

# Famine and life on the margins

## Food insecurity and famine

Food insecurity might be thought of as a sort of ‘water-table’ lurking just beneath the surface of everyday life in many parts of the world. Every now and again, it rises to the surface, signalling a dramatic increase in food insecurity and resulting in famine. **Famine** is defined as a short-term, severe and widespread shortage of food that endangers the lives of the most vulnerable groups and leads to increased mortality (Figure 1.12, page 15).

It is important to understand two concepts that underlie both food insecurity and famine. **Food availability deficit** (FAD) refers to a situation in which there is simply not enough food available to feed a given population. This is clearly the case in virtually all famines. On the other hand, **food entitlement deficit** (FED) occurs when significant numbers of people are unable to pay for the food they need, despite there being food generally available. It is this that can create ‘pockets’ of food insecurity in an otherwise food-secure country. Such ‘pockets’ most often coincide with areas of chronic poverty. In the early stages of a famine, it is likely that there will be FED. The initial impact of any growing food shortage will be to push up the price of what little food remains available. Again, it will be the poorest people who suffer FED first.

Famine occurs most frequently in parts of the world that are made particularly vulnerable by contextual factors such as:

- widespread poverty
- a high dependence on farming as a source of income
- poor and inappropriate agricultural practices
- harsh or varying environmental conditions

These factors more or less guarantee a level of food insecurity that is persistently close to the brink of famine. They are essentially endemic, long-term factors. But most famines are short-term and usually triggered by localised ‘shocks’. Those shocks can be both ‘external’, such as wars and migrations, and ‘internal’, such as a natural disaster or civil war. The disruption of food production quickly leads to FAD.

So the main causes of famine are basically the same as those underlying food insecurity (see Figure 2.5, page 27), but the actual trigger is often provided by a

sudden convergence and interplay of localised forces associated with those causes. Most famines are geographically localised and may affect only particular groups within a population, most obviously the poor. The impacts of famine are made worse where there is no safety net in the form of food aid to help the most vulnerable people. These are usually women, children, old people and ethnic minorities. In short, people who have little or no political influence.

Famine is nothing new in the history of humanity. It occurred in the world long before the global population exploded to its present size. Today famine is usually associated with parts of the developing world. In the British Isles, famines occurred until as late as the mid-nineteenth century.

Visit: [www.dfid.gov.uk](http://www.dfid.gov.uk)

## The causes of famine

It is a popular belief that famines are the outcome of natural events. In 2005 Niger was particularly unlucky to suffer two natural hazards at the same time. But the country's tale of woe did not end there, as its food supply was cut by another famine-inducing event — but one of human origin.

### FAMINE IN NIGER (2005)

### Case study 16

#### Triple trouble

Late in the main 2004 rainy season, locusts invaded the scattered crop-growing and livestock-grazing areas of arid northern Niger, causing substantial, but localised, damage to grasslands and crops (Figure 3.1). Shortly afterwards, the rains came to an abrupt halt in many of those areas. This was before the millet and sorghum crops had finished filling their grains, so there was considerable loss of yield (estimated at twice the losses caused by the locusts). Early warnings were given, generally suggesting the likelihood of severe local food insecurity and a need for food aid.

At the same time, another crisis occurred in the south of the country, in what is reckoned to be the relatively wealthy and well watered part of Niger. It is the country's breadbasket. It is also among the more densely populated parts of Africa. Indeed, it is overpopulated. Agricultural plots are relatively small and becoming smaller because of population pressure. The pressure on land and the presence of the huge neighbouring Nigerian market are strong incentives to grow commercial crops for export rather than for home consumption.



**Figure 3.1**  
Locust damage —  
a biological hazard

Rick Carlson/Fotolia

However, many of the poorer farmers cannot compete in this commercial arena, and have had to sell their land and become wage labourers on cash-crop farms. Both farm owners and labourers often have to supplement the cash they receive, mostly at harvest-time, with loans of grain to support food consumption, but there are long periods when cash and food are in short supply in the household. What tipped the situation in 2005 towards famine was the skyrocketing of basic food prices in tune with global trends.

