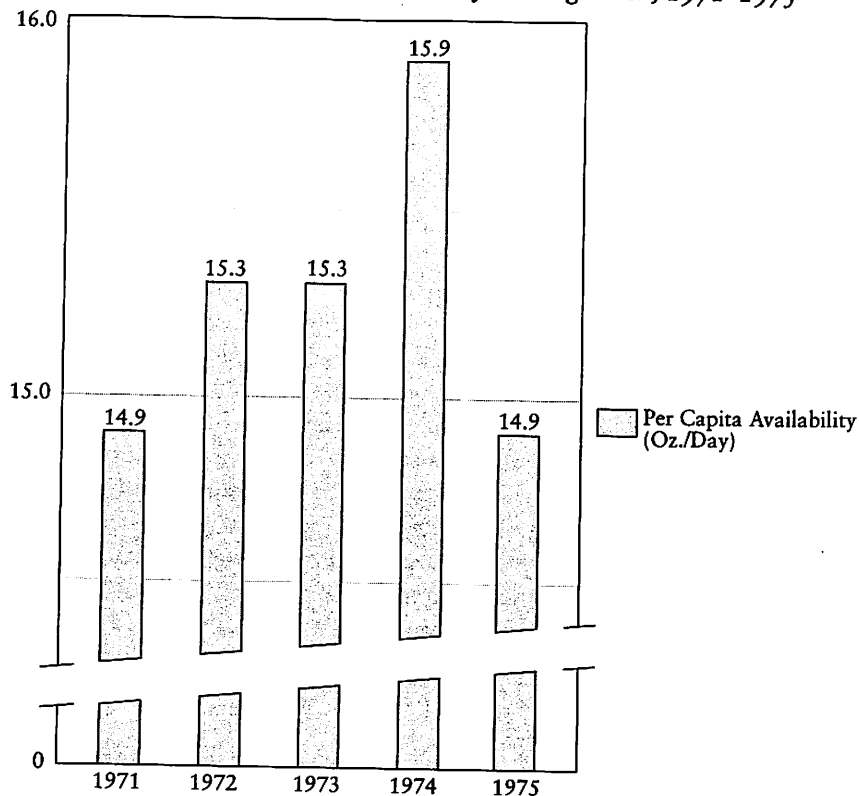
For those who do not themselves produce food (for example, industrial workers or service providers), or do not own the food they produce (for example, agricultural wage laborers), the ability to acquire food in the market depends on their earnings, the prevailing food prices, and their nonfood necessary expenditures. Their ability to get food depends on economic circumstance: employment and wage rates for wage laborers, production of other commodities and their prices for craftsmen and service-providers, and so on.

Even for those who do produce food themselves, while their entitlements depend on their *individual* food output, there is no similar dependence on the *national* output of food, on which many famine studies standardly concentrate. Also, sometimes people have to sell expensive foods such as animal products to buy cheaper calories from food grains, as poor pastoral people often do: for example, animal-rearing nomads in the Sahel and in the horn of Africa. The exchange-dependence of the African pastoralist in having to sell animal products including meat to buy cheap calories from staple food is rather similar to that of the Bengali fishermen, discussed earlier, in having to sell fish to buy cheaper calories from rice. These fragile exchange equilibria can be ruptured by shifts in exchange rates. A fall in the price of animal products vis-à-vis food grains can spell disaster for these pastoral people. Some African famines with a strong pastoral component have involved a process of this kind. A drought can lead to a fall in the relative price of animal products (even meat) vis-à-vis traditionally cheaper food, since people often shift the pattern of their consumption *against* expensive food (such as meat) and non-necessities (such as leather goods) in a situation of economic distress. This change in relative prices can make it impossible for the pastoralists to buy enough staple food to survive.⁶

Famines can occur even without any decline in food production or availability. A laborer may be reduced to starvation through unemployment, combined with the absence of a social security system of safety nets (such as unemployment insurance). This can easily happen, and indeed even a large famine can actually occur, *despite* a high and undiminished general level of food availability—perhaps even a “peak” level of food availability—in the economy as a whole.

One example of a famine despite peak food availability is the Bangladesh famine of 1974.⁷ This occurred in a year of *greater* food availability per head than in any other year between 1971 and 1976 (see figure 7.1). The starvation was initiated by regional unemployment caused by floods, which affected food output many months later when the reduced crop was harvested (mainly, around December), but the famine occurred earlier than that and was over well before the affected crop matured. The floods led to *immediate* income deprivation of rural laborers in the summer of 1974; they lost the wages that they would have earned from the transplanting of rice and related activities, and that would have given them the means to

FIGURE 7.1: Food Grains Availability in Bangladesh, 1971-1975



Source: Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), table 9.5. The famine occurred in 1974.

acquire food. The local starvation and panic were followed by more widespread hunger, reinforced by a nervous food market and a steep rise in food prices as a result of exaggerated expectation of future food shortage. The future shortage was overestimated and to some extent manipulated, and the price rise was followed later on by a downward price correction.⁸ But by that time the famine had already taken its heavy toll.

Even when a famine is associated with a decline in food production (as it clearly was in the case of the Chinese famine of 1958-1961

or in the Irish famines in the 1840s⁹), we still have to go beyond the output statistics to explain why it is that some parts of the population get wiped out, while the rest do just fine. Famines survive by divide-and-rule. For example, a group of peasants may suffer entitlement losses when food output in their territory declines, perhaps due to a local drought, even when there is no general dearth of food in the country. The victims would not have the means to buy food from elsewhere, since they would not have anything much to sell to earn an income, given their own production loss. Others with more secure earnings in other occupations or in other locations may be able to get by well enough by purchasing food from elsewhere. Something very like this happened in the Wollo famine in Ethiopia in 1973, with impoverished residents of the province of Wollo unable to buy food, despite the fact that food prices in Dessie (the capital of Wollo) were no higher than in Addis Ababa and Asmara. Indeed, there is evidence of some food moving *out of* Wollo to the more prosperous regions of Ethiopia, where people had more income to buy food.