Niger's 2005 emergency was an amalgam of two different food crises (one due to natural events, the other due to overpopulation) occurring in the same poor country, at the same time, in different locations.

*Famine-initiating droughts and locust plagues are nothing new in this part of Africa. What is new is the deepening degree of underlying poverty and overpopulation and the 'erosion' of subsistence agriculture by the commercial market.*

Even in those cases where natural events such as floods and droughts are regarded as causal factors, it usually requires other factors to convert those events into famines. This is well illustrated by what happened when Cyclone Nargis hit the southern part of Myanmar in May 2008. The famine that followed was largely the result of a government failing to provide the necessary emergency assistance and to accept international food aid.

## Case study 17 DOUBLE TROUBLE IN MYANMAR

### Natural disasters and famine

In May 2008 Cyclone Nargis devastated much of the southern part of Myanmar, causing 4000 deaths, displacing nearly 100 000 people (Figure 3.2) and disrupting food supplies so badly as to create a real risk of famine. The situation was not helped by the apparent inability of the military government to provide the required emergency aid or to accept help from other countries. Four months later, parts of Myanmar were struck by another and rather different natural disaster — a plague of rats.

**Figure 3.2**  
*Makeshift shelter in southern Myanmar after Cyclone Nargis struck in May 2008*



Mark Pearson/Alamy

Once every 50 years or so, bamboo plants in the western part of the country produce a fruit. The fruit attracts hordes of rats, which feed on its seeds. These seeds are rich in nutrients and allow the rats to multiply rapidly. Once the seeds have been devoured, the hungry rats turn on villagers' crops, destroying rice and maize and bringing the inhabitants to the brink of starvation.

The Chin region was the part of Myanmar worst hit by the plague of rats. An estimated 20% of the population were thought to be in immediate need of food aid. Since the military government took power in 1962, the Chin people (an ethnic minority) have suffered violent oppression at the hands of the army. Despite appeals, little or no emergency food aid was sent to the area. In desperation, many people migrated and sought food and help in nearby India. Thus it appeared that the Myanmar government took advantage of this natural disaster and its ensuing famine to pursue a policy of ethnic cleansing.

*This case study illustrates the fact that natural disasters are not just geological or climatic. More importantly, it demonstrates that natural disasters can easily be turned into famines when governments fail to provide the necessary emergency aid. Such failure may be because of incompetence or a lack of resources. Equally, it may be that a government, which in this case was an unelected one, takes the opportunity to pursue a rather different agenda, e.g. the persecution of dissident minorities. To decline international offers of aid can be to deprive citizens of their human rights.*

The Myanmar case study also illustrates that famine can be used to pursue other and rather more sinister objectives — in this instance, genocide. The case of the 1932–33 famine in Ukraine is perhaps even more horrifying in that it was deliberately created.

## FAMINE IN THE UKRAINE (1932–33)

## Case study 18

### A deliberate act of genocide

In 1917 the Bolshevik Revolution brought to an end tsarist rule in Russia and its colonial territories. One of these territories, the Ukraine, saw this as an opportunity to break away and become an independent republic. This unilateral declaration was strongly resisted by Lenin, principally because the Ukraine was an important food-producing area. Indeed, it was referred to as the 'breadbasket of Europe'. For 4 years, Ukraine sought to protect its territorial integrity. Its army fought Lenin's Red Army and the White Army that had remained loyal to the deposed tsarist regime, as well as invading troops from Poland and other countries. In 1921 the Ukrainian forces were finally defeated. The western part of the Ukraine was divided up between Poland, Romania and Czechoslovakia. The Soviets immediately began shipping out huge amounts of grain to feed the hungry people of Moscow and other big Russian cities. Coincidentally, a drought occurred in the Ukraine, resulting in widespread starvation and a surge of popular resentment against Lenin and the Soviets.