Or, to take a different type of case, food prices may shoot up because of the increased purchasing power of some occupational groups, and as a result others who have to buy food may be ruined because the real purchasing power of their money incomes may have shrunk sharply. Such a famine may occur without any decline in food output, resulting as it does from a rise in competing demand rather than a fall in total supply. This is what started off the famine in Bengal in 1943 (discussed earlier), with urban dwellers gaining from the "war boom"—the Japanese army was around the corner and the British and Indian defense expenditures were heavy in urban Bengal, including Calcutta. Once the rice prices started moving up sharply, public panic as well as manipulative speculation played its part in pushing the prices sky high, beyond the reach of a substantial part of the population of rural Bengal.¹⁰ The Devil, then, took the hindmost.¹¹

Or, to take yet a different type of case, some workers may find their "occupations gone," as the economy changes and the types and locations of gainful activities shift. This has happened, for example, in sub-Saharan Africa, with changing environmental and climatic conditions. Erstwhile productive workers may then be without work

or earnings, and in the absence of social security systems, there would not be anything else to fall back on.

In some other cases, the loss of gainful employment can be a temporary phenomenon, with powerful effects in initiating a famine. For example, in the Bangladesh famine of 1974, the first signs of distress were found among the landless rural laborers, after the summer floods, which disrupted the employment of labor for transplanting rice. These laborers, who led a hand-to-mouth existence, were forced to starve as a result of the loss of wage employment, and this phenomenon occurred much *before* the crop that was adversely affected was to be harvested.¹²

Famines are highly divisive phenomena. Attempts to understand them in terms of *average* food availability per head can be hopelessly misleading. It is rare to find a famine that affected more than 5 or 10 percent of the population. There are, to be sure, alleged accounts of famines in which nearly everyone in a country had to go hungry. But most of these anecdotes do not bear much scrutiny. For example, the authoritative *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, in its vintage eleventh edition, refers to the Indian famine of 1344-1345 as one in which even "the Moghul emperor was unable to obtain the necessaries for his household."¹³ But that story runs into some problems. It is sad to have to report that the Moghul empire in India was not established until 1526. Perhaps more important, the Tughlak emperor in power in 1344-1345—Mohammad Bin Tughlak—not only had no great difficulty in securing necessaries for his household, but also had enough means to organize one of the more illustrious programs of famine relief in history.¹⁴ The anecdotes of unified starvation do not tally with the reality of divided fortunes.

FAMINE PREVENTION

Since famines are associated with the loss of entitlements of one or more occupational groups in particular regions, the resulting starvation can be prevented by systematically re-creating a minimum level of incomes and entitlements for those who are hit by economic changes. The numbers involved, while often absolutely large, are usually small fractions of the total population, and the minimum levels of purchasing power needed to ward off starvation can be quite

small. Thus the costs of such public action for famine prevention are typically rather modest even for poor countries, provided they make systematic and efficient arrangements in good time.

Just to get an idea of the magnitudes involved, if potential famine victims constitute, say, 10 percent of the total population of the country (they usually affect a much smaller proportion than that), the share of total income going to these typically poor people would not in normal circumstances exceed, say, about 3 percent of the GNP. Their normal share of food consumption may also, typically, not be greater than 4 or 5 percent of the national food consumption. Thus the resources needed to re-create their *entire* income, or to resupply their entire normal food consumption, starting from zero, do not have to be very large provided the preventive measures are efficiently organized. Of course, famine victims typically have some resources left (so that their entitlements do not have to be re-created from zero), and the *net* resource requirement can thus be even smaller.

Also, a good deal of the mortality associated with famines results from diseases unleashed by debilitation, breakdown of sanitary arrangements, population movements, and infectious spread of diseases endemic in the region.¹⁵ These too can be sharply reduced through sensible public action involving epidemic control and communal health arrangements. In this field too, the returns on small amounts of well-planned public expenditure can be very large indeed.

Famine prevention is very dependent on the political arrangements for entitlement protection. In the richer countries, such protection is provided by antipoverty programs and unemployment insurance. Most developing countries do not have any general system of unemployment insurance, but some of them do provide emergency public employment at times of massive loss of employment caused by natural or non-natural disasters. Compensatory government expenditure in creating employment can help to avert a threatening famine very effectively. Indeed, this is the way potential famines have been prevented from occurring in India since independence—mainly through countervailing employment creation. For example, in 1973 in Maharashtra, to compensate for the loss of employment associated with a severe drought, 5 million temporary jobs were created, which is really a very large number (when account is taken of the workers' family members too). The results were extraordinary: no

significant rise in mortality at all, and even no great deterioration of the number of undernourished people, despite a dramatic decline (in many areas 70 percent or more) in food production over a vast region.

FAMINE AND ALIENATION

The political economy of famine causation and prevention involves institutions and organizations, but it depends, in addition, on perceptions and understandings that accompany the exercise of power and authority. It depends particularly on the alienation of the rulers from those ruled. Even when the immediate causation of a famine is quite different from this, the social or political distance between the governors and the governed can play a crucial role in the nonprevention of the famine.

It is useful, in this context, to consider the famines of the 1840s that devastated Ireland about 150 years ago, killing a higher *proportion* of the population than any other famine anywhere in recorded history.¹⁶ The famine also changed the nature of Ireland in a decisive way. It led to a level of emigration—even under the most terrible conditions of voyage—that has hardly been seen anywhere else in the world.¹⁷ The Irish population even today is very substantially smaller than it was in 1845 when the famine began.

What did cause this calamity, then? In George Bernard Shaw's *Man and Superman*, Mr. Malone, a rich Irish American, refuses to describe the Irish famines of the 1840s as "famine." He tells his English daughter-in-law, Violet, that his father "died of starvation in the black 47." When Violet asks, "The famine?" Malone replies: "No, the starvation. When a country is full of food and exporting it, there can be no famine."

There are several things wrong with Malone's spiked statement. It is certainly true that food was being exported from famished Ireland to prosperous England, but it is not true that Ireland was full of food (indeed, the coexistence of hunger and food exports is a common phenomenon in many famines). Also, while the expressions "starve" and "starvation" can certainly be taken in their old, proactive sense—now largely defunct—of *making* people go without food, in particular *causing* their death from hunger, it is hard to deny

that there *was* a famine (as the term is commonly understood) in Ireland at that time.

Malone was making a different—and rather profound—point, admittedly with some literary license. The focal issue concerns the role of human agency in causing and sustaining famines. If the Irish famines were entirely preventable, and in particular, if those in public authority could have prevented them, then the charge of "starving" the Irish would have perspicuity enough. The accusing finger cannot but point to the role of public policy in preventing or not preventing famines, and to the political, social, and cultural influences that determine public policy. The policy issues to be examined concern acts of *omission* as well as of *commission*. Since famines have continued to occur in different countries even in the modern world of unprecedented overall prosperity, questions of public policies and their effectiveness remain as relevant today as they were 150 years ago.

Turning first to the more immediate reasons for the Irish famines, there clearly was, in this case, a reduction in the food output in Ireland, mainly because of a potato blight. However, the role of overall food supply in generating that famine can be assessed in different ways depending on the coverage of our food statistics. Much depends on the area over which food output is considered. As Cormac O Grada has pointed out, if the food output and supply over the entire United Kingdom are considered, then there were no crises of food output or supply, in contrast with what happened specifically in Ireland.¹⁸ Certainly food could have moved from Britain to Ireland if the Irish could have afforded to purchase it. The fact that this did not happen, and exactly the opposite occurred, relates to the poverty of Ireland and to the economic deprivation of the Irish victims. As Terry Eagleton puts it in his forceful literary treatment of the Irish famines, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*: "In this sense it can be reasonably claimed that the Irish did not die simply for lack of food, but because they largely lacked the funds to purchase food which was present in abundance in the kingdom as a whole, but which was not sufficiently available to them."¹⁹

In analyzing the causation of famines, it is important to study the general prevalence of poverty in the country or region involved. In the case of Ireland, the poverty of the Irish in general and the modest

size of their assets made them specially vulnerable to the economic decline that occurred with the blight.²⁰ In that context, focus has to be placed not only on the endemic poverty of the people involved, but also on the special vulnerability of those whose entitlements are particularly fragile when there are economic changes.²¹ It is the general defenselessness of the very poor, combined with additional misfortunes created by economic variations, that produces the victims of drastic starvation. The small Irish growers of potatoes were severely hit by the blight, and through the increase in the price of food, others were too.

As far as food itself is concerned, far from there being a systematic import of food into Ireland to break the famine, there was (as mentioned earlier) the opposite movement: the export of food from Ireland to England (especially of food of a somewhat higher quality). Such a "food countermovement" is not altogether rare in a class of famines—the so-called slump famines—in which there is an overall slump in the economy, which makes the purchasing ability of the consumers go down sharply, and the available food supply (reduced as it is) fetches a better price elsewhere. Such food countermovement happened, for example, in the Wollo famine in Ethiopia in 1973 mentioned earlier. Residents of that province were unable to buy food, despite the fact that food prices there were no higher—often substantially lower—than elsewhere in the country. In fact, it has been shown that food was moving *out of* Wollo to the more prosperous regions of Ethiopia where people had more income and thus had greater ability to buy food.²²

This did happen on quite a large scale in Ireland in the 1840s, when ship after ship—laden with wheat, oats, cattle, pigs, eggs, and butter—sailed down the Shannon bound for well-fed England from famine-stricken Ireland. The export of food from Ireland to England at the height of the famine has been a subject of great bitterness in Ireland, and even today continues to influence the complex mistrust between England and Ireland.

There is no great economic mystery behind the movement of food from Ireland to England during the Irish famines. The market forces would always encourage movement of food to places where people could afford to pay a higher price for it. The prosperous English could do just that, compared with what the impoverished Irish could

do. Similarly, in 1973, the residents of Addis Ababa could buy food that the starving wretches in Wollo could not afford.

One must not jump from this to the conclusion that stopping market transactions would be the right way to halt a famine. In some special cases, such a stoppage can serve a limited goal (it could have helped Irish consumers if the food countermovement to England had been restrained), but in general that would still leave untouched the basic problem of the poverty and destitution of the famine victims. To change that, more positive policies would be needed—not the purely negative one of banning market transactions of certain kinds. Indeed, with positive policies of regenerating the lost incomes of the destitute (for example, through public employment programs), the food countermovement could have automatically been reduced or stopped, since the domestic purchasers could have commanded food more affluently.