Lenin died in 1924 and was succeeded by Stalin, a ruthless man and even more determined that the Ukraine should remain part of the Soviet Union. Stalin set about a series of actions designed to eliminate any form of Ukrainian independence movement. These included:

- arresting over 5000 Ukrainian scholars who were either shot without trial or deported to prison camps in remote parts of Russia

- imposing the Soviet system of farming known as collectivisation (*Case study 5*) and seizing all privately owned farmland and livestock
- liquidating a class of formerly wealthy farmers called 'kulaks'

But the resistance continued. The Ukrainians simply refused to be cogs in the Soviet farm machine. Wheat and oats were left to rot in unharvested fields as a form of protest.

Stalin responded to the Ukrainian defiance by dictating a policy that would deliberately cause mass starvation. By mid 1932, nearly 75% of the farms in the Ukraine had been forcibly collectivised. On Stalin's orders, mandatory quotas of foodstuffs to be shipped from the Ukraine to other parts of the Soviet Union were drastically increased in August, October and again in January 1933, until there was simply no food remaining to feed the people of the Ukraine.

Much of the abundant wheat crop harvested by the Ukrainians in 1933 was dumped on the foreign market to generate cash to aid Stalin's plan for the modernisation of the Soviet Union and also to help finance his massive military build-up. It is estimated that if the wheat had remained in the Ukraine, it would have been enough to feed all the people there for up to 2 years.

Starvation quickly followed throughout the Ukraine, with the most vulnerable, children and the elderly, being the first to feel the effects of malnutrition. In desperation, hordes of people abandoned the countryside and set off in search of food in the towns and cities. But there was none to be had. It has been estimated that Stalin's artificially induced famine killed more than 7 million people in the Ukraine — one of the last places on Earth where a famine might have been expected.

*This is probably the most blatant example in modern history of a famine being contrived to achieve a geopolitical objective.*

Famines are not always the result of food shortages brought on by some sort of catastrophic natural event. They can occur where there is a breakdown in the marketing system that links food production with food consumption or when governments put other national considerations above the welfare of their people.

## Case study 19 FAMINE IN NORTH KOREA

### Why so?

North Korea, a small, backward and isolated country with a centralised economy, was hit by a prolonged famine during the mid-1990s. As with most famines, the trigger was a natural hazard in the form of unprecedented floods. But what really converted an emergency into a famine was the collapse of the Soviet Union, which for decades had supplied food to North Korea at 'friendship prices'. Moreover, the break-up of the Soviet Union dealt a double blow. Not only did North Korea lose its source of cheap food, it also lost the main market for its economic output in the form of industrial and agricultural products. Inevitably the economy spiralled into decline and the government was powerless to do much to stave off the threatened famine.

One indication of the desperateness of the situation was the government propaganda extolling the virtues of having two meals a day instead of three. Later food rationing coupons were issued, but by now the distribution of food was breaking down and, as a result, the shops were empty. It was with reluctance that the North Korean

government accepted food aid from the USA and China. The aid was gradually withdrawn, however, when it was discovered being diverted to feed the military and being sold on the open market. Nearly 1 million people starved to death.

Over the last decade or so, the North Korean government has become increasingly reclusive and unpredictable. It also suffers from delusions of military grandeur, seemingly intent upon becoming a nuclear power and maintaining a military force that is truly oversized for such a small country. The ‘pantomime’ parades that periodically appear on our television screens are meant to impress the outside world with its military might. Equally, they can be seen as evidence of a government that misuses its resources and callously puts the basic welfare of its people well down its list of priorities.

In 2008 North Korea was again on the brink of famine. The gap between the required amount of grain and available supply was around 100 000 metric tonnes. Local food prices more than trebled. International food aid was again reluctantly accepted, but with its distribution being much more closely monitored by its donors. The aid may have just about kept the famine at arm’s length. The daily food rations for North Koreans on the public distribution system now stand at 350 calories. In contrast, the average daily food intake in the USA is over 3000 calories.

There is a strong likelihood that North Korea will continue to be confronted by chronic food security problems and periodic famines unless some long-term corrective steps are taken. Most important is the need to revitalise its manufacturing and to move out of its isolation and into the trading world. The export of industrial products would earn foreign currency that could be used to import grains and other foodstuffs to make good the shortfalls in domestic food production. In the interim, it should enter into negotiations with the World Food Programme, accept more food aid and guarantee its proper distribution.