We know, of course, that very little help was provided by the government of the United Kingdom to alleviate the destitution and starvation of the Irish through the period of the famine. There have been similar occurrences in the empire, but Ireland was distinguished in being part of the British Isles itself. This is where *cultural alienation*, as opposed to purely political asymmetry, is of some significance (though cultural alienation is "political" as well, in a broad sense).

In this context, it is important to bear in mind the fact that by the 1840s, when the Irish famine occurred, an extensive system of poverty relief was fairly well established in Britain, as far as Britain itself was concerned. England too had its share of the poor, and even the life of the employed English worker was far from prosperous (indeed, the year 1845, when the sequence of Irish famines began, was also the year in which Friedrich Engels's classic indictment of the poverty and economic misery of English workers, *The Conditions of the Working Class in England*, was published). But there was still some political commitment to prevent open starvation within England. A similar commitment did not apply to the empire—not even to Ireland. Even the Poor Laws gave the English destitute substantially more rights than the Irish destitute got from the more anemic Poor Laws that were instituted for Ireland.

Indeed, as Joel Mokyr has noted, "Ireland was considered by Britain as an alien and even hostile nation."²³ This estrangement

affected many aspects of Irish-British relations. For one thing, as Mokyr notes, it discouraged British capital investment in Ireland. But most relevantly in the present context, there was a relative indifference to famines and suffering in Ireland and less determination in London to prevent Irish destitution and starvation. Richard Ned Lebow has argued that while poverty in Britain was typically attributed to economic change and fluctuations, poverty in Ireland was viewed as being caused by laziness, indifference and ineptitude, so that "Britain's mission" was seen not as one "to alleviate Irish distress but to civilize her people and to lead them to feel and act like human beings."²⁴ This may be a somewhat exaggerated view, but it is hard to think that famines like those in Ireland in the 1840s would have been at all allowed to occur in Britain.

In looking behind the social and cultural influences that shape public policy and that in this case allowed the famines to occur, it is important to appreciate the sense of dissociation and superiority that characterized the British attitude toward the Irish. The cultural roots of the Irish famines extend as far back as Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (published in 1590), and perhaps even earlier. The tendency to blame the victims, plentiful in *The Faerie Queene* itself, survived through the famines of the 1840s, and the Irish taste for potatoes was added to the list of the calamities that the natives had, in the English view, brought on themselves.

The conviction of cultural superiority merges well with the asymmetry of political power.²⁵ Winston Churchill's famous remark that the Bengal famine of 1943, which was the last famine in British India (and also the last famine in India altogether), was caused by the tendency of the natives to breed "like rabbits" belongs to this general tradition of blaming the colonial subject; it nicely supplemented Churchill's other belief that Indians were "the beastliest people in the world, next to the Germans."²⁶ One cannot but sympathize with Winston Churchill's double jeopardy confronted by beastly Germans wanting to topple his government and beastly Indians requesting good governance.

Charles Edward Trevelyan, the head of the Treasury during the Irish famines, who saw not much wrong with British economic policy in Ireland (of which he was in charge), pointed to Irish habits as part of the explanation of the famines. Chief among the habitual failures

was the tendency of the Irish poor to eat only potatoes, which made them dependent on one crop. Indeed, Trevelyan's view of the causation of the Irish famines permitted him to link them with his analysis of Irish cooking: "There is scarcely a woman of the peasant class in the West of Ireland whose culinary art exceeds the boiling of a potato."²⁷ The remark is of interest not just because it is rather rare for an Englishman to find a suitable occasion for making international criticism of culinary art. Rather, the pointing of an accusing finger at the meagerness of the diet of the Irish poor well illustrates the tendency to blame the victim. The victims, in this view, had helped themselves to a disaster, despite the best efforts of the administration in London to prevent it.

Cultural alienation has to be added to the lack of political incentives (discussed in chapter 6) in explaining British nonaction during the Irish famines. Famines are, in fact, so easy to prevent that it is amazing that they are allowed to occur at all.²⁸ The sense of distance between the ruler and the ruled—between "us" and "them"—is a crucial feature of famines. That distance is as severe in the contemporary famines in Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan as it was in Ireland and India under foreign domination in the last century.

PRODUCTION, DIVERSIFICATION AND GROWTH

I return now to the economics of famine prevention. In preventing famines, it helps to have a more opulent and growing economy. Economic expansion typically reduces the need for entitlement protection, and also enhances the resources available for providing that protection. This is a lesson of obvious importance for sub-Saharan Africa, where the lack of overall economic growth has been a major underlying source of deprivation. The proneness to famines is much greater when the population is generally impoverished and when public funds are hard to secure.

Attention has to be paid to the need for incentives to generate the growth of outputs and incomes—including, inter alia, the expansion of food output. This calls for devising sensible price incentives, but also for measures to encourage and enhance technical change, skill formation and productivity—both in agriculture and in other fields.²⁹

While growth of food output is important, the main issue concerns

overall economic growth, since food is purchasable in the world market. A country can purchase food from abroad if it has the means to do this (based, say, on industrial production). If, for example, we compare food production per head in 1993-1995 with that in 1979-1981 in different countries in Asia and Africa, we find a *decline* of 1.7 percent in South Korea, 12.4 percent in Japan, 33.5 percent in Botswana and 58.0 percent in Singapore. We do not, however, observe any growing hunger in these economies, since they also experienced fast expansion of real income per head through other means (such as industries or mining), and they happen to be richer anyway. The sharing of the increased income made the citizens of these countries more able to secure food than before, despite the falling food output. In contrast, even though there was little or no decline in food production per head in economies such as Sudan (7.7 percent *increase*), or Burkina Faso (29.4 percent *increase*), those economies experienced considerable unfolding of hunger because of their general poverty and the vulnerable economic entitlements of many substantial groups. It is essential to focus on the actual processes through which a person or a family establishes command over food.

It is often pointed out—rightly—that food output per head has been falling in sub-Saharan Africa until recently. This is indeed so and is obviously a matter of concern, and it has implications for many aspects of public policy, varying from agricultural research to population control. But, as was noted earlier, the same fact of falling food output per head applies to many countries in other regions of the world as well.³⁰ These countries did not experience famines both (1) because they achieved relatively high growth rates in other areas of production, and (2) because the dependence on food output as a source of income is much less in these countries than in the typical sub-Saharan African economy.

The tendency to think of growing more food as the only way of solving a food problem is strong and tempting, and often it does have some rationale. But the picture is more complex than that, related to alternative economic opportunities and the possibilities of international trade. As far as lack of growth is concerned, the major feature of sub-Saharan Africa's problems is not the particular lack of growth in food output as such, but the *general* lack of economic growth alto-

gether (of which the problem of food output is only one part). The need for a more diversified production structure is very strong in sub-Saharan Africa, given the climatic uncertainties, on the one hand, and the possibility of expanding in other fields of productive activity, on the other. The often-advocated strategy of concentrating exclusively on the expansion of agriculture—and specifically food crops—is like putting all the eggs in the same basket, and the perils of such a policy can be great indeed.

It is, of course, unlikely that the dependence of sub-Saharan Africa on food production as a source of income can be dramatically reduced in the short run. But some diversification can be attempted straightaway, and even the reduction of overdependence on a few crops can enhance security of incomes. In the long run, for sub-Saharan Africa to join in the process of economic expansion that has taken place in much of the rest of the world, sources of income and growth outside food production and even outside agriculture would have to be more vigorously sought and used.

THE EMPLOYMENT ROUTE AND THE AGENCY ISSUE

Even when the opportunities of international trade are absent, how the total food supply is shared between different groups within the country can be crucially important. Famines can be prevented by recreating lost incomes of the potential victims (for example, through the temporary creation of wage employment in specially devised public projects), giving them the ability to compete for food in the market, making the available supply more equally shared. In most situations in which famines have occurred, a more equal sharing of food would have prevented starvation (though expanding the food supply would obviously have made things easier). Famine prevention through employment creation, with or without expanding the total food availability, has been well used in many countries, including India, Botswana and Zimbabwe.³¹

The employment route also happens to encourage the processes of trade and commerce, and does not disrupt economic, social and family lives. The people helped can mostly stay on in their own homes, close to their economic activities (like farming), so that these economic operations are not disrupted. The family life too can

continue in a normal way, rather than people being herded into emergency camps. There is also more social continuity, and, furthermore, less danger of the spread of infectious diseases, which tend to break out in the overcrowded camps. In general, the approach of relief through employment also allows the potential famine victims to be treated as active agents, rather than as passive recipients of governmental handouts.³²

Another point to note here (in line with the overall approach of this book) is the combined uses of different social institutions in this process of famine prevention. Public policy here takes the form of drawing on very different institutional arrangements:

- 1) *state support* in creating income and employment;
- 2) operation of *private markets* for food and labor;
- 3) reliance on normal *commerce and business*.

The integration of the respective roles of different social institutions—involving the market as well as nonmarket organizations—is very important for an adequately broad approach to the prevention of famines, as it is, in fact, for economic development in general.

DEMOCRACY AND FAMINE PREVENTION

Earlier on in this book I referred to the role of democracy in preventing famines. The argument related particularly to the political incentives generated by elections, multiparty politics and investigative journalism. It is certainly true that there has never been a famine in a functioning multiparty democracy.

Is this observed historical association a causal one, or simply an accidental occurrence? The possibility that the connection between democratic political rights and the absence of famines is a “bogus correlation” may seem plausible enough when one considers the fact that the democratic countries are typically also rather rich and thus, perhaps, immune from famines for other reasons. But the absence of famines holds even for those democratic countries that happen to be very poor, such as India, Botswana or Zimbabwe.

Indeed, the democratic poor countries sometimes have had much larger declines in the production and supply of food, and also sharper

collapse of the purchasing power of substantial sections of the population, than some nondemocratic countries. But while the dictatorial countries had major famines, the democratic ones managed to avert famines altogether despite the worse food situation. For example, Botswana had a fall in food production of 17 percent and Zimbabwe one of 38 percent between 1979–1981 and 1983–1984, in the same period in which the food production decline amounted to a relatively modest 11 or 12 percent in Sudan and Ethiopia. But while Sudan and Ethiopia, with comparatively smaller declines in food output, had massive famines, Botswana and Zimbabwe had none, and this was largely due to timely and extensive famine prevention policies by these latter countries.³³

Had the governments in Botswana and Zimbabwe failed to undertake timely action, they would have been under severe criticism and pressure from the opposition and would have gotten plenty of flak from newspapers. In contrast, the Ethiopian and Sudanese governments did not have to reckon with those prospects, and the political incentives provided by democratic institutions were thoroughly absent in those countries. Famines in Sudan and Ethiopia—and in many other countries in sub-Saharan Africa—were fed by the political immunity enjoyed by governmental leaders in authoritarian countries. This would seem to apply to the present situation in North Korea as well.