The key questions here are:

- Is it possible to make the country’s centralised economy more efficient and productive?
- Is North Korea ready or willing to normalise its relations with the global community?
- Will the welfare of its people ever become a priority?

*North Korea has been described as belonging to the ‘axis of evil’, a term used by President George W. Bush to describe states guilty of helping terrorism and seeking weapons of mass destruction. Ironically, it seems that North Korea’s autocratic regime also stands guilty of attempting the mass destruction of its own people — by malnutrition and famine.*

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Using case studies

### Question

Distinguish between ‘food insecurity’ and ‘famine’.

### Guidance

Identify the differences between the two terms with regard to (a) their symptoms, and (b) their causes. Be sure to make use of the case studies in this and the previous parts of the book to illustrate the points you wish to make.

## Question

'Not all famines are caused by environmental hazards.' To what extent do you agree with this statement? Use case studies to support your argument.

## Guidance

Most famines have multiple causes, and in nearly all these cases there is an environmental factor. It often just needs an event such as a war, civil unrest or government indifference to trigger the onset of famine. There are plenty of examples of famines to support the statement (e.g. Darfur — *Case study 13*). There are some famines that can be laid at the door of natural hazards (e.g. Niger and Ireland — *Case studies 16 and 22*). The Ukrainian and North Korean famines (*Case studies 18 and 19*) can be cited in support of the statement.

What emerges from these case studies is that governments have a particular responsibility to alert the outside world and seek aid before famine strikes. Famines rarely happen overnight. They can be spotted looming on the horizon. Furthermore, in most cases there is a 'window of opportunity' between the occurrence of a natural disaster and the onset of any consequent famine. It is worrying to recall how many governments have failed to do anything during this window. It is even more worrying to know that governments have used famine to further other sinister objectives.

# Famine relief

Most famine situations eventually receive emergency food aid, most if not all of it coming from outside the afflicted country. Such international aid comes through three different donor routes:

- **bilateral aid** — provided directly by one country, such as by China to North Korea
- **multilateral aid** — provided by a number of countries through the medium of a third-party intergovernmental organisation, of which by far the biggest is the UN World Food Programme
- **non-governmental aid** — provided through any number of voluntary organisations, such as the Red Cross and Oxfam

## Case study 20

### THE UN WORLD FOOD PROGRAMME

#### Relieving famines

The World Food Programme (WFP) is the branch of the United Nations responsible for food aid. It is claimed to be the world's largest humanitarian organisation. On average, it provides food (4 million metric tonnes) to 90 million people per year, two-thirds of whom are children (Figure 3.3). Its headquarters are in Rome and it runs 80 country offices around the world. It was set up in 1960.

The basic aim of the WFP is to eradicate hunger and malnutrition, with the ultimate goal being to eliminate the need for food aid itself. The WFP's brief is much broader than just the relief of famines and other emergency situations. Food aid is also directed to fight micronutrient deficiencies, reduce child mortality, improve maternal health,



**Figure 3.3**  
A WFP aid distribution point in Lesotho provides food for people affected by poverty

Kim Haughton/Alamy

combat disease including HIV and AIDS and promote food-for-work programmes. One unfortunate backlash effect of the WFP's activity is that in buying in food to feed the hungry, it is party to pushing up the market prices of basic foods such as cereals.

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Using case studies

Visit the World Food Programme website [www.wfp.org](http://www.wfp.org) and find out what the organisation has been doing in one of the case study countries in this and previous parts of the book, for example Ethiopia, Sudan, Zimbabwe, Niger, Myanmar or North Korea.

### Guidance

Are you able to distinguish between what the WFP has done by way of a short-term emergency response to the threat of famine and by longer-term help to reduce malnutrition and food insecurity?

## Life on the margins

It is worth clarifying what is meant by the 'margins' in this context of food and famine. There are two possible and slightly different connotations. One refers to the spatial limits of where it is possible to grow food (the so-called margin of cultivation). These are largely determined by physical conditions (low temperatures, aridity and infertile soils) and economic factors (commodity prices and demand). The second refers to the margin that critically separates food security from food insecurity, feasting from famine, and survival from starvation. It is this margin that is now brought into focus.