Indeed, famines are very easy to prevent through regenerating the lost purchasing power of hard-hit groups, and this can be done through various programs, including—as was just discussed—the creation of emergency employment in short-term public projects. Postindependence India has had, on different occasions, very large declines in food production and availability, and also quite gigantic destruction of the economic solvency of large groups of people, and still famines have been prevented through giving the potential famine victims “entitlement” to food, through wage income in employment-oriented projects and other means. It is obvious that getting more food into the famine-stricken region helps to alleviate the famine if the potential famine victims have the economic power to buy the food, for which too creating income for those without any (or with very little) is quite crucial. But even in the absence of any food import into the region, the creation of income for the destitute people itself

helps to alleviate hunger through a better sharing of the available food.³⁴

In the 1973 drought in Maharashtra in India, food production fell so sharply that the per capita food output was half that in sub-Saharan Africa. And yet there was no famine in Maharashtra (where five million people were employed in rapidly organized public projects), while there were very substantial famines in sub-Saharan Africa.³⁵ Aside from these intercountry contrasts of experiences in famine prevention, which bring out forcefully the protective role of democracy, there is also some interesting intertemporal evidence relating to a country's *transition* to democracy. For example, India continued to have famines right up to the time of independence in 1947. The last famine—one of the largest—was the Bengal famine in the spring and summer of 1943 (which I had the experience of witnessing, in its full rigor, as a nine-year-old boy); it is estimated that between two million and three million people died in that famine. Since independence and the installation of a multiparty democratic system, there has been no substantial famine, even though severe crop failures and massive loss of purchasing power have occurred often enough (for example, in 1968, 1973, 1979 and 1987).

INCENTIVES, INFORMATION AND THE PREVENTION OF FAMINES

The causal connection between democracy and the nonoccurrence of famines is not hard to seek. Famines kill millions of people in different countries in the world, but they don't kill the rulers. The kings and the presidents, the bureaucrats and the bosses, the military leaders and the commanders never are famine victims. And if there are no elections, no opposition parties, no scope for uncensored public criticism, then those in authority don't have to suffer the political consequences of their failure to prevent famines. Democracy, on the other hand, would spread the penalty of famines to the ruling groups and political leaders as well. This gives them the political incentive to *try* to prevent any threatening famine, and since famines are in fact easy to prevent (the economic argument clicks into the political one at this stage), the approaching famines are firmly prevented.

The second issue concerns *information*. A free press and the prac-

tice of democracy contribute greatly to bringing out information that can have an enormous impact on policies for famine prevention (for example, information about the early effects of droughts and floods and about the nature and impact of unemployment). The most elementary source of basic information from distant areas about a threatening famine are enterprising news media, especially when there are incentives—provided by a democratic system—for bringing out facts that may be embarrassing to the government (facts that an authoritarian government would tend to censor out). Indeed, I would argue that a free press and an active political opposition constitute the best early-warning system a country threatened by famines can have.

The connection between political rights and economic needs can be illustrated in the specific context of famine prevention by considering the massive Chinese famines of 1958–1961. Even before the recent economic reforms, China had been much more successful than India in economic development in many significant respects. For example, the average life expectancy went up in China much more than in India, and well before the reforms of 1979 had already come close to the high figures that are quoted now (nearly seventy years at birth). Nevertheless, there was a major failure in China in its inability to prevent famines. The Chinese famines of 1958–1961 killed, it is now estimated, close to thirty million people—ten times more than even the gigantic 1943 famine in British India.³⁶

The so-called Great Leap Forward initiated in the late 1950s had been a massive failure, but the Chinese government refused to admit that and continued to pursue dogmatically much the same disastrous policies for three more years. It is hard to imagine that anything like this could have happened in a country that goes to the polls regularly and that has an independent press. During that terrible calamity the government faced no pressure from newspapers, which were controlled, and none from opposition parties, which were absent.

The lack of a free system of news distribution also misled the government itself, fed by its own propaganda and by rosy reports of local party officials competing for credit in Beijing. Indeed, there is evidence that just as the famine was moving toward its peak, the Chinese authorities mistakenly believed that they had 100 million more metric tons of grain than they actually did.³⁷

Interestingly enough, even Chairman Mao, whose radical hopes and beliefs had much to do with the initiation of, and official persistence with, the Great Leap Forward, himself identified the *informational* role of democracy, once the failure was belatedly acknowledged. In 1962, just after the famine had killed so many millions, Mao made the following observation, to a gathering of seven thousand cadres:

Without democracy, you have no understanding of what is happening down below; the situation will be unclear; you will be unable to collect sufficient opinions from all sides; there can be no communication between top and bottom; top-level organs of leadership will depend on one-sided and incorrect material to decide issues, thus you will find it difficult to avoid being subjectivist; it will be impossible to achieve unity of understanding and unity of action, and impossible to achieve true centralism.³⁸

Mao's defense of democracy here is quite limited. The focus is exclusively on the informational side—ignoring its incentive role, and also the intrinsic and constitutive importance of democracy.³⁹ Nevertheless it is extremely interesting that Mao himself acknowledged the extent to which disastrous official policies were caused by the lack of the informational links that a more democratic system can provide in averting disasters of the kind that China experienced.

PROTECTIVE ROLE OF DEMOCRACY

These issues remain relevant in the contemporary world—even in the economically successful China of today. Since the economic reforms of 1979, official Chinese pronouncements have provided plentiful admission of the importance of *economic* incentives, without making a similar acknowledgment of the role of *political* incentives. When things go reasonably well, this permissive role of democracy might not be greatly missed, but as and when big policy mistakes are made, that lacuna can be quite disastrous. The significance of the democracy movements in contemporary China has to be judged in this light.