If nothing else, it is hoped that the case studies in this part of the book have rammed home one critical point, namely the significance of poverty. It is the poor who are most vulnerable to food insecurity and famines. Being poor is generally viewed in

terms of deprivation of some of life's basic needs, such as food, clean water, housing, clothing, basic education, primary healthcare and security. Why are the poor so vulnerable to hunger and starvation? There are a number of interrelated explanations that together create a sort of downward spiral:

- Poor families are either landless or have access only to the most marginal of farmland, which is likely to be the first to feel the impact of any natural disaster.
- Food shortages raise the price of food, which the poor cannot afford.
- There is a high prevalence of ill-health among the poor for a variety of reasons — no access to primary healthcare, unsafe water supply and sewage disposal. A poor diet weakens resistance to a wide range of diseases (*Case study 21*).
- The poor have little or no political 'voice' with which to publicise their plight or to fight for food.

As a consequence, mortality rates among the poor and particularly their children are all too readily raised even by the slightest increase in food insecurity, let alone a famine.

## Case study 21 DISEASES OF FAMINE

### Critical nutrient deficiencies

It is only during prolonged famines that the lack of food becomes a direct cause of death. The rise in the mortality rate is due more to people falling victim to diseases related to undernutrition and malnutrition. The causal factors are deficiencies in the intake of certain vital nutrients (Table 3.1).

**Table 3.1**  
*Nutrient-deficiency diseases*

Nutrient	Function	Source	Deficiency disease	Symptoms	Scale of disease
Vitamin A	Vision; body growth and healing	Milk, cheese, liver and fish	Xerophthalmia	Poor sight, blindness, reduced resistance to infection	Affects 50% of children in the developing world
Vitamin B	Release of energy	Liver, some grains and pulses	Pellagra	Weight loss, diarrhoea, mental disorder	Prevalent where maize diets predominate
Vitamin B1	Release of energy; nerves	Grains, milk, eggs, dried peas and beans	Beriberi	Loss of appetite, swelling, heart failure	Prevalent where overcooking predominates
Vitamin C	Wound healing, iron absorption	Citrus and other fruits; potatoes and green vegetables	Scurvy	Slow healing of wounds; bone weakening	Not known
Vitamin D	Calcium absorption	Sunlight, dairy produce, oily fish	Rickets and osteomalacia	Bone deformities	Prevalent where insufficient exposure to sunlight
Protein	Growth and repair of body tissues	Meat, cheese, eggs, nuts and pulses	Malnutrition — kwashiorkor and osteomalacia	Muscle wasting and weight loss	Affects about a quarter of the population of the developing world
Iron	Formation of red blood cells	Liver, meat, vegetables with green leaves	Anaemia	Blood disorders causing fatigue, loss of appetite and low blood pressure	Affects 917 million people, especially women in the developing world
Iodine	Vital to brain activity	Fish, seafood, eggs, milk and cheese	Stillbirths, endemic cretinism, goitre	Brain damage and mental retardation	600 million people affected

During times of food shortage and famine it is infants and children who suffer most — their mortality rates are raised much more than those of adults. Why? One factor is that maternal malnutrition during pregnancy means that a baby's resistance to deficiency diseases is already weakened. Infants are also vulnerable to diseases related to other conditions that frequently accompany a famine, such as unclean water, poor sewage disposal and inadequate access to primary healthcare.

*There is a wide range of diseases associated in general with famine and in particular with specific nutrient deficiencies.*

A common reaction to food shortages and famines is migration. People are simply persuaded that the only option open to them in their desperate search for food is to seek it somewhere else. Again, it is the poor who figure most prominently in such population movements. The classic case study in this context is the Irish potato famine of 1845–50 and its outward ripples of migration (*Case study 22*). Today, the mass media regularly transmit grim images of emaciated and weary people carrying their children and a few possessions in a desperate search for food (*Case study 23*). For these people, the term '**food miles**' has a particular meaning — long and sometimes fruitless journeys on foot.