Another set of examples comes from sub-Saharan Africa, which has been plagued by persistent famines since the early 1970s. There are many factors underlying the famine-proneness of this region, varying from ecological issues of climatic deterioration—making crops more uncertain—to the firmly negative effects of persistent wars and skirmishes. But the typically authoritarian nature of many of the sub-Saharan Africa polities also has had much to do with causing the frequent famines.⁴⁰

The nationalist movements were all firmly anticolonial, but not always steadfastly pro-democratic, and it is only recently that asserting the value of democracy has achieved some political respectability in many countries of sub-Saharan Africa. And in this political milieu, the cold war in the world did not help at all. The United States and the West were ready to support undemocratic governments if they were sufficiently anticommunist, and the Soviet Union and China would support governments inclined to be on their respective sides no matter how antiegalitarian they might be in their domestic policies. When opposition parties were banned and newspapers suppressed, there were very few international protests.

One must not deny that there were African governments even in some one-party states that were deeply motivated toward averting disasters and famines. There are examples of this varying from the tiny country of Cape Verde to the politically experimental Tanzania. But quite often the absence of opposition and the suppression of free newspapers gave the respective governments an immunity from criticism and political pressure that translated into thoroughly insensitive and callous policies. Famines were often taken for granted, and it was common to put the blame for the disasters on natural causes and on the perfidy of other countries. In various ways, Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia, several of the Sahel countries and others provide glaring examples of how badly things can go wrong without the discipline of opposition parties and the news media.

This is not to deny that famines in these countries were often associated with crop failures. When a crop fails, it not only affects the food supply, it also destroys the employment and livelihood of a great many people. But the occurrence of crop failure is not independent of public policy (such as governmental fixing of relative prices, or the policy regarding irrigation and agricultural research). Further,

even with crop failures, a famine can be averted by a careful redistribution policy (including that of employment creation). Indeed, as was discussed earlier, democratic countries like Botswana, or India, or Zimbabwe, have been entirely successful in preventing famines despite sharp declines in food output and entitlements of large sections of the population, whereas nondemocratic countries have frequently experienced unprevented famines despite much more favorable food situations. It would not be unreasonable to conclude that democracy can be a very positive influence in the prevention of famines in the contemporary world.

TRANSPARENCY, SECURITY AND ASIAN ECONOMIC CRISES

This preventive role of democracy fits well into the demand for what was called "protective security" in the listing of different types of instrumental freedoms. Democratic governance, including multi-party elections and open media, makes it very likely that some arrangements for basic protective security will be instituted. In fact, the occurrence of famines is only one example of the protective reach of democracy. The positive role of political and civil rights applies to the prevention of economic and social disasters in general.

When things are routinely good and smooth, this instrumental role of democracy may not be particularly missed. But it comes into its own when things get fouled up, for one reason or another. And then the political incentives provided by democratic governance acquire great practical significance. There may be some important economic as well as political lessons here. Many economic technocrats recommend the use of economic incentives (which the market system provides) while ignoring political incentives (which democratic systems could guarantee). But economic incentives, important as they are, are no substitute for political incentives, and the absence of an adequate system of political incentives is a lacuna that cannot be filled by the operation of economic inducement.

This is an important issue because the danger of insecurity, arising from changes in the economic or other circumstances or from uncorrected mistakes of policy, can lurk behind what may look very much like a healthy economy. The recent problems of East Asia and South-

east Asia bring out, among many other things, the penalty of undemocratic governance. This is so in two striking respects, involving the neglect of two instrumental freedoms that were discussed earlier, viz., "protective security" (presently under scrutiny) and "transparency guarantee" (important for the provision of security and for incentives to economic and political agents).

First, the development of the financial crisis in some of these economies has been closely linked with the lack of transparency in business, in particular the lack of public participation in reviewing financial and business arrangements. The absence of an effective democratic forum has been consequential in this failing. The opportunity that would have been provided by democratic processes to challenge the hold of selected families or groups could have made a big difference.

The discipline of financial reform that the International Monetary Fund tried to impose on the economies in default was, to a considerable extent, linked to the lack of openness and disclosure and the involvement of unscrupulous business linkages that were characteristic in parts of these economies. These characteristics connect strongly with a system of nontransparent commercial arrangements. When a depositor places his or her money in a bank there may be some expectation that it will be used, along with other money, in ways that would not involve undue risk and could be openly disclosed. This trust was often violated, which certainly needed changing. I am not commenting here on whether the IMF's management of the crises was exactly right, or whether the insistence on immediate reforms could have been sensibly postponed until financial confidence had returned in these economies.⁴² But no matter how these adjustments would have been best done, the role of transparency freedom—or rather its absence—in the development of the Asian crises cannot be easily doubted.

The pattern of risk and improper investments could have been placed under much greater scrutiny if democratic critics were able to demand that in, say, Indonesia or South Korea. But of course neither of these countries had the democratic system that would have allowed such demands to come from outside the government. The unchallenged power of governance was easily translated into an unquestioned acceptance of nonaccountability and nontransparency,

often reinforced by strong family links between the government and the financial bosses. In the emergence of the economic crises, the undemocratic nature of the governments played an important part.

Second, once the financial crisis led to a general economic recession, the protective power of democracy—not unlike that which prevents famines in democratic countries—was badly missed. The newly dispossessed did not have the hearing they needed.⁴² A fall of total gross national product of, say, even 10 percent may not look like much, if it follows the experience of past economic growth of 5 or 10 percent every year for some decades. And yet that decline can decimate lives and create misery for millions, if the burden of contraction is not shared together but allowed to be heaped on those—the unemployed or those newly made economically redundant—who can least bear it. The vulnerable in Indonesia may not have missed democracy when things went up and up, but that very lacuna kept their voice muffled and ineffective as the unequally shared crisis developed. The protective role of democracy is strongly missed when it is most needed.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The challenge of development includes *both* the elimination of persistent, endemic deprivation and the prevention of sudden, severe destitution. However, the respective demands on institutions and policies of the two can be distinct and even dissimilar. Success in one field may not guarantee success in the other. For example, consider the comparative performances of China and India over the last half century. It is clear that China has been much more successful than India in raising life expectancy and reducing mortality. Indeed, its superior performance goes back to well before the economic reforms of 1979. (China's overall progress in enhancing life expectancy has been, in fact, rather slower in the post-reform period than in the pre-reform stretch.) While India is a rather more diverse country than is China, and there are parts of India (such as Kerala) in which life expectancy has risen considerably faster than in China, nevertheless for the two countries as a whole the comparison of general increase in life expectancy is entirely in favor of China. And yet China also had (as was discussed earlier in this chapter) the largest recorded

famine in history, when thirty million people perished in the famines that followed the failure of the Great Leap Forward, during 1958–1961. In contrast, India has not had a famine since independence. The prevention of famines and other disastrous crises is a somewhat different discipline from that of overall increase in average life expectancy and other achievements.

Inequality has an important role in the development of famines and other severe crises. Indeed, the absence of democracy is in itself an inequality—in this case of political rights and powers. But more than that, famines and other crises thrive on the basis of severe and sometimes suddenly increased inequality. This is illustrated by the fact that famines can occur even without a large—or any—diminution of total food supply, because some groups may suffer an abrupt loss of market power (through, for example, sudden and massive unemployment), with starvation resulting from this new inequality.⁴³

Similar issues arise in understanding the nature of economic crises, such as the recent ones in East and Southeast Asia. Take, for example, the crises in Indonesia, in Thailand, and earlier on, even in South Korea. It may be wondered why should it be so disastrous to have, say, a 5 or 10 percent fall in gross national product in one year when the country in question has been growing at 5 or 10 percent *per year for decades*. Indeed, at the *aggregate* level this is not quintessentially a disastrous situation. And yet, if that 5 or 10 percent decline is not shared evenly by the population, and if it is heaped instead largely on the poorest part of the population, then that group may have very little income left (no matter what the overall growth performance might have been in the past). Such general economic crises, like famines, thrive on the basis of the Devil taking the hindmost. This is partly why arrangement for “protective security” in the form of social safety nets is such an important instrumental freedom (as discussed in chapter 2) and why political freedoms in the form of participatory opportunities as well as civil rights and liberties are ultimately crucial even for economic rights and for survival (as discussed in chapter 6 and earlier in this chapter).

The issue of inequality is, of course, important also in the continuation of endemic poverty. But here too the nature of—and causal influences on—inequality may differ somewhat between the problem of persistent deprivation and that of sudden destitution. For

example, the fact that South Korea has had economic growth with relatively egalitarian income distribution has been extensively—and rightly—recognized.⁴⁴ This, however, was no guarantee of equitable attention in a crisis situation in the absence of democratic politics. In particular, it did not place in position any regular social safety net, or any rapidly responding system with compensatory protection. The emergence of fresh inequality and unchallenged destitution can co-exist with a previous experience of “growth with equity” (as it was often called).

This chapter has been mainly concerned with the problem of averting famines and preventing calamitous crises. This is one important part of the process of development as freedom, for it involves the enhancement of the security and protection that the citizens enjoy. The connection is both constitutive and instrumental. First, protection against starvation, epidemics, and severe and sudden deprivation is itself an enhancement of the opportunity to live securely and well. The prevention of devastating crises is, in this sense, part and parcel of the freedom that people have reason to value. Second, the process of preventing famines and other crises is significantly helped by the use of instrumental freedoms, such as the opportunity of open discussion, public scrutiny, electoral politics, and uncensored media. For example, the open and oppositional politics of a democratic country tends to force any government in office to take timely and effective steps to prevent famines, in a way that did not happen in the case of famines under nondemocratic arrangements—whether in China, Cambodia, Ethiopia or Somalia (as in the past), or in North Korea or Sudan (as is happening today). Development has many aspects, and they call for adequately differentiated analyses and scrutiny.

CHAPTER 8

WOMEN'S AGENCY AND SOCIAL CHANGE



Mary Wollstonecraft's classic book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, published in 1792, had various distinct claims within the general program of “vindication” that she outlined. The rights she spoke about included not only some that particularly related to the well-being of women (and the entitlements that were directly geared to promote that well-being), but also rights that were aimed mainly at the free agency of women.

Both these features figure in the agenda of women's movements today, but it is, I think, fair to say that the agency aspects are beginning to receive some attention at last, in contrast to the earlier exclusive concentration on well-being aspects. Not long ago, the tasks these movements faced primarily involved working to achieve better treatment for women—a squarer deal. The concentration was mainly on women's *well-being*—and it was a much needed corrective. The objectives have, however, gradually evolved and broadened from this “welfarist” focus to incorporate—and emphasize—the active role of women's *agency*. No longer the passive recipients of welfare-enhancing help, women are increasingly seen, by men as well as women, as active agents of change: the dynamic promoters of social transformations that can alter the lives of *both* women and men.¹