## IRELAND'S GREAT HUNGER

### Case study 22

#### Depart or die

The potato famine that hit Ireland between 1845 and 1850 killed 1 million people (nearly one-eighth of the total population). The famine was caused by a fungal disease or blight that devastated the potato harvest, the potato being the country's staple



**Figure 3.4**  
Famine memorial sculptures on Custom House Quay, Dublin — many emigrants departed from this quay for Liverpool and other parts of the world

food. The situation was not helped by a high dependence on this single crop, by the considerable growth in the Irish population and by the fact that Ireland continued to export food to England during the crisis. Added to all this, the British government was misguided in the type of help it provided — launching public works projects rather than trying to diversify and increase food production.

Many people faced with starvation and the likelihood of premature death decided to emigrate (Figure 3.4).

It is estimated that as many Irish emigrated as died from starvation — 1 million. Prior to the potato famine, it is reckoned that about 5000 Irish immigrants were arriving in the USA each year. That number rose astronomically as the famine gripped. By 1850 the population of New York City was estimated to be one-quarter Irish. Canada also opened its doors to the Irish, as did Britain. Today people of Irish ancestry (much of it dating from potato famine immigration) account for at least 10% of the UK's population. That percentage figure is considerably higher in Liverpool, parts of Lancashire and London. The migration ripples also reached as far as Australia and South America, but with smaller numbers involved.

*Famine in Ireland in the nineteenth century caused by a persistent potato blight helps to explain the present distribution of people of Irish descent in particular parts of the world.*

## Case study 23

### ENVIRONMENTAL REFUGEES

#### An integral part of life on the margins

Environmental refugees are people who can no longer gain a secure livelihood in their homeland because of drought, soil erosion, desertification and other environmental problems. They are the face of the environmental impacts illustrated in Part 3 and of life on the margins.

It is estimated that today there are well over 25 million environmental refugees, or nearly 0.5% of the world's population — one person in every 200. By comparison, a figure of 18 million is given for those who are officially recognised as 'refugees' — people who are forced to move for political, religious or ethnic reasons. Many environmental refugee migrations take place within rather than across national frontiers. For this reason, they do not hit the headlines very often and may be seriously underestimated. Migrations across national frontiers are more newsworthy because of the political tensions they so often cause.

If present trends continue, the number of environmental refugees could well reach 200 million by 2050 (potentially equivalent to 2% of the global population). In short, environmental refugees are fast becoming one of the foremost human crises of our time. The costs are enormous in terms of the trauma, stress and alienation acutely felt by individual migrants.

Given that the main 'push' factors are food insecurity, hunger and famine, the solution to the environmental refugee challenge seems likely to lie in:

- finding modes of food production that are sustainable in such difficult environments (see Part 6)
- spreading the necessary know-how
- putting the brake on population growth and thus easing the overpopulation underlying so much of this migration

Such pre-emptive actions, which tackle the sources of the problem, are a better long-term bet than directing scarce resources to setting up refugee camps and embarking on resettlement programmes that rarely succeed.

*Many of the headline-hitting migrations of recent times have been the reaction to famines induced by environmental hazards and civil strife. But they have also been exacerbated by climate change.*

So life on the margins is very much about poverty, hunger and sometimes starvation. It is also about dependence on international aid and on governments that do not always have the best interests of their people in mind. Life on the margins can also be punctuated by spells of forced migration and refugee status.

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Using case studies

**Question**

With the aid of examples, explain what 'life on the margins' really means.

**Guidance**

The last paragraph gives you the main features of life on the margins: now explain and illustrate each of them. You might start by researching the following websites:

[www.geographyinthenews.rgs.org/news/article/?id=766](http://www.geographyinthenews.rgs.org/news/article/?id=766)

[www.secularpakistan.wordpress.com/.../pakistans-baloch-life-on-the-margins-of-punjab](http://www.secularpakistan.wordpress.com/.../pakistans-baloch-life-on-the-margins-of-punjab)